
NOVEL
11
WRITTEN BY
Necoco
ILLUSTRATED BY
NAJI Yanagida
REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

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REINCARNATED AS A DRAGON HATCHLING

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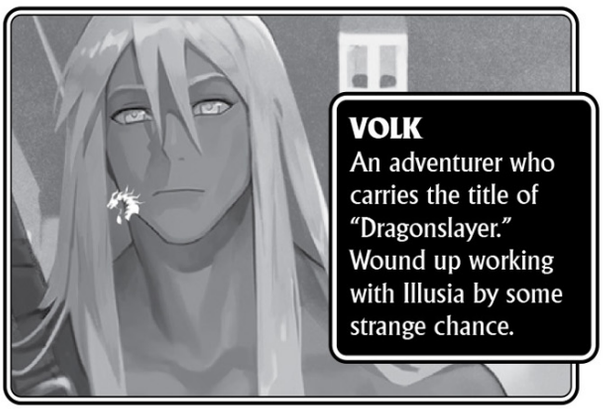
Necoco

ILLUSTRATED BY

NAJI Yanagida



Seven Seas Entertainment



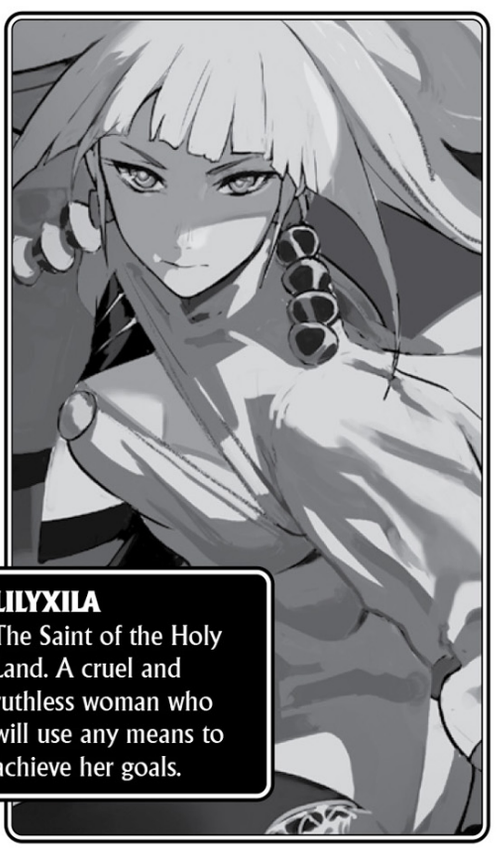
VOLK
An adventurer who carries the title of "Dragonslayer." Wound up working with Illusia by some strange chance.



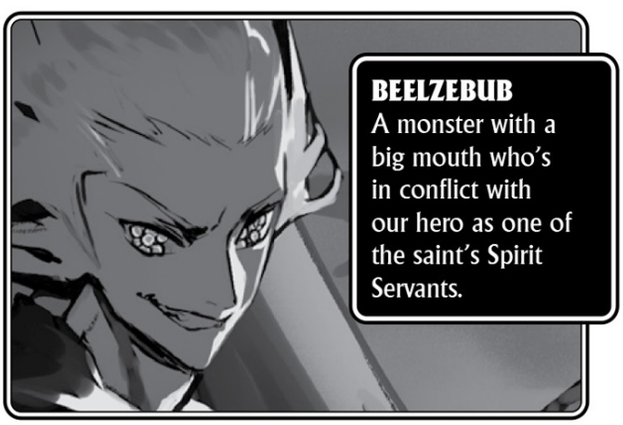
BLACK LIZARD
Trusted companion of our hero and master of poison attacks.



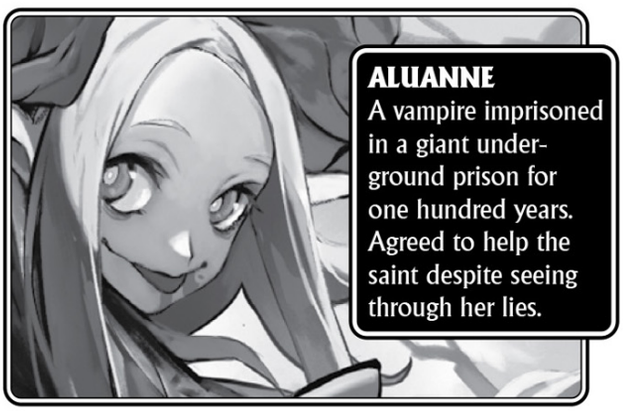
ALLO
An undead girl who adores Illusia for resurrecting her and taking her along with him.



