
WRITTEN BY
Necoco
ILLUSTRATED BY
NAJI Yanagida
NOVEL
10
REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

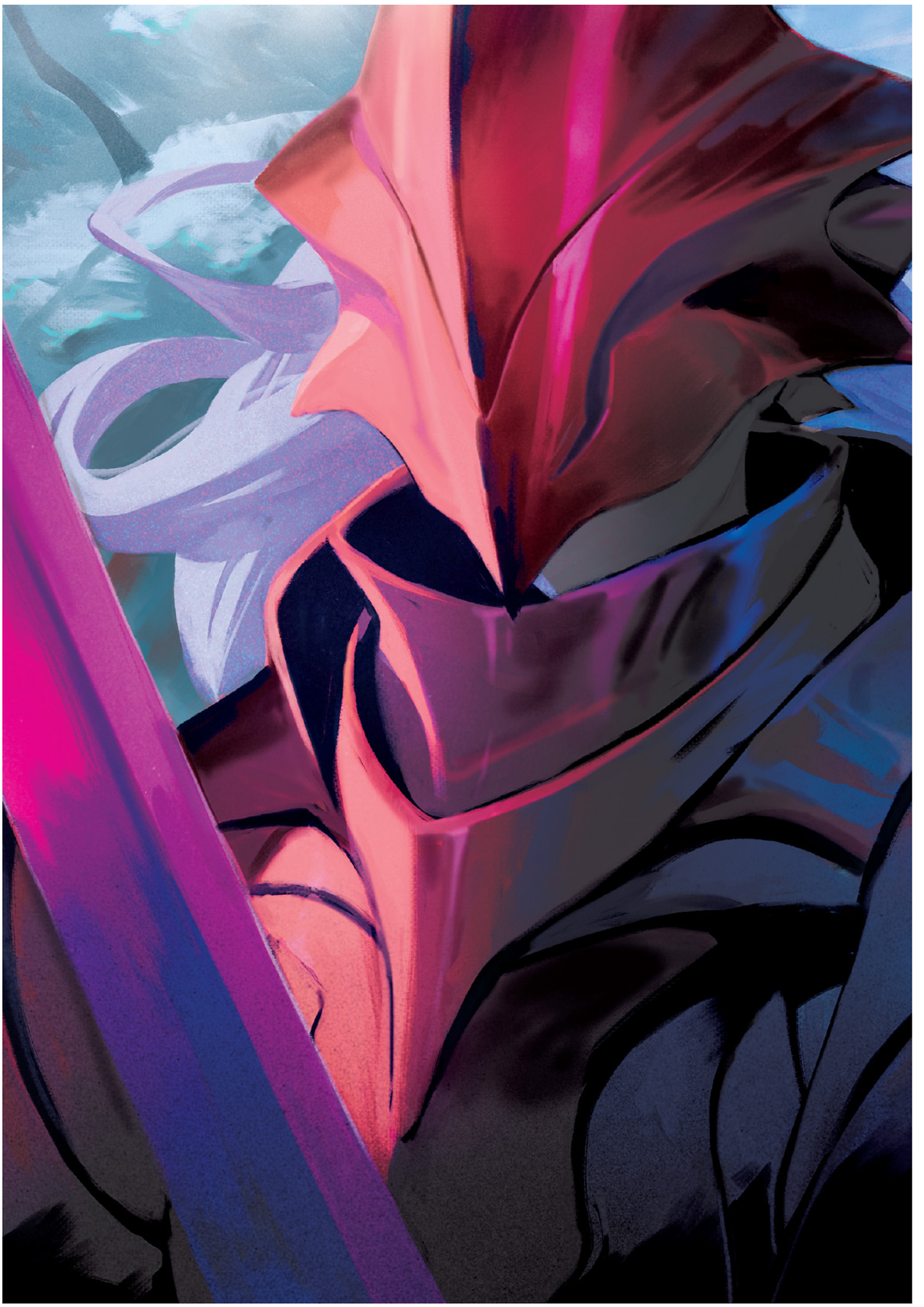
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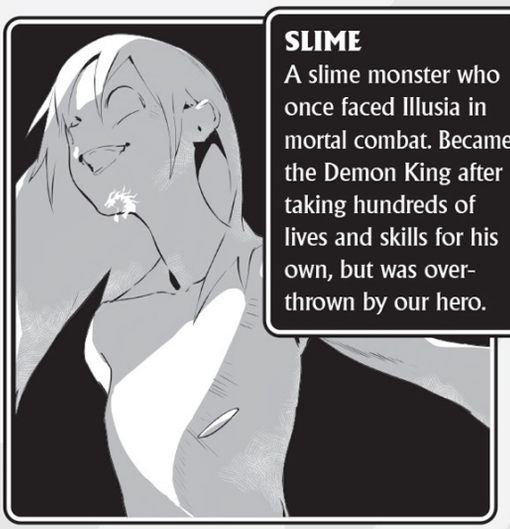
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Seven Seas Entertainment



SLIME
A slime monster who once faced Illusia in mortal combat. Became the Demon King after taking hundreds of lives and skills for his own, but was overthrown by our hero.



LILYXILA
The saint who came to see Illusia and ask for his help to defeat the Demon King. However, this supposed alliance was simply a ploy to try and obtain Illusia's Sacred Skills.



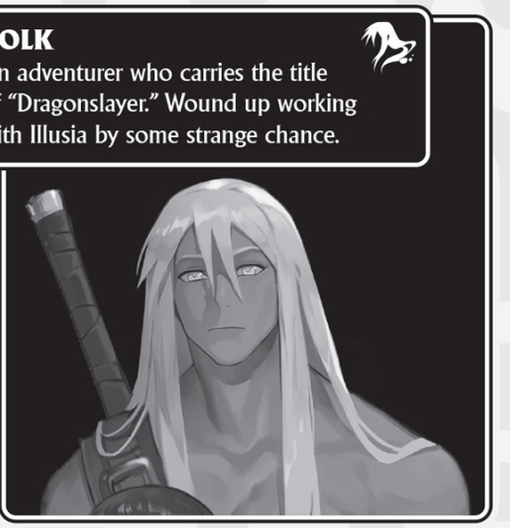
MYRIA
A kindhearted girl who named our hero. Held hostage by the Demon King's cronies, but later rescued by Illusia and his friends.



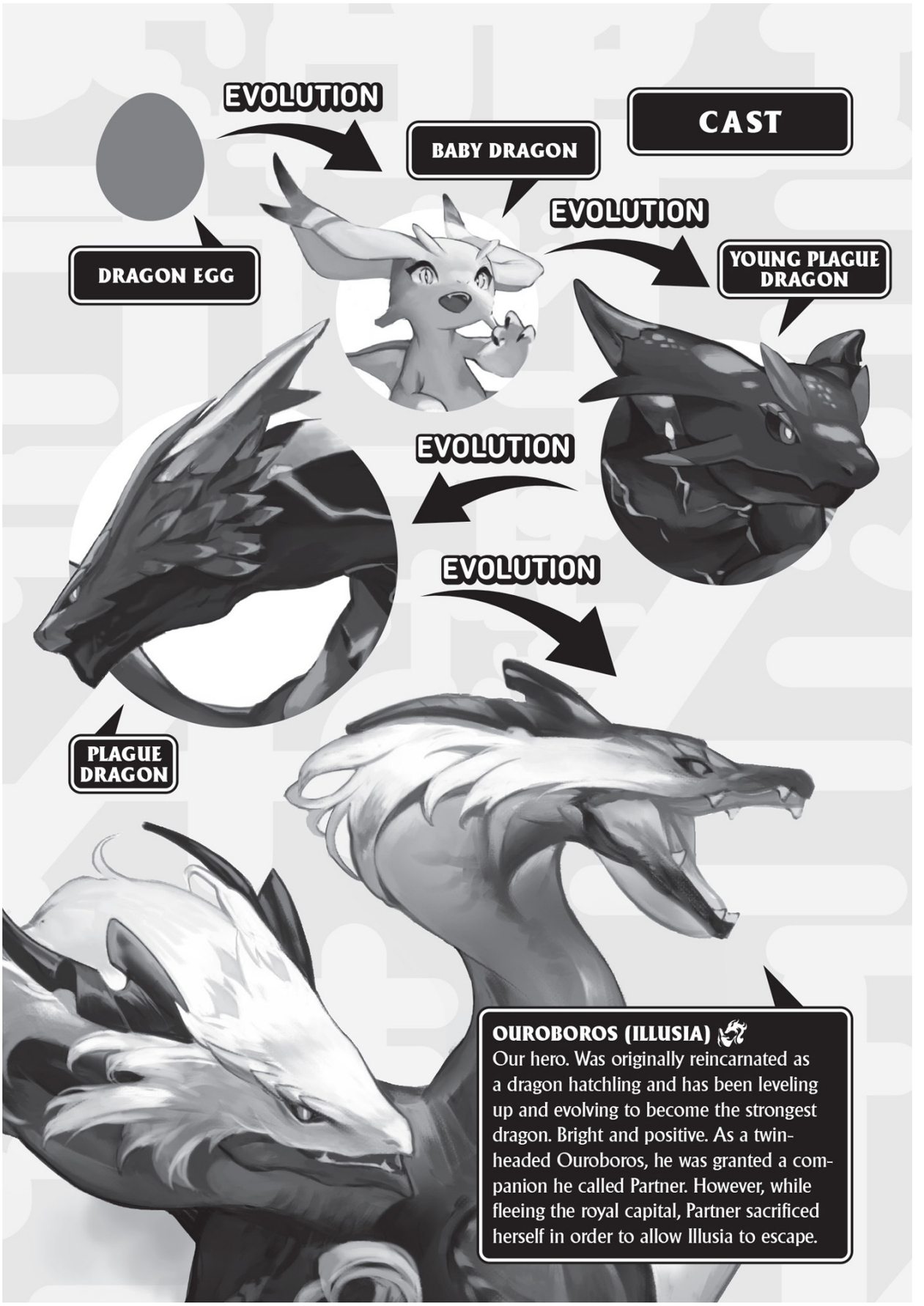
ALLO
A girl from the Lithovar tribe who was sacrificed as an offering to the manticore. Resurrected by Ouroboros, then evolved in order to inhabit a human body once more.



BLACK LIZARD
Trusted companion of our hero and master of poison attacks. Aided a gravely wounded Illusia with little regard for its own safety.



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


EVOLUTION
BABY DRAGON
CAST
EVOLUTION
DRAGON EGG
YOUNG PLAGUE DRAGON
EVOLUTION
EVOLUTION
PLAGUE DRAGON
OUROBOROS (ILLUSIA)
Our hero. Was originally reincarnated as a dragon hatchling and has been leveling up and evolving to become the strongest dragon. Bright and positive. As a twin-headed Ouroboros, he was granted a companion he called Partner. However, while fleeing the royal capital, Partner sacrificed herself in order to allow Illusia to escape.

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Afterword



THE STORY SO FAR

After teaming up with Saint Lilyxila on the Island at the Edge of the World, Illusia traveled to the city of Alban and entered the royal castle, where the Demon King was said to be hiding in secret. Although the absence of the saint made him anxious, Illusia took down the Demon King's underlings with the help of his friends, then descended deep under the castle to find the Demon King and defeat him once and for all.

However, what awaited him in the depths was a slime who Illusia had once faced in a deadly battle when he attempted to destroy Myria's village. After their battle, the slime had slunk off and spent his days absorbing the experience points and skills of hundreds of other people to become the Demon King.

Despite struggling heavily against the slime's plethora of powerful skills, Illusia managed to corner him. However, when the slime should have been taking his last breaths, he evolved into an embodiment of destructive power, Ruin, and began to swallow up the entire royal capital in his wrath.

Out of options, Illusia tried to lead Ruin as far away from the capital as he could. All hope seemed lost for the broken and battered Illusia. But then his other Ouroboros head, Partner, sacrificed herself as a decoy and took Ruin down with her.

Illusia, weary from his battle wounds and the tragic loss of Partner, collapsed. But fate allowed him no rest from his tragedies, and he faced an assassin sent by Saint Lilyxila—her promises of joining forces with Illusia had been empty from the start. She had deceived him in an attempt to obtain the Sacred Skills that both he and the Demon King possessed. But just when Illusia, no longer able to stand up on his own, thought it was all over, his old friend, the black lizard, appeared and carried him away to safety despite the danger to itself.

Partner had given her life to protect his, and now the black lizard had risked its own life as well. Not wanting their sacrifices to go to waste, Illusia pulled himself together and got to work. Certain the saint would not give up on her quest for his Sacred Skills, Illusia and his friends began to prepare for the inevitable battle.

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 10
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Chapter 1:
The Foreign Lands of the Far East

Part 1

I SOARED THROUGH the empty skies with Allo, Nightmare, Treant, Volk, Grandpa Magiatite, and the black lizard atop my back. I had no destination in mind; my only goal was to get as far away from the Kingdom of Ardesia as possible.

I'd joined forces with Saint Lilyxila to take down the slime, which had disguised himself as the princess of Ardesia and taken over the kingdom's royal castle. But Lilyxila had been secretly hoping the slime and I would take each other out. As soon as my battle with the slime was settled, she launched her attack on the one left standing: me.

There was no way of knowing what her true intentions were, but my guess was that rather than going after the slime for the sake of Ardesia's citizens, she was after the Sacred Skill the slime had as Demon King: Demi-God Realm Path. And since I had the Human Realm Path skill from defeating the hero, I would've also been a prime target.

I couldn't let Lilyxila catch up to me. I wouldn't stand a chance against her Spirit Servant Beelzebub if he showed up right now—my stats were way too low.

I flapped my wings, then looked at my...decidedly lighter left side. What was once the base of Partner's head and neck was now just a painful, gaping wound with a bit of bone jutting out of it. I let out a low groan at the sight.

Perhaps I couldn't directly attribute Partner's death to Lilyxila's betrayal—Partner had sacrificed herself to save me from the slime's final assault. Even so, I couldn't help but despise Lilyxila for everything she'd put me through, including losing Partner.

‹Volk...Grandpa Magiatite...I kind of brought you two along with us on the spur of the moment. Are you sure you want to be here?› I asked the two of them with Telepathy.

“It seems there’s not much else for it,” Volk replied. “The saint has me on her radar now. From what she and the knight were saying, it sounded like they were concerned about what would happen if we caught wind of their ploy and turned against them. If they capture me, they may very well kill me, just in case.”

I’d have liked to think Lilyxila wouldn’t go that far…but to be honest, I didn’t know what she’d do anymore. I was probably better off not getting my hopes up.

“And I have also taken a great interest in you. I’ve been starved for a worthy opponent for years; but only now have I felt so acutely aware of my own lack of strength! Staying by your side will ensure I never get bored, at the very least,” Volk added with a wry grin.

‹As for me, well…I have come this far, haven’t I?› Grandpa Magiatite replied with Telepathy. *‹I will see you through to the end. For Partner.›*

‹I… Thank you. Both of you.›

“The same to you, Ouroboros. But…do you have any thoughts as to where we’re headed next?” Volk asked.

‹Actually, I was thinking about going back to the Island at the Edge of the World…› It was a tempting thought, but I knew the Dragon King, Eldia, was still there. I’d only escaped from him last time by the skin of my teeth.

Maybe if I told him about how Lilyxila betrayed me, he’d be willing to put the whole thing behind us. But regardless, I had no interest in ruling over the humans or securing prosperity for dragons like Eldia did. We’d end up facing off against each other again eventually…

My friends’ lives were at stake. Maybe my best bet would be to make nice with Eldia to get him on my side, then take him out when I didn’t need him anymore? But that felt…wrong. I didn’t want to use him and then toss him to the wolves. I wasn’t like Lilyxila.

“Oho, so you came from the edge of the world, eh? That island in the Far West? You don’t seem particularly keen on returning, though.”

‹Well…you’re not wrong, but it may be the only choice we’ve got.›

I needed to get stronger. Without Partner to back me up, I'd never be able to compete with Lilyxila and Beelzebub as an Ouroboros. I had to evolve, and that meant grinding some levels. At this point, the only way to do that would be to take on as many high-rank, high-level monsters as I could. Hunting down Adams would be perfect. Taking down Eldia would be an option too, although one I'd…rather not pursue, if at all possible. He'd been an intimidating foe from the very beginning.

"If you are simply looking for a remote area with a lot of powerful monsters, I may have another idea."

O-oh? Is there another place out there that's even more terrifying than the island of Adams?

"There are four famous regions called the Four Great Lands of Monsters: the Great Ravine of the Far North, the Island of Giant Trees of the Far West, the Volcano Island of the Far South, and the Strange Lands of the Far East. Each of these places were host to generations of Demon and Beast Kings who ravaged their ecosystems and gave rise to multitudes of vicious, powerful monsters that set these regions apart from the others."

Oh, nice! Thank goodness for Volk and his in-depth human knowledge. The Island of Giant Trees must've been the Island at the Edge of the World with all the Adams.

That being said, I had no idea there were so many other places with powerful monsters. I'd been wondering where the slime I faced got all its OP skills; maybe the slime traveled to the Four Great Lands of Monsters?

In that case, setting aside the Island of Giant Trees, I should be heading toward one of the other three regions: the Great Ravine in the North, the Volcano Island in the South, or the Strange Lands in the East.

"Regrettably, I have never had any means of journeying to any of them," Volk said. "And even if I were to try and go by boat, I would have had no one to accompany me. Volcano Island, for example, is said to be so hot that no human can even step foot on its shores."

Jeez. That's insane.

"Of course, that won't be an issue for me," he added.

O-oh, really? Hmm…but Lilyxila and her Holy Knights might not be able to operate properly there. I was still kinda concerned about Volk, but I guess he did have Regenerate. I couldn't compare him to your average "strong" human.

I pondered this new information. Lilyxila had Beelzebub's Followers' Eyes skill at her disposal. As long as she had that, it didn't matter what backwater village or cave I hid us all away in—she'd eventually find us, and then she'd come for us. That was fine with me; I was definitely going to take her down this time. But if she came before I was ready for her, it'd be a tough fight.

‹So…which of the other three lands has the toughest monsters?› I asked Volk.

"*Hmm…* It is hard to say for certain, as there isn't much information available about any of them. But if I were to hazard a guess, it'd be the Far East. It is said that it is a vast wasteland, covered in fog. I believe it to be the most dangerous of the Four Great Lands of Monsters."

‹Well, then. Volk, you mind if we make our way there?›

Volk grinned. "What? Are you crazy? That place is cursed! Even the great heroes and saints of old are rumored to have refused to set foot there."

‹Exactly. And if that fog is thick enough, maybe Lilyxila will have a harder time finding us. Let's take a major detour to throw them off the scent and head for the Strange Lands of the Far East.›

I didn't know how much of a threat the predictions Lilyxila got from her Laplace were, but being able to hide from Beelzebub's fly eyes was a big deal.

What were all those "heroes and saints of old" afraid of? If it was just a big rank A or rank A+ monster, I'd try to take it down with everything I've got and make it my meal. Besides, the most dangerous of the Four Great Lands of Monsters would be a perfect shield to protect me from Lilyxila.

I'm gonna grind up my levels in the Far East and reach my next evolution…then help Allo and the others level up more and finally settle the score with Lilyxila.

I turned to the east and soared through the sky toward our goal: the Strange Lands at the eastern edge of the world.

Watch, Partner! This isn't the end of the road for me. I'm going to beat Lilyxila, and her Holy God too, if I need to. I'll never be their pawn!

Part 2

FOR THE FIRST PART of the day, my pace wasn't even half of what it normally was. I couldn't stop to rest in Ardesia out of fear that Lilyxila would pursue me, so I just used Regenerate as I flew with my battered wings to heal anything that needed healing. Once we'd put the Ardesian kingdom far behind us, I stopped to rest for a while and finally healed my wings so I could fly properly again.

Two full days passed before I caught sight of our destination in the distance, partly because of the major detour I took to throw Lilyxila off our trail. But thanks to that, I was already back in peak physical condition.

I raised my head. Far across the water, I saw a vast expanse of land covered in a deep, permeating fog. I could see a far-off mountain range, only barely visible through the mist, and a dense forest that spread out in all directions before it. It wasn't like I couldn't see very far, but visibility was definitely poor.

This is the most dangerous of the world's Four Great Lands of Monsters: the Strange Lands of the Far East. I've got no idea what I'll be facing here, but if I can't handle what this place has in store, then there's no way I'll ever beat Lilyxila and Beelzebub.

I looked over my shoulder to check on Allo and the others. Although I'd already activated my Psychic Sense as a precaution, I simply had no idea what kind of monsters would show up here. The fact that I no longer had Partner—who usually sensed enemies before I did—around to keep an eye on things worried me. But I had no choice but to approach the foggy landscape.

Almost as soon as I landed on the ground, a branch snapped, and I felt a menacing presence behind me. I whirled around—intentionally sending Allo and the rest flying off my back and away

from the danger as I went—and raised my front leg up to shield myself.

Mere centimeters from my face, a massive set of jaws opened wide, baring dozens of sharp, white fangs. The fangs belonged to a huge black wolf, maybe five meters long. Its four eyes leered at me hungrily.

I let the wolf snap its jaws down on my arm. There was a bit of blood, but it didn't hurt much, and it gave me time to get a look at its traits.

Fenrir: Rank B Monster.

A vicious, giant wolf with speed and agility ill-befitting its massive frame. It is said that the lands upon which its shadow falls are doomed to perish in the near future. A fleet-footed disaster that devours everything in its path before moving on to its next hunting ground.

I see… Its description definitely matches its wicked appearance. Might as well check its stats too.

Species: Fenrir
Status: Normal
Lv: 72/80
HP: 673/673
MP: 292/292
Attack: 405
Defense: 211
Magic: 288
Agility: 561
Rank: B
Special Skills:
Dark Type: Lv —
Scent: Lv 7

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8
Stealth: Lv 8
Instant Death Gaze: Lv 3
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 3
Magic Resistance: Lv 2
Poison Resistance: Lv 4
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 3
Normal Skills:
Curse: Lv 7
Clay: Lv 4
Hidden: Lv 5
Dark Sphere: Lv 5
Foul Bite: Lv 3
Beast Tackle: Lv 4
Scorching Breath: Lv 3
Regenerate: Lv 5
Tremor: Lv 7
High Jump: Lv 5
Filthy Tongue: Lv 3
Call Allies: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Tenacious: Lv 5
Big Eater: Lv 4
Final Evolution: Lv –

…That's it? It's only a rank B!

"My word! A fenrir! We've only just arrived, and we're already encountering beasts I've only ever heard of in legends!" Volk exclaimed, drawing his Grandpa Magiatite sword and dropping into a fighting stance.

I used Regenerate where the fenrir's jaws were clamped into my flesh to regrow my scales, locking its fangs in place. Then I raised my leg higher.

"...Hng?" The fenrir's body froze as it was lifted into the air. Then I slammed it into the ground with all the force I could muster.

The ground shook around us. The fenrir's four eyes rolled back, and its mouth opened wide. Before it had time to come to its senses, I pulled its neck out as far as it could go and snapped it with my other paw. The force of the blow knocked the fenrir's fangs out. It writhed on the ground for a few moments, convulsing, its twisted neck gushing blood. But it soon stopped moving.

Gained 1,876 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,876 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 122 has become Lv 123.

A rank B... I wouldn't get anywhere close to the experience points I needed to take on Lilyxila fighting a bunch of rank B monsters. The Island of Giant Trees was full of B+ and A– monsters! This place was supposed to be the most dangerous one!

Volk stared at the fenrir's mangled neck in stunned silence for a moment, then returned the Grandpa Magiatite sword to his back with a look of regret.

"It's scenes like these that remind me how truly out of my league you are, Ouroboros. Regardless, with prey this large, there should be enough food for us all."

Volk's words made me think of Partner. If she were here, she'd probably be over the moon at such a good meal.

Well, I guess it was good that the first thing we ran into when I landed was just a fenrir and not a super deadly monster. In the worst-case scenario, a powerful monster like Eldia could've been hiding out here and swooped in out of nowhere when we landed to gobble us up. If that'd happened, none of us would've been safe.

First things first: We had to keep our eyes peeled for danger and find a safe spot to set up camp. We needed to stock up on meat from the fenrir too. I also wanted to explore this island a little, get a lay of the land, and figure out our plans moving forward. Maybe there were monsters here like Grandpa Magiatite who'd be able to tell me more about what the deal was with this place.

Part 3

I DRAGGED THE FENRIR along the ground as I walked forward, eyes alert. The fenrir had been ready to fight, but as it turned out, the other monsters in the area weren't so eager. As we approached a tree along our path, the bark split into a wide mouth.

"Guooooooooh!" The tree monster yelped, pulled its roots out of the ground, and fled.

Jeez. That even startled me! As it turned out, it was a rank B treant called a trollwood. And it was a master at camouflage; my Psychic Sense hadn't picked up on its presence at all.

I glanced back at our treant. Those guys sure had some strong species traits.

Treant's eyeholes widened with shock as it watched the trollwood flee.

Y'know, I wish Treant was a little better at spotting its own kind. Or at least tried to keep an eye out for 'em.

As we walked along the coast, we came across a river flowing out from the forest. I decided to check it out to see if the water had anything strange mixed into it. In a place like this, I wouldn't be surprised if the water was poisoned or cursed somehow, and once we drank it, we'd all be turned to stone or something.

Spirit Water: Value B–

Water imbued with powerful magic that flows from the Fountain of Spirits. The water's magic disrupts the natural flow of water through the body, causing subtle drowsiness and agitation. Also restores a small amount of MP upon

consumption. Once separated from its natural environment, the water's magical properties are lost.

"Drowsiness and agitation," huh...? Does that mean the Sleep and Berserk status effects? It's...not alcohol, is it? Anyway, it could be handy to have, depending on how we used it.

I lowered my head to the water and lapped at it. There was no sign of any status conditions, and I didn't feel any ill effects. The water was cool and soothing, and tasted slightly sweet on my tongue.

We decided to follow the river into the forest with the idea that we wouldn't have any water problems if we stayed near the river. As we got closer to the mountains, the fog began to thicken around us, gradually decreasing our visibility. The trees were becoming more and more twisted and warped, making the landscape feel even eerier. Some trees seemed to stretch horizontally along the ground, as though they were crawling. With the poor visibility, they almost looked like monsters.

The river connected to a large hole at the base of the mountain. I stuck my head inside, but the opening wasn't wide enough for me to fit through. There was a hole in the ceiling at the very back of the cave, through which a waterfall flowed. It seemed like the water didn't spring from the cave itself; the source was farther up the mountain.

There were a few other interesting features in the cave, including lopsided, tumorlike mushrooms spreading across the rocks and several strange-looking chickens with huge mouths where their faces should've been.

I checked the stats of the mushrooms, and while they looked rather ominous, they were neither particularly poisonous nor particularly appetizing. If they were poisonous, I wouldn't have wanted to leave them here, but it seemed like there was no need for me to get rid of them.

The chickens with the big mouths were rank C– monsters called ogre chickens. They posed no threat to us as we were now. The ogre chickens didn't seem to have any intentions of going up

against us either; one after another, they all jumped into the river and used the water's current to make their escape.

I decided we could use this cave as our base for the time being. However, there were no visible entrances from the inside; the cave stretched out into the darkness in either direction. The only thing connecting the cave to the outside was the river, which meant I had to dive into the river to get inside. *Well…I don't* have *to go into the cave myself, I guess. If something attacks me, I'll just take 'em down.*

I tore the fenrir's head and limbs off with my claws before dividing the monster into ten equal parts. Then I asked Volk to chop the meat into more manageable pieces and had Nightmare hang the pieces from the ceiling with thread. I didn't know if it would taste good or not, but at least we wouldn't be going hungry for a while. I resolved to go back to the ocean later to gather some sea salt.

While I rested outside our new camp, I began to ponder our plan for the future.

I truly was grateful that Volk and Grandpa Magiatite had agreed to come with us. Volk sometimes seemed like his human brain had been replaced by a monster one, but he had more knowledge about human society than the rest of us combined. Grandpa Magiatite, as an elder monster, also brought a lot of knowledge to the table in other respects.

Now then. First, I should level myself up…

Illusia
Species: Ouroboros
Status: Normal
Lv: 123/125
HP: 3138/3138
MP: 3011/3026

I only needed to gain two more levels, and then I'd be able to evolve into the next rank. Ouroboros was an A class monster, so my

next evolution would probably send me to the same rank as the slime's final form, Ruin: Legendary rank.

The slime's Ruin form had a status condition called Collapsing God that caused its body to degenerate, but that was probably because the slime had evolved without a Sacred Skill. Since I had both the Human Realm Path and the Demi-God Realm Path, I shouldn't have to worry about that.

Whether I'd win or lose against Lilyxila would depend on whether I could level up and evolve, ranking up to Legendary before she attacked. Once I got to rank L, my levels would reset, so I should be able to level up fairly quickly.

I turned my attention to Allo, who was standing outside the cave and playing with the black lizard—or rather, Allo was chasing it and giggling, and the black lizard was reluctantly going along with it. In any case, it was nice to see Allo running around and acting her age a little more.

Name: Allo
Species: Levana Liche
Status: Cursed
Lv: 35/85
HP: 446/446
MP: 465/465

Allo had reached her Final Evolution: the rank B+ Levana Liche. There was no need to push her all the way to max level, but I at least wanted to bring her level up to 50.

Next, I turned to Nightmare, who was brazenly trying to steal some of the raw fenrir meat.

Species: Nightmare
Status: Normal
Lv: 29/70
HP: 234/234

MP: 227/227

That's right. Nightmare's Final Evolution is only a C+… To be honest, I would've liked her to evolve one more time, but at least her level cap was high.

I kept my gaze on Nightmare as I pondered. Nightmare lifted her head and shot a glare at me when she noticed me staring. Without thinking, I lowered my head a little.

Next is…

Species: Magical Tree

Status: Cursed

Lv: 15/60

HP: 223/223

MP: 166/166

Treant was drinking river water directly from the mouth in its trunk; its tree body bent at an unnatural angle. *I…I had no clue it could bend so far.* Its trunk looked like it was going to snap at any moment.

Shouldn't a tree monster of all things be drinking water from its roots…? I'd always thought that mouth was just for decoration. Who knew?

Treant was a rank C+ like Nightmare, but its level wasn't very high, and it didn't have the Final Evolution Title Skill. I hoped to get Treant evolved into a rank B+ so it'd be on Allo's level…but since it wasn't an attack-oriented monster, grinding levels with Treant was tough. I wanted to make getting Treant to max level a priority, but it'd take a lot of time and work, and it might've ended up evolving into a disappointing monster anyway. It was Treant, after all.

I mean, Treant had some potential, but not enough to make it a priority right now. If I based my plan around Treant's evolution, we'd probably fail.

Volk Veidaf
Species: Earth-Human
Status: Normal
Lv: 84/85
HP: 870/870
MP: 323/323

I've got no notes for Volk. He can put up a fight against even rank B+ monsters. I can't expect him to grow or evolve, but he's pretty much fine already. He doesn't need me to tell him what to do to improve.

Species: Magiatite Heart
Status: Normal
Lv: 53/70
HP: 114/114
MP: 414/414

Grandpa Magiatite was a high-level rank B– and also had the Final Evolution skill. Bringing his level to max wouldn't change his stats a whole bunch, so there was no need to focus on leveling him up. He seemed pretty content in his role as Volk's sword, so I wasn't planning on separating the two of them anytime soon.

Species: Venom Queen Lacerta
Status: Normal
Lv: 26/55
HP: 180/180
MP: 198/198

The black lizard was a rank C, which meant it had probably only evolved once since we'd parted ways. Now it could definitely compete with monsters like the Little Rock Dragon and the red ants, at least. But to be honest, it wasn't going to be much help in our

current situation. I was grateful to it for helping us get away from the A+ Beelzebub…but bringing it with us might've been a mistake.

There was still a risk that Beelzebub would remember the black lizard's face, but I doubted Beelzebub was the type to go out of his way to take down such a weak monster. Not because I thought he was a nice or forgiving guy by any means, but because it felt like a lot of effort to go out of your way to kill a single black lizard. There was also a risk that Lilyxila would take notice of the black lizard, but even taking that into consideration, bringing it here still felt more dangerous.

Okay. My first priority was to get myself leveled up and evolve. I could worry about the rest after that. My safest bet would be to train Allo and Nightmare while also making sure the black lizard evolved so it could protect itself. It'd be nice to bring Treant's level up a bit too, but I wouldn't focus on getting it to evolve.

"Ah!" Allo yelped, falling into the dirt. The black lizard, who Allo had just tried to mount, took the opportunity to showcase its agility to the fullest by dodging out of her path and running up to me instead. Treant set a branch on Allo's shoulder, as if to comfort her.

Sorry, Treant. I'll get back to you later, I swear.

When that thought crossed my mind, Treant suddenly turned its head to me and extended a branch.

‹It's all right, Master. Don't worry.›

T-Treant?! Jeez, you really like to pipe up out of the blue sometimes. You're free to use Telepathy more if you want, you know.

That being said, I hadn't used Telepathy to send out my thoughts, and Treant still picked up on them. Was Treant always using Telepathy to keep an ear out for my thoughts? That was a little creepy… Were none of my thoughts safe?!

"Kshh! Kssssshh!" The black lizard came closer to me and stretched out its neck. I patted it on the head, careful not to use too much force.

The two of us used to be just humble rank D monsters, but I blinked, and before I knew it, we were rank A and rank C. The black lizard used to jump all over me and lick my face, but now our difference in size had widened considerably.

Well, to be fair, I'd had a lot of help growing and developing to this point. My experience point gains were doubled, which halved the experience points I needed to level up and evolve, and I'd been constantly surrounded by powerful enemies all this time. Of course a regular monster would grow much slower.

"Kssshh!" The black lizard stretched out to press its head against my paw. *H-hey, don't move too much! If you hit one of my claws, you'll be in trouble!*

Allo, quietly watching from afar, looked like she was about to raise her arm and point in my direction. Treant placed a branch on her arm to block the movement, a serious look on its face.

What...the heck are those two doing?

Part 4

I'D MANAGED TO SECURE a base for my group, but it wouldn't do much good if there were any nests of dangerous monsters nearby. I decided to go out and patrol the forest around the waterfall cave to make sure it was as safe as possible. Allo and the others stayed behind, but I made sure to stay close enough that, if anything happened, I'd be able to hear their shouts and come help.

I walked along the river, squinting in the dense fog to try and look around. It really was scary, having my vision obscured by so much fog. I could see vague outlines of the terrain in front of me, but that was about it. There was no way to tell if anything nasty was lurking nearby until I was practically on top of it.

And this was the way we'd come from. I'd have to be even more careful when I started moving closer to the mountain. It felt like bad news.

I decided to drink a bit of the river water to calm my nerves before exploring upstream.

As I stretched my head toward the river, still lost in thought, my gaze landed on four menacing eyes staring at me from across the water. It was another fenrir, head lowered and drinking water

from the other side of the river. It seemed like we'd noticed each other at about the same time.

The fenrir immediately spun around to run for the trees. I sent out a Whirlwind Slash at its retreating form and hit it squarely in the back. Red blood gushed from the wound in its black fur, but it didn't seem to slow it down at all; the fenrir dashed into the fog and disappeared.

I peered into the distance, trying to see past the thick curtain of gray but slowly shook my head. The hulking shadow of the fenrir was already out of sight.

Dang it. I let that big wolf get away. After a few moments of silence as the fog settled, I heard the fenrir's defeated howl off in the distance.

"Garooooooo! Garooooorooo!"

Hey, shut it! If you're just gonna make a racket, come back here and face me for real! I could catch up to the fenrir if I followed the blood trail, but I didn't want to leave my friends alone in the waterfall cave without some sort of plan.

That being said, unless there was a huge jump in the amount of experience points required to get to the next level, I'd only need to take down about four more fenrirs before I reached max level. It was a shame I didn't get to take that one down. Maybe I should've just jumped over the river and attacked instead of using a long-range skill.

Lately, my Whirlwind Slash had started to feel a little… underwhelming. I didn't have any other mid-range attacks to speak of, so it's not like it really mattered, but it just didn't do enough damage. Even though it was pretty cheap in terms of MP and easy to shoot—which made it a good, quick deterrent—it was far inferior to direct attacks in terms of damage dealt.

It was handy for hunting weaker monsters, and it'd saved my butt a million times, so I didn't really want to speak ill of my beloved Whirlwind Slash. Sadly, those were the only things it was useful for at this point. Whenever I tried to use it as my main attack, it always backfired somehow. And its skill level was at 7, so it wasn't a skill level issue.

I felt like Whirlwind Slash was the skill I used most, followed by Roll, but it'd been noticeably underpowered lately. This felt especially true after taking on Eldia, the Chaos Ooze, Ruin, Beelzebub, and all the other top-notch enemies I'd fought lately. Whirlwind Slash barely did anything to them.

I might've been better off if I had my Normal Skill, Holy Sphere, that I'd gotten from my Title Skill, Hero: Lv 8. But unfortunately, Ouroboroses seemed to have their skills divided between their left and right necks. Holy Sphere was Partner's, so now I'd never be able to use it again.

I knew hoping for a long-range attack with the speed and power of a melee attack was asking for a miracle. But if I had a skill as powerful as Eldia's Drago Flare, I'd be able to make quick work of rank B enemies…

Okay, that's enough. I pushed my thoughts away and stretched my neck down to take a long drink from the river, as I'd originally planned. I was here to drink water and feel better. Not to reflect on the usefulness of my beloved Whirlwind Slash, or to hunt fenrirs, but to cool my thoughts with some refreshing water.

Mm, yeah, this is the stuff… I wished Partner could've tried it. But this didn't feel like regular water to me. It was almost like alcohol in terms of its effects…

Well, I didn't find any monsters of note around here. Once I'd reported back to Allo and the others, I should go up the mountain and explore. Maybe find the source of the waterfall too. The fog seemed to be thicker on top of the mountain.

For now, though, I just wanted to explore the area around the cave; hunting rank B monsters should've actually been enough to bring myself to my next evolution safely. And to level Allo and the others, a rank B or a herd of rank C monsters was just the ticket.

But if I was going to settle the score with Lilyxila here, I couldn't have any unknown adversaries lurking around. I could've put it off for now, but I'd eventually have to go up the mountain and investigate what was going on up there. The best thing to do was to try to increase my radius slowly and locate as many landmarks as I could.

Lilyxila was scary, but this was also supposed to be the most dangerous land in the world. If I let my guard down even a little, it'd become my grave, and Allo and the others would make for a tasty meal for some monster. Leveling quickly was vital, but I needed to be smart about it.

I turned around and began to walk back along the river to the waterfall cave.

Now then... I'd like to extend the radius for my next sweep of the area, but who should I bring with me, and who should stay back in the cave?

Sticking together wasn't a bad idea, but I felt like it'd be better to keep the exploration party small. If we ran into something particularly nasty, like a horde of B+ monsters for example, it'd be really hard to protect Allo and the rest and escape in such poor visibility.

In that case, my top candidates to come along and help me explore would be Allo and Volk. However, they'd also be my top picks to stay behind and look after the others, as they were the only ones who I felt like could take on a B+ enemy.

It'd be tough for Allo or Volk to fight off a monster like a fenrir alone while also keeping an eye on Treant and the others. I wanted to bring someone along as backup, but for their safety, going it alone was probably the best course of action.

I was getting close enough to see the waterfall cave clearly. Allo spotted me approaching and ran toward me, waving her hand.

"Master Dragon!"

Ha ha ha, Allo, don't go too far from the cave! It's dangerous out here!

Suddenly, I felt an ominous presence nearby. It wasn't coming from the cave, where Allo and the others were. No...it was from behind me, and off to the side a little. When I looked around, I saw a hazy figure moving through the mist.

And it wasn't just one. There were at least three figures surrounding me, keeping their distance and concealing their presence.

…Crap. I brought a nasty enemy back with me. I guess scouting a safe zone didn't always go exactly as planned. These enemies must have had excellent senses to be able to surround me on three sides through all this fog without me noticing. They were clearly also used to working in packs.

I stopped walking and stared hard at Allo, silently urging her to stop. Allo, sensing something was amiss, stopped in her tracks and turned to the others behind her to signal them with her eyes. Volk began to slowly make his way over to us, his Grandpa Magiatite sword at the ready, and Treant slipped back into the cave as casually as it could.

That's…an acceptable decision, and it's not the wrong choice here, but it's also why you can't raise your level at all, Treant.

The black lizard, on the other hand, was trying to come out of the cave and join us, but it was blocked by one of Treant's branch arms. It struggled to get through to no avail.

Okay… Good work, Treant. Sorry about giving you a hard time. It's just too soon for Black Lizard to take on an enemy like this.

For a while, the three shadows lurking in the fog and I were at a stalemate.

Should I attack first? No, there are three of them. If I go toward one of 'em, the other two will take that opportunity to attack. I focused my mind and took a deep breath.

"Groooooooh!" I let out a Bellow at the three figures. One of them leapt toward me.

"Graaah!" A fenrir, its back still matted with blood from our encounter along the river, emerged from the fog. Its four vicious eyes blazed with fury. Wait, did that mean…the other two were fenrirs too?!

"Garoooooo!"

"Graaaaah!"

The other two shadows stepped out from the fog after the first. Eight additional eyes stared at me from hulking frames covered in pitch-black fur.

I thought these monsters devoured everything in their path and then moved on to their next hunting ground? Why are they working

together like it's normal?!

I'd assumed that the Call Allies skill was just a leftover skill from a previous evolution or something, but it seemed like I was wrong. Did that mean this place was the hunting ground for an entire pack of fenrirs?

"Garooooo!" The first fenrir lunged at me, baring its teeth. I twisted my body backward to avoid its jaws. The second one took advantage of my back being turned to pounce, trying to tackle me to the ground.

While keeping an eye on the third fenrir, I leapt to the right to avoid the second one's tackle. But I didn't account for the fenrir's reach, and the second wolf's claws tore through my shoulder.

"Garooo!" The second fenrir looked back at me with a satisfied howl as it landed gracefully and bounded off. These guys knew what they were doing. They weren't going to break their three-way boundary. I could easily go in and smash one of 'em, but the other two would use that chance to attack.

"Master Dragon!" Allo called out to me. She was also a rank B+, but those fenrirs were around level 70, and her level was half that. Her HP and Magic stats were higher, so it wouldn't be an impossible fight, but she was lacking when it came to speed. The only way to compensate for that...would be for her to fire off magic skills from on top of me.

"Grah!" I growled at Allo and lowered my head. She nodded in understanding.

"Gale!" Allo's body was enveloped in a gust of wind that sent her soaring to the top of my head.

"It seems I have a chance to get in on the action this time!" Volk called, slashing at one of the fenrirs on his own. The fenrir caught the blade between its claws and swung it around, tossing Volk away.

Volk swung his sword as he landed on the ground, sending a Shockwave straight across the giant wolf's face. Then he dashed forward, closing the distance between them again, and leapt into the air.

The fenrir ducked its head to avoid the Shockwave and swung its claws up toward Volk in midair. The claws looked like they made contact. But Volk seemed unfazed and stood tall on top of fenrir's upraised foreleg.

"Gngh!" Blood suddenly spurted from one of the fenrir's four eyes, and Volk leapt from its leg to its shoulder, then safely onto the ground.

"Leave this one to me! I'll keep it busy!" Volk said with a wild laugh before dashing out of the clearing.

"Garooooooooooo!" The fenrir with the slashed eye snapped its fangs and tore off after Volk.

The two remaining fenrirs looked at each other, then began to run around me in a circle. That would make it much easier for them to attack my blind spot.

"Dark Sphere! Dark Sphere!" Allo called from her spot on my head, shooting two orbs of dark energy straight into the fenrirs' paths. The spheres exploded with black light, cracking the ground and sending a spray of earth dancing along its surface.

Nice! Shoot 'em up, Allo! If you run out of MP, you can just siphon some off me with Mana Drain! These fenrirs are fast and hard to hit, but their strategy is starting to crumble!

"Grr...!" One of the fenrirs, apparently realizing their current strategy wasn't going to work, began to try and back away. Then Allo's Dark Sphere exploded directly behind it, and the fenrir froze for a moment.

Now! I sent out a Whirlwind Slash that sliced deep through the fenrir's thigh.

"Gyaaa!" The fenrir howled in pain.

I rushed to catch up with the last fenrir, which was fleeing in the opposite direction. The one with the injured leg was probably out of commission for now, which meant I could use this opportunity to finish the last one off.

The final fenrir's eyelids twitched. Then it whirled around and lunged toward me with everything it had, kicking off the ground hard and rolling sideways in the air. Seemed like these guys were fans of this attack.

But just because a maneuver worked once didn't mean it'd work a second time. I figured it must have thought it could make up for the difference in agility between us with its erratic spinning moves, but things were different now. Before, it'd been three against one, and I couldn't focus on this one alone because I had to keep an eye out for the other two. But now this fenrir was a lone wolf, and I had Allo with me.

"Gale!"

Allo's wind magic stopped the lunging fenrir in its tracks. The fenrir landed on its feet, then turned tail and ran. *Jeez, it sure gave up fast. It must've realized it couldn't get past me after Allo stopped it in midair. But if it was gonna give up, it should've done it earlier.*

"Graaaaaaaah!" I roared, leaping at the fenrir and tearing through its back with my claws. The fenrir fell to the ground, its chest against the earth.

"Dark Sphere!" A black orb of magic flew straight into the fenrir's skull. Its head caved in, and blood began to pool beneath it.

Gained 1,076 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,076 Experience Points.

So it's over, huh? It seemed like Allo received a lot of experience points. Her level had increased from 35/85 to 39/85.

Taking down the last fenrir was easy. It had apparently healed its leg injury with Regenerate, so Allo and I had to chase after it, using our mid-range skills to whittle down its HP. When I saw an opening, I pounced on it and finished it off.

Volk came back drenched in blood but with a satisfied look on his face. He seemed to have taken down the fenrir single-handedly without any trouble. This guy had really given up on being human…

I looked over the three dead fenrirs and used my claws to tear them into lumps of meat, then hung them in the air with some of Nightmare's thread to drain their blood. The mouth of the cave was now full of blood and suspended chunks of meat, but that was the best spot we had to hang it. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Unfortunately...I didn't manage to level up this time. It seemed like leveling up in the 120-level range was harder than I thought—it was pretty unexpected to not level up after killing two high-level B class monsters.

I only had two levels between me and my next evolution, but those two levels were a massive barrier. Maybe I should've taken these guys out myself. It would've been a bit risky, but it wasn't impossible for me to defeat three B class monsters on my own. Compared to Chaos Ooze, Ruin, and Beelzebub, they felt like a walk in the park.

Even if Beelzebub's fly eyes were hindered somewhat by the poor visibility, Lilyxila also had Laplace at her disposal. I wouldn't be shocked if they showed up here tomorrow. It felt like...I should've been taking more risks here so I could evolve faster.

Volk was strong enough to take care of the group while I was gone. This was a strange place with awful visibility, and I could never tell what kind of monsters were lurking just out of sight. But... whatever was out there, Lilyxila was much more dangerous. Maybe I'd been playing it a little too safe lately...

Part 5

I DECIDED TO LEAVE Allo and the others in the waterfall cave and go explore more of the area on my own. I needed to find out what kind of monsters were around, what rank they were, and where they were located.