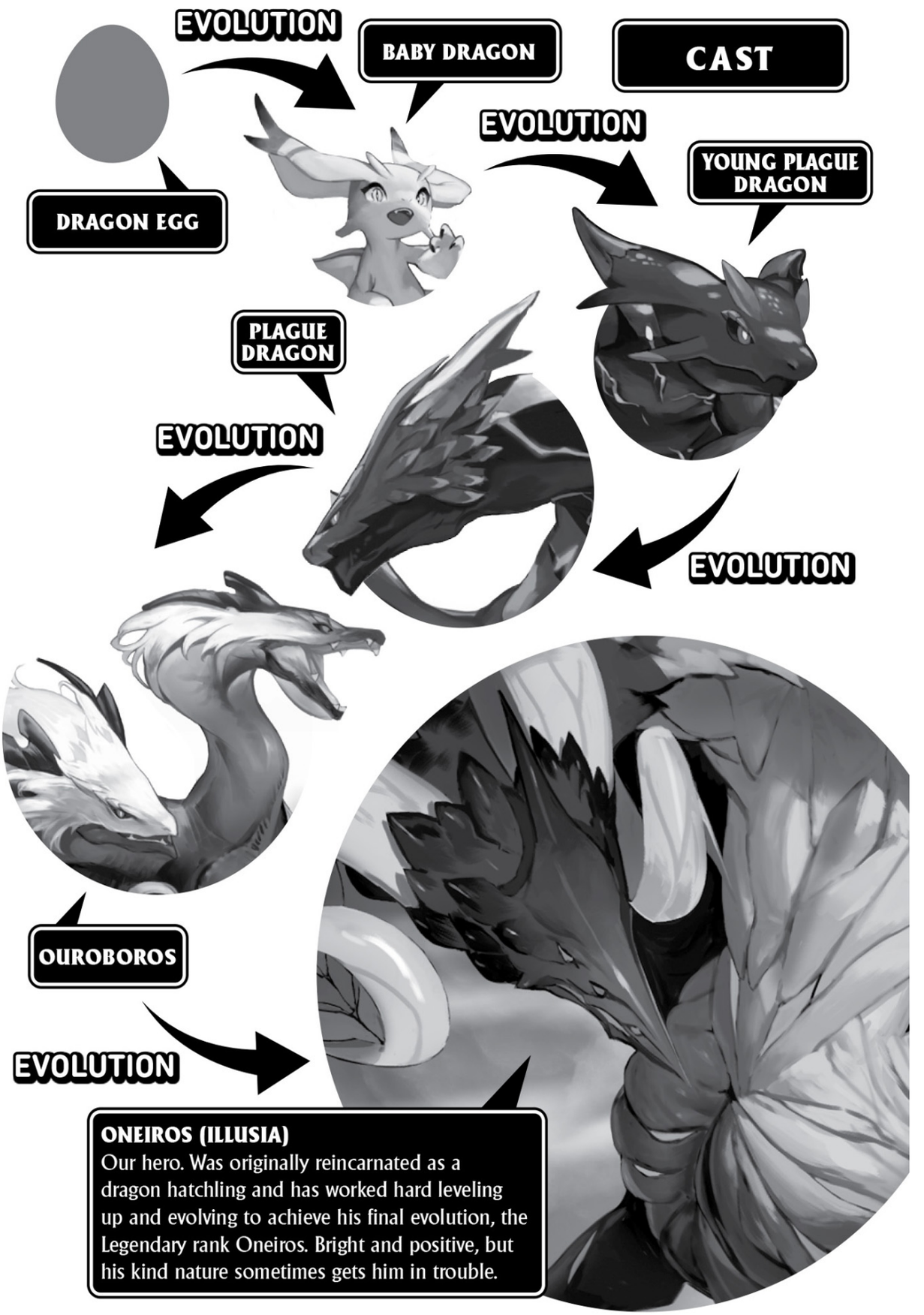
LILYXILA
The Saint of the Holy Land. A cruel and ruthless woman who will use any means to achieve her goals.



BEELZEBUB
A monster with a big mouth who's in conflict with our hero as one of the saint's Spirit Servants.



ALUANNE
A vampire imprisoned in a giant underground prison for one hundred years. Agreed to help the saint despite seeing through her lies.


CAST
EVOLUTION
BABY DRAGON
DRAGON EGG
EVOLUTION
YOUNG PLAGUE DRAGON
PLAGUE DRAGON
EVOLUTION
EVOLUTION
OUROBOROS
EVOLUTION
ONEIROS (ILLUSIA)
Our hero. Was originally reincarnated as a dragon hatchling and has worked hard leveling up and evolving to achieve his final evolution, the Legendary rank Oneiros. Bright and positive, but his kind nature sometimes gets him in trouble.



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Afterword

THE STORY SO FAR

Having
being chased from
the royal capital by the saint,
who was desperate to get her hands on
his Sacred Skills, Illusia and his friends made
their way to the most dangerous of the Four Great
Lands of Monsters—the Strange Lands of the Far
East—where powerful monsters roamed freely.

Illusia, certain that the saint would come to take his Sacred Skills at the Divine Voice's behest, worked tirelessly to raise the levels of both himself and his friends so they could evolve before the coming battle. At long last, he evolved into a Legendary rank Oneiros.

While continuing to level up after Illusia's evolution, the group happened upon a beautiful woman on the mountaintop. After her master's death, this beautiful woman waited for many years in these lands for anyone who possessed Sacred Skills to arrive, to determine if that person was capable of standing up to the Divine Voice.

Illusia, who no longer trusted his Divine Voice, agreed to take on the woman's challenge and overcame it successfully. But the tragic tale he was told afterward pointed to the Divine Voice as the one behind everything.

Illusia and his friends were reaffirmed of the fact that
they could not hand his Sacred Skills over to
the saint. However, they would soon be
within reach of the saint's evil
clutches...

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 11
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Chapter 1:
The Succession of Kings

Part 1

AFTER MAKING MY WAY back down the mountain-side, I stood in front of the waterfall cave my friends and I had claimed as our hideout, thinking.

Today—perhaps tomorrow at the latest—Saint Lilyxila would likely be invading this island at the far eastern edge of the world with an army behind her.

My level grinding had gone well enough. I'd managed to evolve into my newest form, the rank L dragon, Oneiros. Allo and the others also earned a significant number of levels; the black lizard, Atlach-Nacha, Treant, and Grandpa Magiatite all evolved as well. We were much stronger now than we had been when we first arrived at this island, that much was certain—but whether we were strong enough to survive this fight remained to be seen.

All that was left was to get a final decent night's sleep in preparation for the coming battle. Rather than worrying about packing in a few hundred more experience points in the time we had left, I wanted to make sure we were well rested, with our HP and MP at max.