With the visibility being so poor, it was probably a good idea to get a general feel for the terrain. I especially wanted to explore the top of the mountain to find the river's source, along with the origin of the fog. I suspected the fog was being made by some sort of dangerous monster up there.

I'd initially planned to take it slow and be more cautious, but I was ready to change up my approach. If I didn't act now, I might not catch up to Lilyxila before she attacked.

I needed to take some risks.

The only information about this island I had to go on was what Volk had told me. For all I knew, it could've been the tamest of the Four Great Lands of Monsters, including the Island of Giant Trees, where the Adams were. If that were the case, then I had to consider moving to one of the other three regions.

I ran up the cliff outside the cave, parallel to the waterfall. The river at the top of the cliff was somewhat calmer than the one that led to the cave. If I continued along the water's edge, I'd likely reach the river's source.

The mountain's slope varied between gentle and steep. Thanks to the fog, I had no sense of its scale, but it seemed pretty big. The mountain's landscape was barren, with exposed soil and only a few trees and plants dotting the cliffs. I wanted to fly around and check out the area from above, but I wouldn't be able to see the ground from the air with all the fog.

As I walked, I started to feel like someone was watching me, but my Psychic Sense wasn't picking up anything of note. Even so, it was important to pay attention to my intuition. And it felt like my senses were dulled somehow—maybe due to the fog.

I wandered around the area for a while, keeping a watchful eye out for any danger. Suddenly, a huge shadow appeared in the mist nearby.

"Groooooooooh!" To scare off the figure, I used Bellow, spread my wings wide, and leapt back to create some distance between us. *D-dang, that spooked me!* This guy seemed like bad news... The Bellow didn't even seem to faze it.

Maybe it's a higher-ranked fen—hm?

A sudden shiver of unease crept down my spine. I hurried over to the shadowed figure, which hadn't moved since it first came into view. As I got closer, I realized it was a massive human head...made of clay. The statue was about five meters tall and had the face of a gruff old man.

W-weird. What was a clay statue doing all the way out here? I thought the Far East was supposed to be uncharted territory for humans. Maybe if I checked its status, I'd be able to figure out when it was made and for what. That should help me solve the mysteries of this island.

Clay Guardian: Rank B+. A guardian of the earth who has been granted sentience. Its strengths are forged from its tempered magic power and the depths of its hatred. Once part of a monster created to destroy gods…but no longer.

I quickly leapt into the air and kicked the clay guardian's earthen face. I used the recoil from the blow to soar out of reach, then righted my posture. *Th-that was close… So it's a monster after all, huh? It tricked me good!*

Species: Clay Guardian
Status: Normal
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)
HP: 714/785
MP: 225/225
Attack: 544
Defense: 881
Magic: 364
Agility: 241
Rank: B+
Special Skills:
Golem: Lv —
Earth Type: Lv —
Stealth: Lv MAX
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 9
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 9
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv MAX
Magic Resistance: Lv MAX
Poison Immunity: Lv —
Instant Death Immunity: Lv —

Normal Skills:
Bite: Lv 8
Transform: Lv 8
Regenerate: Lv 9
Sandstorm: Lv 9
Heat Beam: Lv MAX
Lingering Rope: Lv 9
Clay: Lv MAX
Clay Wall: Lv 8
Clay Sphere: Lv 7
Gravity: Lv 8
Gravidon: Lv 9
Physical Barrier: Lv MAX
Float: Lv 9
Curse: Lv 7
Death: Lv 7
Direct Burst: Lv 1
Title Skills:
Clod: Lv MAX
Follower of the Last Demon King: Lv —
Final Evolution: Lv —
Tenacious: Lv MAX

H-huh? These stats don't make sense... That kick was mainly intended to create some distance, so it was pretty light, but it barely did any damage at all. This monster was an unusual one, both in appearance and stats. According to its status screen, it used to be a follower of a former Demon King with a Sacred Skill, huh?

It seemed like the last Demon King—or maybe even the Demon King from a century ago—had come to this place after all. I'd thought I just happened to stumble upon an important place by chance with the Island of Giant Trees, but it seemed like the Demon

King was meant to visit the Four Great Lands of Monsters after it got stronger and was driven from human lands.

That being said, I was happy to see this rank B+, max-level monster. Taking it down might give me enough experience points to gain those last two levels and evolve.

In truth, the sight of this monster set off alarm bells in my head. Nothing good could come of this thing. Getting involved with it was probably a bad idea. I didn't think I should go any deeper into this fog. In fact, I probably should have left then and there.

These Far Eastern lands weren't the perfect leveling spot and blind spot for the fly's eyes I'd hoped they'd be. Normally, I wouldn't touch a monster so blatantly dangerous, but right now, there's no way I was letting a monster with so many juicy experience points get away.



“Groooooooh!” I dashed toward the clay guardian, closing the distance between us once more. Then I slashed my claws straight across its face.

A light flashed over the surface of the clay guardian’s body.

That must be its Physical Barrier skill.

It had raised its resistance to physical attacks. But even so, it was never going to keep up with me if it moved that slowly.

I slammed into the clay guardian with all my might. My claws scraped chunks of clay from the statue’s form as I sent it flying. Fine. If it was that tough, I’d just have to slice through it as many times as it took!

I looked down at my claws, now packed with clay.

Alchemia’s Magic Clay: Value B+. Clay imbued with magic created five hundred years ago by the alchemist Alchemia, who gained the power of the Demon King while still in human form. It is said that by forming the clay into the shapes of beasts, Alchemia was able to create many monsters. After the Demon King’s death, a vast majority of the magical clay golems were destroyed and their bodies returned to the earth, but some may still be seen in remote regions.

I see… So it’s the same type of monster as a claybear. This clay guardian’s strength is on a whole different level, though.

The clay guardian’s trajectory from my hit slowed, and it began to float in midair with its Float skill.

Species: Clay Guardian

Status: Physical Resistance Boost

Lv: 85/85 (MAX)

HP: 511/785

MP: 208/225

This thing sure was sturdy. I'd hit it with everything I could, and that's all it did? Well, I hadn't tried a Dragon Punch yet, just regular melee attacks. I wasn't scared of playing defensively when there was a difference in rank. So long as those hits did some damage, I was in the clear. Even if it recovered, if I just kept smacking it, I'd whittle it down eventually.

The clay guardian's MP was already down a tenth of its max. I didn't really want to exhaust myself taking down this one opponent, but the experience points I'd get from a B+ monster would be worth it.

The clay guardian's eyes began to glow red. I leapt into the air just as two beams of red light shot out at the spot where I was standing. It was using Heat Beam, the long-range skill that caused me so much grief with the Giant Sand Centipede. *I wasn't expecting two beams at once, though...*

This skill was long-range, long-lasting, and extremely powerful. It was one hell of a skill to be up against. But at close range, it was nothing to be afraid of.

I soared through the air with the clay guardian's crimson beams following just behind me. I swooped past the clay head, kicking it hard as I went by. The disturbance broke its concentration, and the red beams disappeared as chunks of clay broke off from the statue.

I immediately swerved around and lifted the clay guardian into the sky, then slammed it to the ground with the full force of its weight. As the statue hit the ground, I brought my raised front foot down on it to increase the impact of the collision.

The clay guardian cracked. Instantly, countless clay needles formed on its back and extended out toward me at once. It was using its Transform skill to attack—but it was just too slow. I spread my wings and jumped up and away from the clay guardian, out of the range of its needles.

Things were going well so far, but I was still nervous—in particular, about the golem's skill I hadn't seen yet.

Normal Skill “Direct Beam.” Non-elemental magic skill. Causes user to self-destruct, inflicting massive damage on its opponent based on magic and defense stats.

Oh, man… I had my suspicions when I first took a look at its status, but this thing is a big ol’ freaking bomb?! I had no clue how much damage a self-imploding rank B+ monster would do or how large of a blast radius I had to worry about. And on top of that, this clay head was so solid that my long-range skills wouldn’t do any real damage to it.

This really is the type of monster I wouldn’t normally touch with a ten-meter pole! For now, my only option was to keep my distance and keep myself at full stats.

Direct Burst was the clay guardian’s only oddball skill. Aside from that one, it was a pretty easy fight—easier than the fenrirs, with their impressive power and agility that made them formidable attack-oriented foes. Even when they were outranked, those attack- and agility-type enemies could still eat me right up if I wasn’t careful. However…this golem’s Direct Burst was a serious thorn in my side if I wanted to take it down.

While I kept my distance, the clay guardian healed the fissure in its clay along with its HP—likely with Regenerate.

Should I…rush in and overwhelm it with melee attacks? No, that’s a bad idea. I don’t want to risk getting caught in the Direct Burst.

I swooped in and out of range at high speed, punching, scratching, and kicking the clay guardian with every pass. I just had to be smart and take my time, and I’d beat this thing for sure.

Just as I was starting to tire out, I took another look at the statue’s stats and saw its HP and MP were nearly depleted. The clay guardian’s massive form dropped to the ground from where it was floating.

A magic circle appeared on the ground around the clay guardian, and several lumps of clay broke off from the surrounding landscape to form four huge spheres that shot toward me.

This had to be the golem’s Clay Sphere skill. Of course, I was able to dodge them without any issue. *But why would it make the*

Clay Spheres so big? I wondered. It was just throwing away MP.

Next, a huge circle of black light appeared, centered on the clay guardian. It was using Gravity. However, thanks to the big gap between our stats, Gravity's effects weren't nearly as extreme as usual. It took a bit more effort to move than before, but that was about it. After all, clay guardians didn't specialize in magic.

Even inside the ring of black light, I was still able to evade the Clay Spheres. But as soon as I dodged out of the way, something grabbed me from behind.

I whirled around to look and froze in shock. Dozens of clay arms extended from the surface of the Clay Sphere, trying to seize me and hold me down. Arms stretched out from the other spheres as well, grabbing hold of my body. Between them and the gravitational force of Gravity, I sank to the ground.

"Grr...groooooooaaar!" I bit down on one of the clay arms and tore it to shreds, twisting my body to shake off the rest.

Those arms freaked me out for a second there. It had to be using that skill Allo used sometimes: Lingering Rope. Could she maybe do the same thing with a ball of clay? I'd have to tell her about it later.

When I looked back up, my vision was obscured by the clay guardian's wide-open mouth directly in front of me. Its face was now 80 percent mouth. I tried to jump back away from it, but it lurched forward and bit deep into my shoulder.

C-crap! The bite didn't do much damage, but I've gotta get this thing off me soon, or I'm in trouble! The clay guardian's many arms clung to my body. No matter how many I managed to break off, another one came to take its place.

The clay guardian's expression changed to one of malice as the ring of black light expanded, and cracks began to appear all over the guardian's surface.

Uh-oh. H-here comes the Direct Burst!

I clenched my teeth and used Regenerate to recover all the damage I took from the bite.

Moments later, there was a blinding flash of light, and then my body was enveloped in overwhelming heat. My eyeballs felt like

they were immediately burnt out of their sockets, making it impossible to see what was going on. For a split second, I lost consciousness. As I fell to the ground, I quickly got to work repairing my body with Regenerate. It was a good while before I got back up again.

Man…that was close. I was only alive thanks to my Special Skill that let me avoid being killed with a single blow. Maybe it would have been better for me to be able to finish this fight quick thanks to that skill, but to be honest, I didn't want to have to rely on that skill to save me.

Well, it felt like I probably would've been able to just barely survive the blast even without the skill, but the fact that it could bring even a tanky Ouroboros's HP down this low made Direct Burst a pretty nasty skill indeed. Its radius was smaller than I'd expected, but if it could bring even rank A monsters to their knees, then it could really pack a punch.

Even so, going up against the clay guardian had been well worth the risk.

Gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 123 has become Lv 125.

Ouroboros has reached MAX Lv.

Evolution Requirements have been fulfilled.

At long last, the requirements for my evolution had been met. Two levels up, huh? I guess it was a good thing I took down those two fenrirs. With this…I could finally rank up to Legendary like Ruin.

Part 6

I CONTINUED ON THROUGH the fog, healing my injuries with Regenerate as I went. I would've liked to evolve right away, but

there were still things I needed to do around here first.

Because I didn't know how much time I had before Lilyxila attacked, I had no time to waste. It was a long trek back to the waterfall cave. Since I'd already made it that far, I wanted to see if I could find where the fog was coming from at the source of the river.

I just need to get a quick look at it, and then I can get out of here. Even just a brief investigation of the area would make it much easier to determine my next move once I got back to the cave.

I continued forward along the river for a while until I heard noise from up ahead. It sounded like something being dragged along the ground. I crept forward, staying alert for any signs of life from my Psychic Sense. A few moments later, I glimpsed multiple silhouettes in the fog.

There were three of them: Two were sliding along the ground, while the last one floated between them. No...it wasn't floating. As I got closer, I realized it was *walking*—but on what looked like long, thin legs.

I hid behind a rock and peered out at the three figures. The longer I watched, the clearer their forms became. Through the fog, I caught a glimpse of two giant human heads that were immediately familiar to me.

Species: Clay Guardian
Status: Normal
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)
HP: 785/785
MP: 225/225

Species: Clay Guardian
Status: Normal
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)
HP: 785/785
MP: 225/225

My breath caught in my throat.

Wait, there're more *of 'em?! You gotta be kidding me! If those things find me, I'm dead meat! Did they get worried when they heard one of their brethren self-destructing and come to investigate?*

I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, but first, I wanted to check out the monster in the middle. Its figure slowly materialized from the fog as the trio drew closer.

Five long, beast-like legs extended from the creature's body. Each seemed to have two—no, three joints; it walked with an uncanny gait. Atop them sat a bloated, tumorous lump of flesh with what looked like several ragged, gaping mouths. It quivered like an embryo in the womb.

Species: Shub Niggurath

Status: Normal

Lv: 125/125 (MAX)

HP: 1811/1811

MP: 1568/1568

I-It's a rank A?! I figured I'd run into a monster that strong around here at some point, and here it is! And it's not just a rank A...it's a max-level rank A!

Shub Niggurath looked like an experience point gold mine, but I couldn't get any closer in my current state. My body was still healing from the clay guardian's Direct Burst. If I got into a fight with that rank A along with the two rank B+ monsters, it'd be over for me.

The clay guardians were no ordinary rank B+ monsters either. Their self-destruct skill dealt nearly 2,000 damage. It was almost too much for even me to handle, so Volk and Allo would probably die instantly.

As if pushed out from inside the lumpy mass, a single large eyeball rose to the fleshy surface and popped out. It dropped, then hung there by what looked like a bundle of nerves. The monster quivered again, and the bundle of nerves rose until the eye was

upright. Then the eye began to glow red and stretch out in my direction.

"O-ohhh, ooohhhh..." A groan escaped from one of Shub Niggurath's many mouths.

I froze. *H-huh? Did it see me?* I couldn't tell for sure. I'd be better off staying put.

The next moment, Shub Niggurath bent all five of its legs and dashed toward me at lightning speed. I leapt out from behind the rock and moved on pure instinct, unleashing five Whirlwind Slashes at my foes. Before the wind blades even reached their targets, I turned around, curled into a ball with Roll, and sped off down the mountain in the opposite direction.

What the hell?! Why does it move like that?! It's so creepy! If I get caught by that thing, I'm screwed! Is it the main boss of this place or something?

I kept speeding away from Shub Niggurath for a while, but I missed a turn because I was going too fast and crashed into a nearby wall of mud. The area rumbled with the impact, and the mud wall was reduced to rubble. I pushed a large rock off me that'd fallen down from above.

Th-that was rough. I can't go up against that thing yet.

I'd felt a malicious presence chasing after me for a while as I fled, but that sensation was gone now. *Maybe it's safe to assume...I got away?*

If Shub Niggurath had to guard the mountain's summit, it was possible that it couldn't follow me all the way out here. But if it really was on my trail, and I led it to the waterfall cave, things could go really bad, really fast...

I decided to stay where I was for a while to make sure I wasn't being followed. I used that time to rest and heal up the last of my injuries with Regenerate.

During my break, another fenrir came by, drawn by the scent of blood in the air. Because I couldn't gain any more experience points, I just drove the fenrir back with three Whirlwind Slashes. The longer I stayed up there, the more time the fenrirs had to return

with their pack, but I felt confident that I could take on three or four of them at the same time if I needed to.

After that, there was no sign of Shub Niggurath. I squinted up the stream, sighed, drank some water, and turned to head back to the cave.

Once I got back, I'd be able to evolve. And I had a goal now.

If I could kill that big lump of meat, I should be able to take Beelzebub on.

Chapter 2:
Mandragora Leveling

Part 1

"MASTER DRAGON!"

"Kssssshh!"

When I returned to my base in front of the waterfall cave, I was greeted by Allo and the black lizard running toward me. I knelt down, rested my chin on the ground, and caught their two leaping forms with my cheeks.

Nightmare was busy steadily weaving her web through the surrounding area. I'd have to be careful not to destroy it by mistake; if I got on Nightmare's bad side, she'd drag me through the dirt. Were there even any monsters around here that'd get caught in her web, though?

Volk was eating raw fenrir meat, which I opted not to comment on.

It occurred to me that since we had a lot of meat to go around, I could make some salt from the seawater and try making dried meat for the first time in a long while.

Allo suddenly moved away from my cheek. When I glanced over at her, she was staring at my body with searching eyes.

I felt a twinge of embarrassment from her stare. *Wh-what? Do I have something on my face?*

"Your fur is shorter, and your scales look different somehow." Allo looked back up at me, curious.

Huh?! She can tell?!

It must have been because I took the clay guardian's Direct Burst full to the face. I'd used Regenerate to carefully heal myself up before I got back to avoid suspicion, but it seemed like I'd been found out anyway.

"Don't be...*too* reckless, Master Dragon. If you disappeared, I don't know what I'd do."

I lifted my head a little, then lowered it back down. “*Grrr…*” *‹S-sorry… I was in a hurry.›*

The black lizard, who’d been watching the exchange between Allo and I, started checking over my body. I felt like they shouldn’t have been able to tell what happened just by looking at me…

‹Oh, right… Allo, do you know where Treant is? I want to gather everyone up for a minute. I’ve reached my level max, so it’s time for me to evolve.› Immediately, a tree at the edge of my field of vision turned around to face me.

Ah. There you are, Treant. Wait, were you listening in?! Treant, who looked like it’d been sunbathing, didn’t respond.

While Allo went to explain the situation to Volk and Nightmare, I decided to check my options for evolution. This was the evolution with which I’d have to face off against Lilyxila and Beelzebub; I needed to choose carefully.

Display Evolution options?

It’d been a long time since I last received that message.

All right, let’s see ’em. I don’t know how much of this is part of my Divine Voice’s ultimate plans, but I can play along for now.

Future:

Sins Rank L (Legendary)

Oneiros Rank L (Legendary)

Ziz Rank L (Legendary)

Jabberwock Rank A+

Yig Rank A+

Present:

Ouroboros Rank A

Past:

Plague Dragon Rank B-

Young Plague Dragon Rank D+

Baby Dragon Rank D-

Dragon Egg Rank F

Five options, huh? That's a lot to choose from.

Even so, the Jabberwock and Yig were only rank A+, while the other three were Legendary. I'd have to check them all out individually and rule them out as options unless there was a really good reason to choose one of them over the rank L choices.

For now, let's start with the lower-rank options. If I only had rank A+ evolutions to choose from, I would've been in trouble; I was glad to see that I had some Legendary options to pick from.

Yig: Rank A+. A long, slender azure dragon with an exceptionally lengthy tongue. A specialist in poison, paralysis, and other status conditions, the Yig itself is immune to most status effects. Also able to spawn a large number of serpents inside the body of an enemy afflicted with Curse, which can be controlled and used as minions. The skill drains the enemy's energy, minimizing the user's own MP consumption. In most cases, the enemy will lose consciousness before its energy is fully depleted.

Due to its ability to produce a large number of spawn, the Yig can cause a great deal of devastation when it appears. However, what mankind fears the most about this dragon is not its numerous spawn, but what would happen to those who dared to capture it.

Dang…these evolutions are vicious right from the get-go. I think I'll probably pass on this one, though.

If I evolved into a Yig, my fighting style would be to create a bunch of followers through mass sacrifices, trap my enemies inside a pit of my snake soldiers, and torment them to death through curses and sheer force. It felt like it'd be strong, but…I didn't think I'd be able to stomach a battle strategy like that.

Besides, it's only a rank A+, so…yeah. Next!

Jabberwock: Rank A+. Fangs that slice like a line of razor-sharp greatswords and claws that pierce like a bundle of giant spears. Its evil eyes burn away all it sees, its corrosive breath brings entire nations to ruin, and its flexing tail causes powerful earthquakes. An Evil Dragon whose every body part is a fearsome weapon to behold. Its overwhelming destructive power is unrivaled by that of any other monster.

I was pretty sure I'd seen this monster's name in another enemy's skills section a long time ago. It seemed like the Jabberwock was a dragon that specialized in offensive power above all else. Although it was a rank A+, in my experience, offense-focused dragons were exceptionally powerful and had the potential to take on even top-rank monsters.

Its rank is still low, so it probably won't be my first choice…but it wouldn't be a bad option. I'll put it on the back burner for now. Next!

Ziz: Rank L (Legendary). A gigantic dragon with glossy, shimmering feathers. Its appearance and overwhelming size make it feared as "He Who Covers the Sun." During battle, it dons Hellfire Armor, which prevents most from even getting close to it. Highly adept at flight, it prefers to keep to the air and lay waste to its enemies with long-range attacks.

This one was a strong contender. Its flying abilities gave it a massive advantage, although I had doubts that its multiple flame skills would be able to compensate for my somewhat lackluster Whirlwind Slash. The Ziz also seemed promising in terms of defense, thanks to its Hellfire Armor. It would give me a big overall advantage in close combat. Being constantly protected by flames would be a massive check against Beelzebub's Inhale and Fly King's Gale double whammy. *I think I'm leaning toward this one so far…? On to the next!*

Oneiros: Rank L (Legendary). Also called the Dream Dragon, the Oneiros is said to govern the world of dreams. It fights using powerful magic that allows it to manipulate light, gravity, and space. The magic unleashed by an Oneiros is said to transform a place into another world.

This one seems like a pretty tricky type too. From what I knew, gravity magic skills were extremely popular. If I had those, along with Legendary stats, they'd make the fight with Lilyxila and Beelzebub a lot easier.

However, I was afraid that this evolution would make me weak in close-quarters combat. I had a lot of skills already, but at the end of the day, I still relied a lot on simple punches and kicks. I might not be able to utilize my new skill set very well and end up getting myself in trouble.

And now, last but not least…

Sins: Rank L (Legendary). In ancient times, Sins once drove mankind to the brink of extinction and established a world of monsters. It is said that the dragon appears in order to punish humanity for their sins. It possesses seven heads, all different in appearance and nature, and each of them governs one of the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, envy, lust, gluttony, wrath and sloth. Additionally, the heads can separate into seven individual dragons, although doing so reduces their physical abilities and causes a continuous drain on HP and MP.

For a moment, my mind froze. *A…multi-headed dragon, huh? So that's an option this time around too…*

This evolution felt like an all-rounder, considering the fact that each of the seven heads possessed different abilities. I could've been wrong, and I didn't know how long ago this was, but…if the Divine Voice was to be trusted, then apparently a Sins had once come out on top against the saint and the hero of its time.

It depended on how practical splitting into seven was, but if I was able to utilize it well, I could potentially combine forces with

Allo and the rest and split into two teams to take on Lilyxila and Beelzebub.

My biggest fear, though, was that on their own, my seven heads would be destroyed one by one. Having six other heads as potential Sacrifice users would give me a powerful advantage, but I didn't even want to consider that anymore. Not after Partner.

Although…there was another thought nagging at my brain. *If I evolved into another multi-headed monster, would Partner come back?* Typically speaking, it was impossible. She'd separated from my body and then was killed on her own.

But…in a world ruled by strange and arbitrary stats and skills, maybe this evolution could bring Partner back?

I sat quietly for a while, thinking. *If I choose one of the Legendary ranks, this will probably be my final evolution. Yig, Jabberwock, Ziz, Oneiros, or Sins…*

The rank A+ choices—Yig and Jabberwock—were tempting, but considering my current situation, I had to rule them out. The jump in stats between ranks was just too significant. With the threat of Lilyxila and her A+ Beelzebub attacking at any moment hanging over my head, I couldn't rationalize choosing an A+ over an L. Unless I was max level, I wouldn't be able to compete with Beelzebub. And even if I were, it'd be next to impossible to beat the two of them together.

The question was which of the three rank L evolutions to choose: Ziz, Oneiros, or Sins. I weighed the options for a while, but no matter how much I thought, I couldn't decide between them.

My thoughts kept circling back to that one issue: Would evolving into the multi-headed dragon Sins bring Partner back?

After much deliberation, I decided to go with option four: consulting Laplace.

The last time I'd used Laplace was when the Divine Voice made me do it, right before I defeated the Little Rock Dragon. Since then, I'd sworn off using it. The slime and Lilyxila seemed to use it a lot, but I really wasn't a fan of it. I had the vague sense that the more I used it, the more I'd be following the Divine Voice's designs, and that one day, I wouldn't be able to stop and turn back. It wasn't just

because I didn’t like the Divine Voice either. The slime, Illusia the hero, Lilyxila… To me, their thoughts and sensibilities made no sense whatsoever. I had a strong suspicion that either the Divine Voice or Laplace were behind their motivations.

Even so, the question of whether Partner could be resurrected by evolution couldn’t be answered by anyone other than Laplace. I didn’t like it, but my only choice was to break my self-imposed ban under the excuse of wanting to understand more about the system upon which this world was built.

Using Laplace was easy. All I had to do was close my eyes and think—it was no different than using a magic skill. At first, the words were garbled like I was doing something wrong; but after a few tries, they quickly stabilized.

Probability of reincarnation of ??? if Sins evolution is chosen: 0%.

No variability in outcome expected due to user’s number of references or calculation errors.

I’d been holding out hope for the possibility of bringing Partner back, so this result was an unfortunate shock. I wanted to believe that the Divine Voice was at work here, that it was showing me this result because it didn’t want me to evolve into a Sins.

But more than feeling angry or resentful, all I felt was a deep sense of resignation. When I first looked at the description for Sins, it’d felt too convenient to be possible…but for a moment, I’d truly believed I could bring Partner back. And at that moment, Sins was my number-one choice.

Still, Sins could be a powerful evolution. It had seven heads, each with its own strengths. Any inconveniences it might have would more than likely be made up for by its raw power.

But I only had one Partner, and she was gone. I couldn’t stand the thought of her place beside me suddenly being occupied by a stranger.

That left…the fierce, armor-clad giant dragon Ziz and the dream dragon Oneiros. Both had their pros and cons.

Oneiros would give me powerful skills that would allow me to bend light, gravity, and space to my will. The gravity magic was

especially enticing to me. Where it fell short, though, was close combat. Compared to long-range magic, striking from up close was more stable in terms of damage output, and it felt more natural to me.

Ziz, with its Hellfire Armor, would give me a massive advantage in close combat…but in a fight against Lilyxila, I'd have a dangerous weakness: everyone else. By its very nature, it would be difficult to protect Allo and the others as a Ziz. Not only that, but I doubted they'd be able to ride on top of me as I flew either. Even if the Hellfire Armor could be turned on and off, if I had to protect Allo and the others, I'd lose the Ziz's greatest advantage.

And Lilyxila wouldn't miss the opportunity to exploit that weakness. I was painfully aware of how cunning she was—she'd use any means necessary to achieve her goals. She'd make Allo and the rest her main targets in order to get me to remove the Hellfire Armor.

Fast physical attacks would be a massive boon against Beelzebub's Inhale and Fly King's Gale, but as long as Lilyxila was around, choosing Ziz for the Hellfire Armor would be a mistake. Although it wasn't my first choice, my safest bet was to evolve into an Oneiros.

While I still had my misgivings about its ability to fight in close quarters, Ouroboros was also a support- and endurance-type dragon with a higher magic stat than attack stat, and a majority of its utility lay in its impressive HP. As an Oneiros, I should be able to use my magic skills to create openings, then go into melee combat to strike decisive blows against my opponent.

In essence, this meant I had the potential to get powerful help in the form of magic without having to change my fighting style.

All right, it's decided. I'm going with Oneiros.

While I was thinking, Allo came up to me with the others in tow. I looked around to her, Treant, Nightmare, the black lizard, Volk, and Grandpa Magiatite in sword form, then gave a short bark. Then I took one final look at the description for Oneiros.

Oneiros: Rank L (Legendary). Also called the Dream Dragon, the Oneiros is said to govern the world of dreams. It fights using powerful magic that allows it to manipulate light, gravity, and space. The magic unleashed by an Oneiros is said to transform a place into another world.

I closed my eyes.

This will probably be my final evolution. Not only because I'm reaching the upper limits for rank, but because there aren't any potential enemies in this world who are stronger than Lilyxila. After this, there won't be any need for me to evolve any further.

A burst of searing heat flashed through my body. From the end of my snout to the tip of my tail, my entire being was being made anew. After my many evolutions, I'd grown accustomed to the strange sensation.

My face hardened, and my horns grew longer. I couldn't see my face changing, so it was a purely sensory experience, but my growing horns soon entered my field of vision. On my back, I felt a second pair of wings sprout behind the first; apparently, Oneiros was a four-winged dragon. I felt a second tail begin to grow as well.

Please tell me I get at least a little bigger... I had the sensation of my body raising up, but it didn't seem like my viewpoint changed much.

I looked down toward the river and saw my new dragon self for the first time. My Oneiros body was covered in bluish-purple scales. The upper half of my face had transformed into the semblance of a mask.

Special Skill "Fly" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Special Skill "Dragon Scale Powder" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Special Skill "Dragon Scale" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Special Skill "Automatic MP Recovery" Lv 6 has become Lv 8.

Ahh…it's been a while, hasn't it? All of my accumulated skills were being raised to higher levels.

Lost Special Skill "Twinheads" Lv —.

Lost Special Skill "Split Personality" Lv —.

Lost Special Skill "Mutual Understanding" Lv 3.

Lost Special Skill "Master's Demonic Gaze" Lv 1.



O-oh…

On instinct, I looked over at my left shoulder—but of course, there was no Partner there to greet me, just my shoulder and wing, with no room left for another neck to sprout. I felt a pang of sadness. *She's gone. She's really gone.*

But I couldn't stop now. Even so, losing Master's Demonic Gaze was an unexpected shame. It was difficult to use, but it was a very handy skill to have when used in the right situation. Partner had used it on me right before she sacrificed herself to save my life.

Gained Special Skill "Dragon Mirror" Lv —.

Gained Resistance Skill "Illusion Immunity" Lv —.

Due to Title Skill "Dragon King's Son" Lv —, all Resistance Skills less than Lv 5 have increased.

A new Resistance Skill…and it's full immunity to illusion magic? Nice. This one skill will let me counter all illusions without any issues.

All status conditions were a pain, but I'd been particularly wary of illusion magic. It could create massive openings to exploit, even in stronger opponents, so it was difficult to counter unless you knew your opponent was using it. And if you let yourself get caught in it, you were almost guaranteed to take a massive hit.

I was especially afraid of Lilyxila's Illusion skill. After witnessing it firsthand, I'd come to understand just how crafty and cunning she could be. If she used it, I felt like there was no way for me to win. But now that I had the Illusion Immunity Resistance Skill, there was nothing to be afraid of anymore.

Normal Skill "Diseased Breath" Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Normal Skill "Scorching Breath" Lv 5 has become Lv 7.

Normal Skill "Telepathy" Lv 2 has become Lv 4.

Normal Skill "Death" Lv 5 has become Lv 7.

Normal Skill "Soul Addition (Fake Life)" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Normal Skill “Holy” Lv 2 has become Lv 5.

Normal Skill “Wide Rest” Lv 1 has become Lv 5.

Normal Skill “Regen” Lv 1 has become Lv 5.

Normal Skill “Holy Sphere” Lv 1 has become Lv 5.

My Normal Skills were also leveling up. I hadn’t been able to improve my magic skills much, so that was a huge relief. *Y’know, thinking about it now, I feel like Ouroboros was the right choice for evolving. I probably wouldn’t have much in the way of recovery skills as an Oneiros if I hadn’t gone through Ouroboros first.*

Gained Normal Skill “Dimension Claws” Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill “Illusion” Lv 8.

Gained Normal Skill “Gravity” Lv 8.

Gained Normal Skill “Dimension” Lv 8.

Gained Normal Skill “Illusion” Lv 8.

Gained Normal Skill “Hell Gate” Lv 8.

Here come some new Normal Skills. They all look pretty impressive, to boot. They were already high level from the get-go too—they were probably ready to use in battle. I’d have to check out how useful they were before my fight with Lilyxila.

Gained Title Skill “Dream Dragon” Lv —.

Gained Title Skill “Final Evolution” Lv —.

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Title Skill “Laplace Authority Interference” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

So this really was my final evolution. I doubted I’d need to be any stronger than this anyway, but I figured I’d cross that bridge if I ever came to it. *Now then…is that everything?*

Title Skill “Demon King” Lv 1 has become Lv 6.
Gained Special Skill “Fearsome Gaze” Lv 1.
Gained Special Skill “Control” Lv 1.
Gained Special Skill “Magical Brainwashing” Lv 1.
Gained Special Skill “Demon King’s Blessing” Lv —.

O-oh, right… I guess that makes sense… I’ve evolved into a dragon even more unbelievable than Ouroboros. I completely forgot I’d get the Demon King’s skills as well. They all seemed pretty powerful too, judging by their names.

Illusia
Species: Oneiros
Status: Normal
Lv: 1/150
HP: 725/725
MP: 754/754
Attack: 495
Defense: 274
Magic: 647
Agility: 322
Rank: L (Legendary)
Sacred Skills:
Human Realm Path: Lv —
Demi-God Realm Path: Lv —
Special Skills:
Dragon Scale: Lv 8
Divine Voice: Lv 7
Grecian Language: Lv 3
Fly: Lv 8
Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 8
Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8
Psychic Sense: Lv 5
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 8
Valiant Soul: Lv —
Dragon Mirror: Lv —
Demon King's Blessing: Lv —
Fearsome Gaze: Lv 1
Control: Lv 1
Magical Brainwashing: Lv 1
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 5
Falling Resistance: Lv 6
Hunger Resistance: Lv 5
Poison Resistance: Lv 6
Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6
Magic Resistance: Lv 5
Dark Resistance: Lv 5
Fire Resistance: Lv 5
Fear Resistance: Lv 4
Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 5
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 6
Illusion Immunity: Lv —
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4
Curse Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 3
Blinding Resistance: Lv 2
Petrify Resistance: Lv 2
Normal Skills:
Roll: Lv 7
View Status: Lv 7

Scorching Breath: Lv 7
Whistle: Lv 2
Dragon Punch: Lv 4
Diseased Breath: Lv 7
Venom Fangs: Lv 7
Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6
Dragon Tail: Lv 2
Bellow: Lv 3
Celestial Fall: Lv 4
Earth Fall: Lv 2
Human Transformation: Lv 8
Whirlwind Slash: Lv 7
Neckbreaker: Lv 4
Hi-Rest: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 5
Sacrifice: Lv —
Death: Lv 7
Soul Addition (Fake Life): Lv 6
Holy: Lv 5
Telepathy: Lv 4
Wide Rest: Lv 5
Regen: Lv 5
Dark-Dispelling Flash: Lv 1
Holy Sphere: Lv 5
Dimension Claws: Lv 1
Illusion: Lv 8
Gravity: Lv 8
Dimension: Lv 8
Hell Gate: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —
Klutz: Lv 4
Just an Idiot: Lv 1
Infighter: Lv 4
Pest Killer: Lv 8
Liar: Lv 3
King of Evasion: Lv 2
Chicken Runner: Lv 3
Mr. Chef: Lv 4
Stalwart: Lv 4
Giant Killer: Lv 5
Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4
Clan Boss: Lv 1
L aplace Authority Interference: Lv 4
Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —
Ant King: Lv —
Hero: Lv MAX
Dream Dragon: Lv —
Demon King: Lv 6
Final Evolution: Lv —

My stats had been cut in half…but these new skills should make up for it. If I leveled up some more, I'd catch up to the status I had as an Ouroboros in no time.

I looked around at the others. Nightmare's face hadn't changed, but Allo and the black lizard were looking up at me happily, and Treant was clapping its branches together in front of it like a clapping monkey toy.

"*Hmph.* Now *that's* a monster I'd love to cross blades with sometime."

I thought I heard Volk mutter something, but I didn't pay any attention to it.

First, I had to check my skills and see if I could use Partner's magic skills. After that, I needed to work together with Allo and the rest to farm fenrirs for experience points, and… *Hmm?*

I'd checked Allo's status while I was thinking and felt like something was…off, somehow. I stared at Allo for a while, and when Allo looked back at me, face reddening, I finally realized what had changed.

Name: Allo
Species: Levana Liche
Status: Cursed
Lv: 39/85
HP: 469/469
MP: 488/488
Attack: 243
Defense: 215
Magic: 553
Agility: 120
Rank: B+
Special Skills:
Grecian Language: Lv 4
Undead: Lv —
Dark Type: Lv —
Body Morph: Lv 7
Privilege of the Dead: Lv —
Master of the Earth: Lv —
Evil Eye: Lv 4
Undead Maker: Lv —
Resistance Skills:
Debuff Immunity: Lv —
Physical Resistance: Lv 5
Magic Resistance: Lv 5

Normal Skills:
Gale: Lv 7
Curse: Lv 4
Life Drain: Lv 5
Clay: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 5
Clay Doll: Lv 6
Mana Drain: Lv 6
Lingering Rope: Lv 6
Fog of the Dead: Lv 5
Charm: Lv 1
Wide Drain: Lv 2
Dark Sphere: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Demon King's Underling: Lv —
Hollow Mage: Lv 7
Everlasting Body: Lv —
Undead Queen: Lv —

I-It's gone! Allo used to have the Final Evolution Title Skill, but now it's not there!

I immediately checked Nightmare and Grandpa Magiatite's statuses; the Final Evolution skill was missing from both of theirs as well. *No way… How is that possible?* I scanned through my list of newly acquired skills.

Special Skill "Demon King's Blessing." As the Demon King, this skill allows the user to unlock the potential of those who serve them. Raises the evolutionary limits of monsters under one's command. Also doubles the rate of experience point gain for any monsters of lower rank than oneself.

Wh-whoa…what a crazy skill. The double experience point gain would be huge. Wasn't this super overpowered?

It made sense, though; the slime did have a lot of high-rank underlings. I'd wondered how it was able to level them all up so much, but now I understood.

With this skill at my command…I might have to rethink my strategy moving forward. When we got here, I'd made two assumptions that were no longer true. The first was that I shouldn't prioritize leveling Allo and the others because they were getting close to their max levels and already at their final evolutions. The second was that I didn't have the time I'd need for them to gain a bunch of experience points anyway.

But now, thanks to this new skill, all bets were off.

Part 2

NOW THAT MY STATS had been cut in half after evolving, I needed to find monsters I could reliably beat while I was still weak to progress through my lower levels. In my experience, when my level reset back to 1 after evolving, I could get back to my previous evolution's stats pretty quickly as long as I found a good spot to farm experience points.

I could've kept hunting down fenrirs by relying on my skills, but…I didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. My level-one stats were about the same as a max-level fenrir's, so I might've been able to beat them, but their agility stats were much higher than mine. It was just too risky. Besides, if I could find a monster that was a little easier to beat than the fenrirs, Allo and the others would have a much easier time leveling up.

"Grrh…" ‹Hey, I'm gonna go scout the island a bit by myself again. I want to see if there are any monsters around that're weaker than the fenrirs.› I said to the others with Telepathy.

"But won't that be dangerous for you now?" asked Volk. "If you're chased, you will have no choice but to fight."

‹Yeah, I know. But I've got some handy new skills to use too. Stay put for a minute and watch.› I moved away from Allo and the others and began to concentrate. Magic shimmered in the air as I began to twist and distort the light and space around me, changing my appearance. This was my new Special Skill, Dragon Mirror. As usual, I couldn't explain *how* I made the skill work—it was all pure intuition.

I looked down at the river, adjusting my appearance in the water's reflection. My new appearance was that of a small, round, yellow dragon: a Baby Dragon. Where before I'd towered above her, I was now not much taller than Allo.

Special Skill "Dragon Mirror." Distorts light and space around user to change its appearance. Can also enable user to attract enemies or reduce detectability. By using it in conjunction with other body transformation skills, MP consumption rate can be greatly reduced.

Feels like a useful skill to have in all kinds of situations... But because it wasn't as good as Human Transformation, and because it drained MP continuously, it felt like it'd be tough to use with any sort of regularity. It also required a bit of focus to work, which made it less than ideal for using in the heat of battle. I might be able to improve if I practiced, though. And according to the description, if I used it along with Human Transformation, my MP consumption rate would be greatly reduced. I may have just gotten it, but I could already tell that this was an amazing skill. As a Legendary class, Oneiros lacked the destructive power of a Ruin, but this skill alone was handy enough to make this evolution worth it.

There was no particular reason why I chose to take the appearance of a Baby Dragon. The only benefit of choosing it was that it was a form I was already familiar with, which made it much easier to move around from the start.

On top of that, this small shape also made it much easier to get around unseen. Although I could use Dragon Mirror to disappear completely if I wanted to, it would require even more MP than Human Transformation and make it impossible for me to move

around much. This was as small and incognito as I could get if I still wanted to be mobile for a while. That being said, it was worth remembering I could go invisible for a little while and escape if I really needed to.

I checked my status. It seemed like my max HP, attack, and defense had all been reduced by half, just like with the Human Transformation skill. Maybe I'd get some back if I took on a bigger form? Tolemann's bodyguard Azalea's stats increased when she used Dragon Transformation, so it wasn't out of the question.

"Oh? That is no mere illusion, is it?" Volk said, looking unusually surprised.

"M-Master Dragon...?"

"Kssshh...?"

Allo and the black lizard walked closer, their bodies vibrating with excitement. Allo had her hands stretched out toward me, like a kid trying to catch a cat. Her face was filled with expectant delight.

U-um, guys? Stay back... With my level-one stats cut in half from Dragon Mirror, I was now much weaker than Allo.

Suddenly, the black light of Gravity emanated out from Treant behind me. Allo, who was leaning forward, fell down on the spot as the gravitational force hit her, taking the black lizard down with her.

Treant stuck a branch out toward me. The eye and mouth holes on its trunk, resembling a human face, were curved upward in a kind smile.

O-oh. Thanks, Treant... Seems like Allo and Black Lizard are too busy staring to talk to, but you just keep an eye out and wait for me, okay? I'm gonna go take another look now.

This form made it easier to conceal my presence and move quietly, but it was even more difficult to spot me in the island's fog. Even if something did see me, I could use Gravity to stop them from getting close, then Dragon Mirror to turn invisible and run away. And since my agility wasn't halved like my other stats were, I'd be able to hightail it out of there at full speed with Roll.

In Baby Dragon form, I went to scope out the area around the waterfall cave again. Hopefully, there'd be some sort of nest of rank

C+ monsters around here…like red ants or something. Then I could dive in and start leveling.

I pressed on through the foggy landscape. Out in the distance, I spotted a fenrir running in my direction. I crouched low, hiding in the underbrush, until it passed me and disappeared again.

Nice. If I'd been my original size, it would've definitely seen me. Seems like my strategy's paying off.

As I stood there thinking, I heard a series of snapping sounds that sounded like dozens of cracking joints—and it seemed to be getting louder. Something was coming, and it looked like it already knew I was there.

Tch! It must've had some pretty keen senses to spot me. There had to be a way to get out of here somehow, right?

I was beginning to see the faint outline of a figure in the fog. *Hmm…well, if it's this close already, I might be better off seeing what this thing is before I make my escape?*

The approaching figure didn't seem very large; it was maybe a size bigger than a typical human. Maybe it wasn't that strong…?

Killer Queen: Rank A–. Driven by an all-encompassing desire to dismantle everything in sight. Due to their nature, most boogie dolls run out of stamina after endless consecutive battles and are inevitably destroyed. The very fact that a boogie doll has survived long enough to evolve into a Killer Queen is proof that they are vicious, killer dolls that have never known defeat.

The figure's form came into view. It was a girl doll wearing torn, raggedy clothes. Her body was crooked and deformed, with four long arms, four equally long legs, and a missing eye. In each of her four hands, she clutched a wicked-looking knife.

I locked eyes with her single one. A chill ran down my spine, far stronger than the one I'd felt facing the avyssos for the first time.

"Found…you…" The Killer Queen moved closer, her body's joints cracking repeatedly as she went.

Without a moment's hesitation, I used Dragon Mirror and disappeared.

The Killer Queen rushed forward at lightning speed to the spot where I'd been standing just moments before. Confused, she wandered around the area for a little bit before tilting her head and clacking away into the fog.

A little while after she left, I returned to my Baby Dragon form. *Oh, man... That was close.* That thing almost killed me! It might cost a lot of MP, but being able to completely disappear at a moment's notice was a lifesaver.

I stayed there a while to catch my breath before deciding to move on and give up on scouting this area for the time being. With that thing still out there, there was no way I was about to bring Allo and the others back this way anyway.

Part 3

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY DODGING the Killer Queen with my new Dragon Mirror skill, I proceeded carefully through the fog, still in my Baby Dragon form.

I entered the creepy forest with the warped trees, keeping an eye out for any treants trying to camouflage themselves among the trees. At one point, I spotted a fenrir wandering around on its own. Thinking I could take it down, I hid myself in the fog and fired a Whirlwind Slash at its rear. But because my level was so much lower than the fenrir's it barely did any damage.

The fenrir immediately whirled around and dashed toward me, its four eyes gleaming red. My only choice was to vanish again, wasting more precious MP. It hung around for a while, seemingly intent on finding me, but when that proved impossible, it wandered off in confusion.

This skill sure is convenient.

It still had its caveats, though; it took too long for me to transform, and I couldn't move or do anything while I was invisible. It'd be much less useful against smarter opponents.

After traveling for a while, I'd refamiliarized myself with how to get around as a Baby Dragon. I was also getting used to walking around more cautiously than I'd had to in a long time. Using Dragon Mirror continuously drained my MP, so this excursion had a time limit. I decided to pick up the pace with Roll.

As I Rolled down a steep incline, I entered a narrow path between two cliff walls that was almost invisible in the fog. The path grew steadily steeper, almost like a long slide. In my original form, such a narrow path would've been impassable. Considering I wanted to find a place for Allo and the others to level up, I decided it'd be best to avoid this place, but the slope was so steep that I was afraid to stop using Roll and head back.

Well, if I find a good spot, I can at least fly back to it later, so it won't be a complete waste of time.

I exited the dirt slide onto a patch of ground covered in grass, flowers, and ivy. The fog still lay thick over the landscape, but it felt quiet. Serene.

I looked around. I couldn't see all the way from end to end, but...was this entire area closed in by the cliff walls? I felt like I'd found a secret—a field of flowers left undiscovered by the rest of the world.

Hmm... This felt like a good place to take a break. If it was completely closed off, it might help keep any strange monsters off my back. If there was a decent water source nearby, I'd be willing to move our base here.