On the way down the mountain, I'd spotted a handful of fly monsters—likely created by Beelzebub's Multiply Followers skill and sent here to scout the area. I got rid of them from afar with my Dimension Claws, but the fact that I saw so many of them on an island as vast as this one suggested that Beelzebub's fly vanguard must be scattered throughout the area in considerable numbers. I'd be a fool to think they didn't have eyes on us.

A good number of fly monsters must've been eaten by the monsters on the island, though. There was no way those flies could stand a chance against the monsters of the Far East; the weakest among them—the fenrirs—were still high-level rank B monsters. The flies were a pain, but they were still only rank C pests.

Beelzebub had said himself that in order to use Multiply Followers, he had to sacrifice some of his own HP and MP. He'd once sent about ten followers after me, but based on how much that affected his stats, I had to assume that the most followers he could send out at any one time would be around fifteen.

My guess was that all the flies created by Multiply Followers would disappear if Lilyxila deactivated her Spirit Servant skill, effectively calling off Beelzebub. Otherwise, they'd have a mass-produced army of fly sentries at their disposal. The fact that their numbers were limited suggested that they had some other drawback than just HP and MP reduction. I had to assume that the reason there were so many this time around was because Lilyxila was using MP to maintain Beelzebub's Spirit Servant manifestation and forcing him to continuously use Multiply Followers.

That being said, the multiple fields of vision Beelzebub's followers provided him gave Lilyxila a dangerous advantage in the island's thick fog. For that reason—and the fact that it would cut down the bulk of her fighting force—Beelzebub was the obvious choice for our first primary target.

The reason Lilyxila had waited so long to act was no doubt to prepare for the battle with me. In Alban, the royal capital of Ardesia, Lilyxila's main Spirit Servant—the white dragon Seraphim—had been absorbed by Ruin, the slime's evolution, when it went berserk. She was likely looking for a suitable monster to take Seraphim's place as her second Spirit Servant. There was no way Lilyxila would keep the slot for a skill as useful as that empty for long.

Even so, while Lilyxila, Beelzebub, and one additional powerful monster would make for a difficult fight for me, I still felt like I'd be able to take them down on my own without much concern. The problem was the possibility that she was supplementing her forces with something other than another Spirit Servant. It was hard for me to believe that a bunch of human soldiers would be powerful enough to make it all the way across the ocean. Beelzebub was big, but not *that* big; he wouldn't be able to carry an army of humans on his back.

So what was her plan here? How was she going to attack?

With an outstretched claw, I sketched a rough map of the surrounding area on the ground.

Let's say we're up against Lilyxila, Beelzebub, another big monster, and a group of Holy Knights. What's the best way to confront them?

Beelzebub was a vicious, bloodthirsty monster. His stats and skills made him a far more daunting opponent offensively than Lilyxila herself. If I wasn't careful, he could kill one of my friends in an instant. His super long-range attack, Fly King's Gale, along with his ability to swap fighting styles by using Human Transformation, made him especially powerful. Beelzebub was definitely the biggest threat, and the one I needed to deal with first. Lilyxila probably viewed him as the main force in her party as well. With that in mind, was the safest strategy for me to take the lead and expose myself, and have Allo and the others stay back and hide for the time being?

Surely Lilyxila knew that there was no point in trying to defeat me one-on-one. I figured she'd probably try and concentrate her gathered force on me before I had a chance to take them out and launch a fast and furious battle to decide the victor. Or at least...I couldn't think of any other viable strategy. Unless she had some special trick up her sleeve I didn't know about, that was most likely going to be her plan of attack.

In that case, it would be better to keep Allo and the rest of my team away from Beelzebub's stupidly strong attacks so they didn't get caught in the middle of them. If Lilyxila decided to split up her forces and spread out, I could ask my team to thin out their numbers on the outskirts—I couldn't risk pitting them against Lilyxila's main forces. The difference in strength between Beelzebub and my team was so vast that they might not be able to match his power even with all of them working together. The ranged attack Beelzebub used in his giant form was dangerous, but his lightning-fast attacks in his human form were equally formidable.

On the other hand, if Lilyxila got isolated from Beelzebub somehow, Allo, Volk, and Atlach-Nacha might be able to defeat her on their own, but in a land this vast, I doubted she'd willingly let Beelzebub out of her sight for long. The saint was a woman whose worth lay far beyond just her stats. There was no telling what she had planned for us.

I had to assume that it was possible for Lilyxila to cancel her Spirit Servant skill and recall Beelzebub that way, but reactivating the skill would cost her a lot of MP, and it would also reset the flies Beelzebub produced with Multiply Followers. That'd be a move she'd want to avoid if at all possible.

"Master Dragon?" Allo called out to me, standing at my side. "What's on your mind?"

Allo never slept at night. Sometimes she went still and allowed her body to rest, but on those occasions, she usually just leaned against me while I snoozed. It seemed like undead had no need for sleep. Behind her, though, was a massive tree, snoring loudly as it slept the night away. Undead might not need to sleep in this world, but Treants apparently did. He had a lot of nerve, snoring that loud.

I turned to Allo and used Telepathy. *‹When Lilyxila gets here, I want you and the others to group up and get out of here as quickly as you can. If you run into any enemies you think you can beat, then go for it. But please don't bite off more than you can chew. I'm sure Volk will be a good judge of that, so listen to him.›*

"...Okay. Got it." Allo nodded, clearly attempting to hide her frustration. She must have been painfully aware that she still wasn't strong enough to face Lilyxila on her own. If she'd managed to evolve and level up like the others, she would have been able to fight as a mage on the same level as Lilyxila, but unfortunately, there just wasn't enough time.

"If there are humans after us, are you going to kill them too?" Allo asked me. For a moment, I didn't know how to answer her. But then I nodded solemnly.