...Or so I thought until I noticed the flower petals and tree roots scattered along the ground as though something had been gnawing at them. It looked like there were some native monsters hanging around here after all. I had to be careful.

I walked a little further and came across a few large plants, each growing a fair distance away from the others. The plants were about three meters tall; tall enough for Baby Dragon me to have to look up at them. They looked somewhere between a type of grass and a tree—almost like the stalk of a pineapple—and had two large, simple flowers growing from the tops.

As I stood admiring one of these unique-looking plants, it suddenly grew—no, it lifted up from the ground. From underneath,

a massive monster made entirely out of roots appeared and began to move toward me, its mouth open wide.

W-wait! Are all the plants here monsters?! Oh, crap! These things totally caught me off guard! Is my Psychic Sense broken or something?!

I kicked off from the ground and jumped back. The monster's gaping maw snapped shut where I'd been standing.

It was easily six meters tall—ten, if you included the plants sticking out of its head. The monster's body of tangled roots resembled an evil spirit with a wide, hungry mouth.

Let's take a look at this thing's status...

Species: Troll Mandragora
Status: Normal
Lv: 52/80
HP: 531/531
MP: 184/184
Attack: 416
Defense: 247
Magic: 344
Agility: 216
Rank: B
Special Skills:
Earth Type: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 7
Photosynthesis: Lv —
Stealth: Lv 6
Super Regeneration: Lv 6
Recovery+: Lv 6
Resistance Skills:
Petrify Resistance: Lv 8
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 8
Confusion Resistance: Lv 7

Sleep Resistance: Lv 7
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 7
Poison Resistance: Lv 7
Normal Skills:
Bite: Lv 5
Burrow: Lv 3
Regenerate: Lv 5
Tremor: Lv 4
Weak: Lv 4
Clay Wall: Lv 3
Paralyzing Bite: Lv 2
Acid Drool: Lv 4
Title Skills:
Rare Monster: Lv —
Delicacy: Lv —
Elixir of Immortality: Lv —

All right! An easy target! Even at level 1, all of my stats were higher than the troll mandragora's. *I guess this is what it means to be Legendary rank!*

On top of that, the troll mandragora didn't have any particularly nasty skills for me to be worried about. It had a lot of recovery skills, and more Resistance Skills than usual, but that was nothing to write home about.

Specializing in resistance and recovery was useful for beating lower-rank opponents, but those specialties quickly lost their utility when faced with opponents of the same or higher ranks. Treant was a perfect example of this.

Plus, this troll mandragora was a rank B monster with a decent number of levels under its belt, which meant taking it down would mean a hefty sum of experience points. I hated to say it, but this might be the most delicious monster I'd ever tasted.

The troll mandragora gritted its gigantic teeth, as if frustrated at missing its prey, and then turned its sights on me once more.

I released the effects of Dragon Mirror and returned to my original Oneiros form. The troll mandragora froze, then trembled in fear and began to retreat. *Sorry, but you're the one who's about to be my prey!*

I decided to try out one of my new skills, Dimension Claws.

Normal Skill "Dimension Claws." Allows user to manipulate space to their will and unleash claws on a target without regard to distance. However, a great deal of skill is required to wield effectively.

Ooh…a claw attack that can be used at any distance, huh? That's quite an interesting skill. It seems faster and more powerful than my ol' reliable Whirlwind Slash too.

I gathered magical energy into my claws and unleashed it at the troll mandragora.

Normally, there would've been no way this attack could hit the troll mandragora—but a massive slash appeared along its surface, and its massive body trembled in pain.

I'd aimed right at the center of the monster, but it seemed like my attack had landed slightly off to the side. Dimension Claws definitely needed some finesse to control, but the skill's power and speed were no joke.

I swung my front leg down twice more. For the second shot, I overcorrected my aim and ended up on the edge of the troll mandragora's opposite side. But the third shot landed dead center on the mandragora's massive root system.

Normal Skill "Dimension Claws" Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

The troll mandragora fell to the ground, unmoving. With that, the hardest part of evolving—getting past level 1—was complete.

Gained 1,352 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,352 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 1 has become Lv 46.

Ooh…that sure got me a bunch of levels! If only I could power through the other two-thirds of my levels that fast!

To be honest, I would've been able to win that battle even if I'd just fought normally, but I was glad I got to test out my new skill. Dimension Claws…was nice. Being able to attack instantly and continuously from a good distance away was huge. The attack range also felt reasonable. This was going to be very handy.

Now let's take another look at my status.

Illusia
Species: Oneiros
Status: Normal
Lv: 46/150
HP: 725/2255
MP: 231/2329
Attack: 1620
Defense: 994
Magic: 2087
Agility: 1042
Rank: L (Legendary)
Sacred Skills:
Human Realm Path: Lv —
Demi-God Realm Path: Lv —
Special Skills:
Dragon Scale: Lv 8
Divine Voice: Lv 7
Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 8
Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 8
Dark Type: Lv —
Wicked Dragon: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8
Psychic Sense: Lv 5
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 8
Valiant Soul: Lv —
Dragon Mirror: Lv —
Demon King's Blessing: Lv —
Fearsome Gaze: Lv 1
Control: Lv 1
Magical Brainwashing: Lv 1
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 5
Falling Resistance: Lv 6
Hunger Resistance: Lv 5
Poison Resistance: Lv 6
Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6
Magic Resistance: Lv 5
Dark Resistance: Lv 5
Fire Resistance: Lv 5
Fear Resistance: Lv 4
Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 5
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 6
Illusion Immunity: Lv —
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4
Curse Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 3
Blinding Resistance: Lv 2
Petrify Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:
Roll: Lv 7
View Status: Lv 7
Scorching Breath: Lv 7
Whistle: Lv 2
Dragon Punch: Lv 4
Diseased Breath: Lv 7
Venom Fangs: Lv 7
Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6
Dragon Tail: Lv 2
Bellow: Lv 3
Celestial Fall: Lv 4
Earth Fall: Lv 2
Human Transformation: Lv 8
Whirlwind Slash: Lv 7
Neckbreaker: Lv 4
Hi-Rest: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 5
Sacrifice: Lv —
Death: Lv 7
Soul Addition (Fake Life): Lv 6
Holy: Lv 5
Telepathy: Lv 4
Wide Rest: Lv 5
Regen: Lv 5
Dark-Dispelling Flash: Lv 1
Holy Sphere: Lv 5
Dimension Claws: Lv 3
Illusion: Lv 8
Gravity: Lv 8
Dimension: Lv 8

Hell Gate: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Dragon King's Son: Lv —
Walking Egg: Lv —
Klutz: Lv 4
Just an Idiot: Lv 1
Infighter: Lv 4
Pest Killer: Lv 8
Liar: Lv 3
King of Evasion: Lv 2
Chicken Runner: Lv 3
Mr. Chef: Lv 4
Stalwart: Lv 4
Giant Killer: Lv 5
Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4
Clan Boss: Lv 1
Laplace Authority Interference: Lv 4
Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —
Ant King: Lv —
Hero: Lv MAX
Dream Dragon: Lv —
Demon King: Lv 6
Final Evolution: Lv —

...Whoa. Now that's a serious jump in stats. This evolution is insanely strong!

At max level, my HP and MP as an Ouroboros were around 3,000, so going back down to around 2,000 was a little tough, but all of my other stats were way better. Especially my magic stat: It used to be around 1,300, but now it was over 2,000. My attack had surpassed Eldia's 1,500 by a comfortable margin too.

So this was what Legendary rank stat gains looked like… With these stats, I could take on Beelzebub and Lilyxila at the same time!

Although I'd killed it and gotten experience points, the troll mandragora still seemed to be growing. Maybe those plant bits I found on the ground were the remains of a dead one that'd been cannibalized by the others.

I decided to head back to the waterfall cave where Allo and the others were waiting for me. If I brought them here, they should be able to level up pretty fast.

My MP was running low, so instead of using Dragon Mirror to make my way back, I opted to fly back over the cliff wall. I was a bit worried that if I wasn't careful, I wouldn't be able to find the place on my way back in the thick fog, but it would be easy enough to find once I made it over the cliff.

Part 4

ON THE WAY BACK to the waterfall cave, I didn't bother using Dragon Mirror. After crossing the cliff wall with Fly, I went back the way I came in my Oneiros form.

Now that I'd gained some levels, my stats were high enough to deal with any errant fenrirs or a Killer Queen attack—and with no way of knowing how much time I had until Lilyxila caught up to me, I wasn't going to miss any chances to gain some more experience points.

I felt something's eyes on me from a distance and slowed down, daring whatever was stalking me to follow. Behind me, I spotted four gleaming eyes in the fog: a fenrir.

Fenrirs were two ranks beneath me, and now that I'd reached a decent level, they no longer presented much of a threat. On top of that, they were high-level, aggressive, and reckless—all of which now worked in my favor. The waterfall cave was nearby, but I decided I could level up a little more before I got back.

I slowed down my pace and listened to the fenrir's footsteps as it approached. It was close now and didn't seem to be trying to

hide its presence.

I turned around. Drool trickled down from between the pitch-black beast's razor-sharp fangs, and its four red eyes glared straight at me.

But...for some reason, it looked much smaller than the fenrir I'd seen on my way to the cliff. Its body was the same length, though; maybe their individual status differences contributed to their physical appearance?

The fenrir, who looked ready to pounce, suddenly stopped a short distance away. It seemed to realize just how outmatched it was, either from my appearance or ability to sense it.

"G...g-gr, grrr..." Black light began to gather in front of the fenrir's face for a Dark Sphere attack. So far, the fenrirs had opted to jump in and challenge me to close combat from the beginning, so it was unusual to see one attack from a distance.

"Garooooooooo!" The fenrir unleashed its Dark Sphere. It flew toward me in a dizzying spiral. I didn't bother moving, instead letting the black orb hit me full in the face. The light burst out from the contact, then disappeared. My neck shook slightly from the impact.

"...Gnn?"

This fenrir may have some magic up its sleeve, but with my stats and dragon scales, attacks I was resistant to did basically no damage at all. *Sorry, fenrir, but you're not even a challenge to me anymore.*

A moment later, I heard a gust of wind behind me.

"Garooooooooo!"

A second fenrir dropped down from the sky above, aiming for my back. *I see. So the first one was a decoy, and the second one used High Jump to hide in the fog and launch a sneak attack.*

Not a bad strategy, honestly. I'd thought these things were all brawn, but it seemed like they used their brains for hunting too. I guess they'd have to if they wanted to survive in a place crawling with rank A monsters.

"Graaaaaaaaah!" I raised my head and let out a loud roar. Black light spread out on the ground around me as I used Gravity. With

my magic at 2,087, the fenrirs didn't stand a chance. The one behind me fell to the ground and hit its head hard, and the one in front sank to the dirt.

I decided to use Holy Sphere on the fenrir who was closest to me. At this range, it wasn't necessary to use any skills to take them down, but I wanted to try it out. Holy Sphere was simply a light-type version of Dark Sphere. When I thought about it that way, it didn't seem like a big deal.

I pointed a front leg at the fenrir's abdomen. A hazy white light formed at the tip of my paw, and I willed it into the shape of a sphere.

"Gnn..."

I unleashed the glowing ball of light straight at the fenrir's abdomen. It ripped the creature open from the gut like an explosion, splattering blood, flesh, and bone across the area. The fenrir's body split into two and tumbled to the ground, unmoving.

Gained 1,794 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,794 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 46 has become Lv 56.

G-gross... When I'm this overpowered, I almost feel a little guilty.

Gained Normal Skill "Gravidon" Lv 8.

Oh, nice... I knew I'd get Gravidon someday, but I wasn't expecting it to show up so fast. Gravidon used gravity magic to attack an enemy directly. It ranked reasonably high in terms of usefulness and power among the various long-range skills I'd seen.

I turned my attention back to the fenrir on the ground in front of me. As far as new skills went, I still had yet to try Hell Gate out, and I didn't know what to expect.

"G...grr..." The fenrir stared at me as it tried to get to its feet.

Normal Skill “Hell Gate.” A type of spatial magic. Summons part of the now-abandoned underworld to burn away enemies with hellfire. The hellfire does not affect the skill’s user. Maximum size of the summoned area is determined by skill level. Powerful but costly.

I turned back to the fenrir and used Hell Gate. A jet-black summoning circle appeared around it, enveloping the surrounding area in black as well.

“G…gar…?” The fenrir tilted its head in confusion. The black light grew and traveled upward, taking on the form of five massive, humanoid skeletons. They surrounded the fenrir, then swung their arms down at it.

“Graa…garooooooooo!” The fenrir’s despairing howl echoed through the clearing as the black light disappeared. There was nothing left of the fenrir. I wasn’t sure whether it’d been burned to ash by the black light or if the skeletons had taken it somewhere far more unsavory.

Gained 1,872 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 1,872 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 56 has become Lv 61.

Gained Normal Skill “Mirror Counter” Lv 8.

I sat in stunned silence for a little while, digesting the horror of my Hell Gate skill. *This…isn’t a skill I should be using on just anyone.*

I felt dizzy, lightheaded. Hell Gate seemed to have rapidly depleted my MP. It was powerful, that much was obvious, but the cost of using it seemed painfully high. On top of that, it was pretty slow to activate. And it left a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

My newest skill, Mirror Counter, was an anti-magic barrier skill I’d seen Lilyxila using before. She seemed to consider it fairly reliable for reflecting magic attacks—aside from Ruin’s Ruin skill,

that is, but that was an exception. Besides, Ruin's magic stat had been well above hers.

I remained there for a little while longer, pondering my skills and Lilyxila and whatever else, before deciding to return to the waterfall cave for the time being.

Part 5

WHEN I GOT BACK to the cave, I told Allo and the others that I'd found a good place to level up and suggested we make our way there.

"Oho… A nest of troll mandragoras, you say? How rare," Volk murmured. I wasn't the only one who thought they were rare then.

‹You've heard of them before?› I asked via Telepathy.

"Indeed. Not only are they rare and valuable, but they are also fearsome monsters. Adventurers who underestimate them often meet with an unfortunate fate. They'll be a handful for me to deal with, but I will accompany you all the same."

It was reassuring to hear Volk would come along after his single-handed victory against the fenrir. The troll mandragoras were sure to be a tough opponent for Allo and the others as well.

I mean, Allo might be able to take one down on her own if she's on top of her game, but Treant, Nightmare, and Black Lizard will definitely struggle. I'm glad Volk is willing to help out and take on more of an assistant role.

I put Allo, Nightmare, and Treant on my back and asked Volk and Grandpa Magiatite to cover me on foot, then made my way back into the forest of fog.

Because I was a higher level now, I had my friends with me, and I didn't want to waste MP, there was no point in using Dragon Mirror to conceal my presence this time around. It seemed difficult to use Dragon Mirror to transform or hide anyone other than myself. It might've been possible to hide Allo and the others with a different skill, like Illusion, but my MP would drain too quickly to keep everyone concealed all the way there and back.

But this time, fortunately, we made it to the face of the cliff without encountering any other monsters—maybe because I'd just passed through the area and scared everything off. We lucked out. Of course, if we *had* crossed paths with a fenrir or something, I would've been able to use Gravity to stop it from moving and defeat it from a safe distance.

When we reached the cliff face, Volk and Grandpa Magiatite climbed onto my back with the rest, and I soared over the edge. I landed just on the other side of the wall and bent down to let Allo and the others hop off safely.

Allo was level 39 of 85, Nightmare was level 29 of 70, Treant was level 15 of 60, Grandpa Magiatite was level 55 of 70, and the black lizard was level 26 of 55. If possible, I wanted to get the black lizard and Treant to max level today so they could evolve. Volk was already close to max level, and I doubted evolving would suddenly give him wings or anything too crazy, so there wasn't much point in leveling him up. He was on assistant duty this time around.

‹All right…I wanna focus on you today, Black Lizard. You ready to give it your all? I'll watch your back and give you a hand if you need it, of course. I just want to make sure your stats are high enough for you to get away from Lilyxila when she shows up. Just thinking about what she might do scares me.›

"Kshiii…"

The black lizard nodded, looking a little sad. I knew how it felt; once, we'd been comrades fighting side by side with each other. But now I was a legendary Oneiros, and it was still a C class Venom Queen Lacerta. Where we were once equals, we were now three class levels apart. I knew I'd feel the same way if our roles were reversed.

"Now then," said Volk. "Troll mandragoras… With our Magiatite friend acting as my sword, there are six of us. We should be able to hunt them safely if we split into three pairs. Of course, we should also be alert for any signs of uninvited guests."

Allo and the black lizard perked up.

He was right; we needed to split into teams. If all seven of us rushed the same monster, some of us would get much less experience points than others… More specifically, Treant probably

wouldn't get enough experience points to max out its levels and evolve.

"Ouroboros... Well, I suppose it's Oneiros now."

‹Going by Oneiros all of a sudden feels weird. Just call me Illusia. There's no guarantee I won't evolve into something else later.›

"Oh...? Is that your name?" Volk asked, surprised.

Wait, had I really never told Volk my name?

He chuckled. "With those looks, I expected your name to be a little more...fearsome."

‹W-well, I was a lot cuter when I got it.›

"I didn't know either..." Allo said, mouth hanging open in shock.

I-I didn't have Telepathy until recently! The only way I could "talk" was through vague words and images! There was no way to tell them something as specific as my name! Sure, I could've mentioned it while I was in human form, but it never came up, and... Well, it was a little embarrassing, okay? So...

"Very well, Illusia it is. Now, I believe it would be best for Illusia, Allo, and I to act as aides and accompany the Magical Tree, Lacerta, and Nightmare as they train."

Allo closed her mouth with a snap, eyes widening in amazement. The black lizard glanced sideways at Allo and wagged its tail happily.

"U-um, you mean, I'm not fighting with Master Dragon?" said Allo. "I'm not sure... No, I don't think I'm ready to be an aide. I'm...I'm not strong enough."

Volk smiled. "Do not worry. From what I've seen so far, you seem more than ready to take on a troll mandragora yourself. But perhaps it would be wise to assign you to assist the strongest of our training group, Nightmare. I will keep an eye on the two of you as well."

Volk's assessment of our group was spot-on, as expected. As the one able to see everyone's statuses, I completely agreed with him.

He went on: “The Magical Tree is likely the one who requires the most effort to level. From what I’ve seen of its abilities, it seems to excel in support and status conditions but struggles in combat. Those strengths are only able to survive if they are protected by other strengths.”

Well, Treant? Is he wrong?! Treant looked at Volk, its mouth open in disbelief, then turned its gaze toward me as if pleading for help.

“After all, in more advanced battles where hindering one’s enemy with status conditions or providing support is necessary, those skills can only be of use if their caster is able to keep up with the fight and stand on their own two feet. Otherwise, they are simply a burden.”

H-hey now… Why’re we giving Treant such a hard time?! It’s strong and tanky, and has a bunch of pretty strong magic skills…especially Gravity. That one’s brutal!

‹A-all right, let’s leave it at that, Volk.› I raised my paw and made a “simmer down” motion.

“*Hmm?* I was simply trying to work out our strategy…”

‹Right, yeah, I see your point. Can we skip to the conclusion, though?›

“Yes, well…in short, I believe Illusia should assist the Magical Tree. Otherwise, I think I’d be doing most of the slashing despite being there to assist.”

‹Yeah…agreed.› I nodded. If Treant was with me, I’d be able to use support moves that would give Treant more room to participate.

The black lizard’s tail drooped, and it turned its eyes to the ground. *“Kshiii…”*

“That leaves me to accompany the Lacerta for its training.” Volk put his hand on the black lizard’s back.

I noticed Allo look at the black lizard and do a little victory pose. But when I turned my attention to her, she raised her arms up high and stretched.

Huh? What, was that just a warm-up exercise or something?

Part 6

TREANT AND I approached one of the towering stalks. Underneath it was where we'd supposedly find our troll mandragora prey.

Treant walked carefully, lifting each of its roots off the ground like it was tiptoeing, trying not to make a sound. It hadn't had many chances to practice fighting until now, and its nervousness was palpable. As I strolled blithely up to the plant monsters, not really bothering to pay attention to my surroundings, Treant's trunk trembled from side to side in fear.

I looked around, assessing the positions of the other two groups and their members. Although it was unlikely, I wanted to be ready just in case a fenrir or something found its way in here. If it did, I needed to get everyone behind me for cover.

Nightmare was giving Allo's shoulder a reassuring pat as they trudged along toward their target. Those two made a good team. Maybe it was because they'd had to pair up and work together so much.

"What's the matter?!" Volk shouted to the black lizard. "Why aren't you taking advantage of this opportunity to attack?! I have its attention! Come on, it's full of openings!"

The troll mandragora's arm swung down at Volk, and he sliced through it with his sword.

Jeez, that guy works fast... I didn't even see him dig that one up.

"Hurry, attack! What's wrong with you?!"

"K-kshhh..." The black lizard turned to me with a pleading look, like it wanted my help.

‹H-hey, Volk...go easy on it, will ya?›

"What are you talking about, Illusia? I can assure you, Lilyxila won't go as easy on it as me or this troll mandragora! Do you intend to let them neglect their training and get killed during the battle?!"

‹U-urgh... I mean, I get what you're saying, and you're right, but...›

I looked at the black lizard and lowered my head slightly. *‹W-well, er...good luck?›*

“Kshiiii...” It gave a weak cry in response.

Don’t worry! I know you can do it!

Treant stood perfectly still, watching Volk yell and the black lizard shrink back in fear.

‹Ah, Master...are we going to do that too?› Treant asked with Telepathy. Man. It was really getting fluent with Telepathy. I’d noticed it before, but dang!

‹Yeah, you go ahead and take the first shot,› I replied. *‹Let’s do some damage.›*

I turned to face the giant imitation stalk in front of me. Treant leapt forward, poked the stalk with the top of its branch, and then immediately leapt back, trembling.

H-hey, you can attack from a distance, you know. You’ve got plenty of handy magic skills at your disposal.

Treant backed up a little and stretched its trunk up high. A flash of light enveloped its body.

That’s...Physical Barrier. Was it trying to raise its defense? I wasn’t too concerned yet, but if things went south for Treant, I could always finish the troll mandragora off with a barrage of Dimension Claws.

I glanced over at Allo and Nightmare’s team. Allo had pinned down their troll mandragora with the clay arms of Lingering Rope, while Nightmare tied its limbs with its Spidersilk. The troll mandragora, with only its head free from the dirt, was struggling wildly. Countless clay arms covered the writhing mass of roots, pushing it back down into the ground. While the troll mandragora struggled to break free, Allo and Nightmare fired two simultaneous Dark Spheres at it, blowing its head to pieces.

The troll mandragora’s movements began to slow, and then it slumped over, motionless. Allo ran over to Nightmare, grinning wide, and held her hand up for a high five. Nightmare looked away from Allo’s outstretched hand with a haughty sniff and began to search for her next prey. Allo kept her arm raised and just kept

staring at Nightmare until eventually Nightmare relented and stretched out her front spider leg for a mock high five.

Th-those two were a fierce match when they worked together... They'd always gotten along well. It felt like they were on the same page somehow.

Well, we can't let them have all the fun. C'mon, Treant. Let's hunt ourselves a troll mandragora.

Treant gave a firm nod, then gathered one of its signature Clay Spheres above its head and lobbed it at the stalk. The sphere smashed through one of the stalk's branches, but the monster didn't even seem to notice.

Wait, was it so weak that it didn't even register as an attack? Nah, that couldn't be it. No way.

‹Give it another shot, Treant!›

‹Y-yes, Master!›

Treant fired another sphere of clay at the stalk. This time, the projectile soared through the leaves with a loud rustle.

Wait...maybe hitting the plants on their heads doesn't do any damage to the troll mandragora?

Greengreens: Value C. A tree bearing beautiful flowers of pure green. The tree's wood is easy to process and full of magic, making it useful for wands and staves. However, its numbers are rapidly declining due to overharvesting. Can sometimes be found in areas where no human has set foot, but traveling to such unexplored regions is rarely worth the risk, so these trees are left alone to flourish.

Although identical in appearance to the troll mandragora, the two species are not related. It is widely believed that they evolved over time to resemble the troll mandragora to discourage any nearby hungry herbivores from taking a bite.

I-It's an impostor?! Dammit! I fell for its ruse! I should've checked its status earlier!

Treant was arched back with a third Clay Sphere above its head, ready to fire.

‹B-bad news, Treant. This one's a fake!›

The third Clay Sphere was finally enough to send the plant toppling to the ground.

‹What…did you just say, Master?› Treant muttered telepathically with its back turned toward me.

‹I-I'm sorry. I should've done my research first. Next time! I-I'll be more careful next time! Oh, l-look. There's a troll mandragora over there! Let's go get it!

As I responded, I watched Allo and Nightmare tackle the second troll mandragora, while the black lizard rested on the ground, panting heavily after defeating its enemy in a deadly struggle.

J-jeez. We've really gotta pick up the pace…

Part 7

I SEARCHED THE AREA for troll mandragoras again, this time making sure I didn't try to attack another greengreens or something, and approached another stalk with Treant. I stopped a fair distance away, then motioned for Treant—who'd stopped at the same time—to move closer. Treant twisted its trunk around to glare at me, but then, in what seemed like resignation, began to walk toward our new target.

Just as Treant began to lift a Clay Sphere into the air, the troll mandragora unburied itself from the dirt and attacked.

I quickly unleashed my Gravity skill. The ground was covered in a ring of black light, stopping the troll mandragora in its tracks. Of course, the skill also forced Treant to stop. In fact, Treant was the one most affected; its trunk was bent by the gravitational force, warping its body. As for the troll mandragora, it was on all fours in a crawling stance, but it looked like it could still move if needed.

O-ohh, crap. I screwed up. What do I do?! Should I have snuck around back so the troll mandragora was the only thing in range? Well,

either way, I think I know the best course of action! With that, I stretched out my tail, picked Treant up, and set it on my head.

The troll mandragora crawled up to me on all fours, opening its mouth wide to take a bite. I ducked down to avoid Treant getting bitten above me.

Okay, okay, I've got this. It ain't gonna be pretty, but let's go with this strategy. Hold on tight, Treant!

The troll mandragora opened its massive mouth to bite me again. I pulled my neck in and lowered my head to avoid it, just like before. At the same time, Treant used Clay Sphere and shot another ball of dirt straight at the troll mandragora's face. It hit it squarely in the forehead with a resounding clunk.

Now that sounded like it hurt!

Species: Troll Mandragora

Status: Normal

Lv: 54/80

HP: 519/541

MP: 186/186

...Or not! And doesn't this thing specialize in recovery skills? Can we even cut it down?!

I doubted Treant would level up if I left it to fight the troll mandragora alone. It didn't have the agility or skills for close-range attacks, and its stats were pretty low to begin with, so getting up close was pointless. On the other hand, its long-range magic skills barely did any damage.

W-well, if we get its level up, it should be a little better. But for now, let's just get this fight over with!

I continued moving my head up and down while Treant sent out Clay Sphere after Clay Sphere.

Ooh, nice one, Treant! That's it, keep hitting the same spot over and over again! The troll mandragora should start getting weaker as we whittle down its HP!

After trading blows for a while, Treant landed one, two, three consecutive Clay Spheres on the same spot on the troll mandragora's body. Its forehead was dented slightly with the first hit, caved in by the second, and then smashed clean through with the third.

G-good work! Keep going, Treant!

‹Master, I…seem to have run out of magic.›

W-wait…what? Really? On the first monster?!

I checked the troll mandragora's status again.

Species: Troll Mandragora

Status: Normal

Lv: 54/80

HP: 455/541

MP: 143/186

Y-you gotta be kidding me… After all those Clay Spheres, it's only lost like a fifth of its health?!

That being said, if I thought about it, the troll mandragora had about the stats of a giant centipede. Although it wasn't doing much damage, it was probably a good thing Treant could attack without fear of being hit.

The reason Treant was losing was simply because its enemy was too powerful. I should've looked for weaker monsters for Treant to fight. For some reason, I still used Allo's stats as the default reference when I looked for suitable enemies for leveling. But while Allo was rather blessed in terms of her stat ratios and skills, Treant's stats and skills were so abysmal that it made me wonder whether it was cursed or something.

Long story short, there was a massive gap between Allo and Treant's abilities. If there were a dozen Treants facing off against Allo, then maybe, just maybe, Treant might come out on top.

I closed my eyes and swung my paw, using Dimension Claws. My claws appeared in front of the troll mandragora and tore

through it, ripping its body to shreds. The troll mandragora fell back and stopped moving.

Gained 1,053 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,053 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 61 has become Lv 63.

The fact that Treant and I split our experience point gain didn't help, but even so, my level gains were getting slower and slower. *Well, two levels is still something, at least.*

I checked Treant's level to find it increased from **Lv: 15/60** to **Lv: 20/60.**

Urgh…that's…not great. On top of that, Treant's MP was now completely depleted. *No, c'mon. Let's just be glad it gained a couple levels at all. Speaking of which… Treant, did you learn any skills?*

‹…Decoy, and…Statue.›

I remembered Adoff having Decoy, but I'd never seen Statue before.

Normal Skill "Statue." Raises defense by turning user into steel. However, while the skill is active, the user is unable to move.

Ahh, this was one of the skills those quell trolls used. Right, now Treant could lower attack power with Anti-Power, distract the enemy with Decoy, and defend itself with Statue.

It…was a nice combo, I guess, but Treant needed some more active combat skills! I mean, why did it keep learning all these magic skills when it didn't have much MP to begin with?!

‹Forgive me, Master… I am unworthy…›

‹N-no, Treant, I'm not mad at you! It's just…no, it's okay. I'm sorry.›

This training ground might have been a little out of Treant's league.

‹By the way, er…I believe there is a way for me to recover the MP I used up earlier.›

‹O-oh? Really? How?›

‹If I put down roots in fertile soil…I think my magic will replenish a little faster than usual.›

Now that Treant mentioned it, I realized it had a skill called Take Root that I didn't know anything about. Was that the skill it was talking about?

‹At the risk of sounding rude, Master…if you allow me to take root inside your body—which is filled with magical energy—I may be able to recover my magic at a reasonable rate…›

‹O…oh?›

I lay down with my stomach on the ground for a little bit. Treant used Take Root, and before too long, roots began to burrow their way past my scales and into my skin.

This…isn't going to let you take over my body, is it?

Part 8

I HAD THE ROOTS from Treant's Take Root skill burrowing through my back for a while. But when I looked at its stats again, I saw its MP steadily replenishing. The skill seemed to work similarly to Allo's Mana Drain.

‹Thank you, Master. With this, I will be able to rejoin the fray!›

Treant seemed…weirdly motivated. Usually, getting it to battle was like pulling teeth. *Y-you okay, Treant?*

Anyway, can you get off my back now? It feels like there's a bunch of worms digging through my skin and it's freaking me out a little bit. Is this, like, safe? You're not going to try and take my body over with this, are you?

The roots had wormed their way into the little gaps between my scales. Up close, they looked a little grotesque.

Once Treant freed itself from my back, I plopped it back on my head and approached the stalk of another underground troll

mandragora.

‹All right. Go on, Treant, take a shot at it.›

‹Are you sure…this is really one of our targets, Master?›

‹Y-yeah! I checked and everything!›

It seemed like Treant was holding a grudge over me mistaking the greengreens for troll mandragoras and making it stare down a regular plant for a while. *Only you, Treant.*

Treant unleashed a Clay Sphere toward the towering plant, and the Clay Sphere smashed into the base of it. Shuddering, the plant rose, revealing the massive clump of roots underneath that formed another troll mandragora.

Treant, although initially intimidated by the entire affair, seemed to be getting its bearings now. It stood tall, staring the troll mandragora down with a firm gaze. Whether this newfound courage was a result of its growing combat experience or simply because it was perched on the head of a rank L dragon, I'd rather not speculate. But the fact that it was no longer cowering from battle was already a massive win in my book.

Maybe it was because this spurt in courage meant it wasn't nervously averting its eyes from the enemy, but Treant's Clay Spheres were now landing squarely on the troll mandragora's forehead. Like before, the damage Treant dealt was heavily mitigated by the troll mandragora's recovery skills, but…the important thing was for Treant to get as much of the shared experience points as possible.

Hmm… At this rate, though, Treant would have to stop and rest to regain MP after every kill. At the end of the day, it just wasn't doing enough damage.

Treant had the Poison Cloud skill. Maybe if we poisoned them with that, it'd be… No, wait, troll mandragoras were resistant to poison, weren't they? Considering how low Treant's magic stat was, I doubted its status condition skills would have much effect.

…Wait. Didn't Treant have all four elemental Sphere skills? Earth, water, wind, and fire? I mean, it always used Clay Sphere, so that one had to be the highest level, but I felt like Fire Sphere would

be better for dealing with plant monsters like troll mandragoras. Sticking with Clay Sphere was just way too inefficient.

‹Hey, Treant, you have Fire Sphere, right? Why don't you use that one?›

‹Hah, aha ha ha… Are you kidding, Master? I am afraid if I use it, I might catch on fire.› Treant's wooden face twitched. Not only did it hate being burned, it hated using fire too.

‹This is no time to be picky, Treant! I know you don't like it, but you won't get stronger if you stick to what's comfortable!›

‹H-hng…›

‹Don't worry, you'll be okay. I've never seen anyone set themselves on fire from using a fire skill. It'll never happen, okay? Promise!›

‹…V-very well, Master! I'll do it. I must be able to fight shoulder to shoulder with you, as Miss Allo does! Before Miss Nightmare!›

‹Er, right… For sure.› I felt like leaving Treant behind in Alban Mine while we all went to fight the slime might've been the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back here… Well, at least it gave Treant some motivation to get stronger, I guess.

I jerked my neck up and back to avoid a chomp from the troll mandragora, then thunked my jaw on the root monster's head, making it flinch.

Now, Treant! The enemy's open!

‹Y-yes, Master! Fire Sphere! Fire Sphere!› Two balls of fire burst out of Treant, one after the other. Both hit the troll mandragora squarely in the face, quickly setting fire to the roots. The fire spread, spewing black smoke into the air.

Well, that definitely did a bit more damage. I think we can do this. Treant had four elemental magic skills. If it learned how to use them all properly, it should be able to drastically increase the damage of its magic attacks.

…U-uh, Treant? Is your head…hot at all? I think I see smoke…

‹Masteeeerrr! Water! Get water!›

Did…did you seriously catch yourself on fire?! Uwaaaaaah! Why the heck did you use that skill twice in a row?! You've literally never used it before!

Sighing, I swung my front paw and sliced through the troll mandragora with Dimension Claws.

Gained 828 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 828 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 63 has become Lv 64.

I lowered my head to the ground and rolled Treant around in the dirt, then quickly sucked it into my mouth, using my saliva to stifle the flames.

‹You okay, Treant?›

‹Yes…I suppose.›

I checked Treant's level. It had gone from **Lv: 20/60** to **Lv: 26/60**.

All right, it was leveling at a pretty good pace. I was glad Treant plucked up the courage to use fire magic, even at the risk of catching itself on fire. The damage dealt had been just enough to overwhelm the mandragora's recovery skills. If Treant could learn to tame its Fire Spheres, farming the troll mandragoras for experience points would be a piece of cake.

My Demon King's Blessing skill doubled the amount of experience points gained by monsters under my control that were lower rank than me. Once I got Treant on the right track, it should be able to evolve fairly quickly.

‹Master, I am running low on magic again. May I root in you?›

I said nothing. *This is just going to slow us down. Is there some way to do this more effectively?*

‹If I put my roots down in your head, I wouldn't have to move between your back and head, you know!›

‹Wouldn't that make me look like some kinda freaky demon or something?!› A dragon with its head taken over by tree roots felt like a bit much, visually speaking. *Besides, wouldn't that be the perfect opportunity for you to, I don't know, take over my mind?!*

‹It seems like a good idea to me, but if Allo saw us, she might turn me to charcoal…›

Was it a good idea…? No, no way. Maybe we'd be more efficient that way, but there were a lot of other factors to consider too. Hmm… This was no time to be selfish, though…

It would be nice if Treant could find a more efficient way to defeat the troll mandragoras on its own, but I couldn't seem to think of anything.

Suddenly, the image of Treant on fire popped into my mind. *H-hey, Treant…I think I've got an idea.*

‹Really? Then let's do it, Master!›

‹Well, it's up to you whether you want to go through with it or not, but…›

‹If you think it will help, I'll do it! Whatever it takes!›

I gave Treant the rundown on my plan, and then we made our way over to another troll mandragora. Treant used Fire Sphere to burn the foliage above the ground, causing the troll mandragora to lurch up out of the ground at us in fury.

‹Let's do this, Treant!›

‹Yes, sir!›

I curled my tail around Treant, then swung my tail around and flung it into the sky. Treant soared above the troll mandragora's head, its branches and leaves bursting into flames as it went. It had intentionally let itself get caught in the blaze from Fire Sphere. The next moment, Treant used Statue and its entire body turned to steel.

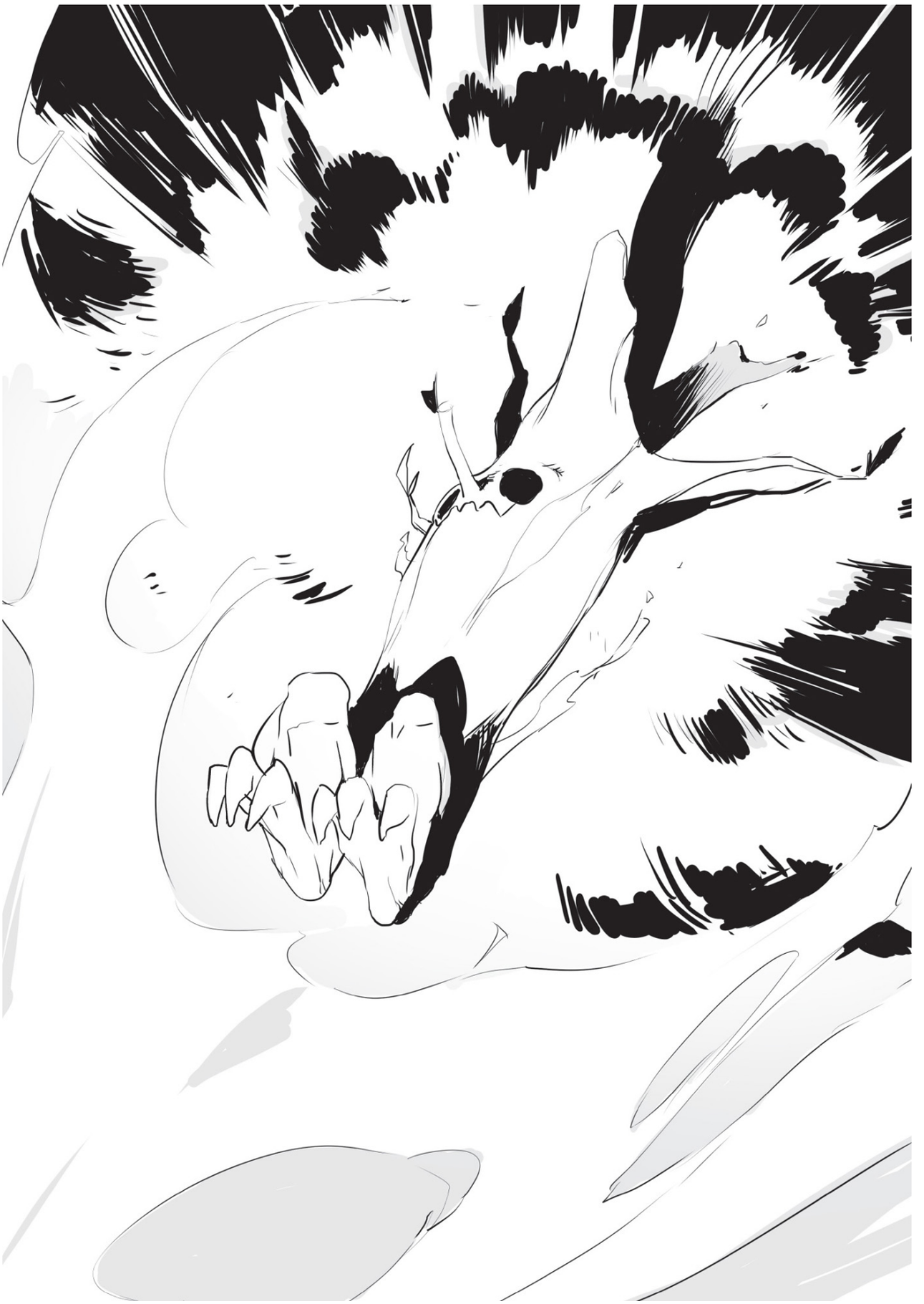
Then, Treant's body was enveloped in black light as it used its erstwhile favorite skill, Gravity. But instead of using it in a wide area, it focused the skill in on itself. With that, Treant was ready.

Wreathed in flaming steel, Treant plummeted downward, rapidly accelerating due to Gravity's downward pull. It landed squarely on the troll mandragora's head with a *thunk*, chipping massive pieces off with it, then fell to the ground as it bounced.

The troll mandragora groaned in pain. The spot where Treant had landed on it was blackened and charred.

Species: Troll Mandragora
Status: Normal
Lv: 52/80
HP: 379/531
MP: 164/184

I glanced at the troll mandragora's status to check how much damage Treant did. Nice! It was a pricey skill sequence in terms of MP, but it did way more damage than you'd expect from a monster with Treant's stats! And when I checked Treant's status, I found out it had learned a new Normal Skill: Meteor Stomp. Ooh! It was so good it was registered as an official skill!



I tackled the troll mandragora, recovered Treant—who was stuck in the ground from the momentum of its fall—and threw it back into the sky to use Meteor Stomp again. Then, after a third attack, the troll mandragora stopped moving.

We'd finally succeeded in taking down a troll mandragora with Treant as the only source of damage.

Gained 526 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 526 Experience Points.

All right, my share of the experience points was much lower this time. That must mean Treant got more. I checked Treant's level and found out it had increased from **Lv: 26/60** to **Lv: 32/60**.

Yay! I was a bit worried at first, but we're steadily getting closer to our goal!

Treant tottered up to me.

Great work, Treant! Your levels are going up like crazy! How about that Meteor Stomp, huh? Isn't it great? We'll use this as our main attack, and…

‹Um, Master…do we have to keep using this strategy…?›

O-oh…do you not want to?

Part 9

TREANT DROPPED DOWN vertically from high in the sky and smashed straight through the head of another troll mandragora. Black smoke rose from the charred hole as the troll mandragora's body shuddered violently, toppled over on its stomach, and lay still.

Gained 249 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 249 Experience Points.

All right, another one down.

Our plan of attack now was for Treant to use Fire Sphere to get the troll mandragora out of the ground; then, while there was an opening, I launched Treant high into the sky. Next, Treant used Fire Sphere and Statue to transform itself into a mass of fiery steel, followed by Gravity to increase gravitational acceleration and shoot downward, striking the troll mandragoras on their heads.

The damage inflicted from this attack sequence was quite high and stable. This combo skill, Meteor Stomp, was an instant hit and would definitely be its signature skill moving forward.

Including the first trial run, this was the fourth troll mandragora we'd defeated using this strategy. But Treant had received an extraordinary amount of experience points from just those four wins. The skill levels of each of the skills used were also rising steadily. If they continued to improve, Treant's skills could be useful for not only leveling but serious battles as well.

I grabbed Treant's trunk—half-buried in the ground from the impact of the fall—and yanked it free.

Treant's level had increased to a whopping **Lv: 49/60**. It hadn't learned any new Normal Skills to speak of, but it had picked up a few strange new Title Skills. None of them seemed to be particularly noteworthy, though.

‹Hey, Treant, I've got an idea. How about I fly up with you and drop you from way up above?›

Lilyxila's spirit beast, Beelzebub, seemed like a daunting enemy to defeat. But if the power of Treant's Meteor Stomp increased with the height from which it was dropped, I felt like I might be able to one-hit KO him if I dropped Treant on him before he could realize what was happening.

The only issue with this strategy was that it was difficult to aim right. But when he was in his regular form, Beelzebub's body was massive. The attack was bound to hit him somewhere, at least. If we were up high enough, the thick fog would conceal our presence. And if I used Dragon Mirror to camouflage us, he'd never see us coming. Beelzebub, with his skill that halved his agility, wouldn't be

able to dodge fast enough to avoid it. To me, it seemed like a perfect strategy with no downsides.

‹But, Master…wouldn't a fall like that shatter me into pieces?› Treant asked, fear etched into its bark face.

O-oh. Would it…? I mean, I supposed turning into steel with Statue didn't guarantee that Treant was invincible. The skill's description only said that turning to steel would raise its defense.

Well, I guess there's probably a limit to how high I can go…

Even so, the attack would still pack quite a punch. If Treant managed to evolve, the power of its Meteor Stomp would probably increase as well. I wasn't giving up on the idea of dropping a Treant-shaped anvil from the heavens to take Beelzebub down without a fight.

I plopped Treant onto my back and let it suck up some more of my MP with its roots.

Thankfully, with the help of my Demon King's Blessing skill, Treant's levels were rising at a steady pace. Treant had been stuck at around the same level for a long time, but now, evolution was on the horizon.

In comparison, Allo—who'd teamed up with me around the same time Treant did—had evolved from a wight to a skull low mage, then to a Levana Mage, a Levana Low Liche, and finally, was now a rank B+ Levana Liche. Treant had only gone from a lesser treant to a magical tree in that time, which really put things into perspective. It was woefully behind.

But Treant *had* managed to evolve from a little rank D lesser treant sapling to a rank C+ in one fell swoop. I felt like maybe if we were lucky, it would only take one evolution for it to be as powerful as Allo.

So my goal for today is to hunt as many troll mandragoras as it takes for Treant to evolve!

‹Master…there may not be any left?›

‹Huh?› I looked around. Treant was right; there were no more troll mandragora stalks sprouting from the ground around us. Instead, the area was covered in the root monsters' remains.

Allo, Nightmare, Volk, and the black lizard strode toward me, their faces awash in a mixture of triumph and exhaustion.

No way… Did they already wipe 'em all out?

I looked around me in all directions, and my eyes finally landed on a stalk sticking up from the ground in the distance. *Oh, hey! There's still one left!*

‹Treant, look! That one's still—›

‹That is the plant look-alike we challenged when we first got here.›

Oh. Right. The greengreens.

Holy cow… They already wiped out every troll mandragora in here…? That was way too fast! I would've liked to raise my own level a little here too…

Hmm, well… If everyone had leveled up a bit, they should be able to fight some fenrirs now, so it might be fine to switch to those…

"Kssshh! Kssshhhii!"

The black lizard ran toward me, practically bouncing with joy. *Wait, if it's this happy, does that mean…*

Species: Venom Queen Lacerta

Status: Normal

Lv: 55/55 (MAX)

HP: 144/277

MP: 31/299

Whoa! It maxed out its levels! I never doubted you, Coach Volk!

The team ace, Allo, had gone from **Lv: 39/85** to **Lv: 55/85**, Nightmare went from **Lv: 29/70** to **Lv: 48/70**, and Grandpa Magiatite went from **Lv: 55/70** to **Lv: 57/70**. Leveling slowed down and got much harder past level 50 or 60, but even so, they were getting close to my level.

How many mandragoras had Allo managed to hunt in that time anyway? Her wide-range magic attack and her handy MP recovery ability really made for a powerful combo.

Part 10

I DOUBLE-CHECKED my surroundings to make sure we wouldn't be interrupted by any lurking monsters and saw nothing but the many strange, warped trees. The black lizard should be able to evolve safely.

‹Okay, Black Lizard! Let's see this new evolution!› I brought my face in close to the black lizard's body and looked at it expectantly.

"K-kssshh..." The black lizard took a few steps back and began to tremble.

H-huh? What's up? Do you not want to right now?

The black lizard's gaze dropped, and it sank to the ground, shrinking back to make itself smaller.

‹Black Lizard...?›

It didn't respond. After a few moments, it looked away with a slight jerk of its head.

S-seriously?! What's the matter?! Is it mad at me?! I turned back to Allo and the others to see if they could make any sense of the black lizard's behavior.

‹Wh-what the heck? Is it sulking or something? Did I say something bad?›

Volk spoke first. "Evolution is when a monster is at its most vulnerable. They typically do not do so out in the open, in front of other monsters."

‹Understandably so!› Grandpa Magiatite chimed in.

O-oh, really...? ‹But I thought the black lizard trusted me...›

‹There are plenty of monsters who dislike their evolutions being a spectacle. But I assumed you would know this?› Grandpa Magiatite looked over at Treant and Nightmare.

Well...Nightmare is pretty shameless, y'know? And Treant is... Treant. It seemed more like it wanted me to watch, if anything.

And Allo was originally human, so she probably didn't relate to their sentiments. Right?

‹Hey, Allo, do you…› I trailed off as Allo hid behind Treant, blushing a little.

"It…*was* a little embarrassing at first," she mumbled.

I-It was?!

Now that I thought about it, Allo—being a human-turned-undead—had no clue what her next evolutionary step would be. It must not have felt great to evolve in front of a dragon she didn't know without knowing what she'd end up looking like.

‹Sorry… I'll look away next time. Even if it's a little late now.›

"…It's okay. It's still a little embarrassing, but once I evolve this time around, I'll be really pretty, so…I want you to see me right away," Allo said from around Treant's trunk, her cheeks bright red.

H-h-hey now…cut it out. That kind of talk gets me flustered.

Regardless, I now understood that the black lizard wasn't comfortable evolving in front of other monsters—let alone a human. I told it to go behind a large rock, and the rest of us would wait around the other side for it to be done evolving. I felt a little like a group of people going to a department store and waiting for their friend to finish trying on outfits.

"It is understandable, though," said Volk. "Evolution creates a massive opening for attacks, so we should give it some cover. As a species, Lacertas don't naturally travel in packs, so perhaps it is not used to it."

Oh? Is that what the deal is?

In the middle of the black lizard's evolution, I began to hear what sounded like something being peeled or ripped. What was that? Was the black lizard okay?

"Master Dragon," Allo said in a small voice, "I think Lacerta would prefer it if you covered your ears…"

Wait, really? It would?!

‹Wh-what about you and Volk? Are you fine? It's just me?!›

Allo nodded her head, silent.

‹And Treant? Treant's fine too?›

"Well, Treant *is* Treant, so…"

Treant looked at Allo, a complicated look on its face. *Ahh…it was a joke when I said it, but now Treant looks a little hurt.*

Soon, the ripping sound was abruptly cut off. *Oh! Is it over?*

"K-kssshh…" From behind the rock, the black lizard stretched out its neck. It was undoubtedly still the same black lizard I knew before, but it looked a little different. The length of its neck had doubled from two meters to about four meters, and it had horns sprouting from its head made from transformed scales. Its shiny black body was covered in brilliant lines of light aqua, which swirled around its legs and stomach to form a symbol of some sort. Four bat-like wings stretched from its body, and its two swishing tails were tipped with sharp talons. A shining azure gem was set in its forehead, giving the black lizard's new look an almost divine majesty.

Species: Venom Goddess Lacerta
Status: Normal
Lv: 1/80
HP: 144/217
MP: 31/115
Attack: 144
Defense: 126
Magic: 85
Agility: 133
Rank: B
Special Skills:
Special Venom: Lv —
Poison Belt: Lv 8
Scale: Lv 4
Undercover: Lv 4
Dark Type: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 5
Decoy Tail: Lv —

Psychic Sense: Lv 4
Petrifying Gaze: Lv 2
Fly: Lv 2
Resistance Skills:
Poison Immunity: Lv —
Paralysis Immunity: Lv —
Physical Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 2
Petrify Resistance: Lv 4
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 3
Curse Resistance: Lv 4
Normal Skills:
Venom Fangs: Lv 5
Venom Claws: Lv 7
Paralyzing Tongue: Lv 6
Double Poison: Lv 5
Roll: Lv 5
Clay Gun: Lv 6
Purify: Lv 4
Surprise Attack: Lv 4
Clay Wall: Lv 2
Regenerate: Lv 4
Flurry Claws: Lv 2
Storage: Lv 3
High Jump: Lv 2
Poison Sphere: Lv 2
Poison Clone: Lv 2
Poison Swamp: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Bizarre Gastronomist: Lv 7
Poison Master: Lv 6

Cunning: Lv 5

Chicken Runner: Lv 4

Demon King's Underling: Lv —

Reaper: Lv —

Venom Goddess: Lv —

Oooooh! Its stats are low now, but they'll improve in no time! The black lizard got a bunch of new skills too!

The black lizard was a rank B now, which put it above Nightmare and Treant for the time being. There was a massive difference between rank C and B monsters. The black lizard was going to be powerful—that much was clear.



Venom Goddess Lacerta: Rank B. The highest evolution of the Venom Lacerta line, its beauty has earned it the title of Venom Goddess. The combined value of its hide and the precious stone in its forehead is enough to fund the construction of an entire castle. However, adventurers do not dare to challenge the Venom Goddess Lacerta. Even slight exposure to its powerful poison will cause agony and death in anyone unlucky enough to cross its path.

The pain of the Venom Goddess Lacerta's poison is so great that a single night can feel like a hundred years or more. A certain torture-loving noble once purchased a vial of its blood for more than the cost of the stone on its forehead.

Wh-whoa…that's brutal. I probably wouldn't want to use Black Lizard's poison much, even on my enemies…

I was relieved to see the black lizard had learned Fly. Flying with Treant, Nightmare, and whoever else on my back was already a little tiring; I was worried about what I'd do if the black lizard evolved into something really big. Its wings looked a little small relative to its body, but it didn't seem like it'd have any trouble flying.

Although the evolution's description mentioned Venom Goddess Lacerta being the final evolution of the Venom Lacerta line, the black lizard still didn't have the Final Evolution Title Skill. I figured it had to be thanks to the effects of my Demon King's Blessing skill. *But it's already been a princess, queen, goddess…and there's still more? What's next?*

"Kssshh…" The black lizard glanced at me, seemingly asking for my thoughts about its new evolution.

‹Nice, Black Lizard! You look pretty strong. If you level up a little, you can use your high agility to your advantage and run circles around the enemy while you pepper 'em with your poison and Special Skills!›

"Kssshh…" The black lizard sank to the ground, looking defeated.

Huh…?! ‹Oh, and, uh, it's a really beautiful evolution?›

The black lizard's two tails lifted into the air and wagged happily. *All right! Crisis averted!*

With the black lizard's evolution out of the way, I decided to call it a day and head back to the waterfall cave to decide the next day's plans. *Should I limit my own leveling to help my friends or make leveling myself up more of a priority?*

I was afraid that, between all my friends leveling together and the significant increase in efficiency I now had, we'd quickly wipe out all the monsters we were trying to farm for experience. Or rather, we already *had*, and I didn't want to do it again.

If we continued to level as a group like we did today, we could potentially exhaust all of our options for gaining experience points on this island before too long. *But still, I at least want to make Treant evolve...* As I considered my next steps, the area began to rumble and shake.

Huh? What's going on? An earthquake? Or maybe some kind of monster attack? I looked around and spotted a strange tree with massive flowers and a weird, warped trunk that seemed to be trembling.

Wait, was that a monster too?! Its presence was so faint that it didn't even register! I couldn't believe it—there was another species of mandragora here, just lying in wait?!

Part 11

THE GROUND EXPLODED in a spray of dirt, revealing another grotesque root monster. It had a large, distorted mouth that looked like it had been overtaken by its roots. Just above its mouth, three goggling eyeballs glared at us.

Beneath the mandragora's tangled mass of roots, dozens of dull yellow, human-sized caterpillars with three black circles on their faces writhed in the dirt.

"Blraaaaaaagh!" the root monster shrieked, spewing caterpillars from its open mouth.

Wh-what the heck? Freaky monsters keep comin' out of the woodwork one after the other!

Species: Hades Mandragora
Status: Enraged
Lv: 81/85
HP: 786/786
MP: 267/267
Attack: 584
Defense: 372
Magic: 491
Agility: 348
Rank: B+
Special Skills:
Earth Type: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 5
Photosynthesis: Lv —
Stealth: Lv 7
Super Regeneration: Lv 7
Recovery+: Lv 7
Wild Flowers: Lv —
Poison Pollen: Lv 4
Resistance Skills:
Petrify Resistance: Lv 9
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 9
Confusion Resistance: Lv 8
Sleep Resistance: Lv 8
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 8
Poison Resistance: Lv 8
Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 7
Burrow: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 6
Tremor: Lv 7
Weak: Lv 6
Clay: Lv 5
Clay Wall: Lv 5
Paralyzing Bite: Lv 7
Acid Drool: Lv 6
Gravidon: Lv 5
Foul Bite: Lv 6
Rancid Breath: Lv 5
High Jump: Lv ?
Title Skills:
Rare Monster: Lv —
Delicacy: Lv —
Elixir of Immortality: Lv —
Nest Eater: Lv —
Final Evolution: Lv —

Dang. That's a strong monster! Those other mandragoras don't even compare. Neither do the fenrirs!

The Hades Mandragora seemed pretty balanced in terms of stats, which meant it didn't have as much agility as the fenrirs, but because it was such a high level, its other stats more than made up for it. It didn't seem like a monster I'd like to fight with Allo—much less Treant—nearby.

Those caterpillars seem like bad news too…

Species: Malice Caterpillar
Status: Cursed
Lv: 52/65

HP: 388/388

MP: 98/98

Malice Caterpillar: Rank C+. Although it is a caterpillar, it will never transform into a butterfly. An evil monster borne of malice, it is a curse in and of itself. Capable of mutating what it devours into monsters, then uses those monsters as nests to increase its own population.

Based on their hefty HP, attack, and agility stats, I pegged these caterpillars as attack-type monsters. They came spewing out of the Hades Mandragora one after another.

So did that mean…the reason this area became a mandragora field was thanks to these caterpillars? In that case, they might be handy to have around so they could mass-produce some more mandragoras for us to fight. But considering the monsters they created were rank B and above, they'd be an absolute nightmare for humans.

The part about the caterpillars being "borne of malice" was interesting. My guess was that meant the caterpillars themselves were originally created by some sort of skill. Anyway, it was nice to see some rank C+ monsters showing up for once, but if we weren't careful, one of us could become their next meal. For safety, we were probably better off falling back here. I could just come back later, kill the Hades Mandragora, and then call everyone else in to fight the caterpillars.

"Now *that* looks like a monstrosity worth cutting down." Volk raised his Grandpa Magiatite sword. *Wait. He wants to fight it?!*

‹H-hey, I'm not sure that's such a good idea…›

"Fear not, for I shall assist. I may typically hunt alone, but I am not averse to cooperation."

That's not what I'm worried about…

Allo's eyes met mine. "Master Dragon…I think we should fight it."

R-really? Doesn't that feel a little overly ambitious?

“Illusia…do you think that thing is more formidable than Lilyxila?” said Volk. “Because to me, that cunning woman is far more frightening than a monster whose only asset is raw power. I only encountered her at a distance, but her eyes were colder and more ruthless than those of any monster I’ve ever faced.”

…He had a point. Playing it safe and avoiding riskier battles would affect our levels and, thus, our chances of winning the coming battle against Lilyxila.

“If you think the amount of power you now hold will ensure your safety, then think again,” he added. “Who knows what Lilyxila will do if she gets cornered? That sort of mindset is dangerous. There will be no victory for those too afraid to grasp fortune by the horns!”

Volk spoke with the confidence of decades of experience. He’d probably known hundreds of tough adventurers in his time—he knew what he was talking about. And I agreed with him about Lilyxila: There was definitely more to her than just her stats.

‹Sorry… You’re right, Volk. I let my fear get the best of me.›

This was as natural of a leveling progression as I could’ve hoped. It was no time to get intimidated and back down. *All right. Let’s get one more level under my belt, why don’t we?*

‹Pair up in the same teams as before!› I told everyone. *‹Volk, protect our newly evolved black lizard! Allo and Nightmare, you watch each other’s backs. I’ve got Treant!›* I picked Treant up and set it on my head. *‹Leave that three-eyed mandragora to us!›*

I swung my paw and used Dimension Claws. Three jagged cracks appeared in the ground a fair distance away as a handful of caterpillars were launched into the air. The caterpillars that received the hit directly were torn to shreds.

Gained 510 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 510 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 64 has become Lv 65.

I bounded forward, closing the distance to the Hades Mandragora in a straight line.

The malice caterpillars were only rank C+. Even if rushing forward compromised our position a little, with Volk there to follow up my attack, Nightmare and Black Lizard would have no issue getting away.

Still, the Hades Mandragora was pretty fast, and even a single blow would do some serious damage. Treant and I swung at it simultaneously.

‹M-Master, this feels a little too dangerous!›

‹It's okay! Just stay on my head and shoot the bugs around us with Fire Sphere!›

Treant's Fire Sphere wasn't very fast or accurate—it was going to be hard to hit moving insects with it. But with the swarm we were faced with, it was guaranteed to hit *something.*

‹If you start having trouble, stick your roots into me and protect yourself with Statue!› With Treant perched on my head, I became its legs, negating the one drawback of using Statue. If it used Statue in a tight spot on its own, it would be surrounded and killed. But now Treant could just turn into a hunk of metal and let me handle things.

‹Y-yes, Master! Leave it to me!› Treant flung Fire Spheres around in a whirl, hitting caterpillars left and right. But these caterpillars were pretty tanky; they groaned in pain, but the attack wasn't enough to finish them.

I immediately slashed at the caterpillars Treant hit with my Dimension Claws, tearing their bodies open with lethal precision. By double-teaming the enemies like this, I could share the experience point gain with Treant.

Experience messages began to echo incessantly through my head. As expected of a skill that attacked independent of distance, my Dimension Claws were enough to almost entirely exterminate the army of low-rank insects. This skill was a welcome newbie that had quickly surpassed my more senior small-fry eliminator, Whirlwind Slash.

As I received more and more experience points, my level went from **Lv: 65/150** to **Lv: 66/150**, then jumped up to **Lv: 68/150**.

Although I missed occasionally because I was still getting the hang of aiming a claw attack from a distance, maybe two-thirds of my attacks hit.

Normal Skill "Dimension Claws" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Good deal. Treant's level also went from **Lv: 49/60** to **Lv: 53/60**.

‹Master... I am nearly out of MP...› Treant said grimly.

Whoops. Maybe I'd worn it out a little too much? Well, there was only one thing to do.

‹All right, Treant...you can put your roots in my head.›

‹A-are you sure?›

I wanted Treant to evolve. No matter what it took.

‹Just...don't go too deep, okay?›

I felt a sharp pain in my head that faded to a dull headache. *W-well, I have a skull and everything, so it should be fine. Right?*

I launched forward and closed the distance to the Hades Mandragora in a single bound.

"Blraaaaaaagh!" The Hades Mandragora lurched toward my head, mouth open wide. Caterpillars spilled from its mouth to land on the ground, then headed straight for me.

‹M-Master, this is...!›

‹Don't worry, Treant! Just keep shooting!› As I spoke, I used my Dimension Claws to puncture a spot deep inside the Hades Mandragora's mouth with a single outstretched digit.

"Blragh?!" The Hades Mandragora threw its head back. Two of Treant's Fire Spheres in a row sailed into its mouth and exploded.

Species: Hades Mandragora

Status: Enraged

Lv: 81/85

HP: 592/786

MP: 267/267

Treant was a magic type—a high-level one at that—and the Hades Mandragora wasn't particularly resistant to elemental or magic attacks. It had plenty of recovery skills but not a lot of MP. If we kept whittling it down, we'd beat it eventually.

‹Master... The caterpillars, they're—!›

‹Yeah, I know...› The scattered caterpillars had surrounded us and were closing in. But I wasn't worried about a few attacks from the malice caterpillars, considering how high my defense stat was. Unless they had some sort of skill that negated defense, I could almost entirely block attacks from monsters with attack stats that were less than 500. The damage I couldn't block would be one or two HP at most. To someone with over 3,000 HP, that was nothing.

Even so, I didn't like the idea of getting surrounded and ganged up on—and it'd be bad news if they managed to climb their way up to Treant.

‹Illusion!› I manipulated light to create a false image of myself. The caterpillars, confused, tried to leap toward the illusion and latch on, but there was nothing there. I used my legs and tail to bat away the puzzled insects.

"Blraaaaagh!"

The Hades Mandragora swung its massive root arm down at my illusion with all its might. When the attack passed through the illusion, the forward momentum sent it sprawling to the ground. Treant took the chance and unleashed a Fire Sphere at its head.

"Blraaaah!"

The next time, perhaps spurred on by its failure, it locked eyes with the real me from a good distance away and leapt forward.

With a flick of my claws, I sliced the monster's arm clean off. It flew through the air and tumbled to the ground.

Jeez. I feel like Dimension Claws is almost too *convenient.*

The roots supporting the Hades Mandragora sprung up out of the ground like springs. Suddenly, I remembered it had the High

Jump skill. If it leapt into the air, we'd be in trouble.

‹*Gravity!*› A black light appeared around me and began to spread. The Hades Mandragora dropped on the spot. The surrounding caterpillars also went motionless, their bodies trembling with exertion.

I twisted my body and used my Dimension Claws to end their misery. The caterpillars were ripped open and gutted, while the Hades Mandragora's body was gouged deep.

With a single flash, all the caterpillars around me were dying. My Dimension Claws were so wide that they couldn't hit an individual caterpillar and the attack's power was split between multiple insects. But even so, I still killed three caterpillars.

Gained 1,530 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,530 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 68 has become Lv 71.

Once again, I tried to bat the caterpillars away by widening the range of my Dimension Claws.

Gained 1,490 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,490 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 71 has become Lv 73.

The malice caterpillars began to burrow into the ground and flee from combat.

After fighting it, I could tell: This rank B+ monster was calamity-level powerful. But at this point, I could defeat as many Hades Mandragoras as I wanted. My stats were far beyond anything I'd ever experienced before. Maybe that was to be expected if I was supposed to be able to fight head-to-head with rank L monsters like Ruin now, but I never thought I'd end up so overwhelmingly powerful.

The remaining caterpillars writhed in pain on the ground around us. Those that could move scrambled into the dirt to try and make their escape. Treant worked on finishing them all off with its Fire Spheres.

I received more experience points, and my level increased from 73 to 74. After finishing off all the remaining caterpillars, I looked down at the Hades Mandragora.

"Blrr, blraah…"

It seemed like the Hades Mandragora was out of MP for its recovery skills after trying to heal all the damage from Treant's Fire Spheres onslaught. It groaned weakly from the ground, the deep claw marks I made still gouged into its roots.

I felt bad…but we needed the experience points.

‹Treant…›

Treant jumped a little when I called to it, but then it released another Fire Sphere. It hit the Hades Mandragora in the forehead, burning away the roots. The Hades Mandragora's three creepy eyeballs rolled in their sockets, and then the breath finally left its body.

Gained 1,944 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,944 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 74 has become Lv 76.

Gained Normal Skill "Ideal Weapon" Lv 5.

Another new skill…? Good deal. Oh, speaking of which, I should check Treant's level.

Species: Magical Tree

Status: Cursed

Lv: 60/60 (MAX)

HP: 425/425

MP: 51/346

W-we did it! Treant made it to max level!

But before Treant could evolve, we needed to clear out what remained of the caterpillar swarm. Luckily, Volk was already hard at work, shooting Shockwaves to cover any gaps as Allo, Nightmare, and the black lizard engaged the caterpillars. It seemed like the battle would soon be over.

Part 12

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to clean up the last of the malice caterpillars. When they saw that we'd taken down the Hades Mandragora, they began to burrow down into the dirt and disappear.

Allo quickly smashed her enlarged left hand into the ground, blasting dirt everywhere. Half of a caterpillar flew out of the gouged earth.

When she realized there were no caterpillars left, she ran toward me.

"Master Dra…gon?" She stopped midstride and looked up at me, eyes wide.

‹What's up, Allo?›

"Treant, what are you doing…?" she asked, face completely expressionless. Her voice was shaking with fury as she pointed up at Treant, who was still rooted on top of my head.

Treant twisted its trunk from side to side in a desperate plea of innocence.

‹I-It's not what it looks like, Allo! It was just necessary for the battle! Treant didn't take over my brain or anything! ›

Treant freed itself from my head, and I set it down.

Volk and the others were back, so I decided to check everyone's level and see where we were at.

Allo went from **Lv: 55/85** to **Lv: 67/85**, Nightmare went from **Lv: 48/70** to **Lv: 53/70**, Grandpa Magiatite went from **Lv: 57/70** to **Lv: 61/70**, and the black lizard went from **Lv: 1/80** to **Lv: 28/80**.

Man, that's a massive increase… There sure were a lot of those guys, huh? The malice centipedes might've been even more useful than the mandragoras.

Allo's level progress was especially impressive. She'd always been gifted with magic, and now she wielded a broad array of magic skills. Allo could wipe out monsters of lower rank with ease.

‹All right, Treant, let's see what this new evolution of yours is like!›

‹Yes, Master!› Treant stretched its trunk happily.

‹Oh, you can move behind the rock like Black Lizard did, if you want to. But I know it can be hard for you to transform with the Fake Life stuff, right? I'll try not to look if it makes you uncomfortable…›

‹No, it's fine. Don't worry,› Treant answered quickly. Almost *too* quickly. Wait, did it *want* me to watch? That felt…weirdly perverted somehow… *No, I know not all monsters are self-conscious about evolving. If Treant says it doesn't mind, there's no reason for me to make a fuss.*

I cast Fake Life on Treant. It was a strange feeling; until now, evolving Treant and Allo had always been Partner's job.

A black light surrounded Treant. I watched through the light as its form began to grow. The spindly, armlike branches on either side of its trunk grew thicker and thicker.

When I first saw the new Treant, I was stunned speechless. But then my eyes began to trail up, and up, and up, until I finally met its own.

Treant was massive. Seriously massive. It had to be seven meters tall—*at least.* I was still longer than it was tall, but as far as pure height, Treant was now the one with the clear advantage.

Am I gonna have to carry it all the way home on my back…?

Tyrant Guardian: Rank B+. A giant Treant whose majesty earns it the title of protector. It is frighteningly powerful and possesses ironclad defense. A remarkable fighter who uses a variety of melee skills while also taking advantage of its impressive durability to defeat its opponents. But what is truly frightening about the Tyrant Guardian is when it goes berserk with rage, abandoning its defenses to go on a rampage.

So Treant's finally reached B+ rank. And it looks pretty tough too. I feel bad about it, but I think Magical Tree Treant got excluded a lot for not being strong enough.

Species: Tyrant Guardian
Status: Cursed
Lv: 1/85
HP: 223/273
MP: 11/114
Attack: 120
Defense: 186
Magic: 147
Agility: 83
Rank: B+
Special Skills:
Dark Type: Lv —
Grecian Language: Lv 3
Harden: Lv 5
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 4
Fly: Lv 1
Healing Drops: Lv 2
Stalwart Protector: Lv —
Gravity Compression: Lv 3
Soft Steps: Lv 4
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 6
Falling Resistance: Lv 5
Normal Skills:
Take Root: Lv 4

Clay: Lv 4
Rest: Lv 6
Fire Sphere: Lv 6
Aqua Sphere: Lv 3
Clay Sphere: Lv 6
Wind Sphere: Lv 3
Telepathy: Lv 3
Gravity: Lv 4
Poison Cloud: Lv 2
Physical Barrier: Lv 4
Anti-Power: Lv 5
Decoy: Lv 2
Statue: Lv 4
Meteor Stomp: Lv 4
Tree Spirit Transformation: Lv 4
Berserk: Lv 4
Wood Strike: Lv 4
Wood Counter: Lv 3
Armor Break: Lv 3
Guard Lost: Lv 3
Clay Wall: Lv 4
Tremor: Lv 3
Heat Beam: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Demon King's Underling: Lv —
Devourer of the Fruit of Wisdom: Lv —
White Mage: Lv 6
Black Mage: Lv 6
Dragon's Lost Property: Lv —
Giant Rampaging Tree: Lv —

Oh, it has Heat Beam? And…Fly? I don't see any wings or anything it'd use to fly with, though. But I hope it can; there's no way I can carry it back to the waterfall cave now!

I decided to check out some of Treant's new skills that caught my attention.

Special Skill "Stalwart Protector." A guardian never falls before the same attack twice. Grants resistance to any skill after being attacked by it once.

Oooooh… I couldn't help but wish Treant had gotten this skill sooner, but regardless, it seemed like a good one. It was particularly helpful for Treant since it didn't have many Resistance Skills.

Special Skill "Gravity Compression." Grants powerful gravity to any matter to raise its density. Using on oneself greatly improves attack and defense but lowers HP.

So it's like an applied version of Gravity? That would be handy for damage reduction and stronger melee attacks, but if Treant can also use it on its Clay skills, it could be utilized in a bunch of different ways.

Normal Skill "Guard Lost." Support magic skill. Greatly increases attack at the cost of reducing defense. Difficult to master but has many possibilities for use on both allies and enemies.

Ooh! Now that's an interesting skill. So it raises attack power to support allies or lowers enemy defense to attacks against it? Nice!

The question was, however, whether Treant will be able to utilize it well.

The other skill I wanted to check out was…Tree Spirit Transformation. Or rather, I was holding out hope that it'd answer my question of how to bring Treant home.

Normal Skill "Tree Spirit Transformation." Allows user to transform itself into a tree spirit. While transformed, physical traits such as HP, attack, and defense are halved.

Maybe this could be used to make Treant small enough to transport…?

Part 13

I PUT ALLO AND THE OTHERS on my back and flew up with Black Lizard into the sky, over the cliff, and out of the formerly mandragora-ridden field. We strapped the Hades Mandragora to my back as well, with help from Nightmare's webs.

Hades Mandragora: Value B+. Has a strong yet distinctive aroma that stimulates the appetite. Its rarity and unmistakable flavor make it a prized delicacy for which there exists no substitution. However, it is not a monster that can be tamed by humans, and since it only lives in remote, unexplored areas of the world, no human is foolish enough to dare challenge it. A famous prince from long ago once caused the death of a hundred of his men in his quest for a Hades Mandragora.

Apparently, the Hades Mandragora was considered a rare delicacy. Since we went to the trouble of taking one out, we decided to take it back with us to eat.

To avoid getting lost in the fog, I decided to continue on foot once we crossed the cliff wall, like we did coming in. After landing, I bent down and let Allo and the others hop off. Following Allo, Volk, and Nightmare, a winged, egg-shaped monster about a meter tall plopped to the ground.

‹Ahh. Thank you for the pleasant ride, Master.›

‹N-no problem…›

Yup. This was Treant's Tree Spirit Transformation. Its body was green and luminous, similar to the larans. It was egg-shaped, with

wings but no arms, and had long, slender legs. Its face was covered by a wooden doll mask with a long nose.

It seemed like Treant's Tree Spirit Transformation didn't continuously drain MP like other transformation skills. It drained some the moment it was used, but not a serious amount.

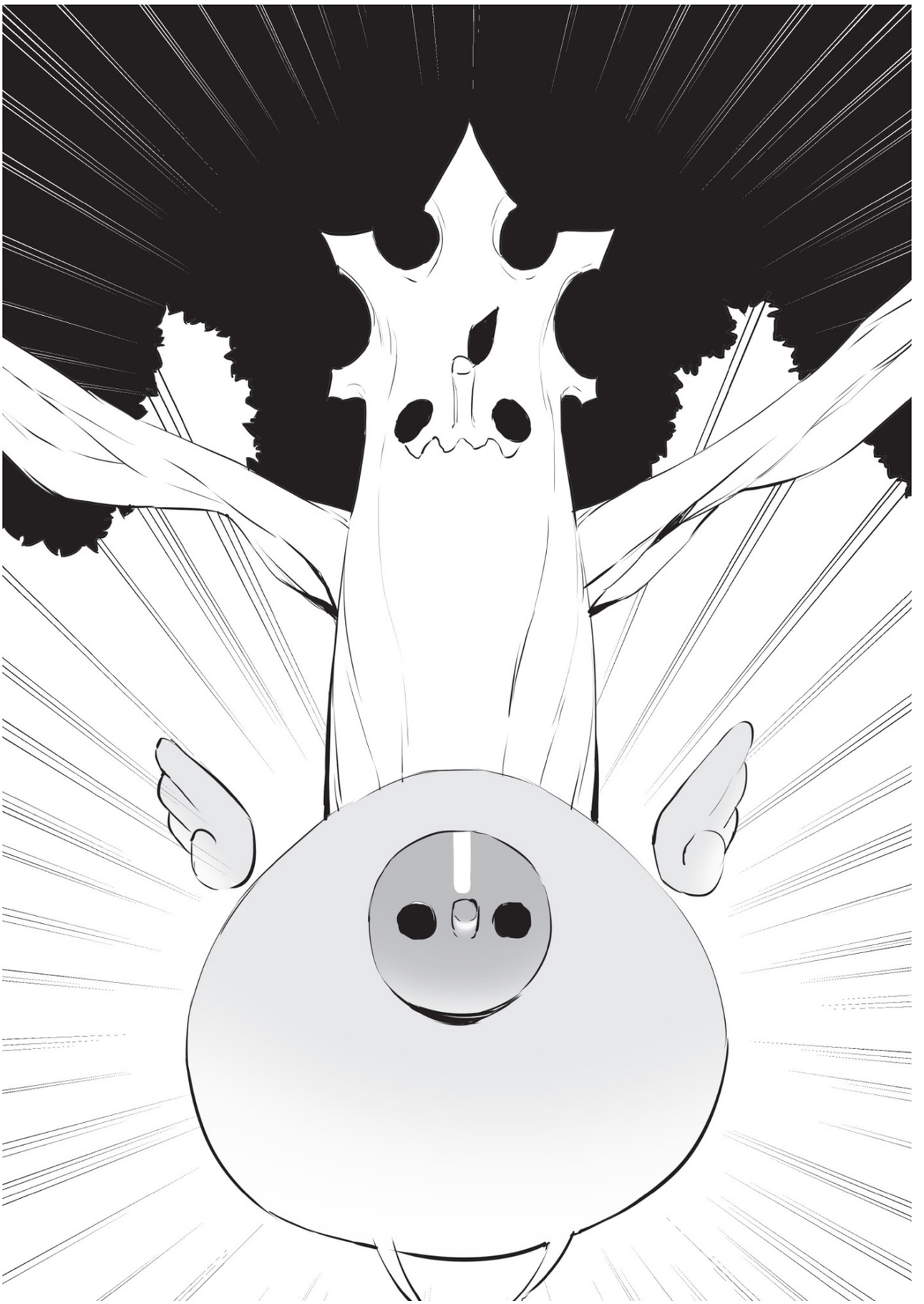
Treant did have Fly, but it wasn't adept enough to make it over the cliff, so I opted to have it ride on my back with the others. Since there was no way I'd be able to fly with its new, massive tyrant guardian form on my back, I asked it to use Tree Spirit Transformation to lighten the load a little.

Allo put her arms underneath Treant's wings and lifted it up. "It's kinda cute…"

‹P-please stop, Miss Allo.› Treant fluttered its thin little legs around in protest.

Really? Cute, she says? It seems kinda creepy to me…

We hiked through the forest, returning to the waterfall cave for the time being. After all the fighting today, Volk, Nightmare, and Black Lizard were almost out of MP. Treant and Allo could technically still recover their stats and fight on, but they seemed pretty wiped out mentally. So instead, we decided to call it a day and turn in for the night.



Allo used Clay to make a clay pot and furnace outside the cave, and I used Scorching Breath to fire the clay, making it harden.

Mm, I would've liked to try out using Alchemia's Magic Clay, but I guess this'll be strong enough. I mean, this is magic clay created by a rank B+ Liche and baked by the flames of a Legendary-rank dragon. No need for Alchemia's stuff—we've got magic clay at home.

It'd be cool to take some of Alchemia's Magic Clay from one of the clay guardians or something, but that would be difficult with their self-destruct skill.

‹Allo…are you sure you're okay? You were firing off a bunch of magic in that fight, right?›

"Yep, I'm still fine! And I don't need to keep on focusing now like I have to during a fight, so it's not that tiring."

Ahh, I guess that's true. Even against weaker enemies, fighting for survival took a lot out of you. That was probably more about mental than physical exhaustion. Even so, Allo manipulated the clay with ease. I hated to admit it, but molding bowls and cutlery with Clay was much faster than if I'd had to mold it by hand. On top of that, as she continued to craft, I began to see more uniform patterns and shapes emerge.

But I can't count it as art unless it was made with your own two hands, Allo!

I started getting an urge to use Clay myself, but when I tried, nothing came out. Hmm…maybe I couldn't remember how to use Clay anymore?

"Master Dragon, do this one too!" Allo happily pointed to a clay statue she'd made of Oneiros.

O-oh, wow! This is gorgeous! She even carved out all my scales! How'd she get so detailed with Clay?

‹Master, I made one too! Please fire it for me!› Treant pushed its own masterpiece toward me: a lump of clay shaped like an upside-down, crooked bucket.

O-oh, nice, Treant. Great work. Don't worry, I'll take care of it.

After that, we decided to head out to the ocean to gather some more salt. I was planning to head out alone, but Allo said she wanted to come too. I asked Volk what he thought.

“I have no issue with that,” he said. “With our group’s current strength, we’d be able to drive back three fenrirs at once even with Allo gone.” With that reassurance, Allo and I went out and followed the river back to the ocean.

There, I used Scorching Breath to evaporate the saltwater, and then we collected the remaining salt into some of our new clay vessels. Our fenrir meat was starting to go bad…but if we left it alone, it really *would* rot. It needed to be salted and dried as soon as possible. Fortunately, we also had the Hades Mandragora to use as a substitute for herbs.

After we returned to the waterfall cave, I cut up the fenrir meat we’d left hanging to drain, put it in a clay pot with slices of Hades Mandragora and salt, and left it to marinate.

Mmm. I’ll leave it in there overnight, then hang it outside to dry tomorrow.

“Illusia, would you mind cooking some meat for us again?” Volk called out to me. “I’d like some salt too, if possible.”

‹Sure. There are mandragora slices in that pot over there too, if you like.›

Allo, who’d been listening to our conversation, moved toward the furnace with some of the carved-up fenrir meat and salt.

“Thank you very much, Allo,” Volk said with a smile. I began to get up and move closer to the furnace as well.

‹Wait, Master! Leave it to me!› Treant darted forward, its massive trunk swaying.

“I…feel like things might heat up a little more than intended with you at the helm, Treant,” Volk hastily said as he watched Treant come closer. “Not that I would mind, of course.”

T-Treant, I’m not sure about this…

“That being said, life out in the wilderness with you all… It’s not so bad,” Volk said with a toothy grin.

Part 14: Lilyxila

SOON AFTER RUIN'S DEATH brought an end to the Demon King's reign in the Ardesian Kingdom, Lilyxila and her party returned to the Holy Land of Lialum, using Beelzebub as transportation. When they arrived, Lilyxila had Beelzebub send out one of his fly beasts for reconnaissance, then moved to a room in the basement of the holy palace for medical treatment.

"...Thank you, Master Oulu. Without your skills as a regeneration master, these injuries would have meant my end," Lilyxila called out to the stubbled man on the other side of the bars, moving her left arm to test its condition.

"Th-then perhaps in return for my services, you would consider freeing me...?" The man called Oulu was a dull-looking man with a patchy beard of stubble, but he was also said to be one of only three people in the world who possessed the Regen skill that could heal things like destroyed limbs. This skill had earned him the title of Regeneration Master. He was taken and "put under protection by the Holy Kingdom of Lialum" fifteen years ago when he was still a boy and had been imprisoned under the palace ever since. Members of the Holy Knights brought weakened monsters down to him periodically, which allowed him to level his skills.

During the previous battle, Lilyxila had been caught off guard and lost a limb to the rampaging Ruin. But thanks to Oulu's Regen, she'd gotten her arm back, good as new.

"What are you talking about?" Alphis, standing beside Lilyxila, interjected. "You are under the Holy Land's protection. If you leave and are taken prisoner by some fiend, you cannot expect such fair treatment. Someone as unaccustomed to the outside world as you could not hope to understand, but left unattended, you would not be able to walk free for a single day before getting snatched by something far more devious."

"But this...this is no better than being dead..."

"Well, on that topic... Would you be interested in accompanying us on our next mission for the Order of Holy Knights, Oulu?"

"...I've told you before that I don't want to do that." Oulu immediately balked at Lilyxila's offer, looking sullen. "I don't have

that sort of power. You'd just use me for as long as it benefits you, then throw me away at the first sign of danger. I may want to get out of here, but I won't throw my life away for it, as you might expect."

"If you join me for our next battle, I will release you from this place. I will also ensure you are protected by an escort at all times. You are far more valuable to me than a Holy Knight whose only trait of note is their ability to wield a weapon. You will not be left for dead."

"Saint Lilyxila, you intend to let Oulu out?" asked Alphis.

"Indeed. If we can manage to destroy that Human Realm Path user, the rest will not matter. And when that moment comes, Oulu, you will be celebrated as one of the great heroes who helped save the world."

Oulu stared at the floor and scratched his head. "What would you have me do?"

"Your role would simply be to tend to the wounded, away from the front lines. If you were to lose your life, it would only be after the Holy Knights and I had already fallen."

Oulu was silent for a moment, eyes trained on the ground, but then he lifted his head. "Very well... I'll do it. And afterward, I'm getting the hell out of here and going back to my village."

"Thank you, Oulu. I look forward to seeing your work out in the field." Lilyxila smiled at him and took his hand. Oulu, still caught up in his fury at the Holy Land, was caught off guard by her expression. He immediately shook his head and returned her smile.

Later, Lilyxila walked through one of the palace hallways, accompanied by Alphis.

"Are you really going to release him, Saint Lilyxila?" Alphis asked.

"Good question. I have preparations in place to bring him out, but I have not decided yet whether he will be useful in the fight against the Human Realm."

"...I see." Alphis knew this was Lilyxila's usual way of handling things, but when she remembered Oulu's deplorable condition, she

still felt a stab of pity for the man. “What are your intentions moving forward?”

“Well…we may have to get a little rough with them, but I intend to loan a battalion of dragon soldiers from one of our neighboring countries. At the same time, I will have my Beast Realm retainers explore each of the frontiers. After that, I will be recruiting the Devil of the Great Prison. I intend to recover the Dragon King to fill out our ranks as well and also negotiate with Howgley for the third time. I’ve heard Howgley has gone off the grid again, though, so I’ll have to rely on my Beast Realm scouts for that. After that… I need to improve my Title Skills, in case the worst comes to pass—though I would rather not use them, so that feels rather like putting the cart before the horse.”

“Is that why you chose not to kill the Dragon King when we first crossed paths?”

“My primary reason was to prevent the Human Realm Path from approaching the level necessary for it to evolve. Though it seems to not have made much difference in the end.”

Alphis hesitated. “My saint, I am against the idea of releasing the Devil of the Great Prison. I know of the destruction she has caused in the past, what she is capable of. It is not possible to control her—she will destroy us from the inside. I believe we should give up on Howgley as well. I don’t believe it is worth wasting any more time on that old fool.”

Lilyxila looked at Alphis then, encouraging her to go on. “In short… I do not think we should give that dragon too much time to regroup,” Alphis said. “It will take time to travel to meet it. Shouldn’t we use the Oracle to get an idea of where it is going and then depart from here to launch our attack?”

Lilyxila shook her head. “We have already given it too much time. Instead of rushing in recklessly, we will be better off ensuring we are fully prepared before we attack. It took us a long time to get back to Lialum, and it will take a while to get to the dragon’s lair, giving them plenty of time to evolve and level up.”

“But…”

“In truth, I am already almost certain of where they will be running off to, but it is a big place with very poor visibility. It will be

difficult to find them, even for my Beast Realm underlings. If we rush in there and they decide to run, they will have no trouble escaping. I cannot defeat it on my own, and I cannot hold a candle to its overall movement speed. If we chase after them, we are the ones who will end up exhausted and open to attack. This means our best option is to allow our opponent just enough time to prepare so that it chooses not to flee—not one moment more than necessary, of course."

"…Understood. I will begin making arrangements at once. However, it will be difficult for me to convince anyone to loan us a dragon without you at my side, and the Devil of the Great Prison should be examined for suitability to the task at hand once you have met with her in person. As for Howgley, I can see if the Holy Knights can…"

Lilyxila shook her head again. "The Holy Knights can deal with securing my dragon soldiers. I don't care about the aftermath; simply gather a force and threaten them until they relent. There is no need to examine and evaluate the Devil of the Great Prison either. This is not the time to be particular about our methods."

"A-are you serious?"

"Quite. I will negotiate with Howgley directly as soon as we learn of his whereabouts. His cooperation is of the utmost importance."

"But that's… I see. Very well." Lilyxila's words confused Alphis, but she bowed her head, as if shrugging off her hesitation.

"I'm sure you know this already, but the next time you face the Human Realm Path, I ask that you stand firm," Lilyxila said. "Do not repeat the same mistake you made last time."

"…Yes, my saint," Alphis murmured, her head still lowered. "If I may ask…what Title Skill are you seeking to improve? I don't remember you mentioning anything of the sort to me."

"Consider it insurance. It is nothing for you to concern yourself with, Alphis."

Chapter 3:
Foreign Monsters

Part 1

AFTER WAKING UP to the sunrise, I devoured the dried fenrir meat I'd hung up the day before. It was spicy and had a distinct curry flavor to it, no doubt thanks to the powdered Hades Mandragora I'd sprinkled over the top.

W-wait, seriously? I mean, it's yummy, but I wouldn't call this a delicacy. It's pretty basic—almost nostalgic, actually.

After taking the night off, we decided to go out and explore the area again. The goal was simple: to gain as many levels as possible. I wanted to get Allo, Nightmare, and maybe Grandpa Magiatite leveled up enough to evolve, but it was high time for me to focus on leveling myself up as well.

This time, however, we didn't encounter a single monster. I considered challenging a clay guardian or Shub Niggurath at the top of the mountain, but they'd be too tough for us to face at this stage.

Even so, I wouldn't be able to grow as much as I needed if I kept avoiding powerful opponents. I didn't know when the saint would attack, so it was risky to put it off any longer than I needed to. I knew that, but the clay guardian's Direct Burst was way too dangerous. And who knew what kind of monsters would be lying in wait once I got past it? No, I was better off waiting a little while longer.

We decided to search the area directly opposite the mountain peak, so we followed the river out to the ocean and began to explore the seashore. A fenrir or two would be about the right level for this group, but for some reason, I couldn't find a single one for once. Maybe they were keeping their distance because we'd killed too many of them?

As we walked, I noticed that the fog was getting thicker, even though we were nowhere near the mountain's summit. Was there... something out there? I'd thought the source of the fog was on top

of the mountain, but it seemed like that might not be the case after all. Were the fog's sources scattered around the area?

We got lost in the fog, but we kept pressing on. After a while, I saw a large, oblong shadow appear in the fog above us. It looked like the shadow of something flying overhead. I could see one—three, no, five shapes moving in tandem.

As I stood watching, one of the shapes drew closer and finally began to emerge from the fog.

It was a massive eel, nearly ten meters long and bright blue. Large fins sprouted from its back like wings—not one, not two, but five pairs.

Dragonfish: Rank B+. A giant fish monster that has learned to swim through the sky. Vicious in nature, they appear suddenly with heavy rain or dense fog, ravage the land, and then disappear. Local legend has it that if you bear witness to a flying fish, your village will be destroyed. Its Bite tears through ground with ease, and it never lets go of its prey, even in death.

These things are bad news. No wonder this place is called the Strange Lands. It has all kinds of clusters of foreign monsters like the fenrir roaming the region.

But their rank was higher than the fenrirs'. There was a surprisingly large difference between a rank B and B+. I couldn't afford to underestimate them.

Hmm, it's still a good distance away. I could kill it with Dimension Claws, but why don't I try out my new skill, Gravidon, instead?

I pointed my snout toward the dragonfish and gathered my magic. A black light appeared in my mouth and began to swell in size.

Then I glanced down at Allo. *If I shoot it with this, it might be enough to kill it outright. Maybe I should let Allo make the first move?*

But the one who made the first move wasn't Allo—it was Treant.

A bright red beam of light shot out from Treant's mouth and toward the dragonfish. *H-here it is!*

This was one of the new skills Treant had acquired by evolving into a tyrant guardian, Heat Beam. I was reminded of the many Heat Beams I'd narrowly escaped in Harunae Desert during my battle with the Giant Sand Centipede.

The dragonfish swooped through the air with a graceful swish. Their movements were truly magnificent; they swam through the air with fluid grace, angling their bodies to become smaller targets.

But what made Heat Beam so dangerous was its range and its unique maneuverability. A straight line of red flashed through the air vertically and horizontally, in time with the movement of Treant's head. The dragonfish finally abandoned their graceful swimming and began to twist and turn frantically in midair to avoid the beam.

Finally, the Heat Beam hit three of the dragonfish. Smoke began to rise from their bodies. Each of them folded their heads in and stared at the spot where they'd been hit, looking annoyed.

That doesn't seem like it did much...!

Species: Dragonfish
Status: Enraged (Slight)
Lv: 68/85
HP: 649/658
MP: 411/411

Well, that checked out. Treant had only just evolved, and it was still level 1. There was no way it'd do any real damage. On top of that, Treant had made them mad. The dragonfish's eyes turned toward the monster who'd unleashed such a spectacular but useless move. Did Treant just make itself their main target...?

‹Ahh, forgive me, Master...›

Treant's huge body was enveloped in light, and it shrank in size. Then it transformed into that same little chick monster with the Treant mask on it that he'd transformed into before. *That Tree Spirit Transformation really is handy...*

“Gale!” Allo cried, raising her hands into the air. A tornado of wind whirled toward the dragonfish, who scattered, screeching.

I released the Gravidon ball in my mouth at the first dragonfish. The space the black orb passed through distorted, blurring the scenery behind it.

“…Gui?”

The dragonfish bent its body in half to try and dodge but seemed to be drawn in by the black sphere. It penetrated through the lead dragonfish and flew past it. For a moment, the dragonfish seemed unharmed, but then the space around the dragonfish distorted, and its long body crunched together in the center like two massive hands were crushing it from either side. The dragonfish burst open, sending blood and bits of flesh flying through the air.

Gained 1,680 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 1,680 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 76 has become Lv 78.