‹Yeah...I guess I'll have to.›

This was a war. I was sure Lilyxila had some good men and women fighting for her. If I'd met them in another way—another lifetime—we might've even been able to become friends.

Alphis, Lilyxila's retainer and close companion, was fully aware of the plot to betray us and went along with it. But when it looked like the royal capital was in danger of being destroyed by Ruin, while the other Holy Knights cowered in fear of its rampage, she chose to offer me a helping hand in the hopes that I'd be able to stop it. For that, I was grateful to her.

But at the same time, I was almost certain that Alphis was part of Lilyxila's envoy headed to the Far Eastern island to kill me.

This fight was going to happen no matter what. I didn't know what exactly Lilyxila's aims were, but at this point, bloodshed was inevitable. I couldn't give in to them and watch any more of my friends die. I wouldn't.

...I wonder if Mia felt the same way. She had once been praised and celebrated as Mia the Hero, but her courageous attempt to protect the Harunae Empire from Saint Lumira, after the battle with the Demon King reduced the empire to nothing more than bone-dry desert, was used to spark a great war between nations. Even now, five hundred years later, she was still named as the worst Demon King to ever walk this world. It must have been hard for her.

I got up from my resting spot and stretched, then turned around and poked my head into the cave behind me.

"Master Dragon...?" Allo's voice came from behind me.

‹Sorry, just doing one last check on everyone.›

I wanted to check my friends' statuses one more time before the battle with Lilyxila began. When I peeked inside the cave, my eyes met with two more eyes peering from the darkness. A long tongue slithered out from its mouth. It was the black lizard.

When it saw me, it wiggled its two tails and raised its head up high. Its batlike wings flared out from its sides in excitement.

"Kshhh! Ksshhh!" It threw its head back toward the ceiling and let out a cute little hiss, then walked toward me.

So it was awake too. I'd been hoping it'd take this chance to rest up, but I couldn't say I was surprised, given the situation we were in. Maybe it was too restless to sleep as well. Not everyone could fall asleep as easily as Treant.

Species: Venom Goddess Lacerta

Status: Normal

Lv: 58/80

HP: 565/565

MP: 297/297

Attack: 378
Defense: 326
Magic: 233
Agility: 344
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 3
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 6
Clay Gun: Lv 6

Purify: Lv 4
Surprise Attack: Lv 4
Clay Wall: Lv 4
Regenerate: Lv 4
Flurry Claws: Lv 2
High Jump: Lv 3
Poison Sphere: Lv 5
Poison Clone: Lv 5
Poison Swamp: Lv 4
Storage: Lv 5
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 —

The black lizard had gotten a lot stronger. Its stats had increased dramatically, and it had improved the levels of several of its skills as well. But even so, this battle would be way too high-level for it to participate. In order to even stand a chance at surviving an encounter with the saint, it would've needed to be at least a rank A. I hoped it'd be able to stay away and keep itself safe, but even so, I was worried.

What kind of preparations would Lilyxila have made before she came here? Knowing so little was seriously hurting our chances. I wished I had some way to do some reconnaissance, but I didn't have a handy recon skill like Beelzebub's.

Next, I turned my attention to Treant's motionless form outside the cave.

Species: Tyrant Guardian
Status: Cursed, Asleep (Major)
Lv: 54/85
HP: 660/660
MP: 273/273
Attack: 290
Defense: 456
Magic: 364
Agility: 194
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 2
Healing Drops: Lv 2
Stalwart Protector: Lv —
Gravity Compression: Lv 3
Soft Steps: Lv 4
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 7
Falling Resistance: Lv 7
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 5
Meteor Stomp: Lv 5
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 —

Wow, Treant's really sawing logs, huh? I'd thought maybe it was just pretending to be asleep, but it seemed like it was actually resting up. Treant's peaceful slumber helped to ease my mind a little.

However, although Treant's stats were now nothing to sneeze at, it was still slow-moving and lacking in attack power, which could

prove fatal in the coming fight.

To be honest, even if your HP and defense stats were fairly high, that wouldn't be enough to keep you safe in a fight. If the enemy managed to surround you and fire off volley after volley of attacks, they'd bring your HP to zero in no time anyway. In the end, the most important stats in battle were attack, magic, and agility—although I felt like they were all necessary to a certain extent.

Treant had a bunch of unusual skills, so the key would be how well they could be utilized in a fight. Meteor Stomp—the combo skill where it used Statue up in the air and dropped down onto enemies—should be able to do more damage than I'd expect from its stats.

Next, I turned my attention to Atlach-Nacha, who was sleeping on a bed of spiderwebs on the ceiling near the mouth of the cave. Her masked, humanoid upper body lay perfectly still, slightly drooping to the side.

Species: Atlach-Nacha
Status: Asleep (Slight)
Lv: 54/102
HP: 551/551
MP: 535/535
Attack: 562
Defense: 383
Magic: 580
Agility: 480
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 7
Sneak Attack: Lv 3
Curse: Lv 5
Human Transformation: Lv 7
Regenerate: Lv 4
Dark Sphere: Lv 4
Clay: Lv 4
Death Demon's Wicked Claws: Lv 5
Telepathy: Lv 3
Diseased Breath: Lv 4
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 —

Yeah…no doubt about it. Atlach-Nacha is strong. Her agility and attack were both around five hundred. Combined with her plethora of tricky skills, she should be able to handle even A rank opponents.