G-gross. I couldn’t get more than one hit in. These dragonfish are way stronger than the Giant Sand Centipede; they’re supposedly on the same level as the Mother Avyssos. But they were nothing to me…

The four remaining dragonfish descended, circling through the sky above. Allo’s Gale, Nightmare’s Dark Sphere, Volk’s Shockwave, and the black lizard’s Clay Gun shot up through the air at them. However, they dodged the attacks with ease and continued to spiral down, approaching steadily. Even if one of their attacks landed, they could easily heal their injuries with Regenerate, and because of their relatively high MP, this battle could rage on for quite some time if I refrained from interfering.

Four rank B+ monsters… Those’re tough opponents for Treant and Nightmare. Allo and Volk might be able to handle them, but it won’t be an easy fight.

The dragonfish could fly, and there was more than one of them, so it was next to impossible for me to protect everyone. I was

probably better off taking them out myself… But it'd be a different story if I managed to get them out of the air. If I used Gravity to ground them, they'd be much easier to deal with.

‹Everyone, get down for a moment! I'll draw them to me, then take them out of the sky!›

Tree Spirit Treant hopped onto my back and stood tall.

I mean, you'll probably be safe there, but don't you think it's time to deactivate that skill?

"Givavavaaa!" the tallest dragonfish of the group cried as they all turned their gazes toward me. Their fish mouths opened much, much wider than I expected—it looked more like their heads were being peeled back by the jaws. Rows of razor-sharp teeth adorned the gaping maws.

Y-yikes… Getting bit by one of these things would hurt like hell, even for me. But I'll take 'em down before their fangs ever get the chance! Gravity!

A ring of black light appeared around me. The dragonfish slammed to the ground one after another, wriggling like fish out of water.

Allo and the others also bent over from the gravitational force, but because they'd been standing on the ground from the start and braced for the impact, they probably took much less damage than the dragonfish. I was careful not to use my full power either.

Now then… There's another new skill I've been meaning to try out.

Normal Skill "Ideal Weapon." A magic skill that allows the user to pull their ideal weapon out of the dream world. The weapon's abilities are dependent on the user's magic stat and skill level. Continuously drains MP while in use. The weapon will disappear if it leaves the user's hands.

In short, Ideal Weapon seemed to be a skill that could create any weapon I pictured in my mind. It felt like a fitting skill for an Oneiros like me—aka a Dream Dragon, who governed the world of dreams.

As a four-legged dragon, I couldn't hold a weapon, but Oneiros also had the Dragon Mirror skill. Transforming my body to be able to wield a weapon would be no issue.

I used Dragon Mirror to distort the light and space around me and remade my body into the form of a bipedal dragon.

Hmm… It's a little uncomfortable, but not too bad. On just my back two legs, I was much taller and could see a lot more of my foggy surroundings.

I used Ideal Weapon. The skill had been level 5 when I got it, so it probably wouldn't be completely useless.

I pictured a massive blade in my mind—one that would be the right size for a giant dragon like me. A phosphorescent light appeared in my hand, then began to materialize into a huge, wicked carving knife. It had a black handle and a long, dull white blade that glowed with a purplish light.

Blade of Calamity: Value B. Attack: +65. A massive, one-sided blade said to call forth disaster. Made from the bones of a dragon that leaves disaster and ruin in its wake. Enemies cut by the blade are inflicted with Poison and Curse conditions proportional to the wielder's magical power.

So the blade's white because it's made out of bones?

H-hmm… For the amount of effort it took to make and use, the sword felt like a bit of a letdown. It was better than nothing, of course, but considering the high MP cost, it didn't seem very practical. Being on two legs also limited my ability to move; I was more used to walking around on all fours, so using my front legs to wield a sword wasn't exactly comfortable.

"Oho…" Volk murmured, eyeing my sword with keen interest.

S-sorry, Volk. This thing apparently disappears when I let go of it, so you won't be able to try it out.

‹Get ready! I'm going to release everyone at once!› I called out to the others via Telepathy, then released my Gravity.

The grounded dragonfish were freed, and Allo and the others began to move all at once.

"Givaaa!" One of the dragonfish opened its mouth wide and launched itself at the black lizard. I was worried for a second, but then the dragonfish I'd minced with Gravidon suddenly moved its bloodied head and bit into its compatriot's side.

"Giiigh!" The dragonfish coiled around itself in pain and hit its head on the ground, hard.

Huh? I thought that thing was dead... I glanced at Allo and saw her hand stretched out toward the corpse. She seemed to be using her Undead Maker skill, which allowed her to reanimate a corpse to use as a weapon. When used on a creature as powerful as a dragonfish, it was a pretty nifty skill. Too bad there weren't many situations where the corpse of a powerful monster was just lying around to use.

I looked at Volk. He seemed to be taking more of a minor role in the fight to help Allo and the rest of the team level up. He was trying to draw the dragonfish's attention, but was also protecting the others while pretending to be on the offensive. His careful combat and attention to detail had stood out to me since we first got to the island.

I suddenly realized that the fog around us had gotten thicker. *Hmm, well, I guess that could change with the wind around here, so maybe I shouldn't worry about it too much.*

The thought had only just crossed my mind when the dragonfish Volk was fighting seemed to blur, and the image of a larger dragonfish appeared in the air behind it. The image disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. *What...was that?* I suddenly felt woozy, almost like I was seasick.

"Guh...!" Volk stopped swinging his sword and jumped backward. I thought maybe he'd lost his balance or something, but then the dragonfish's mouth snapped shut right in front of him.

Huh? That felt like a bit of a clumsy move for Volk...

"Ktchh!" Nightmare also narrowly avoided a vicious bite from the dragonfish, who followed up with another bite attack. Her

dodges seemed somewhat confused too. She appeared to be wasting a lot of energy trying to avoid the dragonfish's bites.

I jumped into the air and flapped my wings to gain some distance, then swooped down at the dragonfish Nightmare was fighting and pierced straight through its head with my sword, pinning it to the ground.

"Giiiiih!"

Gained 900 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 900 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 78 has become Lv 79.

The dragonfish drew its final breath, then died. Relieved, Nightmare stopped her endless dodging.

Suddenly, I realized Treant was no longer on my back. I looked up and saw a huge, Treant-shaped hunk of metal careening to the ground in a straight line.

I figured it must have hopped off when I leapt into the air and decided to go for a Meteor Stomp. Unfortunately, though, it thunked to the ground without even grazing a single dragonfish and ended up burying itself waist-deep into the ground.

‹Ah! M-Master!›

Between Volk's misstep, Nightmare's confused dodging, and Treant's massive Meteor Stomp miss, I was sure of it—something weird was going on.

Were they attacking with illusion magic? Though, I had full immunity to illusions, so it wouldn't have affected me. Maybe the fog itself had an illusory effect? But that wouldn't make any sense either as the flying eels didn't have any illusion resistance or illusion skills.

"Givaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Suddenly, a loud, echoing dragonfish screech pierced the air. Two more long shadows appeared in the sky a short distance away.

I-It's calling for allies…

But even that was strange. There were three surviving dragonfish in the area, but they were all within my line of sight. None of them seemed to be the one calling for backup.

But that sudden shriek had to have come from *somewhere.*

What the hell? Is something…summoning them?

Part 2

AFTER A SHORT WHILE, two additional dragon-fish swooped down to join the remaining three. *Oh, I see what their strategy is now.* The dragonfish were using a variety of different illusions to distract their enemies, which allowed them the time they needed to replenish their stats. *Impressive.*

I used my Dimension Claws to gouge the fins of a few dragonfish, making it harder for them to stay airborne, and the dragonfish hissed as they lost altitude. They had Regenerate, so I knew they'd heal the injuries soon, but this hindered their movement for the time being.

I decided to focus on using my Dimension Claws when they were needed. It'd be tough for Allo and the others to take out this many rank B+ fighters on their own, so the best choice of action was to limit their greatest advantage: their ability to fly in and out of danger.

It might have been a little dangerous for me if I didn't have complete immunity to all illusions. But at this point, I could shoot down as many dragonfish as I wanted with ease, so I wasn't too worried. If I'd still been an Ouroboros, though, I'd probably be dead by now—this was a monster pack that would be impossible to overcome without a rank L monster on your side.

There's gotta be something hiding away somewhere that's creating the fog and the powerful illusions, all while summoning more allies to come help the others finish off their prey.

Its cries were the same as the others, so I had to assume it was a more powerful species of dragonfish. And if all the regular ones were rank B+, that meant this one had to be at least a rank A-,

if not higher. We needed to be careful. If it caught us off guard, a monster that strong could finish off anyone other than me with a single hit. I needed to find the dragonfish leader and stay alert for any surprise attacks, while also making sure Allo and the others didn't get overwhelmed by the regular dragonfish.

So far, my Psychic Sense was only picking up on the dragonfish that I could see. The stronger dragonfish must've been really good at hiding, and the loud shriek from before had echoed through the fog, making it difficult to pinpoint where it originated. For the time being, I walked up to Treant where it was stuck in the ground, intending to help pull it out. But when I approached, it used Tree Spirit Transformation to shrink down and flapped its wings like a chicken, leaving the hole behind before reverting to its original form in midair.

Man…Treant's sure getting a lot of use out of that skill, huh?

I looked over at the black lizard and saw it continuing to fire its Clay Gun at the dragonfish it was fighting, even though the fish was getting dangerously close.

It's…using another illusion to trip the black lizard up, isn't it? With the black lizard's level and stats, if it didn't try to dodge the dragonfish's attack early, it wouldn't be able to avoid it.

With a flick of my right paw, I used Dimension Claws to slash through the tail and gills of the dragonfish coming toward the black lizard.

"Givuuu!" The dragonfish fell to the ground, writhing. At that moment, the black lizard realized its depth perception was off and quickly backed away.

It seemed like the fog was the trigger for the illusions, which meant it had a much larger area of effect than my Illusion skill. Not even I could pull off illusion magic on such a massive scale.

The more I thought about it, the more I began to realize the enemy wasn't hiding behind an illusion. If it were, my immunity to illusion magic would mean I'd be able to see right through it.

Was the boss dragonfish just too far away to notice? The fog surrounding us seemed to vary somewhat in density. Maybe there was a hint to its hiding place in the thick fog somewhere…?

It's an unknown entity, so I can't be too careful. I'd like to draw it to me and then counter it, but…

No, wait! I've got it! It's time to fight illusions with illusions. Let's see who's the true master of illusion here. Good luck, dragonfish! You're gonna need it against Oneiros the Dream Dragon!

"Givavaa!" Two of the dragonfish sped toward me. Treant shot its Heat Beam at their backs, but they ignored it and rushed me instead. If they'd stayed at a distance from me, I could've taken them out one by one with Dimension Claws, but it seemed like they were making eliminating me their top priority.

Well, that's perfect. Time to test out my strategy!

The enemy lurking in the fog was probably watching the battle and thinking we were way out of its league. Even so, it hadn't retreated, which must've meant it either believed it had a chance at defeating me or there was some reason why it couldn't run away. Either way, they weren't giving up. So if I made the lurker believe it had a chance at landing a killing blow, it should come out of hiding. I'd lure it out, then turn the tables on it.

I'm going to let myself get hit once, but don't worry! It's just to draw out the boss of these things! I told Allo and the others with Telepathy. If I pretended to be attacked all of a sudden, it might cause even more panic among my friends than the enemy.

‹Roger that, Master! Master said he's going to let himself be attacked to pretend to be vulnerable but not to let that ruin our concentration! Stay sharp! Do not take your eyes off the enemy!› Treant repeated my directions to the others to make sure they didn't miss anything. *Wow. Treant's pretty solid now, isn't it? Maybe evolving made it a little livelier.*

"Givaaaaa!"

"Givaaaaa!"

The two approaching dragonfish opened their mouths wide, showing off their rows of razor-sharp fangs. I let them draw close but evaded at the last second, then used Illusion to make it look like their fangs had hit their mark, gutting me and scattering blood into the air.

“Groooooohh…!” I tossed the Ideal Weapon sword from my hand to make my illusion even more convincing.

I could’ve used Illusion to pretend I lost my weapon instead, but I was ready to get rid of it anyway. On top of the Ideal Weapon MP drain, there was also a steady MP drain from using Dragon Mirror to make myself bipedal.

And really, the Blade of Calamity was kind of underpowered anyway. The status conditions it caused were handy, but I was already powerful to begin with. Ideal Weapon was definitely a skill I wanted to level up, though; it looked interesting…

‹Master?! Are you all right?!› I heard Treant’s panicked voice.

Huh? Do you not remember what I just told you?! The splattered flesh and blood may have been a bit of a shock, but I’d hope you wouldn’t be so quick to forget after I warned you!

Allo looked at me with concern too. Treant was making such a racket that she must’ve been worried something had actually happened to me.

But after all that, it seemed like my target had finally come out to play. It was faint, but I felt a presence coming from behind me. And suddenly, its hiding spot was clear to me: It was underground.

A tornado suddenly whipped up in my blind spot. It looked similar to the one created by Allo’s Gale. I whirled around and gave it a wide berth while creating another Gravidon in my mouth. *If it’s underground, then I’ll blow this entire patch of sand to smithereens!*

I shot the black Gravidon ball from my mouth. The sand flew up to meet the orb as it sailed through the air, then landed on the ground, slightly distorting the space around it. After a moment, the orb burst, splashing a wave of sand through the air. Fog began to pour out from the crater in the sand. It seemed like I was right: Whatever this thing was, it was the one creating all the fog.

As I watched, a strange monster emerged from the foggy crater. It was massive—about as tall as I was—with four long, slender necks attached to eerie, demonic faces. A total of eight eyes leered at me.

For a moment, I was stunned. But then my Illusion Immunity skill kicked in, and I realized this monster was just an impostor. The

four-headed demon distorted and disappeared; in its place sat a large shell with countless tentacles wriggling from the narrow spaces between each plate.

I-Is this guy really the leader of the dragonfish?

Part 3

THE SIGHT OF MY ENEMY stunned me. *I wasn't expecting the leader of the dragonfish to be a giant shellfish that looks nothing like a dragonfish! What the heck is this thing?*

Shin: Rank A–. A monster that uses fog to create large-scale illusions. Can also mimic various sounds to confuse those around it. Legends say that during an expedition, a group of soldiers found a village in the wasteland and stopped to rest, only to be eaten alive by the Shin. Due to its nature, it is difficult to see its true identity, and it is often believed to be an undead or dragon. But in reality, it is a massive shell monster.

Rank A–, huh? I knew it. Using fog and sound to confuse its opponents really is a tricky strategy. Not only does it make its opponents hallucinate, but it also lures in surrounding monsters and uses them as pawns.

I was surprised that the mastermind behind the fog was a giant shellfish monster with no connection to the dragonfish; it just used illusions and sounds to pretend to be another dragonfish and call them as allies so they could harass us.

The Shin's description said it used fog to create large-scale illusions, but there was no way it could've covered the entirety of the Strange Lands with fog on its own. This wasn't the only area where the fog was extra thick; it was like that on top of the mountain as well. I had to assume there was more than one Shin roaming the region.

The fact that the Shin made the dragonfish fight me instead of going after me itself made me think it wasn't much of a fighter. But

we were newcomers encroaching on its territory, so it decided to test our strength by siccing a bunch of dragonfish on us. When the dragonfish weren't up to snuff, the Shin was unable to retreat, and it was forced to reveal itself.

Species: Shin
Status: Physical Resistance Up
Lv: 89/100
HP: 955/955
MP: 844/844
Attack: 342
Defense: 821
Magic: 892
Agility: 311
Rank: A–
Special Skills:
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6
Psychic Sense: Lv 8
Stealth: Lv 9
Tentacles: Lv 8
Giant Illusion Shell: Lv —
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 8
Poison Resistance: Lv 4
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 7
Illusion Resistance: Lv 7
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 5
Normal Skills:
Mirage: Lv 9
Illusion: Lv 8
Human Transformation: Lv 7

Reflect Sound: Lv 7
Recite Chant: Lv 6
Shell Retreat: Lv 9
Fog Barrier: Lv 4
Burrow: Lv 7
Tentacle Lash: Lv 6
Death: Lv 6
Gravity: Lv 6
Physical Barrier: Lv 6
Diseased Breath: Lv 7
Aqua Sphere: Lv 5
Title Skills:
Final Evolution: Lv —
Master of Illusion Palace: Lv —

I checked out the unfamiliar skills: Reflect Sound, which allowed the Shin to memorize and repeat any sound, and Recite Chant, which allowed it to recognize any opponent's magic skills and use them for a short period of time.

It definitely had some interesting skills, but this fight was ending here. The Shin didn't seem like a fighter; it didn't have much mobility and seemed like it wasn't the type to enjoy close combat.

The Shin's illusions were meaningless to me now. By drawing it in close, I'd already won.

A black ring of light spread out around the Shin: Gravity. It was a convenient and easy-to-use skill that had been difficult for me to overcome in past battles. But it'd really come in handy since I learned it myself, although letting my allies get caught in it was the skill's major drawback.

Regardless, gravity magic of this level meant nothing to me now.

The Shin's figure faded into the mist. In its place emerged the same many-headed, demonic creature as before. But I knew better. The illusion soon distorted and disappeared as well.

If the Shin was repeating the same skill that didn't work on me before, it had to mean it was out of options. The Shin pulled its tentacles back into itself and closed its shell tight. This monster seemed to be more focused on defense than anything.

Hmm…I doubt it's necessary, but I'm going to use it anyway. Just to get more used to the skill. I used Dragon Mirror to become bipedal once more and used Ideal Weapon again.

Phosphorescent light gathered in my hand. This time, I pictured a hammer I could use to smash through a hard shell. As I imagined it, I held in my mind the desire for it to be immensely powerful.

After a few moments, a massive hammer with an ominous air about it appeared in my hand. The hammer's head was white but had glowing red letters engraved throughout it like some sort of charm or incantation. One side of the hammer was pointed, so I turned that side toward the Shin.

Warhammer of Calamity: Value B. Attack: +44. A massive warhammer said to call forth disaster. Made from the bones of a dragon that leaves disaster and ruin in its wake. Blows from this weapon instantly reduce target's physical resistance and defense and occasionally inflicts Curse.

I swung the Warhammer of Calamity at the Shin, smashing through it in one fell swoop.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

Normal Skill "Ideal Weapon" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

I dropped the Warhammer of Calamity and reverted back to my original shape.

Gained 5,696 Experience Points

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 5,696 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 79 has become Lv 83.

The battle could've been tough based on the surrounding conditions, but as expected, the differences in our statuses made me the clear winner.

The fog around me faded, but it didn't disappear completely. It seemed like I was right; this Shin wasn't the only one producing the fog. But considering I still wanted some fog cover for when the saint came to visit, I figured we should probably hold off on hunting them for now.

Now it was just a matter of getting rid of the rest of the poor dragonfish that the Shin had lured over to fight us. I opted to head back to Allo and the rest to check in. Like before, I used my Dimension Claws to slice through the dragonfish's wings to make them fall to the ground.

Without the Shin around to support the dragonfish with its illusions, the rest of the fight was a piece of cake.

Part 4

THE BATTLE AGAINST the dragonfish was over.

Although they were up against a swarm of rank B+ monsters, Allo and the rest of the team seemed to get through the fight pretty well. Rank B+ monsters were comparable to the Mother Avyssos and the Demon King's underling, Samael. Considering Allo and Nightmare had only barely escaped from Samael by teaming up, and now they were taking on rank B+ opponents with ease, this was a pretty significant level jump for them. And Treant—who we'd left behind in Alban Mine during the fight with the Demon King—was now rank B+, which was even better than Nightmare. Allo went from **Lv: 67/85** to **Lv: 72/85**, Nightmare went from **Lv: 53/70** to **Lv: 61/70**, Grandpa Magiatite went from **Lv: 61/70** to **Lv: 63/70**, Black Lizard went from **Lv: 28/80** to **Lv: 41/80**, and Treant went from **Lv: 1/85** to **Lv: 33/85**.

I was ecstatic to see Treant's level increasing so quickly. The Demon King's Blessing skill was really getting put to work. Grandpa Magiatite and Nightmare were getting closer and closer to their next evolutions.

Nightmare was missing a leg, so I used Regen to grow it back for her. She had Regenerate too, but it was better for me to do it since she had a lot less MP to utilize. I also healed the black lizard, Treant, and Allo. Volk and Grandpa Magiatite had made it through the fight almost entirely unscathed.

‹Masterful as always, Volk!› I called out to him, then checked his status. Volk was now **Lv: 85/85 (MAX)**.

"Perhaps…it is better to free the Magiatite from its role as my sword? I do not earn many experience points, and I fear it hinders its leveling…" Volk said, sounding a little sad. I didn't dare to say it, but I felt like he may have realized that he'd reached the ceiling of his own strength.

"By the way, that peculiar weapon you were wielding earlier… would you mind if I borrowed it?"

‹Oh, um, unfortunately…it's made of magic, so it'll disappear when I let go of it. I didn't pull it out with Dimension or anything.› Dimension was a spatial magic skill that allowed the user to have their own pocket dimension where they could deposit inanimate objects and pull them out at will. Because the space wasn't very large, it was usually used to store weapons. Volk had Dimension, so I figured that was what he assumed I did.

When I'd first met Volk, he'd always carried his massive greatsword, Leral, on his back instead of storing it away. However, ever since it was damaged in the battle against the Demon King, Volk kept Leral stored safely inside his Dimension.

"I see… That's a shame," Volk replied, looking disappointed. It seemed like he'd been really looking forward to it.

I felt bad. *‹S-sorry… My Dimension is empty.›*

"Oh? You have one?" Volk asked, surprised.

‹Yeah. But I don't have any use for it, so it's just been collecting dust.›

“I feel like with the amount of magic power you possess, you could have fit that huge mandragora in there and saved everyone the trouble of having to tie it to your back to return to camp with it.”

‹R-really? You think so?›

“Well, I’m not you, so I wouldn’t know for certain. But surely you could have tried?”

I felt eyes on the back of my head and looked back to see Nightmare glaring at me with murderous intent.

“H-hey! Master Dragon didn’t mean to inconvenience you!” Allo stood in front of Nightmare, trying to quiet her down.

S-sorry, Nightmare, really. I’m sorry. B-but, I’m still the one who had to lug it all the way back to camp, so…go easy, okay?

Treant watched the exchange from afar, its trunk shaking as if it was laughing. *Wow, Treant. You’ve really come a long way, haven’t you?*

I decided to try it out and used Dimension. A swirling ring of blue, red, and black light appeared in the air. I pushed one of the dead dragonfish toward it. As soon as the head passed through the ring of light, the lights began to speed up, and the dragonfish was sucked into the portal.

Wh-whoa… It fit. And I could tell just how large my Dimension space was. It would’ve been tight, but the Hades Mandragora would’ve just barely fit. *Forgive me, Nightmare.*

Nightmare glared at me, sullen but quiet thanks to Allo.

I put two more dragonfish, along with the Shin—peeled from its shell—into the Dimension portal. The Shin’s shell would’ve been valuable, and could’ve been processed to be used as shields or something, but the Warhammer of Calamity had obliterated it so badly that it was no longer usable. Even if it hadn’t, though, I didn’t have the skills to process it or sell it anywhere, so I didn’t have any use for it.

It was just past midday, so we decided to stop for lunch before continuing our scouting trip. I removed the head of the one remaining dragonfish with Dimension Claws to drain its blood, then removed its scales and skin, and then its bones and organs. Incidentally, dragonfish looked like it was a type of whitefish.

Since we were near the ocean, I decided to refine some salt out of the seawater and cook the fish with it. I asked Allo to create a Clay tray and then roasted the fish with Scorching Breath.

They were big chunks of fish, so they were easy to gobble up without hesitation. The fish was mild but had a unique taste with a hint of sweetness that was complemented well by the salt. It had a slight odor, but nothing my dragon stomach couldn't handle—and it was deliciously fatty.

Nightmare ate it with gusto as well. But as I watched her, she noticed my gaze and suddenly slowed down her eating and glared at me.

S-sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt. Just happy to see you enjoying it.

"I've heard stories of dragonfish before but never thought I'd end up eating one of them," Volk said, chewing on a piece with a complicated look on his face. "They don't taste bad, per se...but they do have a strange flavor."

Well, as long as they taste good, right? Monsters of this class seemed to be the only type of food out here, but I didn't think I'd ever had such a yummy fish. The subtle flavor wasn't bad, but if we put a bunch of seasoning on it before grilling, the smell would probably fade and turn into a flavor everyone could enjoy.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel like this dragonfish tasted like something else I'd eaten a long time ago.

W-wait...is this thing actually an eel?

Part 5

I'D SUCCESSFULLY EVOLVED Treant and leveled it up. On top of that, I'd found out Allo and the others could take on multiple rank B+ monsters themselves. It felt like it was about time to start heading for the peak of the mountains on the eastern side of the island, which had been my goal since the day we arrived here. I knew we didn't have much time, and we didn't want to go into the fight against Lilyxila with any lingering uncertainties about the island.

But first, there was still an enemy I wanted to take on—one that I'd met earlier while I was leveling and chosen to flee from.

Fortunately, once I began looking around the same area I'd first encountered it, it didn't take long for me to find it again.

Killer Queen: Rank A–. Driven by an all-encompassing desire to dismantle everything in sight. Due to their nature, most boogie dolls run out of stamina after endless consecutive battles and are subsequently killed. The very fact that a boogie doll has survived long enough to evolve into a Killer Queen is proof that they are vicious, killer dolls that have never known defeat.

Yup, there she was: the Killer Queen. She was a formidable foe, the same rank as the Shin, with an impressive set of skills that combined pure attack-type parameters with enhancement skills and plenty of status condition skills.

I wasn't sure whether to take Allo and the others up to the mountaintop, leave them behind in the waterfall cave, or continue to level up elsewhere, so I wanted to have the group fight one Killer Queen to help me decide.

Species: Killer Queen

Status: Berserk

Lv: 94/100

HP: 822/1025

MP: 488/511

The doll girl's single eye looked around at Allo, Volk, human-form Nightmare, the black lizard, and tree spirit Treant as they surrounded her. She raised four long, double-jointed arms toward them, and her mouth opened wide.

"Ah, ah, aaaaaaaah!"

She was faster than Volk, stronger than Allo, tougher than Treant, and trickier than Nightmare. For whatever it was worth, she

was probably the strongest doll in the world.

The Killer Queen evaded both Nightmare and Allo's sphere skills by dodging left and right, then rushed through Allo's Gale to approach. The magical whirlwind hit her for over twenty percent of her health, but she showed no signs of stopping. The adrenaline from her Berserk status was probably keeping her going.

Allo manipulated a lump of clay she'd gathered in advance and used it as a shield to protect herself. When fighting enemies with agility that far outpaced one's own, you either had to rely on others to support you or prepare a defense method in advance.

The Killer Queen swung three of her arms toward Allo, knives in hand. *"Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"*

Within seconds, the wall of clay was destroyed, and pieces of Allo's body flew through the clearing…

No, from my spot in the back I could immediately tell that it wasn't Allo's body—it was a clay decoy made to resemble her. The real Allo was further back, out of reach of the Killer Queen's knives. Of course, the Killer Queen immediately noticed the mistake, but if Allo could mislead her, even for a moment, she could avoid an immediate follow-up attack.

Our goal wasn't to simply defeat the saint, it was to defeat her without losing a single member of our team. Allo and the others needed to learn how to survive, even against an enemy more powerful than them.

Allo hadn't only prepared a lump of clay—one of her arms was also covered in clay to be used as a shield in melee combat.

"Hyaaaah!" With a flash of his sword, Volk attacked the Killer Queen. At the same time, he grabbed Nightmare by the scruff of her neck and tossed her behind him. A piece of spiderweb, attached to the Killer Queen, trailed out behind her.

With one of Nightmare's spiderwebs attached, she could take advantage of the Killer Queen's movement and chase after her with the same speed. However, Nightmare was pretty heavy in her normal form, making it difficult to take advantage of the strategy. In order to make full use of it, Nightmare had used Human Transformation to make herself light enough to be pulled around.

The Killer Queen's remaining arm turned toward Volk behind her and shot out a very thin wire from her fingertips. She was using Thread Slice—the same skill used by the Chaos Ooze. It was an extremely useful skill that was fast, difficult to see, and powerful. The Killer Queen could unleash those threads from her four arms at will, making her even more difficult to handle.

"Guh...!" Volk dodged the Thread Slice by bending his body to the side. He was able to avoid a fatal wound, but the thread managed to slice thinly through his stomach. Blood gushed from the cut. Next, one of the Killer Queen's other arms reached out and grabbed Volk.

Maybe it's about time for me to go in and lend some support?

But as soon as the thought crossed my mind, the tip of Volk's sword began to swell.

‹Fireball!›

To make up for Volk's opening, Grandpa Magiatite immediately went on the offense. The Killer Queen released her Thread Slice and waved away the Fireball with her arm. Nightmare, who'd been thrown behind Volk, pulled him back with her to get him out of the range of danger. The black lizard rushed in to replace Volk, circling the Killer Queen with Roll.

The only way to successfully take on a superior opponent was to attack aggressively but carefully while creating openings for one's allies to utilize.

The Killer Queen pointed two arms at Allo behind her and two at the black lizard in front of her. Just then, Treant's tyrant guardian form appeared in the air above the Killer Queen. When Nightmare pulled Volk back, Volk had kicked the tree spirit Treant into the air.

‹Take this!› Treant's body burst into flames and turned into steel. Its body was cloaked in black light, and it plummeted to the ground.

The Killer Queen, usually prone to rushing into things, may have sensed something bad was coming and instead stopped and bent her legs.

Meteor Stomp was difficult to aim and took time to prepare. The Killer Queen was also not a particularly large target. With her

agility, she'd be able to dodge out of the way.

Or rather, she would've been able to, if the two joints in her legs weren't tangled up with clay arms from Allo's Clay Shield. One of the Killer Queen's legs burst open at the joint. She seemed like she was trying to break the clay arms with force, but it came at the expense of one of her legs. On top of that, it seemed like she couldn't use as much force as she had originally.

"Kya ha...!"

‹Meteor Stomp!›

Treant's massive, burning frame smashed down on the Killer Queen, blowing her away. Her head was half destroyed, and she'd lost both an arm and a leg. With only two legs and three arms remaining, she looked much more human than she had originally.

As soon as the Killer Queen hit the ground, the black lizard hit her with Roll. Her body tumbled along the ground. She tried to pick herself up with shaky, puppet-like movements but collapsed to the ground again, cracks appearing all along her body.

The Killer Queen's eyes slowly closed, and the relief in the air was palpable. But she still had a lot of HP left...

"Don't let up yet!" I was about to warn them, but Volk called out first. The Killer Queen's eyes shot open, and she released a Thread Slice from her mouth. She moved even faster than before. From her position a good distance away, the Thread Slice shot through the air and pierced through Allo's shoulder.

"Kyaaah!" Allo shrieked in alarm.

"Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha!" The Killer Queen's head separated from her body and charged straight at Allo, following the thread to its destination.

Allo swung her bloated arm down to counter the Killer Queen. Her clay arm burst on impact, sending her sprawling along the ground. She stood up, limping, and smiled in relief when she saw the Killer Queen's head tumbling along the ground in the distance. A crack ran from her forehead to her chin.

"Ah...ah, ah, aaaaaaaaaaahh!" The Killer Queen shattered, leaving only dust in her wake.

I was over the moon. My only role in this fight had been to get the Killer Queen's attention and remain on standby in case someone got seriously hurt. But now, finally, Allo and the rest of the team had managed to finish off a rank A– monster entirely on their own.

They were ready to go up the mountain and see what awaited us at its peak. But if we were going up there, I wanted to make sure everyone was in tip-top shape.

I checked Nightmare and Grandpa Magiatite's levels. Nightmare was at **Lv: 64/70**, and Grandpa Magiatite was at **Lv: 65/70**.

Their evolutions were close. I decided to stick to easy hunting for today and aim for the mountain summit tomorrow.

Part 6

AFTER DEFEATING the Killer Queen, we stayed in the area and hunted other monsters, mainly fenrirs. On the way back to the waterfall cave, we also ran into a Poison Lord—a large purple centipede that seemed to be a subspecies of Giant Sand Centipede—and a group of five naked humanoid men with owl heads called Andras that were particularly good at water magic. We didn't run into any other rank A– monsters like the Shin or the Killer Queen. They seemed to be the strongest monsters beneath the mountain.

Aside from Treant almost being burned to death in a Heat Beam battle with the Poison Lord and consistently getting himself stuck in the ground with Meteor Stomp and surrounded by the Andras, there were no close calls.

It was dark by the time we finished leveling. I was relieved that the saint still hadn't arrived and glad once again I chose to come to this foggy land on the edge of the world.

After defeating the Killer Queen, Allo went from **Lv: 74/85** to **Lv: 77/85**, Nightmare went from **Lv: 64/70** to **Lv: 70/70**, Grandpa Magiatite went from **Lv: 65/70** to **Lv: 70/70**, the black lizard went from **Lv: 45/80** to **Lv: 54/80**, and Treant went from **Lv: 39/85** to **Lv: 49/85**.

Nightmare and Treant had finally reached max level. Because I'd only been assisting, and rank B+ monsters weren't giving me many experience points anymore, I'd only gone up from **Lv: 83/150** to **Lv: 85/150.**

I'd been trying to increase the level of my Ideal Weapon skill but hadn't managed to make it go up. Even so, I felt like I was getting the hang of it. My Dimension Claws had gone up from level 4 to level 6.

Grandpa Magiatite said he felt uncomfortable evolving in the open because it would leave him defenseless, so he went into the depths of the waterfall cave on his own. Nightmare created a pitch-black cocoon on the ceiling of the cave and disappeared inside it. Treant tried to poke Nightmare's cocoon with one of its branches, but Allo immediately pulled it back.

Maybe it would have been better to hide away like Grandpa Magiatite…

Grandpa Magiatite was the one who came back first. The change was obvious; he now had a dull yellow-gold glow. *D-did he turn into gold?!*

Gold Magiatite Heart: Rank B+. A Magiatite Heart whose metal has been mutated by its excessive magical power. Because of its rarity, gold magiatite is believed to be fictitious. In addition to strength being far beyond that of conventional magiatite, it is said to possess a variety of different properties.

So is this another type of magiatite then? Jeez, Grandpa Magiatite, you just keep getting more and more rare!

Species: Gold Magiatite Heart

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/92

HP: 55/55

MP: 41/222

Attack: 43

Defense: 301
Magic: 163
Agility: 224
Rank: B+
Special Skills:
Magiatite: Lv —
Poison Belt: Lv 9
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 8
Grecian Language: Lv 2
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv MAX
Magic Resistance: Lv MAX
Debuff Immunity: Lv —
Magic Decomposition: Lv 1
Normal Skills:
Magic Metal Creation: Lv 9
Liquid: Lv 8
Corona: Lv 8
Transform: Lv 8
Telepathy: Lv 5
Fireball: Lv 9
Clay: Lv 7
Clay Gun: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 7
Metal Breath: Lv 6
Shock Absorption: Lv 6
Evade: Lv 5
Double Poison: Lv 7
Human Transformation: Lv 3
Flare: Lv 2
Metal Balloon: Lv 4

Camouflage: Lv 2
Title Skills:
Final Evolution: Lv —
Sage of Steal: Lv —
Coward: Lv —
Rare Monster: Lv —
Ancient Being: Lv —
Demon King's Underling: Lv —
Legendary Metal: Lv —

Man. His defense is insane for only being level 1. I had to assume his defense would only improve as he leveled up. I was beginning to look forward to Grandpa Magiatite's growth.

Grandpa Magiatite also had three new Normal Skills that caught my attention: Flare, Metal Balloon, and Camouflage. But what I was most interested in was his new Resistance Skill, Magic Decomposition. It had to be a very rare Resistance Skill—I'd never seen the word "decomposition" used for a Resistance Skill before.

‹I feel like…I stick out.› Grandpa Magiatite said, seemingly disappointed with his new golden glow. When I first met Grandpa Magiatite, he'd been trying to run away from me as fast as he could. I also knew he was a major target for metal-seeking adventurers.

"Excellent… Yes, quite excellent," Volk said, looking at Grandpa Magiatite and nodding vigorously. Was he just looking at Grandpa Magiatite like a weapon now? Well, I guess Grandpa Magiatite didn't mind, so it was fine.

A little while after Grandpa Magiatite's return, we heard a crack. The black cocoon hanging at the entrance to the cave was opening. Treant, who'd been reaching out toward the cocoon, turned into a tree spirit and zoomed away with a chicken-like flap of its wings.

If that was going to scare you so badly, you shouldn't have been up there in the first place…

There was a good chance Nightmare might be rank B+…or maybe just rank B. Regardless, I doubted it would be a higher rank

than Treant, so there was no reason for it to be so nervous. But perhaps Treant had gotten used to being the weakest link.

Through the crack in the cocoon, a humanoid torso—wearing Nightmare's mask—stretched out its face. Surprised by the purple hair suddenly hanging down from the crack, I involuntarily jumped back.

Nightmare's evolved form landed right in front of me. Unlike before, its body was now covered in purple hair. It was about three meters in length—about the same as its previous evolution—but now a human torso rose up out of Nightmare's spider abdomen. It was similar to Arachne from Greek mythology.

The human part of the spider looked like an adult version of Nightmare's human form. Like the spider body, her human arms were covered in purple hair. Deadly claws extended from the tips of her fingers, bright scarlet.

Whoa. Talk about a vibe change. I-Is that really you, Nightmare?

Atlach-Nacha: Rank A–. A vicious, bloodthirsty spider monster with the torso and head of a human being. Legend has it that it was able to turn a prosperous city into its nest overnight. The dark threads it spits out are deadly, and they also drain an opponent's HP and MP.

A-a rank A–?! Nightmare went from C+ all the way to A–?!

Sure, she was a fairly high level for a rank C+ and had the same max level as the B– Grandpa Magiatite, but still…I didn't expect her to grow this much all at once!

Species: Atlach-Nacha

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/102

HP: 224/224

MP: 52/218

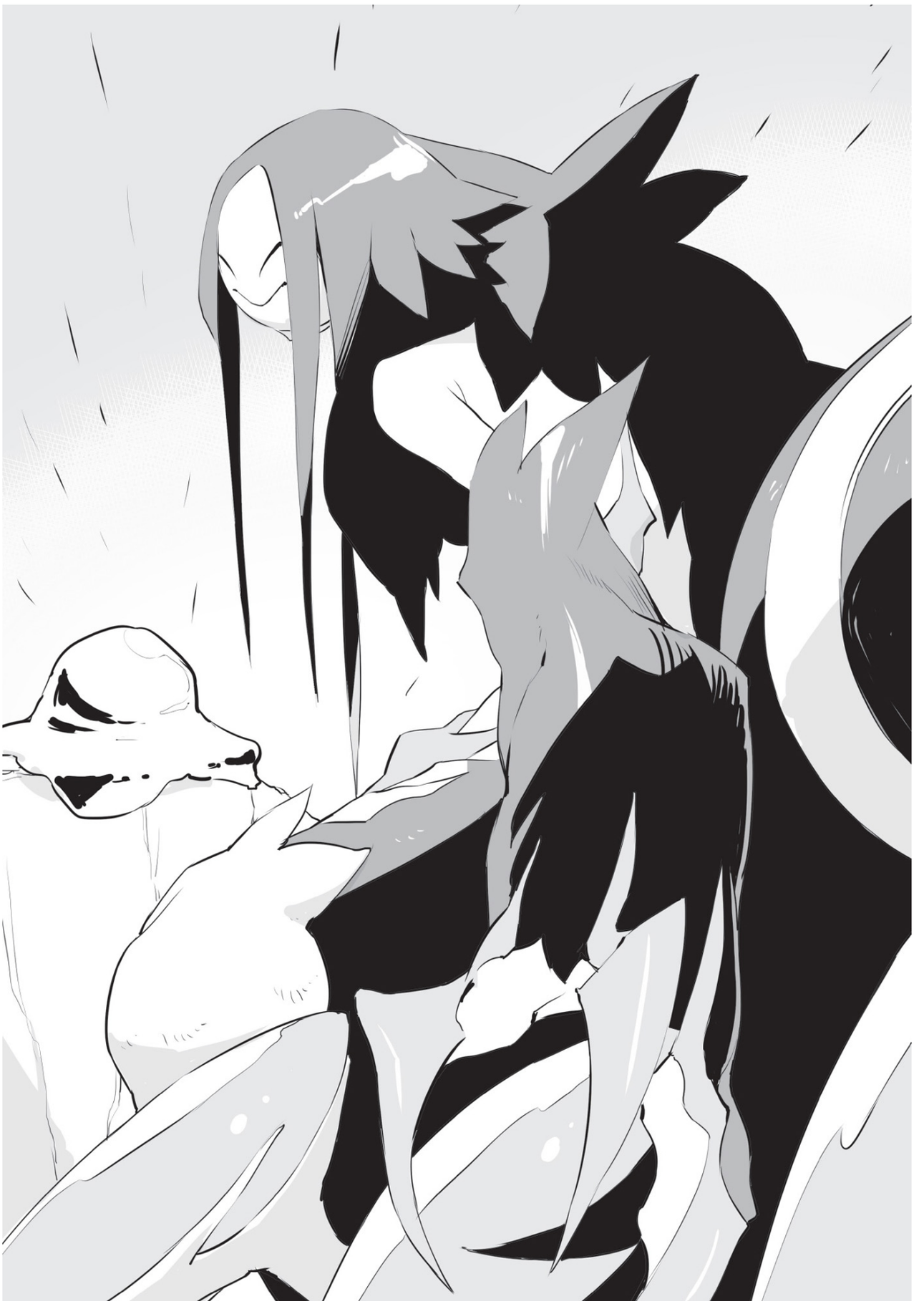
Attack: 196

Defense: 139
Magic: 214
Agility: 175
Rank: A–
Special Skills:
Dark Type: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 6
Poison Belt: Lv 7
Psychic Sense: Lv 7
Nekomata: Lv —
Stealth: Lv 7
Enchanting Gaze: Lv 2
Dark Sticky Thread: Lv —
Grecian Language: Lv 1
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 5
Magic Resistance: Lv 4
Poison Resistance: Lv 7
Curse Resistance: Lv 7
Normal Skills:
Venom Fangs: Lv 5
Spidersilk: Lv 5
Call Allies: Lv 1
Silk Spool: Lv 5
Poison Web: Lv 6
Hanging Thread: Lv 6
Sneak Attack: Lv 3
Curse: Lv 4
Human Transformation: Lv 6
Regenerate: Lv 4
Dark Sphere: Lv 4

Clay: Lv 4
Death Demon's Wicked Claws: Lv 3
Telepathy: Lv 2
Diseased Breath: Lv 3
Thread Slice: Lv 3
Iron Pendulum: Lv 3
Puppet: Lv 3
Abyss Field: Lv 3
Doppel Cocoon: Lv 1
Title Skills:
Demon King's Underling: Lv —
Master Spinner: Lv 5
Meanie: Lv —
Mutation: Lv —
Tenacious: Lv 5
Cunning: Lv 4
Avyssos Eater: Lv 2
Assassin: Lv 6
Final Evolution: Lv —
Darkness Dweller: Lv —

Th-that's a lot of skills. If she gets to a higher level, she'll easily be even stronger than a Shin or an Adam. I was happy about it, but Nightmare was getting so strong so fast that I was honestly baffled.

Since Grandpa Magiatite only went from rank B– to B+, I had assumed there'd be a barrier preventing Nightmare from getting to A class.



Th-that is actually Nightmare, right? For sure?

Part 7

AFTER A NIGHT OF REST in the waterfall cave, we decided to take a quick stroll around the area to liven up the morning and take down a lone fenrir roaming the area. I wanted to put some levels into Nightmare—now Atlach-Nacha—and Grandpa Magiatite's new evolutions before we went up to the top of the mountain where the self-destructing clay guardian and the tentacled lump of flesh Shub Niggurath were lying in wait.

With that goal in mind, I decided to make everyone other than Atlach-Nacha and Grandpa Magiatite operate as assistants. Although I had to intervene a little at one point, the battle with the Fenrir ended quickly.

As you'd expect from a rank A– monster, Atlach-Nacha was already strong enough at level 1 to dominate the near max-level fenrir.

Atlach-Nacha's new skill, Abyss Field, was a magic skill that deployed a nest in a circle centered around itself. I was curious about it when I first heard the name, but I was a little relieved to see it didn't summon an avyssos insect or anything. It was a ranged attack, so even at a low level, it could swallow up the agile fenrir. On top of that, Atlach-Nacha now used Dark Sticky Threads. As the name suggested, they were highly sticky and could negate any physical impact they received, making them difficult to shake off. The Dark Sticky Threads also continuously drained the HP and MP of whatever they were stuck to. It was an incredible skill to have.

In the battle against the fenrir, although the fenrir was able to break the threads with Scorching Breath, they successfully stopped its movement—and also caused it to self-immolate as it tried to get them off with its fire skill. Atlach-Nacha was now a serious contender on the battlefield, and I expected great things from her in future battles.

Grandpa Magiatite also showed a good amount of effort for his level and rank. His new skill, Camouflage, gave his metal body

the ability to divert incoming light. If it were a one-on-one fight, he would've been detected easily, but by tricking the fenrir's eyes and diverting its attention to Atlach-Nacha, he managed to attack fenrir's blind spot without taking damage. His new Metal Balloon skill produced a gas lighter than air inside its body, inflated its metal frame, and allowed him to fly into the air as a balloon. Grandpa Magiatite's other skills allowed him to heat up the Metal Balloon and use it as a self-controlled projectile, and it also seemed like it'd be possible to use it as a bomb by making the gas rupture through his metal membrane with a time lag. On top of that, by using Metal Balloon and Camouflage together, he could even be made into a nearly transparent bomb that would be close to impossible for enemies to avoid.

The way I saw it, Metal Balloon could be an excellent attack skill, but it didn't do much against the fenrir because of the level difference of the two monsters of the same rank and because Grandpa Magiatite's stats were specialized for defense and evasion. Even so, it was a good battering ram for gaining experience points.

The two made quick work of the fenrir. Atlach-Nacha went up to **Lv: 29/102**, and Grandpa Magiatite went up to **Lv: 24/92**. The fight showed a lot of promise for Atlach-Nacha's future; at this rate, she'd likely overtake Allo at some point to become the strongest among my group. Her status was excellent, and so were her new skills—she'd only get stronger from here on out.

Nice work, you two. Especially you, Atlach-Nacha. That was awesome! I said to the two of them.

Atlach-Nacha turned her head toward me, then tilted her head slightly to look behind me. "Sure," she answered curtly before turning back to her original position.

Th-that was cold… Now that she's got a human body and I can understand her gestures better, it feels like she's being blatantly cruel. What do I do, Partner…?

I suddenly wondered what Atlach-Nacha was looking at before and turned around to see Allo standing behind me with a relieved expression on her face. When our eyes met, Allo shook her head and her expression went back to normal.

What the heck? She was just looking at Allo? I thought she looked away…

After the battle was over, Volk asked Grandpa Magiatite to take the form of a sword again. The sword was the same as before, except slightly longer and radiating a golden light.

"Ahh… Such a divine light. How incredible…" Volk murmured, running his fingers along the blade with a twinkle in his eyes I'd never seen before. I secretly thought he looked like a wealthy nobleman with all that shiny gold, but I decided not to say anything.

I checked the sword's new status.

Golden Spirit Sword: A+. Attack: +104. Magic: +65. A sword made from Gold Magiatite, the more expensive version of the magic metal magiatite. A priceless treasure. The magical conductivity of Gold Magiatite is the highest among all existing metals in the world, and it has the ability to enhance its user's ability to wield magic. Its slashes can also nullify the magic of whomever it hits, making it highly suitable to killing mages. The sword is self-aware as well.

Man, Grandpa Magiatite's sword form evolved a lot too, huh… The sword's added attack power had nearly doubled from before. It was now even more powerful than Volk's Moon-Piercer Leral.

It was time. Now that we were this strong, we were ready to venture up the mountain on the easternmost side of this island. There was no time to wait. It had been days since I fought Ruin and Lilyxila, and Lilyxila could attack at any moment.

Chapter 4:
Shub Niggurath

Part 1

WITH ALLO, TREANT, Atlach-Nacha, Black Lizard, Volk, and Grandpa Magiatite in tow, I began to head up the mountain. My goal was to finish leveling everyone up and see what was hidden behind the clay guardians that lined the mountain path. I didn't want to leave any stones unturned before our battle with Lilyxila, even if that meant poking a few snakes out of the bushes.

As we climbed the mountain, the fog got thicker and thicker. I'd come up the mountain a fair distance before, and I still hadn't been able to find the source. Even at the foot of the mountain, the fog was already making it pretty hard to see.

The cloud of fog covering the mountainside seemed quite large. I had a feeling its creator was much more powerful than the Shin we'd faced before.

We climbed up a bleak path lined with distorted trees and strange leaves. After a short while, I felt a chill run through me. My Psychic Sense detected a familiar presence nearby.

As I stood watching, two massive shadows appeared in the fog, then loomed into view.

Species: Clay Guardian
Status: Normal
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)
HP: 785/785
MP: 225/225

Species: Clay Guardian
Status: Normal
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)

HP: 785/785

MP: 225/225

What emerged from the fog were two large rock faces. When I was an Ouroboros, the clay guardians had almost been my undoing. The first time I saw one of them, I was forced to fight it up close because I couldn't do any damage from a distance, and then they'd used a skill to restrict my movement and wrapped me up in their self-destruction skill Direct Burst.

I wanted to level Allo and the others up, but after nearly losing my life to their Direct Burst—even as a tanky Ouroboros—they felt too dangerous to risk.

I'll just finish these guys off as fast as I can!

I opened my mouth and collected a Gravidon orb of black light. My goal was to blow them up from a distance so I didn't have to risk getting close. When I was an Ouroboros, I had no choice but to get close so I could hit hard enough to get past its defense, but now that I had Gravidon, I could destroy them both with a single blow.

The two clay guardians rose into the air and flew to the left and right around me. Their eyes began to glow red.

H-here come their Heat Beams! Fortunately, their eyes were trained on me instead of any of my friends. They must have been trying to stop my Gravidon attack.

If I avoided them, Allo and the others might become their next targets. I decided to stay where I was and take the attack. Four rays of fire shot into my shoulder, then traveled to my chest.

Heat Beam, the crazy cheat skill that'd put me in a lot of pain back in the desert, caused lasting, radiating damage. I was afraid that four direct hits might be too much for me, but…

Illusia

Species: Oneiros

Status: Normal

Lv: 85/150

HP: 3548/3581

MP: 3694/3694

Wait, that's it? That's nothing!

My defense was currently at 1,634, so a rank B+ monster wasn't going to do much damage at all unless it was particularly specialized as an attacker.

"Graaaaaah!" I unleashed my Gravidon. It hit the clay guardian coming from the right and dragged its body to the center of the black orb, then crushed it inward. The clay guardian cracked, then shattered.

Gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 85 has become Lv 89.

The experience point gain from the max-level rank B+ clay guardians was delicious.

The clay guardian on the left opened its mouth, and a black light swirled in its throat. It seemed like it was about to shoot Gravidon just as I had. Did it really think it could compete on the same level as me? The clay guardian was forced to use long-range skills because of its slow movement speed, and it was already clear that Heat Beam didn't work, so it was only natural, if somewhat foolish.

But I wasn't going to wait for it to unleash its skill. I swiped with my front leg, slashing at the clay guardian with Dimension Claws. *First slash to the right, second one to the left, and the third one straight down the middle to take it down!*

The clay guardian's earthen body slammed to the ground, causing a massive vertical crack in its visage. Then the statue shattered.

Gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 3,400 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 89 has become Lv 92.

Normal Skill “Dimension Claws” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Normal Skill “Ideal Weapon” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Normal Skill “Hell Gate” Lv 2 has become Lv 4.

It seemed like my skill levels had increased as a bonus for leveling up past 90.

Although it was still difficult to hit a fast-moving opponent, my accuracy using Dimension Claws was steadily improving. Before, my Ideal Weapon skill was limited to creating the B class Blade of Calamity, but maybe the weapon would be a little stronger now that the skill level had gone up?

All of a sudden, I sensed it. *There you are.* It was right behind the two clay guardians. I’d killed them instantly, so it had missed its chance to come out.

I stared into the depths of the fog and spotted the vague shadow of a massive lump and five long, skinny legs. It was the monster I ran from last time: Shub Niggurath. But now we were more than evenly matched.

I stared at the shadow for a while, then…the shadow suddenly disappeared. I looked around, confused. *Huh? Did it run away or something?*

With my Illusion Immunity skill, it was hard to believe Shub Niggurath had disappeared by using any kind of magic. I thought maybe it had some sort of teleportation move, but there was no sign of it anywhere. *Maybe it just backed off? It’s also possible that it went underground…*

Part 2

“I THINK I SAW SOMETHING over there. Do you know where your prey disappeared to?” Volk asked me.

‹I'm almost completely sure it's gone,› I replied. *‹It's not using an illusion or anything. It could still be in the sky or in the ground, though… I have to be pretty close for my Detect Presence to work in this fog, but I doubt it can take us by surprise either…›*

"Hmmm. It may be using some sort of Special Skill…" Volk put his hand on his chin and nodded. "There are not many behavioral reasons why a monster would distance itself. It could have escaped, or perhaps it is guarding a nest of eggs or young…"

Oho, the Dragonslayer's wisdom comes in handy once again. That's good to keep in mind.

For now, I didn't want to run with the assumption that it ran away. There was definitely a risk that it might have eggs or young, though. I didn't want to handle another avyssos nest.

"Other potential reasons would be wanting time to prepare by strengthening themselves with skills…or perhaps they have allies they want to join up with, or perhaps they are planning to take us by surprise, or they know of an area that will give them an advantage."

Th-that's a pretty big variety! And I don't want to make too many assumptions about our enemy!

"Regardless of the strategy it's using," Volk added, "it is vital to detect and respond to the enemy's actions ahead of time. If we can identify its battle strategy, we have far less to fear from the enemy taking charge of the battle."

I could see his point. How would the enemy act, and what were its trump cards? If I didn't know, then I'd have to be unnecessarily cautious; I wouldn't be able to make any big moves.

In that respect, my View Status skill really was a cheat. Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten a chance to view Shub Niggurath's status yet, and it was frustrating to not know anything about it and have to guess instead.

Under Volk's guidance, I positioned Allo and the others to cover both sides of my rear. Then I proceeded onward, keeping an eye on my friends as they followed along. Treant was directly behind me since its agility stat was low and it was unlikely to be able to react quickly to any danger. In the hinterlands of the Far East,

there was a risk that even highly durable monsters could be defeated with a single blow. To mitigate that risk, I had Treant take the safest position.

Treant's…almost fatally slow, and makes for a massive target, so this is the best option.

Treant stuck to me like glue, looking around in fear. It was taller than me, so I couldn't help but get distracted by the way it peeked out from behind me every five seconds. *I know you're anxious, but can you please calm down a little, Treant?*

As we carefully made our way through the fog, I spotted a mass of flesh crouching in the distance. Its five monstrous legs with an uneven number of joints connected to a massive, tumorous lump, covered in many mouths lined with rows of ominous fangs.

"U, uvuu, vueee… Uveeeee…"

Without a doubt, it was the same monster I saw before: Shub Niggurath. Its numerous mouths opened and closed, letting out an eerie moan. I decided to check its status to make sure it was the main body of the monster.

Species: Shub Niggurath
Status: Normal
Lv: 125/125 (MAX)
HP: 1811/1811
MP: 1568/1568
Attack: 1224
Defense: 1534
Magic: 1584
Agility: 1375
Rank: A+
Special Skills:
Grecian Language: Lv 8
Meat Armor: Lv 7
Earth Type: Lv —

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 9
Fly: Lv 2
Tentacles: Lv 7
Psychic Sense: Lv 9
Fearsome Gaze: Lv 6
Parallel Chant: Lv —
Resistance Skills:
Poison Resistance: Lv 7
Curse Resistance: Lv 7
Illusion Resistance: Lv 7
Physical Resistance: Lv 7
Magic Resistance: Lv 7
Fire Absorption: Lv —
Normal Skills:
Diseased Breath: Lv 7
Telepathy: Lv 7
Human Transformation: Lv 8
Clay: Lv 8
Clay Sphere: Lv 8
Clay Wall: Lv 8
Gardener: Lv 8
Hi-Rest: Lv 7
Tentacle Lash: Lv 7
Claws of the Damned: Lv 6
Fangs of the Damned: Lv 6
Gravity: Lv 7
Feast of Goats: Lv 8
Feast of Calamity: Lv 6
Feast of the Harvest: Lv 7
Title Skills:
Follower of the Last Demon King: Lv —

Final Evolution: Lv —

Black Goat of the Mountain with a Thousand Young: Lv —

Harvest Goddess: Lv —

I was instantly on guard. No doubt about it, this was Shub Niggurath. Rank A+, max level…and in terms of its stats, even more powerful than Beelzebub.

Shub Niggurath: Rank A+. A deformed lump of flesh with superior intelligence and fighting ability. It is said to have once taken human form to visit starving villages, serving unidentified meat and reviving crops that had withered. For this reason, in some countries she is worshipped as a goddess of harvest and fertility. But in lands said to have incurred the wrath of Shub Niggurath, all inhabitants mysteriously disappeared, leaving nothing but strange lumps of flesh in their place…

Shub Niggurath was spitting something out of her mouth that looked like a lump of meat. As we watched, a long, slender leg grew out of the lump of meat and stood. As I looked closer, I realized there were several similar lumps of flesh lying around the base of Shub Niggurath's form. The fog made it difficult to tell how many there were, but there seemed to be at least a dozen, with several more lurking in the fog a short distance away.

It seemed like Shub Niggurath had retreated in order to join up with these little lumps of meat. I checked their status as well.

Species: Black Goat Kid

Status: Follower

Lv: 44/75 (LOCK)

HP: 642/666

MP: 66/66

Attack: 111

Defense: 111
Magic: 444
Agility: 444
Rank: B–
Special Skills:
Earth Type: Lv —
Black Blaze: Lv —
Automatic HP Reduction: Lv —
Fixed Skill Level: Lv —
Zero Experience Points: Lv —
Resistance skills:
Curse Immunity: Lv —
Normal Skills:
Bite: Lv 1
Scratch: Lv 1
Clay Gun: Lv 1
Substitute: Lv 1
Title Skills:
Shub Niggurath's Follower: Lv —
Final Evolution: Lv —
Scapegoat: Lv —

Yikes…that's a creepy status. So they're numerous but inexperienced, like Beelzebub's followers?

I could see Shub Niggurath's fighting style from a mile away. She'd use her followers as decoys and her main method of attacking. But if so…why'd she go to the trouble of going along with the slow-moving clay guardians and leave her weapons behind?

The fact that she didn't fight with the clay guardians almost made me think she was testing us. On top of that, she had a high Grecian Language skill, and the information text said she was highly intelligent. *Should I try to talk with her through Telepathy…?*

‹Hey…can you hear me? I'd like to talk to you. If you want, we could even go down the mountain and—›

Before I could finish, Shub Niggurath formed a large Clay Sphere in front of her face and shot it straight at me.

I raised my paw. The black ring of Gravity formed around me, but this time, it was smaller and much more powerful. The Clay Sphere fell to the ground and disintegrated into the soil before it reached my paw.

‹O…kay, guess that's a no on the Telepathy chat, then?›

Shub Niggurath had both Telepathy and Grecian Language, so there was no reason why we couldn't have a conversation—she just didn't seem interested.

Part 3

I LOOKED THROUGH THE SKILLS of Shub Niggurath and her black goat kid offspring. There were many new ones, and it was difficult to tell from their names what they did. I decided to check three of Shub Niggurath's: Feast of Goats, Feast of Calamity, and Feast of the Harvest.

Normal Skill "Feast of Goats." Allows user to produce Black Goat Kids out of its mouth. However, Black Goat Kids are afflicted with continuous HP drain and will die in less than a day if left to their own devices.

This skill was pretty much what I imagined. It was simply a skill that created black goat kids. Shub Niggurath also had Hi-Rest, so she probably used that to prolong the lives of her black goat kid offspring.

Normal Skill "Feast of Calamity." Emits a black light. Those exposed to the light are transformed into Black Goat Kids if their magic stat is low enough.

Hmm…maybe this is the skill that destroyed all those villages. I wanted to believe we all had enough magic to not be affected by this skill—even the black lizard, as a B class—but even so, I didn't want Allo and the others attracting this thing's attention. I was glad there wasn't a nest anywhere, though, like the Red Ogre Ants'. We'd be in serious trouble if we got surrounded by hundreds of these black goat kids.

Normal Skill "Feast of the Harvest." Can be invoked upon those nearby with the Black Blaze Special Skill, as well as those given the Cursed status condition by the user's own skills. Burns through its targets fiercely from the inside.

This was another worrying skill. The black goat kid I just checked had the Black Blaze Special Skill, and it was safe to assume they all did. The black goat kids' statuses weren't particularly impressive themselves, but if one of them grabbed onto me with the Feast of the Harvest skill active, I could take some serious damage. Was that her true battle strategy?

Next, I checked out the black goat kids' skill, Substitute.

Normal Skill "Substitute." When user's master is nearby and takes damage, the user is able to take on the damage themselves.

This one…might be the most worrying of them all. Even as the Legendary Oneiros I was now, Shub Niggurath's attack power and agility were not to be underestimated. And with the black goat kids around to absorb my attacks, I began to realize just how tough this battle was going to be.

As a former two-headed Ouroboros, I knew. As long as there were black goat kids around, she'd be able to throw her all into attacking without any fear of retaliation.

I wasn't expecting such a powerful enemy to come out of the woodwork here. My first order of business was to take out all of

Shub Niggurath's followers. Unfortunately, I didn't know how close her followers had to be for the Substitute skill to activate. If they all ran off into the fog, they'd be difficult to take down.

Actually...they were already scattered through the fog. Great.

‹All right, guys. As long as there are little ones around, I don't think we'll be able to do much damage to the big one. I'll see what I can do, but...either way, your job is to take down as many of this thing's minions as possible. Volk and Black Lizard, can I ask you to focus on the ones scattered in the fog? I'll hold the big one off for now.›

"Very well, I'll take care of the surrounding enemies. I'm sorry to say, but I fear I am no match for the monster in the center," Volk said, eyeing Shub Niggurath. Even he could tell just how dangerous our opponent was. That meaty mass was more powerful than Eldia the Dragon King or the slime Demon King. If this world were a video game, this would be a hidden final boss. In terms of raw power, Shub Niggurath might be even more dangerous than the saint.

‹The smaller ones aren't nearly as strong. They're faster than the troll mandragoras too, but their only attack is Clay Gun. Other than that, they're nothing major. But there is a chance they might burst into flames when they get near the big one, so watch out,› I told Volk.

"A moment," said Volk. "May I make a selfish request?"

‹Hm? What is it?› This was unlike Volk. *When has Volk ever asked for anything from me right before a battle?*

"The Lacerta and Treant will need assistance to ensure they aren't mortally wounded. But this time, I would prefer to act alone." Volk swung his golden sword through the air.

Ahh, I see. He wants to try going all out with his new sword.

I glanced at Allo and the others. Atlach-Nacha was looking off into the distance with her arms crossed, seeming uninterested, but Allo, Black Lizard, and Treant were all nodding their heads. *Okay, fine. So be it.*

‹Then I think Allo and Black Lizard would make for a good team instead.› Allo and the black lizard jumped, then looked at each other, unconvinced.

Weird. It didn't seem like they hated each other or anything, but maybe they just didn't get along very well?

Treant looked back and forth between Allo and the black lizard. Its expression was the same as usual, but it seemed to be smiling somehow. *‹Treant, are you forgetting this means you're paired up with Atlach-Nacha?›*

It was a thought directed at Treant, but Atlach-Nacha was the first to respond.

"Wh-what? Why?!" Atlach-Nacha shot a withering look at Volk.

Are you really that reluctant to work with Treant?! What's so bad about Treant?!

I wanted to get to the bottom of this, but Volk was already leaping into the fight. If I didn't follow him, Shub Niggurath might target him.

I didn't like the thought of switching up the groups without checking with Volk first, so there was no helping it. *Sorry, just go with it this time. Actually, why don't you two try and get along a little better?*

Treant simply stood, shaking its trunk from side to side in bewilderment. But when Atlach-Nacha glared at it, it froze.

Jeez, Treant... You seemed like you were breaking out of your old ways when you evolved into a B+, but now you're back to how you always were. But it's okay. You still have at least another evolution after this. I bet the next time you evolve, you'll turn into a rank L+ and be a head above me and Atlach-Nacha.

Now then. I needed to keep Shub Niggurath's attention on me while Allo and the rest worked on taking out the surrounding substitute goats. One attack from any of them was more than enough to kill them. My goal was to distract Shub Niggurath while they reduced the goats' numbers.

"Uoo, uooooooooooo..."

Shub Niggurath's countless mouths opened wide. Two simultaneous Clay Spheres began to form around her. It seemed like she was getting ready to make a move.

The black goat kids crawling around the area began to move closer. *First, why don't I try taking 'em out all at once?* I sliced through the air with both of my front paws and released a max range Dimension Claws.

The ground was ripped open with a flash, and the bodies of the first four black goat kids split open, sending green blood spattering through the air. The attack hit Shub Niggurath as well. Her body trembled, and the two Clay Spheres surrounding her dropped to the ground. The black goat kid nearest to her exploded, spraying a mist of green blood.

Guess that was the Substitute.

Shub Niggurath sprinted toward me with her strange, jilted run. She must have realized she'd be in trouble if I kept using this skill. She was a top-level A+ fighter, and as expected, she was fast. Very fast. I leapt forward to take her on.

Before we could collide, Shub Niggurath created two summoning circles on either side of her.

"Uoo, uooooooooo..." As the horrifying cry emanated from her countless mouths, two Clay Spheres appeared at her sides. It seemed like her Parallel Chant skill was the one letting her create two at once. Her magic was a step above that of any other monster on this island. Not even I would be able to endure her attacks easily.

Maybe I should use Mirror Counter?

A wall of light appeared in front of me. The Clay Spheres hit the light wall and bounced back toward Shub Niggurath.

Okay, nice. Looks like this skill can block all the magic projectile skills. The fact that its skill level was high from the moment I got it made it really easy to use too. I wasn't sure how many attacks it could take before it'd break, though...

I lifted my front paw, intending to fire more Dimension Claws at Shub Niggurath. But Shub Niggurath, ignoring the Clay Spheres I sent flying back at her, stretched out toward me with tentacles made from her fleshy mass.

Crap. She's rushing in without worrying about the Clay Spheres because her goat minions will take the damage anyway.

I sliced through her Tentacle Lash with my claws, but the tentacle wasn't shredded to pieces. Instead, one of the nearby black goat kids exploded in a spray of green blood and organs. The blow sent the tentacle in the other direction, but if the tentacles were also invincible, then we were in trouble.

“Uooooooooo!” Black mist began to seep from Shub Niggurath’s mouths. I recognized the skill: Diseased Breath. Numerous tentacles shot out from behind the curtain of black mist.

Oh, I see. She’s using it as a blinding skill. Not a bad play. But I’ve got a better one!

“Graaaaaaaaaaah!” *‹Gravity!›*

A black ring of light spread around me, and Shub Niggurath’s tentacles drooped to the ground. I snatched them all up with my claws and gripped on to them with all my strength. *There. That should take out another one of its goats.*

The black mist from Diseased Breath began to clear, and I realized I was surrounded by more black lumps of flesh. Her goat followers were closing in around me.

Wh-what the heck?! Their stats are pathetically low! They shouldn’t be able to move a muscle when they’re in range of my Gravity!

After a moment, I understood. Shub Niggurath must have brought the goats in with her tentacles. The fact that her followers’ stats were so low but they still managed to surround me suggested they all had the same target: me.

“Uooooooo, uooooooooo!”

Shub Niggurath shrieked. Black flames erupted from the bodies of all the black goat kids around me.

“Mgeeeeegh!”

“Mgaaaaaaah!”

The goats screamed in agony. The only thing remotely goatlike about their appearance was the shape of their legs, but even so, their cries sounded eerily similar to a goat’s.

Oh no, here it comes! She’s using Feast of the Harvest! No, no, stay calm! This is exactly what Mirror Counter is for!

“Graaaaah!” I roared. A summoning circle spread out around me, enveloping me in a curved wall of light. *Heh, nice! I doubt it’ll reflect the fire, but with this, I can at least defend myse—*

Just then, the light wall cracked as multiple tentacles shot through it, heading straight in my direction. Shub Niggurath had

jumped toward me, seen my Mirror Counter, and come at me with a physical attack.

The light barrier vanished, and the black flames began to rush in. *H-hey, if you jump in the middle of all these flames, you're gonna waste a lot of followers!*

W-wait, no. That's right. She has Fire Absorption! D-does that mean she can heal herself by roasting a bunch of her goats?!

Shub Niggurath bit deep into my neck. Another mouth bit down on my shoulder. My body burned with pain as Shub Niggurath tore out chunks of my flesh. Blood spilled from my body, mixed with her saliva.

This was a sensation I hadn't felt in a while. A pain that could lead to death; a pain that brought deep, paralyzing fear. The black flames and Shub Niggurath's razor-sharp fangs chipped away at my HP.

"Grr...graaaaaaaaah!"

I brought my paw down on Shub Niggurath with a massive slam, but the mass of flesh only shuddered, showing no sign of releasing its fangs.

Those fangs aren't budging! How do I get her off of me when I can't do any damage to her?! I can't kill her with her latched on to me like this!

W-wait! I've still got one more trick up my sleeve! I lifted up off the ground, raising her body with me. Then I kicked off from the ground and jumped into the air.

"U-uoooooo...?"

I transformed my body with Dragon Mirror and took on the form of a Baby Dragon. All of a sudden, Shub Niggurath's fangs were biting down on...nothing. Confused, the lump of flesh froze in midair.

I immediately transformed into a Diablos—the same species as Eldia. It was the largest dragon I knew of.

My attack stat immediately jumped to **Attack: 3462 (2770)**. *Ahh, I see. Seems like my stats are cut in half when I transform into a small dragon, but they're only cut by 20% or so for big dragons.* Using the form of a giant dragon wasn't particularly useful because of the

heavy MP drain, but it was good to know in case I ran into a situation that called for it in the future.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!" I slammed my fist into Shub Niggurath, knocking her out of the air. Even if she could nullify all the damage, without anything to keep her in the air, she was sent barreling. The massive mass of flesh fell diagonally to the earth and scraped along the surface before rolling to a standstill.

I moved away from the raging flames and deactivated my Dragon Mirror, then used Regenerate to recover from the damage I'd taken. For the moment, I wanted to keep my distance... But it would be dangerous if Shub Niggurath decided to target Allo or the others, so I needed to be ready to go after her as soon as I could.

Thankfully, there were no goats nearby, so there was no need to worry about suddenly catching on fire. Shub Niggurath would likely attack again before too long, but for now, it seemed like I'd bought myself some time.

There was one more skill I wanted to try. In order to get a feel for her battle strategy, I'd first gone at her with normal attacks, but I had a plan that might allow me to get through her scapegoat tactics.

The skill I'd received for maxing out my Hero Title Skill, Dark-Dispelling Flash, was supposed to deal damage that ignored all damage reduction skills. I might be able to use it to deal damage without activating the black goat kids' Substitute skill.

I dashed toward Shub Niggurath. She quickly got to her feet and stood, staring, as I approached.

"Uoo, uoooooo..." A wall of dirt rose up between us as she used Clay Wall. It was clear that she was intelligent: Even though she had a shield of complete protection, she wasn't letting that make her complacent. Before, too, she recognized my Dimension Claws as a threat and took countermeasures against me. She also hated being stopped by continuous attacks that reduced her number of available scapegoats.

The fact that she didn't rush back to her goats after my Eldia-mode punch suggested that she was probably still within range to use the Substitute skill. That was a shame. It would've been way easier to deal with this thing if I'd punched her out of range.

I used Ideal Weapon to create a powerful sword, shifted to a bipedal stance with Dragon Mirror, and then walked toward Shub Niggurath.

Normal Skill "Dark-Dispelling Flash." Channels holy light into user's sword to cut down one's enemies. In the wake of this flash, all forms of deception will be rendered meaningless. The sword deals massive damage that ignores damage reduction from Resistance Skills, Special Skills, Normal Skills, and Status Conditions.

With this skill, I might be able to deal damage to Shub Niggurath that ignored the Substitute skill.

I was no swordsman, and sword combat was not something I was used to. While I was ultimately faster than before, Shub Niggurath was still lightning fast, smart, and full of tricky moves.

Fortunately, she didn't have many moves outside of her black goat kid horde. My only concerns were being blinded by her Diseased Breath, getting smacked from a distance by her Tentacle Lash, and her Bite—which she could use from any spot on her body and was difficult and time-consuming to pull off of myself. No doubt she'd unleash some more Clay Spheres at some point, but those weren't that scary.

The light of Ideal Weapon began to take on mass in my hand. My magic power had increased a lot since the last time I used it, and so had Ideal Weapon's skill level. *Maybe I can create a stronger weapon than before? I'll pack a bunch of MP into it. Hopefully, that'll bump up the weapon's stats a little…*

Yeah, something like that. It doesn't have to be that big, but something easy to swing around would be good.

The light spread to both of my hands. *H-huh? I said I wanted it to be easy to swing around… Is it that massive?*

It wasn't. The light split and transformed into two long, beautiful swords. The right sword had a shining blue blade with red engravings, while the left sword had a crimson blade and blue engravings.

Are these…twin swords?

Ouroboros Blades: Value A. Attack: +100. Two massive blades, said to remain indestructible until the very end of the world. Made from the bones of the two-headed dragon Ouroboros, a symbol of eternity and taboo. When the blue blade slays a monster, it steals a portion of its life force to give to the sword's owner. When the red blade is wielded, it feeds on its owner's life force to increase its attack power.

Another weird weapon… Hopefully it's okay to swing the red one around? And also…they're called Ouroboros Blades, huh? It's almost like all these Ideal Weapons are related to my previous evolutions…

I faced Shub Niggurath and charged both swords with magic power. Dark-Dispelling Flash brought a glowing, holy light to the swords as they powered up. I wasn't quite sure how it worked, but based on how I'd seen it used so far, I should be able to activate the skill if I just did what felt right.

The swords were enveloped in a radiant glow. At the same time, I felt them become heavier in my hands. My body tilted forward; I pulled back and braced myself. Was this going to hit her?

Shub Niggurath seemed to see my struggle as an opportunity. She used Diseased Breath to disappear in the black miasma and unleashed a Tentacle Lash at me. With her initial movement hidden, it was hard for me to read the tentacle's trajectory.

I swung both swords to the opposite side with all my might. The blades sliced through Shub Niggurath's tentacles, scattering lumps of flesh through the area.

Ah! I-I hit it!

I was right! The black goat kids' Substitute skill didn't work against Dark-Dispelling Flash!

Shub Niggurath dispelled the black miasma and jumped back, seeming shocked by this development. I jumped forward toward her at once, focusing all my power into my red sword. Shub Niggurath attacked me with her tentacles.

Using Dark-Dispelling Flash slowed me down a lot, so I couldn't use it to respond to Shub Niggurath's tentacles from this far away. But this time around, I didn't put any magic into my blue sword. That way, I could still match Shub Niggurath's speed.

I used my blue sword to deflect the tentacles. I couldn't destroy them that way anyway, so I did my best to guard against them.

Then I thrust out my red sword, now glowing with the brilliance of Dark-Dispelling Flash. The tip of my sword pierced into Shub Niggurath's flesh. But before I could drive it in deep, Shub Niggurath jumped backward and out of reach. A hunk of her meat flew through the air. I kept my distance, my eyes trained on the massive lump of flesh.

I could graze her, but slicing fully into her body was proving to be next to impossible. However, all was not lost. With this, the dynamic of our fight changed—Shub Niggurath lost the advantage of being able to attack without fearing retaliation.

As long as I was preparing a Dark-Dispelling Flash, she couldn't throw caution to the wind and attack with all she had anymore. Even if she bit down and latched on to me like she did before, I could cut her up with a Dark-Dispelling Flash instead of going to the trouble of flying into the air and escaping with Dragon Mirror.

As time went by, Allo and the others would reduce the numbers of Shub Niggurath's black goat kid followers. And since she could no longer use her aggressive biting attack, it should be difficult for Shub Niggurath to reduce my HP by a substantial amount. It didn't matter that I was stuck in a stalemate—it was temporary. As soon as the goats were gone and she didn't have anyone left to Substitute, I'd hit her hard and finish her off.

All of a sudden, Shub Niggurath stopped moving. She must have realized from the fight so far that I was far superior to her in terms of status. And now I had a way to get past her scapegoating. No doubt she felt the pressure of the situation.

Shub Niggurath was an A+. The highest normal rank. Even in this land of powerful monsters, I didn't think there were many monsters that could stand a chance against her, even without her

black goat kids. I could see why she felt comfortable walking around without them. The Feast of Goats skill, which created a sacrifice to give oneself absolute protection, was a cheat skill that completely destroyed my previous concept of combat. Shub Niggurath must have placed her trust in the skill too—and was probably pretty upset at it being rendered useless.

I'd use this opening to beat Shub Niggurath once and for all!

‹I did not expect you to have taken both the Demon King and Hero skills.› Shub Niggurath finally spoke via Telepathy. *‹And to think you even learned that sword technique. Though it seems you do not yet possess all four...›*

Sh-she knows about Sacred Skills? I guess it's no wonder, if she was one of the former Demon King's underlings.

‹What do you know about—›

As I spoke, a Tentacle Lash whipped out and struck me in the jaw. I jerked back and flicked the tentacle away with the back of my paw. *Ugh. She's got some nerve...!*

I didn't expect her to launch a surprise attack while I was planning my own. I focused my magic into the red blade and prepared a Dark-Dispelling Flash. Shub Niggurath was just out of reach of my sword; we stared each other down from a distance.

In this situation, it was difficult for me to make the first move. If I rushed in, I'd most likely miss and receive a deadly blow. I was happy to take my time with this fight to give Allo and the others the opportunity to destroy the goats, but it felt like it was time for me to give Shub Niggurath a little push.

I readjusted my blue sword, held up two fingers, and waved them vigorously through the air. My Dimension Claws struck Shub Niggurath's body. There were no external injuries, but I figured another goat exploded somewhere.

‹I won't wait forever. What're you gonna do?› As I asked, two Clay Spheres appeared on either side of Shub Niggurath. Then she opened her mouth, and another Diseased Breath spilled out. The ashen miasma painted my vision in grays.

I considered using Mirror Counter but changed my mind. Her next step would be to attack with tentacles, which would break

through the Mirror Counter anyway. I didn't want Shub Niggurath to get any closer while I was getting my Dark-Dispelling Flash ready. One mistake or wrong move, and I was dead.

I cut through the miasma of Diseased Breath with my Dark-Dispelling Flash, clearing my vision. But it seemed like I was wrong; Shub Niggurath's tentacles didn't come flying out of the black mist. Instead, Shub Niggurath was rushing toward me herself.

‹Huh…?!› Jeez, she took a major gamble! She knew I was anticipating a tentacle attack, then stepped out of the way and waited for me to open up my vision with Dark-Dispelling Flash?!

‹Ha! How unfortunate. I'm afraid I am all too familiar with that skill now.› Shub Niggurath fired two Clay Spheres toward me at close range. Without missing a beat, she sent countless tentacles my way as well.

Damn! How could I be so naive?!

I retreated to safety. Even knowing my status, Shub Niggurath made no move to escape. She clearly knew she was running out of time and goats to sacrifice. I should've expected that to make her take even riskier actions.

…If I'd just jumped forward with my blue sword outstretched and slashed at her with my red sword, I would've won then and there. She read me like a book!

Keeping up my Dragon Mirror form and Ideal Weapon, along with the continuous Dark-Dispelling Flash strikes, was draining a lot of my MP. But it was the only shot I had.

Wait, I know! Gravity! I can use it to reduce the danger from the tentacles and stop the Clay Spheres from reaching me!

A black ring of light began to spread from Shub Niggurath as well. She was counterattacking with her own Gravity. *Is she trying to stop me from acting and put me in a similar situation as her? Well, too bad. My magic stat is way higher than hers!*

I channeled my magic into my red blade again and got ready to unleash another Dark-Dispelling Flash. Shub Niggurath's tentacle slammed into my body. I caught it with my right arm.

A-all right! That did some damage, but I took it well enough! Now I can use Dark-Dispelling Flash to make her back off and buy some

more time...!

One of Shub Niggurath's long legs slammed into my chest. It had less range than the tentacles, but it was much faster and equipped with powerful claws. I instinctively pressed the back of my hand against my chest.

I saw her about to strike me with her tentacles again and swung the red blade with all my might. Shub Niggurath evaded it by leaping back with ease.

This thing really is strong...! Although I had the status advantage, she was clearly superior in terms of combat experience. If it weren't for my Dark-Dispelling Flash, she would've killed me a long time ago.

Suddenly, I spotted Volk's figure on the edge of my vision, walking toward me. The goat hunt was over. We were going to win.

I channeled magic into my red blade again to prepare another Dark-Dispelling Flash. But when I saw Shub Niggurath conjure two more Clay Spheres, I tossed both the red and blue Ouroboros Blades aside and stepped forward.

I raised my left and right claws and used Dimension Claws. Although I was at close range, Dimension Claws was still powerful in that it could fire quick claw attacks from out of reach.

My first, second, and third slashes were absorbed into the surface of Shub Niggurath's body. Then, finally, the fourth slash tore ribbons across her body. *Yes! She's finally out of scapegoats!*

"Uoooooo..." Shub Niggurath staggered, and the Clay Spheres floating around her dropped to the ground.

‹All right, spit it out! Tell me everything you kn—›

Shub Niggurath's body recovered enough to whip a swift Tentacle Lash at me. I tore through the tentacle with my claws, severing it, and then leapt off the ground with my tail. Shifting to my other hand, I clawed at Shub Niggurath, tearing a massive chunk of flesh from its center. Shub Niggurath staggered back, green blood spurting from the gaping wound, then fell to the ground and stopped moving.

Gained 11,875 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 11,875 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 92 has become Lv 97.

Dang. It’s been a while since I’ve seen over ten thousand experience points at once.

Considering I got 42,660 experience points from Ruin without Walking Egg, though, the total for Shub Niggurath was likely at least double that. About half of those experience points must have gone to Allo and the others; it seemed like hunting the goats counted toward the total for the battle.

But in the end…Shub Niggurath didn’t say anything.

It was over, and I still had no idea what her goal had been or what she was aiming to do. It seemed like she’d been patrolling the area with clay guardians and supplying the mountaintop with black goat kids in case of an emergency.

She knew that one day soon, someone she wouldn’t be able to beat with her current status would come to this island. In the end, it seemed like fighting me was her goal in and of itself.

What in the world was that about?

Part 4

“IT SEEMS WE HAVE emerged victorious!” Volk said, propping the golden Grandpa Magiatite sword on his shoulder. “There were no issues on my end. I simply avoided the Clay Gun attacks and sliced through as many of those creatures as I could.”

After wandering around the mountaintop for a little while, we managed to meet up with Allo and the others without incident.

“Master Dragon! I held the goats down while Lacerta drowned them in her Poison Swamp!” Allo said happily.

For something so gross, you sure have a big smile on your face…

Allo and the black lizard had teamed up for this fight. The black lizard had a skill called Poison Swamp that it had acquired

when it evolved into Venom Goddess Lacerta. According to its description, it was a ranged attack skill that broke the ground open to create a poisonous swamp. My guess was that they'd used Poison Swamp and Allo's Hanging Thread, then used her clay arms to drown Shub Niggurath's followers. It was a powerful combo, to be sure, but it painted a rather gruesome mental picture.

The black lizard walked around calmly, but even so, it looked somewhat proud of itself.

What about the Treant and Atlach-Nacha combo? Did they fare okay?

Atlach-Nacha looked unbothered as usual. Treant, on the other hand, looked a little gloomy.

‹Everything okay, Treant?›

‹Yes, Master... I did my very best. In order to be as efficient as possible, I opted to gather enemies together with Decoy.›

‹Ahh, I see... Great work!›

...I probably had Atlach-Nacha to thank for giving Treant those instructions.

However, even though Treant had always had the status of a guard, we'd struggled to find suitable enemies that wouldn't kill it, so it had always been a bit disappointing in combat. But by evolving to a rank B+, it'd managed to catch up to the strength of the monsters inhabiting one of the most dangerous areas in the world.

Treant quickly moved behind me, then stretched out its trunk to glare at Atlach-Nacha. *‹Miss Atlach-Nacha, don't you think you are taking advantage of the fact that I cannot be strong without Master to use me for your own convenience?!›* Treant chastised Atlach-Nacha.

Does that mean it can be strong if I'm around? Interesting... But she's your former senior, you know...

Atlach-Nacha crossed her arms and glared at Treant from beneath her mask. Treant's body trembled as their gazes met, and then it quickly hid its entire body behind me.

"Yeah. You...did your best," Atlach-Nacha said indifferently, as if the admission felt like a hassle. Her voice was a little low, more of an alto than a soprano. It seemed a little clearer than the voice she had in human form when she was still a Nightmare. In fact, she

seemed more humanlike in her Atlach-Nacha form than she did after using Human Transformation back then.

Hey, she's not treating you like a teammate, Treant! She's acting like you're totally beneath her!

‹O-oh? Thank you for the praise, Miss Atlach-Nacha...?› Treant quickly poked its head out from behind my back.

Jeez, Treant. You're way too easy. Is that really all it takes to win you over...?

Well, at any rate, now we could move on.

I walked forward through the fog, my companions behind me. There had to be something ahead, something Shub Niggurath and the clay guardians were protecting.

The fog was getting thicker and thicker, and I got more and more nervous as we went on.

‹Treant, not that way. Same to you, Volk.›

‹O-oh, my bad. Thank you...›

"Hmm... The fog around here is proving itself to be a little much for me. Your shape has appeared blurry for a while now, Illusia."

Allo was immune to debuffs, and the black lizard was riding on top of me, so I knew they were fine, at least. Atlach-Nacha had spit a string of web onto my tail and was following after it behind me. *You sure are getting the hang of that, aren't you?*

Wait...didn't her webs have the Dark Sticky Threads Special Skill now, letting her absorb HP and MP? She might not be able to turn it off, I supposed, and it was only a small amount, so I guess it was fine for now, but... *Ask me for permission next time, okay?*

‹What do you think, Volk? Do you want to call it a day?›

"Are you asking if I wish to give up in the middle of such an intriguing area? Don't be absurd!"

That was our Volk. Strong and stubborn as always.

"Atlach-Nacha, tie a thread around me and lead me along," Volk said.

Wait, didn't her webs drain HP and MP? Was that okay? I mean, I guess it wouldn't drain much if it was just a thin string, but

still…

Atlach-Nacha's mask made it difficult to see her expression, but her body language suggested she was somewhat drawn to Volk.

And so, with Allo, Atlach-Nacha, and I leading the way, we pushed on through the fog.

As we approached the summit and the fog began to look like it had swallowed us up entirely, the vague figure of a lone woman appeared in the dense wall of fog. Her eyes were narrow slits, and her body was clad in a kimono-like dress. She looked like nothing more than a beautiful woman…but there was no way I'd meet a normal woman traveling alone in a place like this.

Umukahime: Rank A+. A monster so powerful that it can shroud large areas in a thick fog of illusion. Can assume a variety of forms, mimic the appearance of a target, and even replicate the skills used by its opponent almost perfectly. Because of its fearsome nature, its true form is a mystery, and it has long been feared as a god or disaster unto itself. Long ago, she allied herself with a human man, but his displeasure caused a fog of confusion to spread throughout the surrounding area, including the entire village. All the creatures around her walked for days without eating or drinking, then died without ever feeling pain. Her true form is that of a large shellfish monster.

Th-this one's rank A+ too?!

"I have no intention of antagonizing you any further," Umukahime declared. "I simply wished to test you. To see whether you had inherited any Sacred Skills."

Wait, if she knows about Sacred skills, then…did she also know one of the former Demon Kings?

I began to feel like maybe Shub Niggurath's strange belligerence was also meant to test me.

"And whether you had the capacity to stand up to your Divine Voice," Umukahime added.

‹St-stand up to the Divine Voice? Wouldn’t it still be watching over me all the way out here?›

Was it even possible to stand up to the Divine Voice? Was it the type of opponent that could be made to step onto a field of battle in the first place? It was true that I didn’t know if I’d ever have any peace of mind as long as that guy was on the loose. But…I didn’t think the Divine Voice was a being I could fight and win against.



“It seems I’ve stirred your interest,” she said. “I am relieved to see you are not a fanatic of his. If you were, I would have had to eat you up right here, even if you did not desire to be my enemy. My master originally followed the Divine Voice and struggled to make the world as it should be. However, they lamented the fact that they were ensnared in the Divine Voice’s schemes and used as a convenient tool for its selfish desires, so they made preparations to defeat it here. But that, too, ended in failure. However...there is a stone monument beyond here that carries a record of everything my master left behind, including what they learned about the Divine Voice. If you intend to undergo the final ordeal, please follow me.” Umukahime moved silently through the fog, heading deeper.

I looked at Allo and the others. They all gave nods of encouragement, so I moved forward, following the figure.

‹Don’t tell me this final ordeal is to battle you?› I asked.

“What could I hope to test against an opponent who has beaten a fully prepared Shub Niggurath? No, your final ordeal is not with me.”

Chapter 5:
The Clay Hero

Part 1

I FOLLOWED UMUKAHIME'S retreating figure deeper into the fog.

Seriously, though... Who would've thought I'd find a stone monument about the Divine Voice here?

I knew that the Divine Voice wanted me to do what it wanted, but I had no idea what it had in store for me or what it meant to me. The only thing I'd learned so far about the Divine Voice was that, regardless of what its goals were, it had a rotten, corrupt personality. I had no clue what it would do to me if I didn't do what it wanted. If traipsing through the fog with the Umukahime would give me some clue as to what it was up to, then it was well worth the gamble.

Plus...the Divine Voice would probably pop up and try something once Lilyxila and I had settled the score. If the war between humans and monsters was truly a fight to acquire all four of the Sacred Skills, planned by the Divine Voice...then this was the place where its goal would be achieved.

Umukahime stopped and looked back at us.

‹Wh-what? Are we there?› I asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I am afraid you must continue alone from this point onward. I will wait for you here."

J-just me? Alone? Did that mean Volk and the others have to wait here too...? As I stopped to consider my options, Allo dropped to the ground in front of me. Her right arm was covered in clay, and she seemed poised for battle.

"You're making Master Dragon go ahead on his own? To do what? Everything you're saying is fishier than the ocean!"

A-Allo! Stop! Take it easy, all right?! Let's keep things peaceful!

"It is my master's final request. Will you not obey it? Your master seems interested in learning more about his Divine Voice. Are you to go against his wishes?"

Allo and the others didn't know much about the Divine Voice. They'd only learned of its existence from a conversation I had with Lilyxila about it on the Island of Giant Trees and the simple answer I gave when Volk asked me about it during our journey. I'd just told him that it was a strange voice that had been following me around and giving me instructions.

Allo and the others probably thought Umukahime's story sounded fishier than I did because they didn't know the whole story with the Divine Voice.

"If you insist on so flagrantly disobeying, then I will not hesitate to stop you. Though it is not my intention to cause you harm." Umukahime narrowed her eyes. She was the spitting image of a beautiful woman in a kimono, except for her expression, which was distinctly inhuman. I felt a threatening aura emanating from her. "I am confident that I will succeed. If I throw everything away and focus on eliminating my targets, I could kill...one, two? Let us say two of you." Umukahime pointed at Allo, then Treant, as if counting them off. "Shall we give it a try?" Treant trembled and spun around to hide its face, pretending to be just a simple tree.

C'mon, Treant. Do you really think you're fooling anyone with that right now?

‹It's okay, Allo. Stand down.› Following Umukahime's instructions meant splitting our group up, which I didn't love. But this felt like a lot of effort for her to go through if she was lying. Besides, when I thought back to how she tested me with Shub Niggurath, it made me feel like I could trust Umukahime.

And more than anything...I wanted to learn what they knew about the Divine Voice.

‹I don't think she's lying. I have a feeling there'll come a time when I'll have to confront the one behind my Divine Voice in some form or another.›

"...All right. I understand." Allo nodded and backed off.

Umukahime's expression returned to something more clearly human. "Then you may proceed straight up the mountain from here. The monument is at the summit."

I looked over at Allo and the others briefly, nodded, then passed Umukahime and headed onward into the fog.

As I walked along the fog-ridden path up the mountain, I spotted the vague shape of a giant head floating in the mist. *Is that…a clay guardian?!*

It was. In fact, three of them lined each side of the path in even rows. None of them moved a muscle when I approached, so I thought for a moment that they might just be statues. But when I checked their statuses, I saw that they were in fact clay guardians, all equipped with their lethal Direct Burst skill.

Well…if they're not going to attack me, it's probably just better to leave 'em alone and move on.

As I neared the mountain's summit, the ground changed from barren earth to a field of lush green grass. I crossed the final ledge and stepped into a wide clearing. At its center was a large stone slab, about three meters in height.

The stone slab was surrounded by a field of colorful flowers. Visibility was still poor due to the fog, but the fog passing through the field of flowers made for a scene of fantastical, picturesque beauty.

There was writing on the stone tablet. I assumed it was the recording of the Divine Voice's secrets written by Umukahime's master—a Demon King from times past.

On the ground near the stone tablet, I noticed a set of eerie, reddish-black armor propped up in a seated position.

No…it's not just a set of armor. There's something lurking inside it.

Umukahime said I was going to be going through some sort of ordeal. Maybe that armor had something to do with it? I decided to check its status from a distance before getting too close.



Clay Hero: Rank A+. A golem created five hundred years ago by the cursed alchemist Alchemia, who gained the power of the Demon King while still in human form. Created in her image, the golem is said to be a symbol of her past folly and regrets—or perhaps it was simply made to make use of armor that would no longer be needed.

So it really is a monster! I thought there was something inside it, but it seems like it's actually a humanoid clay monster!

I was sure of it now: The person who created the Clay Hero and the clay guardians was the same person who created the claybear I'd come across a long time ago.