I turned back around and looked at Allo, who was following behind me. *What's Allo's status looking like right now…?*

Allo
Species: Levana Liche
Status: Cursed
Lv: 80/85
HP: 699/699
MP: 721/721
Attack: 374
Defense: 338
Magic: 868
Agility: 185
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 3
Wide Drain: Lv 3
Dark Sphere: Lv 4
Title Skills:
Demon King's Underling: Lv —
Hollow Mage: Lv 8
Everlasting Body: Lv —
Undead Queen: Lv —

Man…looking at her status again reminds me just how strong Allo really is. Her agility was a bit of a weak point, but if she fought alongside Atlach-Nacha or me, we'd be able to compensate for it. That would reduce the chance that she'd get caught in close combat

—where agility was the most vital—and give her more opportunities to utilize her high magic skill with ranged attacks like Clay and Gale.

Species: Gold Magiatite Heart
Status: Asleep (Slight)
Lv: 35/92
HP: 123/123
MP: 426/426
Attack: 111
Defense: 539
Magic: 333
Agility: 428
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 2
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 3
Metal Balloon: Lv 5
Camouflage: Lv 4
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 —

Hmm… It's great that Grandpa Magiatite's agility is quite high, but that painfully low HP stat is a little scary. Grandpa Magiatite's defense was higher than even defense specialist tyrant guardian Treant's, and he also had maxed-out Resistance Skills and high-level skills in general. But I knew there was no way he'd be able to completely negate all damage. Not against Saint Lilyxila and Beelzebub, anyway. If Grandpa Magiatite took a heavy enough blow, his HP could be reduced all the way to zero.

Grandpa Magiatite had picked up a few interesting new skills, like Metal Balloon and Stealth. But I thought it was best if he avoided situations where he'd be forced to use them. No, he was better off continuing to act as Volk's sword like before. He should be safer with Volk around to protect him.

Speaking of Volk…

Volk Veidaf
Species: Earth-Human
Status: Asleep (Slight)
Lv: 85/85 (MAX)
HP: 886/886
MP: 330/330
Attack: 685
Defense: 443
Magic: 151
Agility: 572
Special Skills:
Grecian Language: Lv 5
Swordsman: Lv MAX
Psychic Sense: Lv 7
Stealth: Lv 7
Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 8
Magic Resistance: Lv 7
Poison Resistance: Lv 4
Curse Resistance: Lv 4
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 5
Normal Skills:
Mega Cleave: Lv 9
Concentration: Lv 8
Armor Pierce: Lv 7
Shockwave: Lv 8
Blade of Exorcism: Lv 8
Moon Pierce: Lv 8

Regenerate: Lv 6
Dimension: Lv 3
Title Skills:
Master of Swords: Lv MAX
Legendary Adventurer: Lv —
Seeker of the Sword: Lv —
Battle Fanatic: Lv —
Dragonslayer: Lv —
Collector: Lv —
Moon-Piercer: Lv —
Bearer of the God of Destruction: Lv —
Smoldering Mad Devil Swordsman: Lv —
Owner of the Blade of Divine Insurrection: Lv —

In terms of status, Volk was even better off than Allo and Atlach-Nacha. Attack and agility were his two strongest suits, and he had the most stable distribution of stats for fighting. He was also equipped with a sword in battle, which added another one hundred or so to his attack power.

All right. I'd have Volk, Allo, and Atlach-Nacha assist the others, and make sure survival was everyone's top priority.

I pulled my head back out of the cave and looked up at the fog-ridden sky. If any of Beelzebub's flies showed up overhead, I'd have to wake the others up and get them out of here. If Lilyxila pinpointed our location with her very first attack, that would be the worst-case scenario. I'd much rather find them first if I could, but I'd never been that great with Psychic Sense. That was Partner's field of expertise. She always did have some uncanny senses.

Anyway…last but not least, I might as well look over my own status.

Illusia
Species: Oneiros

Status: Normal
Lv: 105/150
HP: 4261/4261
MP: 4394/4394
Attack: 3095
Defense: 1938
Magic: 3975
Agility: 1987
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 7
Illusion: Lv 8
Gravity: Lv 8
Dimension: Lv 8
Hell Gate: Lv 5
Gravidon: Lv 8
Mirror Counter: Lv 8
Ideal Weapon: Lv 8
Wormhole: Lv 1
Title Skills:
Dragon King's Son: Lv —
Walking Egg: Lv —
Klutz: Lv 4
Just an Idiot: Lv 1
Infighter: Lv 4
Pest Killer: Lv 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 —

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves.

I should be strong enough to get us through this. I was even more powerful now than Ruin was when it nearly wiped Lilyxila off the face of the planet. Not only did I have the stats to compete with anything coming my way, I also had a variety of useful gravity and illusion skills at my disposal. If I played to my strengths, neither Lilyxila nor Beelzebub should be able to hold a candle to me.

Lilyxila…I won't let myself be defeated by you. I'm gonna avenge Partner and restore peace to the world. I don't know what you and the Divine Voice want with my Sacred Skills, but I'm going to foil your plans once and for all.

Part 2

IT WAS STILL TOO EARLY for the sun to peek over the horizon. As I sat motionless outside the waterfall cave with Allo, a fly monster's silhouette emerged from the fog. It was one of Beelzebub's followers, staring steadily down at us as if it was trying to record our every move.

"Gale!"

Allo's wind skill knocked the fly monster to the ground. She darted over to where it landed and swung her enlarged arm down in a single swift motion, crushing it in a single slam. A small buzzing sound echoed from under her arm, and green bodily fluids and fly legs shot through the air in all directions.

Wh-whoa. She sure doesn't hesitate, does she? I really had to muster my courage to smash that Avyssos back near the Lithovar tribe camp.

‹I appreciate the enthusiasm, Allo, but let me smoosh it next time. It didn't cost you too much MP, but every little bit counts.›

"Okay..." Allo said in a small voice, her head hanging low.

‹Siphon a bit more MP off me with Mana Drain, just in case. It won't take long for me to replenish that much automatically.›

"Okay!" Allo's head snapped back up, and she responded much more cheerfully this time.