Five hundred years ago… That meant around the same time that Eldia, my dragon father in this world, was serving under the Demon King. But Eldia hated humans. I doubted he would serve Alchemia, even if she had the power of the Demon King.

From everything I'd learned so far, it seemed like the master of Shub Niggurath and Umukahime was the alchemist Alchemia, who took the Demi-God Realm Path Sacred Skill from the Demon King who Eldia served. I knew firsthand that taking down the Demon King transferred the Demon King Title Skill, along with the Demi-God Realm Path Sacred Skill.

So does that mean taking down this Clay Hero is my final test? I doubt it'll just hand over the contents of the stone tablet without a fight.

A mysterious light flashed behind the eyes of the Clay Hero's helm. The armor slowly stood, then turned to face me, a gleaming sword in its hand.

Part 2

THE CLAY HERO POINTED its sword at me. It was long and reddish-black—the same color as the armor.

This thing may resemble a former Demon King, but if it wants to test me, then bring it on. Shub Niggurath was a difficult fight because

of her scapegoat invincibility skill, but I had no intentions of letting a single rank A+ monster beat me.

To start, I checked its status.

Species: Clay Hero
Status: Normal
Lv: 130/130 (Lock)
HP: 1902/1902
MP: 1754/1754
Attack: 1631+190
Defense: 1990+255
Magic: 1331
Agility: 1257
Rank: A+
Equipment:
Weapon: Lifesteal Laevateinn: L–
Armor: Wicked Ahriman: L
Special Skills:
Golem: Lv —
Earth Type: Lv —
Light Type: Lv —
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv —
Automatic MP Recovery: Lv —
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv MAX
Magic Resistance: Lv MAX
Poison Immunity: Lv —
Instant Death Immunity: Lv —
Curse Immunity: Lv —
Normal Skills:
Bite: Lv 8

Transform: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 8
Clay: Lv 8
Shockwave: Lv 9
Thirteen-Strike Magic Sword: Lv 7
Floating Form: Lv 7
Hollow Moon: Lv 7
Title Skills:
King of Clay: Lv —
Follower of the Last Demon King: Lv —
Final Evolution: Lv —
Tenacious: Lv MAX
Master of Swords: Lv 9
Bearer of the Sacred Sword: Lv —
Evil God's Garb: Lv —

…Well, it didn't have any unusual skills, at least. It seemed like a melee-type attacker that used its hefty stats to its advantage. In fact, its skill list was similar to those of human swordsmen like Adoff and Volk.

The info said the alchemist Alchemia created it, but if it was modeled after her, then perhaps Alchemia's real talent was in swordplay.

With its strong Resistance Skills, it could use its powerful sword to overwhelm opponents and allow itself to heal during long battles. If it were the same rank as me, it would be a powerful enemy…but I beat it in the numbers game with plenty of room to spare.

The monster itself wasn't what worried me—its equipment was.

Lifesteal Laevateinn: Value L–. Attack: +190. Also known as the "Blade of Divine Insurrection." A sword made from the tail

feathers of the radiant rainbow rooster monster Vidofnir. Grants its wielder unmatched magical power but, in exchange, drains the user's HP with every swing. It is said that a Demon King once sought this sword in order to defeat a god but was sorely disappointed when they finally held the sword of legend in their hand.

Whoa. +190 attack power?!

What the heck? Even the Hero's Holy Sword Radim was only half as good as this one! I'd never heard of a Vidofnir, but...it had to be some sort of legendary class Beast King or something. A legendary sword like that would definitely suit Volk's tastes, but I had a feeling he wouldn't be able to hold it for long before the HP drain killed him.

Wicked Ahriman: Value L. Defense: +255. Armor created by Yornes—once the most powerful saint of all time—and forged in the flames of a Calamity Dragon. The armor was originally intended to be imbued with holy light, but the saint's black heart was reflected in the armor, imbibing it instead with a powerful curse. The power of Yornes's prayers grants the armor ferocious anti-magic properties, as though it were constantly deploying a magic-reflecting barrier. However, it is said that the armor's curse eats away at the wearer's mind, leaving them permanently crippled. Four heroes of legend have donned this armor in the hopes of using it to defeat the Demon King and, without fail, met tragic ends. As a result, the armor has long been hidden away in the underground labyrinth of a certain royal castle.

Seems like the armor's the one to look out for in terms of rank.

The stat bonuses on these two pieces of equipment were a head above anything I'd ever seen before. The Wicked Ahriman had apparently cursed four former heroes to death. It must have been Alchemia who dug it out of the underground labyrinth.

Did Alchemia really go to such extreme lengths because she wanted to kill the Divine Voice?

The Clay Hero tilted its sword hand toward me and aligned the tip of its sword with my forehead. It was a somehow human gesture, almost like that of a proud knight.

The Clay Hero kicked off from the ground, leapt to the side, swung its sword, and unleashed a Shockwave. The attack barreled toward me, charged with the blade's red-black light of destructive energy.

I bent over backward and turned my head to the side to evade. The Clay Hero, having followed after the Shockwave and closing the distance between us, suddenly flipped in midair and attacked with a mighty swing of its sword.

I blocked the attack with my front claws, then swung my opposite paw down on the Clay Hero. My claws caught on its armor and slammed it into the ground, the force creating a hole in the dirt. *Nice! I hit it!*

My celebration only lasted a second, though, before I felt a sharp pain in my paw.

"Gah...!" It got me too! I guessed it had extended its sword the moment we traded blows and made use of my agility to slash my wrist. *But I also managed to hit it, so it's gotta be hurting right now!*

Something jumped out of the hole I'd made in the ground, spraying a cloud of dust in the air. Then, as if nothing had happened, the Clay Hero landed on the ground and raised its sword toward me again.

What?! Not even a scratch?! Is that Wicked Ahriman really that strong?! No, no way. Even with that hefty defense bonus, a direct hit from me should've blown its body to bits.

As it turned out, though, I didn't hit it. It had slashed my wrist with its sword and used the recoil to jump back out of reach.

It was hard to fight such a small enemy... But this was also an issue of battle capabilities. I attacked with brute force, and the Clay Hero used that momentum to parry me.

Even I could only take so many hits with **Attack: 1631+190** behind them. There was also the powerful magic resistance from

the Clay Hero's Wicked Ahriman armor to worry about. Unlike Shub Niggurath, the Clay Hero came at me directly and with no holds barred. But that didn't mean the fight would be any easier.

The Clay Hero dashed at me. I swung my paw, aiming a Dimension Claws attack at it. But the Clay Hero, seemingly anticipating my strike, darted from left to right in a zigzag as it approached.

Although I was supposedly faster, I didn't feel like I could land a single hit. It was as if it could see what I was about to do and where I was aiming, and it was using its best moves to avoid me. It seemed to have a precise read of our battle.

The moment my thoughts strayed from the fight, the Clay Hero came at me with another Shockwave. I blocked it with my claws without moving, being sure to keep the Clay Hero in the center of my vision. My claws cracked, and the scales on my paws split open, leaking blood. I would've liked to avoid the attack altogether, but if I made the wrong move, the Clay Hero wouldn't hesitate to use it to its advantage.

I'd had my fair share of fights, so I knew just how dangerous it was to fight on my enemy's home turf. Even if it meant I had to pay a price, I was better off forcing a fight that took advantage of my natural strengths. It might have looked a little lame, but it was better to fight a battle based on stats and skills than in-depth battle analysis. I was pretty confident that I'd be able to surprise the Clay Hero with a clever plan or two, but I didn't feel like I could hold a candle to its innate combat instincts.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!" When the Clay Hero got close enough, I let out a roar. A ring of black light formed around me as I used my favorite all-purpose skill, Gravity. I'd been really annoyed by its wide range, fast deployment, and restraining effect when it was used on me in the past, but it'd become a major boon since I got it myself.

It'd be nice if this stopped the Clay Hero, but…

The Wicked Ahriman armor gave off a bright glow when the black light touched it. My Gravity slowed the Clay Hero down a little, but it continued to run toward me. It hadn't been completely pointless, but much of the skill's effect was negated by its armor.

So magic doesn't have much effect, and hard-hitting physical attacks will just be parried and exploited. In that case, I'll just blow it up with ranged attacks! I gathered magic in the pit of my stomach, then let it burst out of my mouth with a fiery roar.

Scorching Breath!

My vision was engulfed by a wall of red. With the Clay Hero's defense, there was no way I'd be able to take it out with a single blow…but that had to have done some major damage.

I peered into the flames, front paws at the ready. My Scorching Breath had completely obscured the Clay Hero from view.

No doubt it would use this as an opportunity to catch me off guard. I fired a barrage of Dimension Claws at the flames as a deterrent. The attacks distorted the fire and made it shrink a little.

If I kept up the Dimension Claws onslaught, it would make it much harder for the Clay Hero to find an opening and attack. If I could find it while it was caught in the blaze, I'd have the perfect chance to land a few good hits.

I spotted a human-sized shadow amid the weakened flames and swiped at it with my Dimension Claws. After confirming that I hit my target, I immediately swung my paw down to make a follow-up attack.

I felt a lump of clay explode beneath my fingertips. *Huh? That felt too fragile to be the Clay Hero and its armor…*

The moment I realized my mistake, the ground beneath me cracked and split open, and the Clay Hero jumped out with its sword aimed straight up at my chin.

C-crap! It was a fake statue made with Clay… No, actually, it was probably built to shield it from the flames. With the shield in place, it had plenty of time to quickly escape underground.

I turned my head to the side to try and avoid the sword, but the Clay Hero immediately shifted in midair and extended its sword arm even further.

But I can still avoid it! And then I can tear it to pieces with my claws while it's in midair!

Before I could make good on that thought, the Clay Hero slashed its sword through the air, sending a Shockwave at me that

hit me under the chin with a deep, sideways slice. Blue blood sprayed out from the wound, and I threw my head back. Even at such a close range, the Clay Hero had used Shockwave to ensure its attack connected.

Wary of a follow-up attack, I reared up on my hind legs and blindly swiped at the air with my claws where I last saw it. As I did, I felt something launch off my leg. It seemed like the Clay Hero had used me as a foothold to climb up. Moments later, I felt a sharp, stinging pain on the back of my neck.

S-seriously?! This thing is no joke...!

I kicked off from the ground and leapt into the air, turning my body around to search for my assailant. The Clay Hero jumped off my body and dropped to the ground. I braced myself; otherwise, the Clay Hero would've pushed me away.

I suddenly felt a burning sensation in my stomach. I looked down to see it was split wide open, blood gushing out. *Th-the Clay Hero gave me a parting slash!*

It was clear from the very first slash that this monster was incredibly strong. It had three A+ clay guardian underlings and a legendary weapon and armor set assembled in the name of overthrowing the gods. This Alchemia must have been wickedly powerful.

However, this Clay Hero was only a clay golem made in Alchemia's image. The real Alchemia was probably even more skilled in combat, with an L class status and a wide range of skills at her disposal.

Now that I was an Oneiros, I'd thought there weren't many monsters left in the world that would still be able to match me in a one-on-one battle, but this Clay Hero shattered that naive line of thinking with ease. There must have been many, many monsters throughout history that were more powerful than I was.

I used Regenerate to quickly heal the open wound under my chin, then the parting slash it had left in my stomach.

...It was a good thing that thing didn't have wings. I could try to attack from up here with Dimension Claws, but I could barely see

anything down there with the fog. I'd never be able to land a hit on that tiny Clay Hero.

At least I'm safe while I'm in the ai—ack!

I swooped up higher to avoid a Shockwave the Clay Hero sent at me. *I-It can even reach me all the way up here...?!*

Part 3

I TURNED AROUND to look back down at the Clay Hero standing on the ground. It pointed its Lifesteal Laevateinn toward me and unleashed another Shockwave that crackled with sinister light. I ducked my head, twisted my body, folded my wings, and plummeted down to avoid the third Shockwave.

Even if I kept my distance, there was no guarantee that I'd be safe. It was hard to avoid the Shockwaves hurtling up toward me from the fog; I was only going to be able to avoid them for so long before I'd get hit.

I swung my claws and shot my Dimension Claws toward the spot where the Shockwave originated, but the attack only met with thin air. The fog was too heavy to see the ground from the air. Our size difference would be fatal for me in a long-range firefight—with my massive frame, I was basically a sitting duck in the air.

However, this was not an opponent I could fight if I reduced my size—and my stats—to that of a Baby Dragon. And I doubted I could use Illusion to disguise my position, thanks to the Wicked Ahriman armor's magic-negating abilities. Shub Niggurath had specialized in taking advantage of her opponent's weaknesses, while the Clay Hero favored a direct fight aided by its armor's defensive capabilities.

Well, it is what it is. I didn't have much in the way of skills to deal with this one either. This place might've been a special spot for the Demon King at one point in time or something, but that wasn't my problem. I had to use whatever I could to win this fight.

"Graaaaaaaaaaah!" I unleashed a Bellow and brought my claws through the air with a massive swing, sending out a

Dimension Claws at the ground in as wide an arc as possible. The ground was torn to shreds; several massive cracks ran through the landscape.

The Clay Hero retorted with another triple Shockwave attack. I beat my wings and shot up into the air to dodge.

Preparations were complete. The Clay Hero's footing was crumbling underneath it. Once I reached a certain height, I turned my head back toward the ground.

"Graaaah!" A ring of black light appeared around me as I used Gravity. The gravitational force immediately expanded to envelop my massive body. At the same time, I snapped my wings to my sides and immediately plummeted down to the earth.

As I fell, I unleashed another magic skill. A threatening black summoning circle spread out around me. This skill took a bit of time to prepare, so I wanted to deploy the summoning circle now so I could attack the Clay Hero as soon as I landed.

As I was about to reach the ground, I saw the Clay Hero leap toward me and slash at my side.

Th-this thing is going to attack me now?! Like this?! I thought it'd try to keep its distance... No, wait! This is perfect!

Moments before I hit the ground, I stretched out my hind legs and slammed them into the earth with a thunderous boom. A massive shockwave echoed through the clearing. This was the hero's skill, Celestial Fall. The shockwave sent the ground I'd just ripped open with Dimension Claws flying into the air.

The Clay Hero's Laevateinn blade broke through the scales on my shoulder, trying to reach my flesh, but the reverberation of the ground tremor bounced me back into the air and away from the hungry sword's reach.

The Clay Hero was momentarily open to an attack.

I raised my paw up a little and motioned like I was going to attack, but I didn't unleash my Dimension Claws—my movements were a ruse to goad the Clay Hero into action.

I knew that if I were to try and attack as usual, the Clay Hero would parry me and counter with its own attack. My plan felt a little immature, considering the huge gap in our stats, but I wanted to

take advantage of the Clay Hero not being able to get away…and hit it with one of my wide range skills!

It was time to unleash the skill I'd been prepping all this time: Hell Gate!

Normal Skill "Hell Gate." A type of spatial magic. Summons part of the now-abandoned underworld to burn away enemies with hellfire. The hellfire does not affect the skill's user. Maximum size of the summoned area is determined by skill level. Powerful but costly.

The size of my Hell Gate depended on the skill's level. Back at level 2, it had a diameter of about five meters. At its current level, 4, it should be able to cover a much larger area.

"Graaaah!" The black glow of the summoning circle floating around me became more intense and spread out over the ground. A multitude of giant black skeletons began to crawl out of the spreading miasma.

The Wicked Ahriman armor was powerful enough to counteract a majority of the strength of my Gravity…but not *all* of it. I doubted it could completely protect the Clay Hero from Hell Gate—a skill so powerful it had killed the fenrir I used it on instantly. But just in case, I used it when I knew the Clay Hero's reaction would be delayed.

The Clay Hero dropped its sword hand to the ground to raise itself off the ground a little. Then it lashed out with a powerful kick toward a chunk of ground I'd unearthed with Celestial Fall and launched off of it, sending itself flying through the air and out of harm's way. Continuing, it stretched its foot out toward a lump of earth behind it. I immediately used Dimension Claws to shatter that foothold.

Even if I couldn't restrain the Clay Hero's movements, with the restricted terrain I could still somewhat predict where it was going to move next. I would've been unable to respond well in the spur of the moment, but during my fall, I'd realized it might try to use the

debris kicked up from my Celestial Fall as launching pads for its escape.

Three giant black skeletons bent down toward the Clay Hero. The Clay Hero launched off of their massive forms to try and escape from the swirling black vortex created by my Hell Gate.

The Clay Hero seemed assured of its escape, but as it kicked the giant skeleton, the Wicked Ahriman armor surrounding its leg cracked, then shattered. The clay inside sprayed into the air, completely disintegrated.

The Clay Hero landed on its other foot, then was pinned down by a skeletal arm that extended from the vortex of black light. The three black skeletons loomed overhead and reached down to grab the Clay Hero.

Just as the Clay Hero's form was completely covered by their skeletal hands, the black light faded and disappeared.

Hell Gate was now about ten meters in diameter. *What kind of range would this skill have at max skill level?*

The Clay Hero, free of its skeletal fetters, stood back up to full height. Its shattered leg was already regenerating, but the shattered armor did not return. A crack appeared in the remainder of the Wicked Ahriman armor. Then the rest of it broke into pieces and fell to the ground on the spot.

From inside the armor, a clay woman appeared.

The Clay Hero slowly drew its sword and rushed directly toward me, faster than ever before, leaping into the air as it swung its Lifesteal Laevateinn sword at my head. The reddish-black blade connected with my skull, thrusting deep inside.

Sike! The dragon the Clay Hero had swung at was an Illusion.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

With a mighty swing of my claws, I tore through the Clay Hero's torso, cutting it in half. Its upper and lower bodies flew off in opposite directions.

The Lifesteal Laevateinn landed point-down in the earth with a resounding *thunk*.

Gained 24,700 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 24,700 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 97 has become Lv 105.



Is it…dead? For a moment, I was afraid its upper body would grow a new set of legs and stand back up. But the figure remained a lifeless lump of clay.

…Oh, man. Between my Dimension Claws and Celestial Fall, this place looks like a wreck. Umukahime's not gonna be mad at me, is she?

Normal Skill "Ideal Weapon" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.
Normal Skill "Hell Gate" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.
Gained Normal Skill "Wormhole" Lv 1.

Oooh. A new skill…?

Part 4

MY BODY FEELS…kinda heavy…

I didn't receive that much damage from the Clay Hero itself, but the HP and MP drain from Hell Gate was serious business. It felt like my body was rapidly rotting away from the inside out.

I used Regenerate to heal my body in its entirety. Hell Gate, combined with my recovery skills, had used nearly a thousand MP. Its drain rate was unmatched by any other skill I had.

With my old friend Whirlwind Slash—which had now been replaced by Dimension Claws as my go-to skill—I could have unleashed a hundred attacks with the same amount of MP. On the other hand, I could only fire off Hell Gate three times a day, max. Realistically, it was more like two, considering the wear and tear from other battles.

Lilyxila probably wouldn't ride into battle alone, so I needed to prioritize having enough strength left over to protect Allo and the others at all times. In that regard, all bets would be off as soon as I unleashed my second Hell Gate. But with my current status, I probably wouldn't have to worry about Lilyxila backing me into such an extreme corner that I'd have to resort to using that skill.

All right, let's check out my new skill, Wormhole. Was this the skill Oneiros got for reaching level 100? I wasn't sure; the hefty number of experience points I got from beating the Clay Hero boosted me up and over level 100 all at once.

Normal Skill "Wormhole." Gives user the ability to connect with another location by manipulating space, allowing for instantaneous movement without regard for physical distance.

Wh-whoa…instantaneous movement magic?! How can something that convenient even exist?! Does that mean I can just run away from Lilyxila for as long as I want? That completely changes the game!

The skill's range is proportional to ten times the user's total length. Costs a significant amount of MP and takes time to activate, making practical use difficult.

Yeah…figures. It's not that hard for me to move that far; I can just fly. No need to put in all that effort…

I still wished I had Lilyxila's Gravirion, the skill that compressed Eldia until he was unable to move. Even so, I'd gotten a lot of incredible skills out of becoming an Oneiros so far, so maybe I was expecting too much.

But moving instantaneously is way faster than moving normally… There's gotta be a way for me to put this skill to good use. I'll check it out later and see. It can't be completely useless.

I pulled the large stone slab the Clay Hero had originally been leaning against out of the ground, where it had been half buried. My rampage had turned what was once a beautiful meadow of flowers into a mess of dirt and rubble.

So this is the Alchemia tablet, huh? Let's see what kind of secrets it has to tell me.

Although this was the first time I'd seen it written out, it seemed like the Grecian Language skill carried over to words, and I knew the very basics from the lessons Myria had given me. I'd seen

plenty of Grecian Language skills before but never a “Grecian Script” skill. It made sense.

However, the words inscribed on the stone tablet were ones I’d never seen before. Beneath them, an image of someone carrying a sword and fighting a dragon was carved into the smooth surface. *Wh-what the heck? I can’t read this at all. What happened to this world having a standard language?*

I gently set the tablet down on the ground and decided to head back down the mountain. *Better go get Allo to read this.*

“You’re early. I assumed it would take you perhaps two days at the most.” When I got back to where I’d left my friends, Umukahime was sitting on a chair with a bunch of mysterious tentacles extending from her back. Allo and the black lizard were pinned down underneath the chair.

“M-Master Dragon…”

“Kyuuu…”

Oh, good. Seems like they’re making friends.

‹A-Allo?! Black Lizard?!›

Beside them, Treant was buried halfway into the ground.

‹Master… Forgive me…›

‹Oh, and Treant.›

‹Why did I get added on at the end?›

Umukahime let out a big sigh. “When they heard you roar, they started insisting that they had to go help you. I simply helped them calm down a little. Worry not; as you can see, I did not kill them.”

Man…she’s pretty strong, isn’t she? Before, after I killed Shub Niggurath, she’d implied that she was no match for me.

“Unfortunately, I did not think I would hold a candle to her power,” said Volk from where he was kneeling, shaking his head in frustration. “Since she seemed to not mean any harm, I surrendered at once.”

In the distance, I spotted a few of Umukahime’s tentacles flopping about on the ground. When I looked back at Volk, I noticed a peculiar, translucent fluid clinging to his Grandpa Magiatite sword.

Wait, you were definitely the one who cut those tentacles off, weren't you? Looks like you put up a good fight.

Atlach-Nacha stood to the side, seemingly the only one left unharmed. *...You could at least act like you were a little more concerned about me, you know?*

"I knew you would win," Atlach-Nacha said matter-of-factly from behind her mask. *That's an awfully nice thing to say for someone who acts like they don't care... No witty words of wisdom for me?*

"The right Master is all I have left of the left Master. Even I wouldn't say something rude here."

‹A-ahh. Sorry, Atlach-Nacha.› I bowed my head to her. Atlach-Nacha let out a puff of air in pride. I could trust that she was telling the truth, right?

I turned back to Allo and the black lizard, set them on my back, and then followed Umukahime back up the path to the top of the mountain, where the tablet sat waiting.

As it turned out, Treant hadn't been harmed in any way; it had just managed to get itself stuck in the dirt after pulling out a Meteor Stomp as a Hail Mary. I'd assumed as much.

"I...would have never guessed that you could not read the characters. Haven't you ever needed to in the past?" Umukahime asked, voice laced with a twinge of disappointment.

‹Well...what does it say?›

"I have not confirmed it myself. After all, it would not be strange if the world suddenly turned on its axis the moment its words were read."

‹Huh...?›

Volk, who was walking at my side, also looked doubtful when he heard her words. "Surely that is an exaggeration? If it truly had that level of influence, shouldn't the Demon King have defeated the Divine Voice five hundred years ago?"

Umukahime let out a sigh. She looked thoughtful, as if reminiscing about days long past. "I believe the Demon King knew the Divine Voice's ultimate goal. She crossed swords with it only once, after which she carved those words on the tablet. One can

assume they are a record of the skills the Divine Voice has in its possession."

Part 5

WE ARRIVED AT the mountain's summit, where the Clay Hero and I had fought.

"Ahh…I see." Umukahime gave me a reproachful look as she eyed the stone slab I'd broken from its resting spot and left resting on the broken ground.

‹Er, s-sorry. It wasn't intentional. It was a tough battle is all…›

Umukahime sighed. "Well…I suppose it was to be expected." She walked up to the lump of clay that was once the Clay Hero's upper body. Around it were scattered remnants of the legendary Wicked Ahriman armor. *Wh-whoops. Guess that was a bit wasteful…*

"No matter. It served little purpose, being left on the top of a mountain for so long. If I wished to go into battle, I would not use armor so restrictive that offered so few benefits."

Hmm…I wonder how much money I would've made if I sold it? Well, I don't have those kinds of connections, so I guess it's a moot point.

"Mm…?" Volk's curious gaze was directed at the Lifesteal Laevateinn resting point-down in the ground. He glanced at Umukahime, seemingly about to ask if he could take it with him. But perhaps out of fear, or from reading the current atmosphere, he thought better of it and remained silent.

‹By the way, what did you mean when you said the world might change once I read what's on the stone slab?› I asked Umukahime.

"The Divine Voice has eyes in every corner of the world. My master said that it is because it can see through the eyes of others. That is also the reason why my master had me cover the mountaintop with fog and task the Clay Hero with watching over it: to prevent anyone else from chancing upon the secrets that lie in wait."

‹So that means, when I read it…›

“Yes. It will undoubtedly be seen by that evil god as well.”

I-Is that okay…? Should I really be going up against the Divine Voice right now in the first place?

If I followed through with what Umukahime wanted, then I’d officially be working against the Divine Voice. To be honest, if the Divine Voice didn’t intend to mess with me any further after pitting Lilyxila against me, then I didn’t want to have anything to do with it either. But…it’d never be that easy, would it?

‹Well, doesn’t that mean the Divine Voice could see through the Demon King’s eyes too? How’d she manage to hide the contents of the tablet from it?›

“An excellent question. I do not know how much the Divine Voice knew. My master told me that before she turned against it, she acquired a unique skill via evolution which allowed her to escape its watchful eye.”

Hm…? Wait, wasn’t the Demon King we’re talking about Alchemia, the alchemist who defeated Eldia’s Demon King five hundred years ago? Her name was in the info for the Clay Hero and the clay guardians, so I’d just assumed we were talking about the same person. But if she was just a human hero who gained the Demi-God Realm Path skill, then she wouldn’t have been able to evolve. Was there…more to this story than I thought?

“Now then. I will read the tablet aloud.”

‹O-oh, okay. Thanks.›

Allo, Volk, Black Lizard, and Atlach-Nacha, standing beside me, shifted uncomfortably.

“M-Master Dragon, this…sounds serious. Are you sure it’s okay for us to listen to this?”

I looked at Allo and nodded. *‹Yeah. If it wasn’t, Umukahime would’ve chased you all off by now. Besides…the Divine Voice is probably the mastermind pulling the strings above Lilyxila. And if it is, then I’ll likely have to deal with it sooner or later.›*

I turned to face ahead and found my way blocked by Treant. Its face leaned over the stone slab with great interest. *Really, Treant? You could stand to have a bit of tact.*

‹Some matters contained in this tablet cannot be understood through mere words. I shall read them to you with Telepathy.› Umukahime's voice echoed through my mind as she fondly traced the edges of the stone slab with her hand.

‹It may be hundreds, even thousands of years before another soul reads this, though it is my sincere hope that this will not be the case.›

I'd expected Alchemia's writing to sound a little more fierce and fiery, but the first sentence Umukahime read to me gave me the impression of a rather calm person.

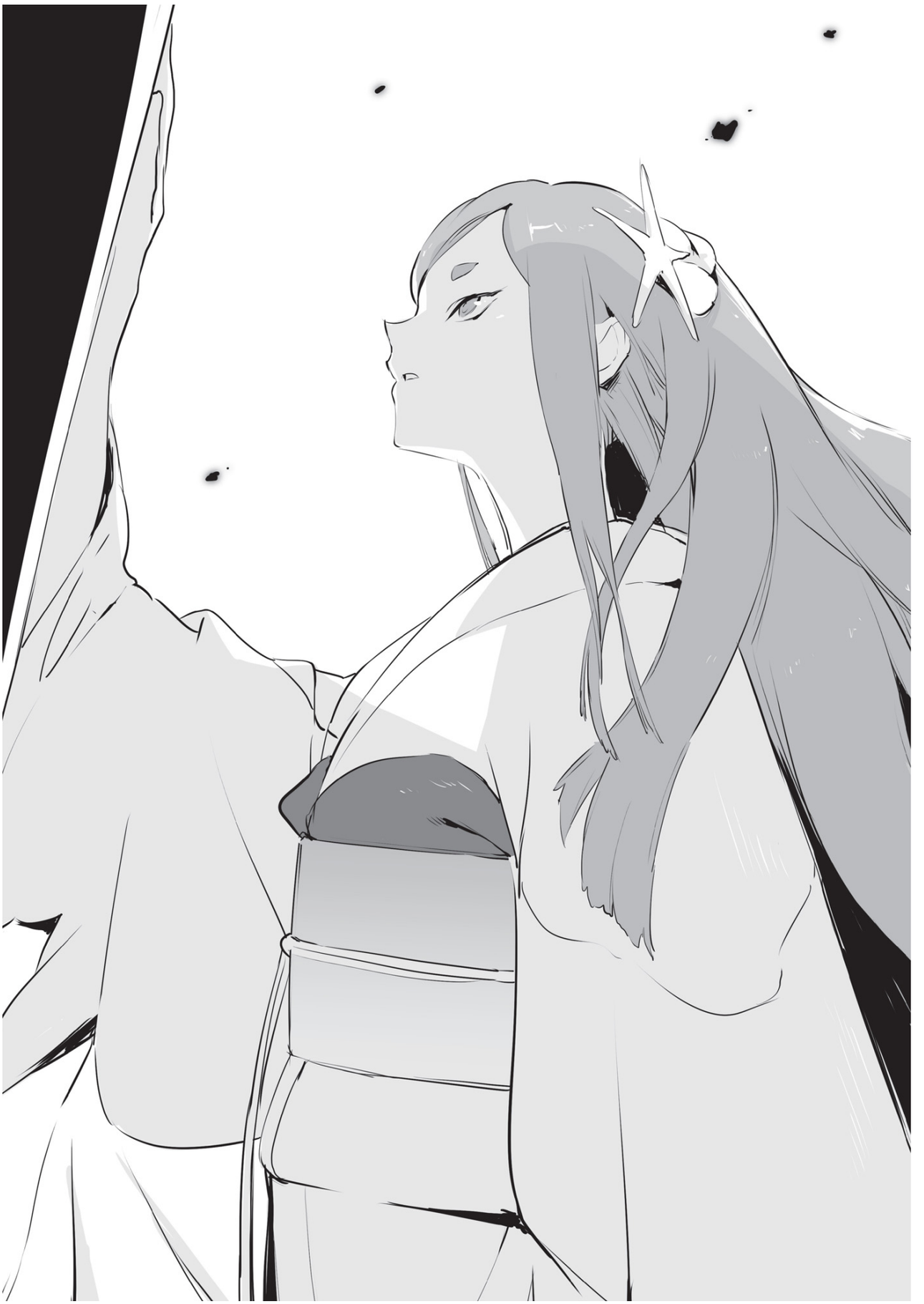
‹I will begin by telling you my true name. I am the Hero of the Harunae Empire, the most glorious nation on the planet. My name is Mia.›

After that, Umukahime began to tell me the tale of Mia the Hero.

It seemed that Alchemia was indeed a woman from five hundred years ago, and it was not wrong to say that she was a former hero.

Back then, Harunae was not just a desert but a lush green land known as the Harunae Empire. The Harunae Empire was powerful—able to send soldiers to conquer smaller countries and bring them under its own rule when necessary—and it was flourishing. It was hard to picture, considering the tiny desert country it was today.

Mia, named a hero by Harunae's Oracle, possessed great power. However, she hated politics and joined the church as a Holy Knight to help fight monsters and rescue people from harm, which allowed her to escape being dragged into military affairs.



And it seemed like the Divine Voice—the one who suggested the convenient way to get out of the military and showed Mia the path she was meant to take—was truly akin to a god to her, as well as her best friend and mentor.

After that, Mia ended up embroiled in a war against the Harunae Empire started by an alliance of smaller countries, with the saint of the time, Saint Lumira, at the center. Then she single-handedly defeated the monster feared as the most powerful of her time: the Beast King, Bandersnatch. Finally, the story arrived at the battle between Mia the Hero and Eldia's master, the Demon King Noah.

At that time, Noah believed it would be impossible for him to defeat Mia by any normal means, so he evolved into Pandora and decided to use the center of the Harunae Empire as his battleground.

I knew immediately what that meant—how terrible and devastating that plan would be. Pandora had been one of my evolution options back when I evolved into an Ouroboros, so I knew that it was a dragon that specialized in durability and curses. I also knew that on its death, it would unleash a death curse in a wide area around it. In short, he planned to torment and kill Mia with the entire population of the Harunae Empire as his hostage.

Eldia had really seemed to adore him, but to me, the Demon King Noah seemed like a coldhearted bastard. He must have truly believed from the bottom of his heart that humans were nothing more than burdens upon the world.

However, it seemed that Mia knew about the Demon King Noah's plans thanks to Laplace's predictions. When she found out, the Divine Voice forced Mia to choose between two options: Either it could lead the Pandora to a spot close to the Harunae Empire so she could arrive at his target location before him and corner him, or she could let him escape, delaying the battle and allowing him to wreak chaos upon the whole world.

If she was prepared to fight and destroy her homeland to defeat Demon King Noah, then this battle would be over. But if she delayed their fight to protect the Harunae Empire, he would create

powerful monsters one after another, and the whole world could be engulfed in war.

Mia chose to kill the Demon King Noah in the center, which cast the Pandora's curse across all of Harunae and transformed the empire into a desert of death. In the process, Mia was turned into an undead by the curse and could no longer live as a human being.

The Harunae Empire, having lost much of its country to the Pandora's curse, was once again marched upon by Saint Lumira, who incited the small nations who held grudges against the empire to restart the quelled war effort. They attacked the empire with renewed ferocity—that is, what little was left of it. With its central authority and infrastructure destroyed and most of its land reduced to a deadly desert, the Harunae Empire simply had no power left to oppose the saint and her army.

Mia, who'd endured a massive war that bordered on genocide and been turned into an undead, tried to intercede on the empire's behalf. But Saint Lumira called her return the second coming of the Demon King and threatened the countries surrounding Harunae, leading to an even more massive war.

In the midst of that war, Mia finally realized that the one advising Saint Lumira and Demon King Noah was the same Divine Voice that had advised her. The Demon King Noah's evolution into a Pandora was a step in the Divine Voice's plan to transform Mia into an outsider and create a massive rift in the center of the empire which would later trigger the great war.

‹…After that, when I tried and failed to persuade Saint Lumira of the Divine Voice's folly, I killed her. Then I disguised myself, went into hiding in these lands to the Far East, and began preparations to defeat my god. Thus ends the telling of my life's tale.›

…Holy cow. If what she wrote was true, it made the events of today's era look cute by comparison.

I felt like Umukahime had assumed from the very start that I opposed the Divine Voice. But after hearing that…I was convinced. No matter how hard I tried, there was no way I'd be able to play nice with the Divine Voice now.

‹From here, I shall make record of all I have learned about the Divine Voice.›

Umukahime traced the lower section of Alchemia's tablet with one of the tentacles extending from her back as she read its contents to me with Telepathy.

I closed my mouth and focused my eyes on the tablet. This felt like it was connected to the reason I came to this world too.

‹In short, it may be possible to destroy the individual behind the Divine Voice. It seems so to me, at least. Its purpose is to create an obedient pawn who has absorbed all six Sacred Skills.›

From there, the topic moved to the Divine Voice.

Alchemia—Mia the Hero—had received a lot of guidance from the Divine Voice. They spoke often, and at times, it even revealed things about itself to her.

The six Sacred Skills were created in ancient times. Their original purpose was to contain the fearsome evil god Fallen. There had been many theories as to the true identity of Fallen and the Sacred Skills since Alchemia's time—and there'd been as many religions as there were popular theories. I hadn't heard much about religions outside of Lilyxila's Holy Land, but maybe there were other ones that were still around.

The Divine Voice drew out the full potential of each individual possessing one of the six Sacred Skills, evolved them by granting them multiple Sacred Skills, and then put them down by its own hand. Every time, without fail. Apparently, its goal was to observe their development. Even if one of them rebelled, it would not interfere and strike them down until it saw just how strong its chosen one could become.

Alchemia killed the nameless Beast King, Demon King Noah, and Saint Lumira. This meant she collected a total of four Sacred Skills. That was when the Divine Voice appeared before her and defeated her—but didn't kill her.

‹One should expect the Divine Voice to be able to use all skills.› Umukahime's gentle, flowing voice cut a strong contrast against the things she was describing. *‹Naturally, it was far more powerful than any being I had ever faced before. It also possessed an unknown and debilitating psychic attack skill that pierced through every resistance I had and used it as its primary attack. There is no way to counter it, so one must endure it through sheer mental fortitude.›*

Wait…seriously? *All* of them? An enhanced version of the Chaos Ooze… No, even worse than that. Unimaginably bad. Was I really supposed to go up against such an all-powerful opponent someday?

‹No matter how much I was able to reduce its HP, it showed no signs of concern. The fact that it seemed to want me to get stronger after confronting it seems to suggest it still had plenty to spare. The only way to defeat the Divine Voice is to endure the inevitable psychic attack skills and use whatever means one possesses to kill it in a single strike when it least expects it.›

I felt a chill travel up my spine. The Divine Voice probably monitored me quite often. I doubted there was any room for me to let my guard down or find an opening.

The Divine Voice was in a position of absolute superiority, so it would naturally be afraid of putting itself in a situation where it could be killed by a single idea or stroke of luck. What Alchemia's inscription was suggesting seemed next to impossible to actualize.

…Why should I go to such lengths to confront the Divine Voice?

I knew it had overwhelming power, and that it had done unforgivable things in the past. I knew that all too well. Even in my time, it had caused the deaths of hundreds of people for no conceivable reason, and probably a thousand times more than that five hundred years ago. I didn't know how long it had been in existence, but it could've been responsible for the deaths of tens of millions. The Divine Voice was a diabolical villain, but it truly had achieved a state of godhood. There was no way I'd win a confrontation against it.

Besides…I had my friends to worry about. I couldn't let them lose their lives by making them join a desperate rebellion against the Divine Voice.

I glanced at Allo and the others. They were all silent, stunned by Umukahime's words. And no wonder. Even I, with the knowledge I already had, was struggling with the idea that I was meant to oppose the Divine Voice who'd been massacring humans and monsters alike for generations.

I knew turning away from the truth of this world was cowardly, but I didn't want to continue down this path any further than I had to.

‹I do not know if this is true, but the Divine Voice claimed that it was the last of the Six Great Sages who sealed away the evil god Fallen in ancient times. It has the power to interfere with the powerful force that established this world, called Laplace, and bend the world's laws to a certain extent.›

I remembered the Six Great Sages from the tale Eldia had told me in the ruins on the Island at the Edge of the World. He'd mentioned Laplace and Fallen as well.

If the Divine Voice was the last one, did that mean the other five were dead? I didn't understand. What was the significance of being the final remaining Great Sage? Did that mean it was the only one keeping Fallen sealed away?

‹The Divine Voice's goal is to create a pawn able to interfere with Laplace's authority and then use them to free the evil god Fallen. Its aim in doing so is to return this world to nothingness.›

‹Huh?!› It wanted to release Fallen to destroy the world?!

No doubt this meant that the evil god Fallen, whom the Divine Voice had been trying to revive for thousands of years, was far more powerful than the Divine Voice itself. *I wonder what Fallen's stats look like…?*

I couldn't make my doubts known in front of Umukahime, but it felt dangerous to believe everything Alchemia had written as fact. She could very well have lied for her own purposes, or the Divine Voice could have deliberately misled her.

Even so, I had a skill that corroborated with Alchemia's words: my Title Skill, Laplace Authority Interference. The skill's level went up every time I evolved or gained a new Sacred Skill. Its very existence was proof of the fact that the Divine Voice was planning to subjugate Laplace by strengthening those with Sacred Skills. It made sense, at the very least.

My Laplace Authority Interference skill was currently at level 4. Lilyxila and the hero with my name were both at level 3, and the slime and the Beast King had been at level 2. Although there

appeared to be room for some variation, the levels seemed to correlate with the number of Sacred Skills we possessed.

I honestly didn't know much about Laplace Authority Interference because I'd never used it; it always felt too dangerous. But apparently—although I had no idea of why or how—the Sacred Skill itself was connected to Laplace through the seal trapping the evil god Fallen.

If what was inscribed on the stone tablet was true, then it seemed like the Divine Voice was using me to carry one hell of a bomb. In short, the Divine Voice's purpose was to change the world, cause wars, and create suitable monsters in order to unleash the evil god Fallen?!

‹One must never allow their Sacred Skills to be handed over to someone who agrees with the Divine Voice. They will undoubtedly obey the Divine Voice's commands and provide enough data to create the ideal Sacred Skill holders in the generations to come. Such data will become the guidelines for it to use Laplace to meddle with the world's laws.›

A person with Sacred Skills who agreed with the Divine Voice… Lilyxila's image immediately popped in my mind.

‹But there is a worse possibility: that the Divine Voice will succeed in breaking the seal keeping Fallen contained and allow for the destruction of the world. Suicide is meaningless. When someone with a Sacred Skill dies, their skill passes into the hands of the most deserving individual. Perhaps the best and only way to keep one's Sacred Skill out of the hands of a follower of the Divine Voice is simply to strike them down oneself and take their Sacred Skills as one's own.›

I was beginning to understand it all now. The battles I'd faced with the Hero of Harunae and the Demon King slime were not just for my survival, for my friends' safety, or to bring peace to their countries—they were much more meaningful than that.

I still wasn't fully aware of how, but it seemed like this battle with Lilyxila would determine the fate of this world.

‹I am certain that before this text is read, the Divine Voice will do something to interfere. As soon as someone else sees it, it should be able to as well. It claims it does not like to interfere unless necessary, but that is a lie. It typically toys with us like its playthings, but if it

believes it may be in danger, it is quick to cast aside its removed approach and interfere.›

Umukahime's tentacle traced the paragraph near the end. Huh? Was there still more?

On one front, at least, the inscription was incorrect: The Divine Voice hadn't shown up to interfere yet.

‹If that has not yet happened, then that is cause for even greater concern. It implies that the Divine Voice is not worried about the information on this tablet being shared.›

Really…? It didn't care that I knew its attack methods and its tricks, or that I got a glimpse of its true identity?

"That…is all." Umukahime lowered her tentacle and switched from Telepathy to her normal speaking voice. "Do you understand? You cannot escape the Divine Voice. Your only options are to face it and die, join it and die, or strike it down."

Umukahime herself was also learning about many of the things contained in this text for the first time. It seemed like just reading it had exhausted her; beads of sweat dripped from her brow.

To be honest, there was a lot of information on that slab that I would've preferred to never learn. If I had been given the choice to live and die in blissful ignorance, without defeating Lilyxila, without the Divine Voice interfering in my life, I would have taken it in a heartbeat.

But unfortunately, it seemed like destiny had other plans for me. After hearing what it had done and what it was planning, there was no way I could go along with the Divine Voice's design and enjoy whatever relative peace that path would offer.

"I…had heard bits and pieces of this before, Illusia, but it seems you've gotten yourself into a great deal of trouble." Even battle-hungry Volk's face was pale as he stared at the tablet.

…I'm definitely not going to lose against Lilyxila, but what in the world can I do against the Divine Voice?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 7 is unable to provide that explanation.

The voice echoed through my head, sounding somewhat sarcastic. *Is it really looking at me right now?*

Suddenly, I sensed a familiar presence. I whirled around and unleashed my Dimension Claws. Above us, a fly monster took the attack and was ripped to shreds, blood spraying through the air as it fell.

I didn't receive any experience points. Without a doubt, this was one of Beelzebub's fly soldiers.

It seemed like Lilyxila wasn't planning to wait any longer.

Part 6

UMUKAHIME WALKED OVER to the giant fly carcass and lifted it up with one of the tentacles extending from her back. "My fog is so thick here that monsters are not normally able to slip in unnoticed… but it must have heard the roar during your battle. I have never seen any monster like it here; do you recognize it?"

I nodded. The black lizard was also staring nervously at the fly's carcass, probably remembering when the two of us narrowly escaped Beelzebub's attack.

‹No doubt about it; it's here for me. It works for the saint of our time: Saint Lilyxila.›

"A Spirit Servant?" Umukahime grumbled, her distaste clear. Her and Alchemia must have fought against their saint's Spirit Servant in the past as well.

‹Umukahime, would you be willing to lend me your strength? I could really use your help.›

Umukahime was a high-level, rank A+ monster. She had higher stats than Atlach-Nacha and Allo, and she had all kinds of combat experience under her belt. On top of that, she could control the fog at will, which would be a massive advantage against Lilyxila's forces.
‹Our interests are aligned. You want me to defeat the Divine Voice, right? And you don't want Lilyxila to defeat me and trigger Fallen's return either, do you?›

I felt like there was no reason for her to refuse. But Umukahime quietly shook her head.

“Forgive me, but I believe I shall watch this battle from the sidelines.”

‹What do you mean…?› I raised my paws. I couldn’t just say “Okay, I see,” and move on here. Depending on her response, I might even consider bringing my claws down on Umukahime.

“If you are unable to overcome the saint by your own hand, then there is nothing more for us to talk about. For that reason, I will not help you.”

I glared at Umukahime. *‹That’s not funny. I’m fighting for my friends’ lives.›*

Several tentacles extended out from Umukahime’s back, as if in warning.

“So am I. My compatriots and everything my master worked for are at stake. For five hundred years, I have waited here, believing that there will come a future generation who will defeat the Divine Voice. Fortunately, I was able to read my master’s final testament. If you fail, I shall wait another five hundred years and pass her message on to one of the next generation’s monsters who possess a Sacred Skill.” She didn’t so much as move a single eyebrow as she spoke.

Is she serious…?

‹But even for you, Lilyxila winning is the worst-case scenario, right?› I asked. If Lilyxila won, the Divine Voice would either raise Lilyxila’s Laplace Authority Interference level up high enough to bring Fallen back, or it’d use the information it got from Lilyxila to mess with this world and ensure that Fallen would be ready to be unsealed in the next generation…

“The victory of one of the Divine Voice’s loyal followers is something to be avoided, but it has probably happened dozens, hundreds, perhaps tens of thousands of times in the past. There is no way for me to know how far along its plans are in the making. That is why I am willing to gamble on what happens next.”

Umukahime said the words so easily. But for my friends and me, this moment, this fight, was everything.

“I may be powerful, but not as powerful as her. I will not go into battle against the saint, even if it is to oppose the Divine Voice. I am my master’s loyal subordinate, and as her last remaining subject, it is my duty to see her vengeance come to fruition.”

I’d done what Umukahime’s master wanted. I underwent the trials Alchemia laid out for me, and I defeated Shub Niggurath and the Clay Hero. Maybe I was reading into it too much, but I felt like those trials were also meant as a way for me to gain a bunch of experience points. At any rate, that meant that Umukahime and the rest had been waiting for someone to show up with enough determination to defeat the Divine Voice.

In that case, it wasn’t fair for me to be angry at Umukahime for being unwilling to help. And I was sure that she wouldn’t change her mind, even if I threatened to kill her.