I lowered myself back down to the ground. Allo leaned against me, almost as if she were stuck to my side, and began to suck up MP through the spots where our skin touched with Mana Drain. As I watched Allo happily draining my MP out of the corner of my eye, I pondered my next move.

Beelzebub's minions had seen me. Should we act now? Could he even trace our location with just the sight of that single fly as a reference?

Rather than moving around randomly, it might be better to stay in place and lure Lilyxila here instead. That would make it easier to guess our enemy's movements and formulate a strategy. We could avoid any unexpected developments that way too, but we'd also be giving her the ability to launch the first attack.

A chill ran up my spine as I considered what Lilyxila's first attack might be. Maybe Beelzebub's beam of death...or the terrifying storm of his Fly King's Gale?

A-anyway, first things first: I've gotta wake everyone up!

One of Beelzebub's flies had finally showed up, but that didn't mean Lilyxila was anywhere near here. There was no guarantee she'd arrive anytime soon. But even so, being caught unawares and

hit by Fly King's Gale would be disastrous. Beelzebub would wipe my party out in an instant.

With a small thud, Atlach-Nacha landed right beside me—it looked like she was already awake. She jerked her head toward me and gave a questioning look.

"Shall I wake everyone up?" she asked.

‹Oh, yes, please! And make it quick! We gotta get moving!›

"Kshhiii!" The black lizard rolled out of the mouth of the cave with a whirl, then pounced on Treant and sank its fangs into its thick bark. Treant's huge body shuddered, sending leaves fluttering through the air. Its eyes and mouth opened wide in shock.

‹Nwooogh?!›

‹Well, it's too late now, but you could be a little more gentle about waking them up...!›

Poor Treant! I know Black Lizard was just trying to hurry like I asked, but... Wait. It didn't use poison, did it?

"...Kssshh." The black lizard started licking the bite mark it made in Treant's bark with its tongue and used Neutralize Poison.

Welp. Guess it did.

Next, Volk appeared at the mouth of the cave, holding the golden Grandpa Magiatite sword in his hand. "Have you seen movement from our enemy?" he asked.

‹Yeah, one of our fly friends just showed up! We've gotta move our base of operations before they find us!›

"Steady yourself," Volk said in a measured voice. "We do not know this island well, and if we act without thinking, we will open ourselves up to attack unnecessarily." But I wasn't in the mood to listen to reason.

‹B-but...!› If we let them attack first and they hit us with Fly King's Gale, we'd be torn to shreds in the storm and we'll be scattered across the island. Atlach-Nacha, Volk, and Treant would get hit with a crazy powerful poison status effect. Then we'd have to recover somehow while also withstanding an onslaught by Lilyxila and her army!

“In a land as vast and unknown as this, even the saint will have to take caution traversing the terrain.”

‹Well…I guess that’s true.›

Even with the eyes of Beelzebub’s underlings to guide them, visibility in this foggy landscape was poor at best. And there was no shortage of dangerous monsters prowling around. For Lilyxila and any humans in her party, this was one of the most dangerous places in the world… Maybe I’d been focusing too much on their strengths and our own weaknesses.

With my claw, I sketched out a rough map on the ground of the general area, the direction from which Lilyxila would arrive, and our current location.

Lilyxila would probably want to head straight toward us. She couldn’t afford to take the long way around, where she could end up losing us in this vast, unknown island of fog; the risk of getting attacked by local monsters or ambushed by us was too great. It wasn’t impossible to do, but I didn’t think it would be worth the risk.

I drew a straight line from Lilyxila’s starting location to us. Their initial attack would probably be Beelzebub’s Fly King’s Gale. A ranged area-of-effect attack like that would force us to take time to heal up, giving them an opening they could use to move in to fight immediately.

Lilyxila would likely be relying on the skills she could use with Spirit Servant. Other than that, I didn’t think she had any advantages over me. If this battle turned into a long-term war, her defeat was certain.

‹To put it simply, she’s gonna try to keep this fight short and sweet.› There was nothing for her to gain by prolonging this battle. She might even be able to end it in an instant.

“That seems probable, yes,” said Volk. “On the other hand, if she tries to drag this battle out, it may mean that she has something up her sleeve that we have not yet been made aware of.”

But Lilyxila shouldn’t have had anything up her sleeve divisive enough to win against me. If we could manage to reduce her strength even a little, she’d start running out of options.

‹Rationally speaking…Lilyxila only has a few possible actions she can take. If we stay here, that narrows down her options even more.›

First, I needed to figure out how to put countermeasures in place against Beelzebub's Fly King's Gale. Should I have Allo and the others hide in the cave to avoid taking a direct hit, then come out and fight him myself? He'd have to focus on attacking me if I was the only one around. And if he tried to launch Fly King's Gale at me, then I could close the gap between us and fight him in close combat.

"If you are able to anticipate our opponent's movements, it would not be a bad idea to engage him here. But to do so, some reconnaissance will be required." Volk pointed to a section of the map I'd drawn in the dirt with the tip of his golden Grandpa Magiatite sword. It was the area slightly in front of our current location along Lilyxila's predicted travel route. To put it simply, he was saying we needed to know in advance when Lilyxila was about to arrive. But was reconnaissance really the answer…?

‹I could use my illusion magic to hide and wait for them to approach instead…›

"No, that won't do. You are our main stronghold, so to speak. If you move forward, the rest of the camp will have to as well, and I know you would prefer to keep everyone else out of harm's way."

Volk was right. I had my own role to play, and I needed to do that here. It would be better for someone else to be the lookout.

"In that case, I suppose it's up to me," Atlach-Nacha said matter-of-factly.

‹It'll be dangerous, Atlach-Nacha. You'll be the first one making contact with Lilyxila's forces. If they find you, they'll…› I trailed off, but the implication was clear.

"I am the only one with the senses and stealth abilities needed to survive. It must be me."

W-well… Atlach-Nacha's Psychic Sense and Stealth skills were both level 7. She was right that she was probably the best one for the job. And with how thick the fog was, the risk that Atlach-Nacha would be discovered while hiding was quite low. It wouldn't be a very difficult role for her.

But even so, our enemy was so dangerous this time around. I couldn't let her face them alone.

"I also have a skill that will let me relay information, even at a distance."

A skill that let her relay info over a distance…? That'd make having a lookout way more of an advantage. It'd also make it much easier for me to move around. But did Atlach-Nacha really have a skill like that in her list?

As I puzzled over her skill set, Atlach-Nacha walked up to me and extended her arm. I craned my neck down toward her, curious.

A bundle of thick purple webs, resembling yarn, wriggled in Atlach-Nacha's outstretched palm. As I watched, they knitted themselves together to form three palm-sized purple spider plushies.

Oh my God…they're adorable. Wait, what even is this skill?!

Normal Skill "Doppel Cocoon." Allows user to create a clone of themselves out of spider silk. The size and status of the clone is proportional to the amount of MP used to create it. Drains user's MP continuously to maintain the clone's form.

Doppel Cocoon was a skill she got when she evolved into Atlach-Nacha. I'd never seen her use it before, so I had no clue it was that useful. Beyond just increasing raw strength when used in battle, it could be used in a variety of different ways.



‹So…how the heck do you use 'em?› I asked. Atlach-Nacha snickered behind her mask. Was she…making fun of me?

Atlach-Nacha pointed her finger at me, and the three knit spiders leapt straight onto my hide, scuttling around on their eight plush legs.

H-hey! That tickles!

‹Ugh! I'm jealous!› Treant grumbled telepathically, but I chose to ignore it.

"They don't drain much MP when they're this small. If the saint shows up, I'll make one go away. If the situation changes and you need to move, I'll make two go away."

‹Ooh, okay…got it.› Man. Atlach-Nacha sure was smart. Or should I say cunning? *‹What if all three of them disappear?›*

"I…didn't think of that. Didn't seem necessary."

‹But having all three of 'em crawling all over me gives me the heebie-jeebies! Can I at least take 'em off? Please?!›

Atlach-Nacha ignored me and continued on her way toward the lookout area. *I know she can hear me! Does that mean I can't take them off?!*

‹H-hey! Atlach-Nacha…!› When I started pestering her with Telepathy, Atlach-Nacha stopped and tilted her mask slightly in my direction.

I was planning to ask her about the third knit spider again, but when my mouth opened, different words began to spill out. *‹If…if anything goes wrong, you come right back here! Okay? Don't do anything risky! If you get yourself killed out there, I'll never forgive you!›*

Atlach-Nacha's eyes met mine through the mask. Then she gave a small nod, turned around, and continued on her path.

"Would you like me to take the spiders, Master Dragon?" Allo piped up from near my stomach.

I shook my head. *‹Nah…it's okay. Atlach-Nacha didn't say it, but all three knit spiders disappearing is another message. It would mean that Atlach-Nacha died. She knew that and chose to leave it unsaid.›*

Allo's eyes widened, and her head turned in the direction Atlach-Nacha was headed, but her spidery form had already

disappeared into the fog.

"The enemy will likely be flying our way by air," Volk said. "Even if they realize we have a lookout on the ground, they won't be able to launch a major attack against her."

I knew that. But there was no telling what Lilyxila might do. She wasn't human, or even a monster—she was a true demon.

It was entirely possible that she might decide to kill Atlach-Nacha. Not for any simple strategic benefit but to try and shake me up psychologically. That was just the kind of person she seemed to be. Unlike the tyrannical Hero of Harunae Desert who'd let his emotions rule his actions, Lilyxila was cold and calculating, and she would take whatever measure she thought was most effective.

For a while after Atlach-Nacha left, we all stood motionless, waiting. From the creepy-crawly sensation of their legs scuttling along my hide, I could tell that there were still three knit spiders on me. Even so, I kept looking down at the three mini Atlach-Nacha clones over and over again to check that they were all really there.

Please…please don't die, Atlach-Nacha! I can't lose anyone else!

I'd kept Psychic Sense fully active as we waited, and after a while, I sensed a familiar presence in the distance.

‹Is that…one of Beelzebub's fly minions?› Another one? Why now?

"Presumably this one is coming to reconfirm our location before their attack," Volk said. "Shall we move? If it finds us, the saint will be right behind it."

I nodded at him. *Yeah, that makes sense.*

Allo, squinting, moved closer to my face. "Master Dragon… could you use your magic to trick the fly somehow?" she asked.

‹Trick the fly? R-right, if we fool it into thinking we're somewhere else, Lilyxila won't be able to find us. No, wait…what's the point of that? If we fool it and change their route, the whole plan to wait instead of move will have been for nothing. If we can't anticipate their movements, then we're in trouble.›

"What if we don't change their route?"

‹That's it…!›

If I could make the fly think we were just a bit deeper into the forest than we actually were, Lilyxila and her army would still be relatively unprotected when they passed through here!

That would also make it much harder for Beelzebub to utilize the full destructive power and range of his Fly King's Gale. He typically used it in combination with his Inhale skill to suck in as much air as possible, but he wouldn't have time to if we ambushed them while they weren't expecting us!

‹Guys, go to the back of the waterfall cave and hide! All of you!› I sent out the telepathic message to the rest of my party. Treant didn't fit in its normal form, so I told it to transform into its small, penguin-like form with the wooden mask with Tree Spirit Transformation.