‹I…I see. Sorry for threatening you. Would you mind leaving the fog behind?›

“I appreciate your understanding. Yes, I will leave the fog. I would rather this land not be trampled on by any wandering vagrants. I could weaken the fog if necessary, but it seems it is not required?”

I nodded. I’d gotten used to living in this foggy landscape. In this battle against Lilyxila, we’d be the one with the home field advantage.

We descended the mountain and returned to the waterfall cave. Allo busied herself with fetching the fenrir and dragonfish meat hanging at the mouth of the cave and preparing food for the group.

Thanks to the experience points we’d earned from Shub Niggurath, Allo went from **Lv: 77/85** to **Lv: 80/85**, Atlach-Nacha went from **Lv: 29/102** to **Lv: 54/102**, Treant went from **Lv: 49/85** to **Lv: 54/85**, the black lizard went from **Lv: 54/80** to **Lv: 58/80**, and Grandpa Magiatite went from **Lv: 24/92** to **Lv: 35/92**. As usual, the double experience point gain from Demon King’s Blessing was proving to be a major boon.

Allo was just a few steps away from reaching max level and evolving. However, with the amount of fenrir she’d have to hunt down to gain the final five levels and the uncertainty of when Lilyxila

might attack, I decided to give us all the rest of the day off to recuperate.

"I…never fit in very well among humans and never understood why," Volk said quietly after tearing off a hunk of fenrir meat. "But I feel strangely at home among you all. With you, I feel I can be at ease." His words warmed my heart, but I couldn't help but notice that he sounded a little sad.

‹Let us hope that we do not lose anyone in the fight to come.› Grandpa Magiatite, in sword form, spoke up from his resting spot on Volk's shoulder, as if he understood what Volk was implying.

I was determined not to lose any of my comrades.

Fortunately, we'd had a lot of time to prepare, but Lilyxila was definitely using that time to prepare herself as well. There was no telling what kind of tricks she'd have up her sleeve; I couldn't guarantee their safety.

"Ksshhhi…" The black lizard looked up at me anxiously.

It would be okay. With the strength I had now, I should be able to take down even Beelzebub. After we dealt with those two, we could kick back and live the easy life for a little while. And hey, now that I could change my appearance, I could go back and visit the orangurangs…

‹Here, Atlach-Nacha! I brought this one for you!› Treant said, lifting a large chunk of meat onto one of its branches and moving it closer and closer to Atlach-Nacha. It looked like a tree that grew meat.

‹…Why?› Atlach-Nacha, on the other hand, turned toward Treant with a mixture of sullenness and suspicion. Even through her mask, it was easy to read the bewilderment on her face.

I felt something brush my leg and looked down to see Allo standing there with her eyes trained on the scene between Treant and Atlach-Nacha, her face scarlet. "I wonder if Treant's in love with Atlach-Nacha now that she's beautiful…?"

…She is? I've only seen her wearing a mask, so I wouldn't know. They were mortal enemies until a few days ago, though. What happened?

Wait. Treant…are you still riding the high from that compliment Atlach-Nacha gave you the other day? She's definitely already forgotten about that, y'know.

Part 7: Lilyxila

WHILE ILLUSIA AND HIS FRIENDS were busy with Umukahime, Lilyxila was already on her way to the Far Eastern Strange Lands with her forces. They stopped at a lone island between the continent and the Far Eastern Strange Lands to take a rest from their travels.

"Act, assess, adjust combat strategy. Act…" Lilyxila sat on a stump on the edge of the island, away from her forces, scribbling a quill over a piece of paper.

Laplace Authority Interference had a simulation ability that came close to being able to predict the future. She was using it to check over her battle strategies in preparation for the fight with Illusia. The work took a lot of concentration, so she preferred to do it in the quiet, away from her subjects.

"Assume level 100 dragon with an attack-oriented status and…"

A multi-armed gray monster with six wings landed behind her as she whispered to herself. "Saint Lilyxila, we finally caught sight of them. Have you found your way to victory?"

Lilyxila looked back at him with annoyance and narrowed her eyes.

"There's Illusia, the undead, one human… Oh, the sword he was holding was also a monster," he reported. "Then there was a giant spider, a treant, and a giant lizard. And a strange one—human-shaped but probably a monster."

"How many of the monsters have evolved?"

"All of 'em, except for the undead! Ha ha ha! Quite a pickle we've found ourselves in, eh? I could tell from the massive footprints on the ground, but that Illusia guy is on a whole different level from before. Don't you think it's finally time for you to accept

your fate, Miss Saint?" Beelzebub was mocking her, but she didn't seem upset. "*Tch!* You really are a boring woman. Wouldn't it have been better to let the hero kill you if it saved you from being the eternal errand girl you are now?"

Beelzebub turned to look at Lilyxila's forces. "Do you really have that much faith in the Holy Knights and dragon riders? Well? Seems like you're using the same strategy you used with me: overwhelming them with sheer numbers. How unoriginal. The slime, Illusia, the Dragon King... These fights have all been such a bore. Why don't you give yourself a bit more of a challenge for once?"

For this battle, Lilyxila had mobilized fifty soldiers from the Order of the Holy Knights, along with fifty dragon soldiers borrowed from the neighboring kingdom of Shard. Her Holy Knights were highly skilled, motivated soldiers, revered as the strongest armed force in the world. Alexio, the knight commander, was rumored to be one of the best knights in the world, and many other famous, well-known swordsmen made up the rest of their ranks. The kingdom of Shard was also known as the Dragon Kingdom and was home to some of the world's finest dragon handlers. They managed to successfully gather a large number of humans who could use Telepathy from all over, using them to tame a wide variety of dragons in the country's jagged cliffs.

This time, Lilyxila borrowed fifty of their most elite dragon soldiers, Zephyrs, in order to intimidate Illusia and the others. Zephyrs were dragons that had been successfully subjugated on a large scale, and their fighting abilities were far superior to those of most other monsters. A battalion of fifty Zephyrs was perhaps enough to bring an entire small nation to its knees.

Zephyrs were also known as the protectors of the Shardian kingdom. The fact that Lilyxila was able to successfully borrow fifty of their prized dragons in such a short period of time was thanks in full to careful preparations she had made in the past in anticipation for this moment of need.

In order to force their compliance, Lilyxila used an informant on the side of the Holy Land to find and exploit a nasty secret in the Shardian royal family, then assassinated two of the kingdom's

authority figures and forced three more to commit suicide. Many people on both sides of the border had their suspicions about this incident—it had greatly damaged the reputation of Lilyxila and the Order of the Holy Knights, as well as relations between the two countries. For Lilyxila, too, it was a gain that came at a heavy price.

Regardless of how they came together, though, their group consisted of the world's most powerful order of knights and the world's most powerful dragon knights. There was no group more qualified to slay a legendary dragon.

A Holy Knight patting one of the Zephyrs noticed Lilyxila's gaze. His expression tightened, and he straightened his back and lowered his head at once. The knight's movements were awkward; he was a young man who'd only just joined the church, and he was still unused to such knightly conduct. When Lilyxila smiled and waved at him, the young man blushed.

"Well, if you hit 'em with that many bodies, I suppose you might even be able to take down the Legendary class you're envisioning," Beelzebub mused. "C'mon, no need to feel tense. You think maybe I'll get a chance to trade a few punches with that Illusia?"

"Unfortunately, they are nothing but sacrifices." Lilyxila was matter-of-fact, even as she stood smiling and waving at the lovestruck knight.

"...Huh?"

"Attack: 1,000. Agility: 800. Do you know what these values represent?"

"How would I know? You know better than anyone that I'm a little slow on the uptake, don't you?"

"They are the minimum requirements to pose even a small threat to the current estimated stats of the Human Realm Path user. Anyone with less is nothing but an opening move or a sacrifice."

Beelzebub tilted his head. "I don't even know if *my* stats are above that. Then how many members of the Order of the Holy Knights have cleared that threshold?"

"Zero."

"...Wha?"

“Not a single one of those fifty knights has cleared the threshold. I spent a great deal of the gold in the Holy Land’s treasury to strengthen their weapons and risked starting a war with Shard to supplement their mobility with Zephyrs, but not because I believed it would increase their chances against the Human Realm Path user. Their attack and agility are far from the lowest required level. At best, I could perhaps find a use for Knight Commander Alexio, but that is all.”

Beelzebub looked around at the members of the Holy Knights with his multitude of beady black eyes. “What about the rest of them?”

“I just told you. They are opening acts and sacrifices.”

Beelzebub frowned slightly. “Oho, so the Legendary class is that scary? Are you just planning to go out there and get yourself killed?”

“Of course not. I have Aluanné—the Devil of the Great Prison—you, and the Dragon King to handle the Legendary class. Howgley the Glutton as well, although his stats make him the exception to the rule. According to the calculations of the Laplace Authority Interference, we should be able to overcome its assumed status by attacking all at once.”

“Oh…? So I’ll get my turn to come out and play after all? Is he really that good?”

“Many of the Holy Knights can use Rest. We also have Regeneration Master Oulu at our disposal, along with Aluanné. We are well positioned to arrange an ideal board to ensure minimal losses. The Holy Knights and the Zephyrs will start us off with a total of one hundred sacrifices, and my upper ranks will see to it that the Human Real Path user is focused on them by slaying the monsters under its control. Then we will hit the Human Realm Path user with our remaining forces. The problem is that the fog makes it difficult for our forces to unite, but fortunately, you—the main force—can be called back immediately, and it is easy to share information with you.”

“That ain’t what battles are about. To think I was killed and had my spirit summoned to fight for such a boring, gloomy woman. Bah!” Beelzebub spat, looking irritated, then turned his attention to

the petite older man mingling with the Holy Knights. “So that’s him? The legendary swordsman you’ve been desperate to get your hands on, Howgley the Glutton? I’ve never seen him in action before, but his stats…aren’t much better than the Holy Knights’, are they? Alexio’s much better than him. Is he really gonna be any use in the fight?”

“He might do an even better job than you.”

“I ain’t letting that happen,” Beelzebub replied, a little miffed. “Anywho, you’re a bit of a lonely bastard, ain’t ya? Am I the only one you can confide in, since you have me on a leash? Maybe I should start a counseling service. Fly King’s Counseling. Really rolls off the tongue, don’t you think?” Beelzebub cackled, mouth open wide.

“Enough with the pleasantries.” Lilyxila answered Beelzebub’s taunts with the measured nonchalance befitting a saint. “Please describe the post-evolutionary forms of our enemies. I can make guesses as to their skill compositions, and the more information I have, the more reliable my Laplace Authority Interference simulation will be. If they have evolved into monsters for whom I have some prior knowledge, then even better.”

“Dammit, I was being serious. You’re a *real* charmer, ain’t ya?” Beelzebub spat on the ground. His venomous saliva melted the earth beneath it, sending up a curl of black smoke.

As he opened his mouth to share more details of his findings, Lilyxila abruptly stood.

A green-haired girl jumped behind Lilyxila and alighted on the stump she was just sitting on. She wore a black dress, with two large rose clips in her hair. The girl looked up at Lilyxila with her big eyes and smiled. Long ears extended out from between her beautiful emerald hair.

“Hey, hey, Miss Saint? You’re taking a break from your predictions, right? Then, then how about you come play with me? Okay?”

The girl was the Devil of the Great Prison, Aluanné. As her title suggested, until just a few days ago, she had been locked up for nearly a hundred years in a deep underground prison inside the Holy Land of Lialum. The reason she still looked like a young girl

was that she had the blood of an Elf, the race that once ruled the world in a bygone age.

Amid great outcry from those around her, Lilyxila had decided to release Aluanné. It was said that she single-handedly destroyed two villages, killing over six hundred people. The whole country was sent into an uproar to capture just this one small girl.

At the time of Aluanné's capture, the Holy Land of Lialum did not allow executions in accordance with their religion, so instead, she was locked up in a cell deep under the earth.

"Hey, hey? You can, right? Miss Saint? I, I want to be friends with you, Miss Saint. Okay? That's all. I'm so grateful to you for bringing me out of the deep, dark place, and I respect you a whole bunch. So can we? Can we?" Aluanné stood and clung to Lilyxila.

One of the things Lilyxila had heard about Aluanné was that her mind was rather underdeveloped. Whether this was because she'd been stuck underground in the dark for so long or she'd been born with the issue, there was no way of telling. Those who'd caught and imprisoned her were no longer alive to ask.

"I…am having an important conversation right now. Forgive me," Lilyxila said, taking Aluanné's hand with a soft smile.

"No, no, Miss Saint. No acting, because Aluanné can tell, you know? Okay? So just tell me, just tell me the truth?" Aluanné asked, an eerie smile on her face. "Just to Aluanné."

Lilyxila's smile turned strained.

"Ha! If a brat like her can read you like a book, then maybe you've lost your touch, Saint," Beelzebub said cheerily.

"Hey, hey? Miss Saint, Miss Saint, when this battle is over, you're gonna kill me, right? Right?"

Aluanné was correct. She was too dangerous to be permitted to live. Lilyxila wouldn't have brought someone as unpredictable as Aluanné along if she'd had any other options. She had brought Aluanné along under the guise of giving her her freedom in exchange for her help during the battle, but if she survived, Lilyxila intended to dispose of her while she was exhausted. She had already informed some of the Holy Knights of this plan.

“No, of course not,” Lilyxila replied in a troubled tone, frowning.

“But it’s okay, it’s okay. I don’t mind. There’s nothing wrong with that. When this is over, when it ends, you can kill me. Okay?”

Lilyxila didn’t respond, instead opening her eyes wide and looking into Aluanné’s, searching for a sign of her true intentions.

“You know, I respect you so much, Miss Saint, I really admire you. I’m just happy to finally be outside. Seriously! So, hey, hey, tell me the truth, okay? The truth, just for me, just for Aluanné.” Aluanné looked deep into Lilyxila’s face.

“Enough with the demonic gaze.” Lilyxila’s expression changed drastically as she glared at Aluanné.

“W-wah! Sorry! I didn’t mean to, I didn’t mean to! I’m not good at controlling it. When I get excited, it just happens! I really do want to be friends, Miss Saint. I just wanna get along. And I want to be useful to you, Miss Saint. Really, I do!”

“I see. I would like to get along with you as well, Aluanné.”

“W-wah! Wah! I’m glad, I’m so glad! You and me, we love each other, Miss Saint! Okay, okay!”

For a moment, Lilyxila and Aluanné stared at each other in mutual silence. “Is there…something you wish to say to me?” Lilyxila asked.

Aluanné giggled, then put her face to Lilyxila’s ear. “Hey? When we get there, can I eat five of ’em? Please? I’m more important, and I work better on a full stomach. Right? Right? So I can be helpful for my beloved Miss Saint, right? Don’t worry. I’ll eat ’em in secret so I don’t lower morale. Okay?”

Lilyxila stared at Aluanné, speechless. She was told that the girl was intellectually behind the curve, but she was clearly reading Lilyxila’s train of thought as they spoke. Although her words and thought processes were somewhat erratic, she seemed objectively aware of them.

Lilyxila stared at Aluanné’s status, then put her hands on her head and closed her eyes, mulling her options over. Aluanné happily watched her expression all the while.

Eventually, Lilyxila opened her eyes again and turned back to the girl. “Very well. I will give you five of your choosing. I wouldn’t want you to fight on an empty stomach, after all. But not Howgley. That is my only condition.”

“Then how about that cool-looking woman who always accompanies you, Miss Saint? Her? Her?” Aluanné replied without a moment’s pause.

Lilyxila looked up and turned her attention to Alphis. She was standing a little apart from the other Holy Knights, her hands toying with her hair, seemingly lost in thought. Since she’d apparently come into contact with Illusia during the Ruin attack, she’d spent more and more of her time pensively staring off into the distance. After speaking with him directly and aiding him, she seemed to feel like this battle was a double betrayal.

“Alphis? She is an excellent swordswoman, and she can read my thoughts and act accordingly, to a certain extent. I intend for her to die on the battlefield, so I would prefer she lived.”

“You love her, right? You do, don’t you, Miss Saint? Aluanné can tell.”

“...What?”

“She’s been your friend since you were little, right? I wish *I* got to be your friend since we were little. Right? I can tell. Just tell me the truth, just me, the truth. Then I won’t do anything bad to you, Miss Saint. Okay? Okay?”

The friendly expression dropped from Lilyxila’s face. Aluanné’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction, as if she’d been wanting to see that look. Lilyxila’s face was frozen for a moment, but then she quickly gave her usual smile. “Y-yes, that is fine. I said anyone other than Howgley, didn’t I? And if you need more, I don’t mind you taking more either.”

Aluanné’s mouth opened in surprise. “Really? Are you sure? You don’t mind?” She leaned toward Lilyxila’s face, staring deep into her eyes, then smiled again and pulled her face away. “As expected of the saint I respect so much. Okay, then I’ll take her? Okay? It’s okay, right? Really? Is it really okay? Really, really?” With that, she got up and dashed happily away from Lilyxila at last.

“I’m not sure I’m the right one to be asking this, but are you really glad you released that girl?” Beelzebub asked Lilyxila after Aluanné was out of earshot. “Your men seem to question your sanity for it, but I wonder how you feel? You never know if she’s gonna suddenly turn on you, do you? You said you had no choice because you needed more balls in your court, but I feel like bringing her was a mistake. Not that I care, of course.”

“Well, she is a much more fascinating girl than I thought she’d be. But she will be an excellent tool in this fight, and that matters more than anything else,” Lilyxila responded, staring at Aluanné with a faint smile on her face.



Bonus Story 1:
The Undead Girl's Black Love Rival

Part 1

I STRETCHED MY TRUNK OUT and let the sun shine on the leaves of my spreading branches. The light was not very strong due to the fog, but it was enough. As a treant, a tree creature, it was important for me to photosynthesize from time to time for the sake of my health.

Mmmmm. Perhaps because my large form could soak in a lot of light at once, I felt more comfortable basking in the sun now than I had in my previous evolutions. According to my master, my current form was called a tyrant guardian. It was no exaggeration to say that this was exactly the kind of fierce evolution I was always meant to become.

As I dozed off in the cozy haze of photosynthesis, I noticed a faint scratching sound coming from below. I turned my eyes toward the sound and saw Miss Allo.

‹Miss Allo…could you please stop tickling me so much? You are going to make me sneeze.›

"You can sneeze, Treant?" Allo asked, looking up at me in surprise.

‹Of course I can. What kind of creature do you think I am?›

"Huh? W-was that rude? Sorry…" Allo bowed her head, still confused. Apparently she thought treants were a species that couldn't sneeze.

At that moment, when I looked a little closer, I noticed that Miss Allo had a clay knife in her hand. She'd probably formed it with her Clay skill. And on my trunk, there was a matching engraving that read "Allo + Master Dragon" underneath a single umbrella.

‹M-Miss A-Allo?! R-really, what made you think you could do that?!›

Miss Allo set her knife on the ground and sat down, leaning against my trunk. Her brow furrowed in worried thought, and then she let out a deep sigh.

I was certain that Allo was also thinking about that evil woman, Lilyxila. I was left behind when they went to Alban Castle, but even so, I was well aware of Saint Lilyxila's vicious cunning.

We'd gotten much stronger since then. I wouldn't be left out of the action this time. Master had reached Legendary class and became the Dream Dragon Oneiros, and his power was incomparable to what it had been before.

But even so, I couldn't shake the sense of unease poisoning my mind. I was certain that Lilyxila would arrive with some sort of heinous plan to defeat us. And we had more to worry about than just Lilyxila. It seemed that Master was involved with the mysterious Divine Voice, who was said to be backing Lilyxila's plans, and that they might become enemies.

Although Master said that he still didn't know if he'd go up against the Divine Voice, it seemed Umukahime—the woman we'd met at the summit of these foreign lands—was certain that they would clash at some point.

There were plenty of things to be nervous about. Would we really be able to defeat Lilyxila and the Divine Voice? Allo was likely pondering the same thing.

She grabbed my hand weakly in her own. *Yes, she is definitely anxious. I should cheer her up! I was originally welcomed into this life by Master in order to support Miss Allo, after all.*

‹Miss Allo…if you have any worries, I am happy to listen!›

"Treant…"

‹Yes?›

Miss Allo looked up at my face, then shifted her eyes to the sky, as if thinking. After stammering a little, she calmed down and slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"Well…I think that Black Lizard might like Master Dragon too…"

‹O-oh?› I couldn't help but respond. I knew that the black lizard apparently saved Master from the Fly King Beelzebub. Of course it liked him. What was Allo talking about?

"No, I'm sure of it! Because…it rubbed its cheeks against Master Dragon so suggestively! L-Like this!" Allo stretched her neck into the air in a nuzzling motion. It just looked like some sort of

strange dance to me. I even thought it might be a form of ritual passed down by the Lithovar tribe, but it seemed like she was just trying to replicate Miss Lacerta's cheek-rubbing gesture.

"And it was making such flirtatious, high-pitched chirps! It was so embarrassing! Because its voice isn't like that when Master Dragon isn't around! It's much lower! Right? Don't you think so too, Treant?" Miss Allo's eyes snapped back to me.

‹H-huh…? So? Is that really what you're worried about right now, Miss Allo?›

"What's that supposed to mean?! It may not matter to you, Treant, but it matters to me! I shouldn't have told you if you weren't going to try and understand…" Miss Allo looked away from me and puffed out her cheeks, sulking.

‹F-forgive me, Miss Allo… I-It's just… No, I understand! I was wrong! I will listen with open ears from now on!›

Allo wrapped her arms around her knees and hung her head. "What do I do…? It seems like Master Dragon has known it for a long time, and it seems like he trusts it a lot…"

‹I-It's all right. Master trusts you too, Miss Allo!›

"And they're related species…"

‹W-well, that may be a larger issue…› It was true that lizards and dragons were genetically close… But what was wrong with that?

"What do I do? If things continue like this, I might not get to marry Master Dragon…" Allo said weakly.

In truth, I was somewhat surprised that the thought had even crossed Allo's mind. *I-I see… So Miss Allo wishes to become Master's wife…?* I immediately wondered what they'd do about children, among various other issues, but decided to let those questions slide for now. As long as Master and Miss Allo were happy, I'd have no reason to say anything.

I crushed the tip of one of my branches with Gravity Compression—one of my new tyrant guardian skills—to make a thumbs-up sign, then pointed it at Miss Allo. *‹Don't worry, Miss Allo! I am on your side! I'll do whatever it takes to support you! Even if it makes our black lizard friend cry!›*

Allo looked back up at me, blinking, then smiled at my worried expression. “Thank you, Treant. But…just hearing that from you is enough to make me happy. You don’t have to do anything extra or anything…”

It was the first time since Alban that I was being taken out of the fight in a roundabout way, and so Miss Allo’s words made my leaves droop a little.

Part 2

WE WERE ALL EATING TOGETHER in front of the waterfall cave. “The fenrir meat is a little tough but still quite tasty. Perhaps I should wander the world and taste more of its magical beasts, like the great swordsman Howgley,” Volk said, sitting on a large rock and devouring chunks of grilled fenrir meat with his hands. He used his teeth to tear off strips of the tough meat. He was so muscular and powerful that it was hard to believe he was truly human. Volk wiped the dripping oil from around his mouth with his arm.

I also used one of my branches to toss a chunk of fenrir meat —flavored with Hades Mandragora—into my mouth. The flavor of the Hades Mandragora was irresistible. It had a unique, hearty taste to it that was difficult to describe, but it was delicious.

Come to think of it, Master had made a complicated face when he sniffed the powdered Hades Mandragora. Did he not like it?

I looked down and saw Miss Allo pointing at me with a look of disbelief, eyes wide. *What? Is there something on my face?*

‹What is it, Miss Allo? It’s not polite to point, you know. You won’t make a good bride with those manners.›

“Y-you eat meat, Treant?”

‹Yes…? What do you mean?› What in the world did Miss Allo think I was? *‹I can certainly photosynthesize and feed myself through my roots, but…what did you think my mouth was for?›* I pointed at my mouth with a branch.

“N-no way. You’ve never done that bef—oh, I get it! You can eat now because you evolved, right?!”

‹No…I've always been able to eat normally. I've always eaten things.›

Miss Allo sat still in shock for a while but then dashed to Master's side. "M-Master Dragon! Treant just… Treant just ate!"

‹What're you talking about, Allo? Treant's a Treant, remember?›

"B-but it really did—"

‹You must be tired, Allo. Your eyes are playing tricks on you. You should go rest up while we've got a chance!›

"But it's true! I'm not lying! Just now, Treant put a piece of meat in its mouth!" Miss Allo tattled to Master about me eating meat, but he seemed to pay no mind.

It was only natural. Maybe Allo hadn't noticed because she'd just assumed differently, but I'd eaten many meals with my mouth in the past. I was pretty sure Miss Allo was the only one among our group who was unaware of this.

After the meal was over, I stretched out by the river and used Tree Spirit Transformation to change into a smaller form. I peered over the river's edge to check out my round, birdlike figure. *Mmm… it's pretty cute, isn't it?* I couldn't help but flutter my wings, twirl around, and strike a cute pose.

The evil woman Lilyxila was accompanied by the Fly King Beelzebub, who had small fly servants whose eyes he could see through. As a tyrant guardian, I was very tall, and my appearance stood out even more than Master's massive dragon form. I was better off using this form as often as possible.

I looked behind me and saw Miss Allo standing a little distance away, staring blankly at a spot in front of her. I waddled over. *‹What is it, Miss Allo?›*

"Ah! Treant, look, look! See?" Allo said gleefully. When I looked past her, I saw Master stretched out on the ground, sleeping for once. He was lying on his stomach on the ground, taking the small, relaxed breaths of deep sleep. Master had been awake all through the night lately, keeping watch. He must have been very tired.

Now that we were at higher levels and had a general idea of how strong the monsters that haunted this region were, we'd likely be able to drive them away ourselves without Master's help. The

battle with Lilyxila was undoubtedly drawing close, and in order to be in tip-top shape for it, Master was better off getting a good night's sleep.

‹It seems he's asleep. We must protect Master from any strange beasts that may come by!›

While I was readying myself for combat, Miss Allo crept forward toward Master. "He's so cute when he's asleep…"

‹Miss Allo? Er…Master is resting, so I think it would be best to not disturb him…› I warned as I followed behind her. But Allo ignored me and kept walking closer and closer to his sleeping form.

‹M-Miss Allo! Are you listening?!›

"Just wanna…touch him a little. That's all. Just a little…!"

‹Miss Allo?! You've got a scary look in your eyes!›

Allo went up to Master and snuggled her face into his chest. *W-well, I guess that's fine… It doesn't seem like she woke him up, at least…*

Miss Allo stayed there for ten minutes or so, then her eyes suddenly snapped open and she stepped away from him. Then she looked up at Master's head and sat there, staring.

‹Miss Allo…can we let Master rest now? C'mon, come get a drink of water at the river with me. The water here is sweet, cool, and refreshing.›

Allo pointed her hand at the ground. "…Clay." The ground underneath her rose and became a platform. She rose up to become level with Master's face. It seemed she had no intention of getting down.

‹Miss Allo! You'll wake him up! You're going to wake him up!›

"Mmm…" Allo snuggled into Master's head, eyes closed.

I'm glad she's happy, but really, Master could wake up any second. As I thought this, Miss Allo placed her hand squarely on Master's face and closed her eyes again. *Wh-what are you trying to accomplish here?*

‹Miss Allo…?› As I looked at her quizzically, Miss Allo stuck out her lips and moved her face closer to Master's mouth. Her face blushed bright red. *‹M-M-Miss Allo! N-not the mouth! Leave it on his*

cheeks instead!› I desperately tried to persuade her, my wings flapping in panic. *It's too early for you to be kissing, Miss Allo! And besides, he has serious dragon breath... W-wait, seriously, I need to stop her! One wrong move, and he could bite clean through her!*

‹M-Miss Allo! Miss Allo, please!› Allo wasn't listening. Slowly, she moved her face closer to Master's.

Suddenly, the Clay platform Miss Allo made turned black and collapsed, dropping her to the ground. She dropped into the clay, which was now mud. Her body began to sink into the muddy ground.

"M-Master Drago—*mmgh!*" Allo's shriek went silent as the mud covered her mouth.

‹M-Miss Allooooooo!›

As I looked on in horror, my wings flapping, I suddenly noticed Lacerta standing next to me. Its two tails wagged slowly as it glared at Allo sinking into the mud. The hostility in its eyes was clear.

I looked at Lacerta and finally understood what had just happened. It must have used its Poison Swamp skill to turn the platform Allo made with Clay into a lump of poisonous mud.

Allo was immune to status conditions, so she should be fine, but she seemed to be stuck in the mud.

Finally, she crawled out, covered in unpleasant green mud, her eyes dazed. "Wh-wh-what just...happened...?"

"...Ksshh!"

Allo and Lacerta's eyes met. After a brief glare, Lacerta wagged its tongue, then turned away from the girl and walked off. Allo watched the black lizard leave, her eyes burning a hole in its back.

H-hmmm...that was rather concerning.

I grabbed Allo by the arms with my wings, trying to pull her up out of the toxic mud. *U-urgh, now there's mud on my wings...*

Part 3

***G**OODNESS, she's had a rough time of it, hasn't she?*

After that fiasco, I went with Miss Allo to the river to desperately try and get all the poison mud off. I was nearly swept away by the river—and had to be rescued by Miss Allo—but somehow we succeeded in cleaning her up.

After that, we went back to check on Master, but he'd already woken up. It seemed like Master hadn't had any intention of falling asleep, but after eating his meal, he'd lay down for a little while and dozed off.

I, for one, thought it was a good thing that he was able to get rid of some of his fatigue. He tended to be a little too focused to rest much.

It would be nice if he could find a hobby to devote himself to instead and forget about fighting for a little while…but of course, Lilyxila could attack at any moment. He couldn't afford to relax.

Neither can that lovestruck fool, Allo… Eheh heh. Just a slip of the tongue. Hmm, I guess I'll just have to ease Master's mind by showing him my lovely tree spirit form.

After getting a drink of water at the river, I returned to Master's resting spot in front of the waterfall cave. He seemed to have transformed into a human and was sitting on the ground, kneading some clay intently. Beside him, Miss Allo looked on, smiling.

After forming the clay into the shape of a container, Master blew a peal of fire from his mouth straight at it. When the flames ceased, a beautiful, glistening white piece of pottery stood in its place.

Master held it up, eyes shining. "Whoa, awesome! The description calls it a Dream Dragon Vase! And it's got a B rating for value!"

Master, I hate it when you're so serious, but… Hmm, you weren't always like that, were you? You've always been pretty easygoing and cheerful. Am I the one who's worrying about our future the most right now…?

No, just because the day of our battle with Lilyxila is near doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy anything. Someone may very well die during the fight; maybe we all will. But that is precisely why we should enjoy

small moments of happiness like this to the fullest. Hmph, have I reached enlightenment again?

"Amazing! No, really, this is incredible! I wonder how much it'll be worth? Maybe after this fight is over, I should switch careers and go into pottery!"

What are you talking about, Master? No, if you really want to become a potter, then who am I to stop you? I'll support you in whatever you want to do. It's just…

"I'm glad you're having fun with it, Master."

"Thanks for collecting those pieces of Alchemia's Magic Clay and bringing them along, Allo! I didn't think you were keeping 'em for me!"

I remembered the clay he spoke of. Alchemia's Magic Clay was clay created by the former Demon King Alchemia that was imbued with magic, and it was suitable for pottery. I thought it could only be obtained from another monster, though… Oh, I realized—that clay must have been from the clay guardian that Master defeated before.

On the way back down from the mountain, Miss Allo had done her best to harden and collect the scattered debris from that fight. I'd wondered what she was doing, but I never asked. Apparently, she was collecting it to give to Master as a present.

After that—while Master sat next to her, happily showing off the pot he'd made—Allo used Clay to collect the remaining magic clay and began to shape it. At first, she shaped the clay into a vague outline of her vision, then used her mind to carve out all the intricate details. In no time at all, in the lump of clay's place was a statue of a two-headed dragon in stunning detail. When Master saw it, his mouth fell open in shock.

"Look, Master Dragon! It's you and Partner! Maybe I should become a potter too!"

"N-no, that's different, Allo! That's bad! You can't do that! It's… it's kind of hard to explain why, but you can't just use Clay to make stuff! You're supposed to take time and craft it by hand!" Master explained, arms waving frantically. *Isn't he just flustered because his handcrafted vase is getting shown up by Allo's beautiful statue?*

“O-oh. It’s…bad?” Allo bowed her head. *Ah! M-Master! If you make Miss Allo cry, I’ll never forgive you! I’m no match for you, but still!*

“N-no, it’s not like that! It’s just… It looks lovely, but it’s just a personal preference thing, so…!”

Just a personal preference? It seems my hypothesis was correct.

“…The way Partner’s looking at me like she’s about to bite me any second… It’s the spitting image of her!”

“Eh heh heh… Yeah, I really wanted that to get across.”

“You want me to fire this so you can use it to decorate the entrance to the cave?”

“Oh, yes, please! Thank you!”

“You should show it to Atlach-Nacha later too. I’m sure she’d love to see it.”

O-oh! Now the atmosphere’s better than ever. Fight on, Miss Allo! I wish you most luck and happiness with Master!

“Kssshh…”

I heard a jealous hiss from the black lizard right behind me. Without thinking, I immediately jumped up. I felt a chill rise up from my feet.

‹O-oh…! You seem like you’re in a b-bad mood. Is something wrong? If there is anything I can do to help, then I am at your service…!› I kneeled to the ground and folded my two wings together in front of me in a hand-rubbing motion.

No, no, no! My soul has been forced into submission! It is time, Treant. Time to stand up for yourself! I just wished Allo happiness with Master, didn’t I?

I rose on shaky legs and spread my wings. *‹No! I will not let you disturb this tender moment between Master and Miss Allo! You may not come any closer unless you go through me first!›*

Lacerta’s eyes narrowed as it looked at me. W-was it going to try it?! I spread my wings wide to block the way and glared back at it. *‹Fine then! Bring it—›*

Before I finished my sentence, the black lizard leapt at me. *S-such a cowardly trick! But I won’t let it beat me!*

I leapt forward, spreading my wings as wide as I could.

Lacerta deftly curled up in midair and bounced cleanly past my head. *I-It went right past me!*

"Kssshh!" Lacerta landed directly in front of Miss Allo. But that meant it was *also* in front of Master, and I doubted it'd try anything while he was watching.

"*Hm?* What's up, Black Lizard? Oh, did you want to check that out?" Master asked.

It hurriedly reached out toward the extra magic clay. It pulled off a piece with its claws and began to try and knead it between its paws. Miss Allo stared, dumbfounded.

I also watched the scene, palms sweating. With Lacerta's paws, there was no way it'd be able to make anything that would surpass Miss Allo's Ouroboros statue. Master knew that, which was why he transformed himself into a human before making the vase.

"Kssshh! Kssshh!" Even so, I could tell it was putting its heart into it. *Is it really trying to create a piece of art with those clumsy paws...?!*

"Th-there's no way you can make anything like that...!" Miss Allo said, biting her lip.

I agreed. But...watching Lacerta's paws work so fervently, I started to believe we might be about to witness a miracle.

But an hour later, Lacerta was still moving its paws around, and the lump of clay it was kneading hadn't even been formed into an outline.

Its initial momentum was gone. It didn't know what it was doing, but it'd jumped into it so enthusiastically that it'd had no choice but to keep at it. At this point, it was just kind of moving its paws across its surface.

Well, I guess that's just how it goes. Those paws aren't made for creating pottery. I knew how this would end before it even started.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Black Lizard! Y-you must've missed me because I've been ignoring you to make pottery all day, huh?"

Master frantically patted its back in a comforting manner, but Lacerta's tail drooped, and it looked on in sadness. *"Kssshh..."*

“H-hey, no need to be so down! Here, what’d you want to make? I’ll fix it up with Clay!” Miss Allo piped up. Despite their earlier hostilities, she still felt bad for it.

Thirty minutes later, two statues stood side by side at the entrance to the waterfall cave. One was an Ouroboros…and the other, an Oneiros.

When I first saw the lumpy mass that Lacerta worked so hard to create, I thought it looked like one of the dragonfish that Master had nearly beaten to death, but I felt like that was a guess best kept to myself.

Later, Allo, Lacerta, and Master in his human form were all lying down together in the field of flowers in front of the cave, snoozing. It seemed like Miss Allo had decided to call a truce for today.

Mm-hmm, I’m glad they’re getting along, at least… But I’m sure they’ll be back at each other’s throats tomorrow.

Well, since I’m here, I guess I’ll join them. I ran through the meadow and jumped between Master and Miss Allo, eager to get into my special spot.

Miss Allo! Master! In my tree spirit form, I’m just the right size to be a body pillow!

At that moment, Miss Allo raised her head, turned her cold gaze toward me, and raised her arm.

…Now that I thought about it, Allo didn’t sleep. She was just lying there. *‹Oh, M-Miss Allo, you’re awak—mmgh!›*

My body froze in midair. No…it was stopped in midair by a dozen clay arms that had appeared just behind me.

‹I-Is this Lingering Rope?!›

“Sorry, but…stay out of my way, Treant.”

Miss Allo immediately pretended to go back to sleep again and, with a natural movement, threw her arm over Master’s body and snuggled closer.

‹W-wait… Miss Allo?! Miss Allo!›

Trapped in the clay arms, I watched the three of them until they finished their afternoon snooze.

Bonus Story 2:
The Hundred-Legged Poison Lord

I WAS FLYING AROUND with Allo and my friends on my back, exploring the Far Eastern Strange Lands. Treant was too big for me to carry in its normal form, so it was in its tree spirit form instead. I had a feeling this might be its main form from now on.

Leveling was going well so far. Thanks to our deadly battle with the troll mandragora, the black lizard had evolved into Venom Goddess Lacerta and Treant evolved into a tyrant guardian. After that, through more battles with powerful enemies like the Shin and the Killer Queen, Allo's level had been rising steadily too. I wanted to hunt more fenrir and other reasonable enemies to evolve Nightmare and Grandpa Magiatite—they were both close to max level.

"We're up too high to see the ground," Volk said, leaning over the edge of my body. *If you look down that hard, you're gonna fall off.*

‹Should I lower the altitude a lit—hm?› I looked down and spotted a giant purple centipede moving along the ground. It was over thirty meters long and moving in a straight line, gouging the earth and knocking trees over with its massive frame.

Wh-what the heck is that?! Is it another subspecies of the Giant Sand Centipede I fought in the Harunae Desert?!

Poison Lord: Rank A-.

The largest and most powerful giant centipede in the world. Said to be highly venomous, and the acid it spits from its mouth is able to dissolve just about anything. When people tell tales of a venomous serpent in the Far Eastern Strange Lands that can end the world, this is the monster they speak of.

Ooh! Rank A–! In the Four Great Lands of Monsters, rank A– monsters could pop up anywhere and everywhere.

‹Master! With a foe that large, I could easily do some long-range damage with Heat Beam!› Treant said cheerfully. I looked back to see

tree spirit Treant stretching its wings.

Hmm…well, Heat Beam was a super long-range attack skill, and Treant was rank B+ now, so it should be possible? And unless the Poison Lord had a super long-range skill, it should be a one-sided fight. As far as I knew, Heat Beam was the longest-range skill out there.

If Treant managed to defeat that thing, its level would surge upward. There'd be a massive reward for the time and MP investment. Treant couldn't fight as hard at close range, and its magic wasn't as useful during combat as Allo's, so it was tough for it to gain experience points. I felt like it should take whatever chances it could get.

‹Okay, sure. Let's try it out.› Treant released its Tree Spirit Transformation, and I held its massive original form in my arms while I flew.

Treant's eyes began to glow red. *‹Here it goes! Heat Beam!›*

The red light shot from its eyes in a straight line toward the Poison Lord. Except…Treant's aim was off, and the attack just hit the ground next to it.

‹It's okay, Treant! Heat Beam lasts a long time, so use it to chase after it!›

‹R-right!›

However, try as it might, Treant's Heat Beam simply couldn't hit the Poison Lord. It seemed particularly hard to hit for some reason. Treant was quickly running out of MP. Rather than continuing to waste it, I felt like we should just call it a day.

"M-Master Dragon, there's a light on that centipede's head…!" As Allo said it, I spotted a red glow that looked strangely familiar… and then a straight beam of red shot up into the air from the Poison Lord.

Is that…a Heat Beam? Don't tell me all the giant centipedes have Heat Beam!

I desperately tried to raise my altitude to avoid the blast while holding Treant's massive form.

Abort, Treant, abort! It's got Heat Beam too! I can't fight back when I'm holding you, so I'm gonna pull back! Go back to your tree

spirit form!

‹I didn’t expect it to challenge me with the same skill! Very well! I, Treant, accept your duel!› Treant shot another Heat Beam at the Poison Lord. It was closer this time, but the Poison Lord dashed out of the way just in time.

So close… No, we’ve got bigger problems here! Stand down, Treant! We’re getting out of here! It’s really hard to dodge it with you hanging off me! You won’t be able to hit it, okay?!

Afterword

HELLO, this is the author, Necoco.

Thank you very much for purchasing *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 10! We've finally hit the double digits!

When I released the first volume, we had no idea we'd get all the way to ten volumes. I had already created the general flow of the story when I started writing, so I knew I'd have a good amount of material if I did everything I wanted to do by the time the story was completed. However, the original *Dragon Hatchling* was based on a novel I had posted on a website, and I wasn't sure how much more of it I'd be able to write. Because it was originally a web publication, its future as a commercial venture seemed somewhat up in the air.

Rereading the novels that make up the first and second volumes of the manga adaptation, I felt some deep emotions welling up inside me. It's been four years since I wrote the first volume of *Dragon Hatchling*. When I think about it, I realize that *Dragon Hatchling* has had a tremendous impact on my life.

I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to all of our readers who have stayed with us to this point. It may be a little soon to say it again, but I think it feels right. For some reason, the momentum of the story gave me the feeling that this was the final volume, but Illusia still has some trials left to undergo, so I hope he'll work hard for a little while longer!

With *Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 10, we're getting close to the story's conclusion, so I'd be happy if you could stay along for the ride until we reach the final volume! It's going to be really great!

Volume 10's cover features Allo, a new character called Umukahime, and...a Baby Dragon! I'm sure when you saw it, a lot of you were like, "Ohh?! Is that a Baby Dragon?!" right? Heh heh, right on target!

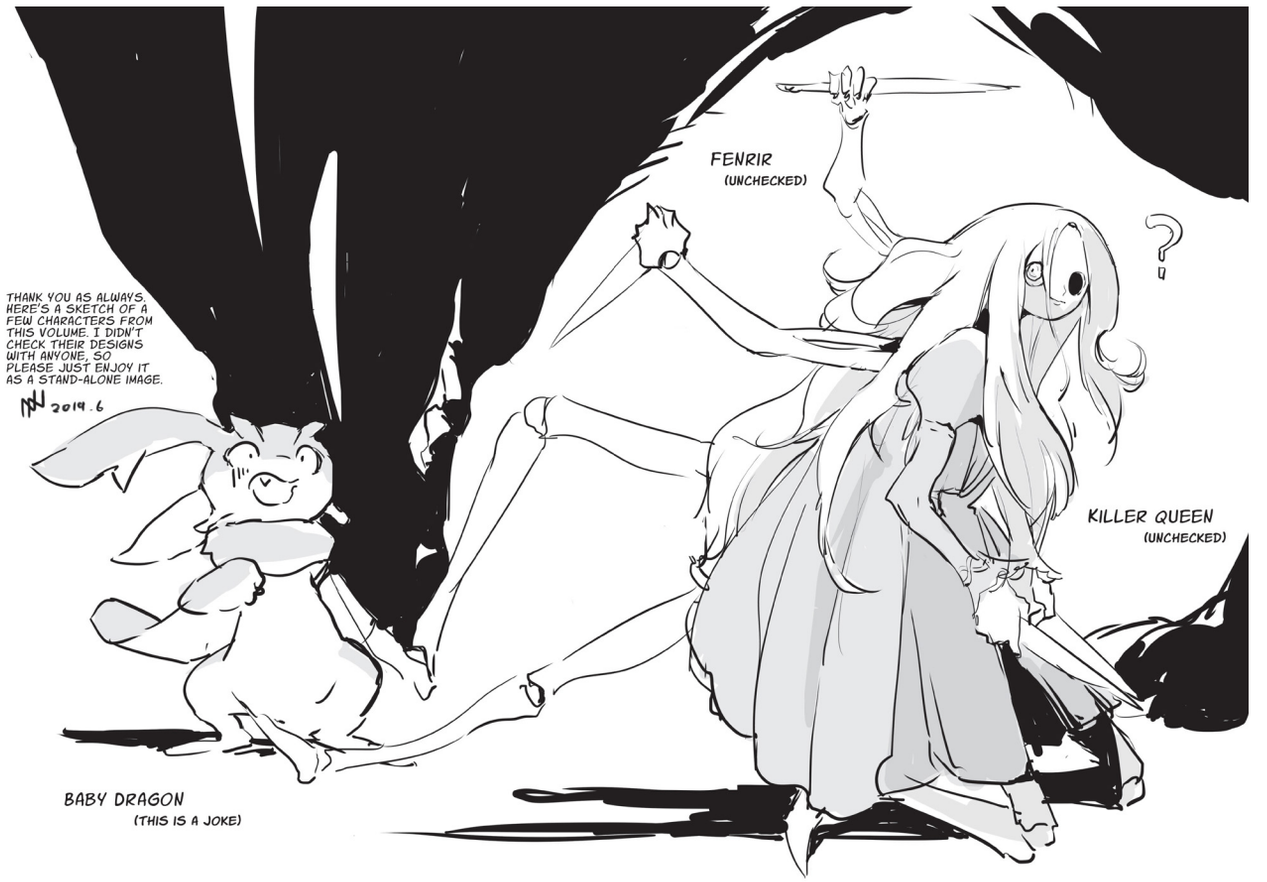
More importantly, we wanted to avoid revealing Illusia's new evolution on the cover. But isn't it great? The Baby Dragon looks so cute being picked up by Allo... His belly looks so plump and squishy...

Besides that, Baby Dragon was on the front cover of Volume 1, four long years ago. It makes me really happy to see Baby Dragon back on the cover for Volume 10, which feels like a huge milestone for me. Looking back at Volume 1's cover with Myria and Baby Dragon definitely makes me a bit nostalgic.

The back cover of this volume features the Clay Hero—which is an embodiment of Mia the Hero! The eerily glowing armor and sword look so cool! The Clay Hero is a powerful enemy who utilizes pure technique rather than status or flashy skills, which is a bit unusual compared to typical *Dragon Hatchling* enemies.

Once again, thank you for purchasing *Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 10! I look forward to bringing more of this story to you in the future!

—NECOCO


THANK YOU AS ALWAYS. HERE'S A SKETCH OF A FEW CHARACTERS FROM THIS VOLUME. I DIDN'T CHECK THEIR DESIGNS WITH ANYONE, SO PLEASE JUST ENJOY IT AS A STAND-ALONE IMAGE.
2019.6
FENRIR
(UNCHECKED)
KILLER QUEEN
(UNCHECKED)
BABY DRAGON
(THIS IS A JOKE)



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