Then, I used Dragon Mirror to transform into a Baby Dragon, used Illusion to conceal myself, and created an Oneiros-shaped illusion in the distance behind me. I could've used Dragon Mirror to make myself completely disappear, but that would've drained way more MP than I could afford.

With how large my body was, the Oneiros illusion looked…a little rough around the edges. But Beelzebub's minions didn't have a whole lot of magic ability, so it was unlikely they'd be able to hit the fake Oneiros hard enough to break the illusion. And Lilyxila wouldn't check it herself; Beelzebub was the one who saw through his minions' eyes and relayed the info to Lilyxila.

Before long, Beelzebub's fly appeared out of the fog in front of me. It wandered curiously around the clearing for a moment, but its eyes passed over my concealed form. Instead, it looked past me toward the silhouette of my Oneiros illusion, then flew off straight toward it.

Did it…work? Did my plan succeed?

The only question remaining was what Lilyxila would think when she received Beelzebub's report. Engaging in a battle of wits with her was the last thing I wanted to do.

Looking back now, the big enemies I'd faced—Illusia, the Hero of Harunae Desert; Tolemann, the arrogant noble who attacked the Lithovarians; the slime who transformed into a princess and took

over the royal capital of Ardesia—had motivations and ideals that were pretty clear-cut and easy to understand.

But Lilyxila… Lilyxila was different.

I just didn't understand her thought process. When I flew off to keep Ruin away from the royal capital, Lilyxila immediately sent Beelzebub after me. When I realized what she'd done, I was more disgusted with her than I was angry. Once I cooled down, I was horrified by her actions. It was then that I realized how ruthless she could truly be. Even now, the thought of what she might do to me sent a shiver of fear through my body.

Part 3

ONCE I'D FOOLED Beelzebub's fly minion with my Oneiros illusion, I returned to my original form and lay down to wait. Not long after, one of the three Doppel Cocoons unraveled itself and dropped to the ground as a pile of web.

Just one, huh? Guess that means Atlach-Nacha caught sight of Lilyxila. They must be getting really close.

At long last, it was time to make first contact. I used Dragon Mirror to transform into a Baby Dragon again. Real Baby Dragon wings were only tiny little protuberances, but I made mine a bit larger so I could use them to fly.

‹When the commotion dies down, meet up with Atlach-Nacha and head for the mountain! This'll be an all-out battle before too long!›

If I was right, Lilyxila would be here any second with two Spirit Servant monsters to try and wipe me out in one focused, simultaneous attack. This area would become a dangerous battlefield where one stray skill could be enough to destroy even Treant. Allo and the others were better off staying as far away as possible.

Once I'd given my orders to the others via Telepathy, I spread my wings and flew into the sky. With Illusion, I distorted the light around me to conceal my appearance as much as possible, then I used Psychic Sense in midair to check my surroundings for any

signs of life so I'd be able to detect my enemy before they found me. After that, I channeled my magic to form an orb of black light in front of my mouth with Gravidon.

Because I'd used Dragon Mirror to change my form, the skill's attack power would be different, but its magic power would still be the same. I'd use Dragon Mirror, Illusion, and Umukahime's fog to conceal my presence and then use Gravidon to take the first move. This way, Beelzebub wouldn't have a chance to use Inhale to strengthen his Fly King's Gale. I doubted he'd have time to prepare such a massive two-step attack that left him vulnerable for so long while he was in active combat with me.

My Psychic Sense caught wind of a massive opponent coming toward me. I cautiously approached the presence. Before too long, a huge shadow appeared from the fog. At that size, there was no doubt about it: It was Beelzebub.

Species: Beelzebub
Status: Spirit
Lv: 86/130
HP: 2152/2152
MP: 1887/2071

Perfect timing. Beelzebub must have originally intended to launch his attack from a far greater distance, but it seemed like the fake Oneiros I made to fool his fly minion did its job perfectly.

All of a sudden, the surrounding fog began to swirl through the air toward the huge, floating shadow, before being sucked into Beelzebub's waiting mouth.

Here it comes! The Inhale I was waiting for! Good thing it's got a pretty obvious windup.

So far, everything was going exactly as I expected!

I unleashed my Gravidon orb from where I'd been storing it in front of my mouth.

The fog around us had cleared a little, exposing more of Beelzebub's form. His enormous fly head looked straight at me.

Then, in an instant, Beelzebub's body began to shrink and change into the thin, gray-skinned man I recognized as his human form. Even so, my Gravidon was right on course to hit this smaller target.

However, when the Gravidon got close, there was a flash of light from in front of Beelzebub, and the black orb changed trajectory and shot off into the distance. I realized after a moment that he'd used Mirror Counter, which created a protective wall around him that deflected magic. The difference between our magic abilities made it impossible for him to reflect the Gravidon straight back at me, but he'd managed to nimbly bounce the orb along the wall of light to avoid taking damage.

I had no clue that skill could be used that way… Guess Lilyxila's tricky ways are rubbing off on him.

Beelzebub's reaction times with both Human Transformation and Mirror Counter felt…unnaturally quick. Maybe I attacked from too great a distance? Or…could he have seen me coming somehow?

Both Lilyxila and the slime Demon King had mentioned using their Laplace Authority Interference to predict events and try to defeat me during the battle at Alban Castle. I had to assume she was doing the same for this fight. Maybe I should consider myself lucky for neutralizing Beelzebub's Fly King's Gale…

At any rate, staying in my current form with its reduced stats was dangerous. In my smaller form, I was incredibly vulnerable to Beelzebub's attacks. I quickly ended my Dragon Mirror skill and returned to my Oneiros form.

"*Gyah ha ha ha!* Been a while, *Illusiaaaa*! It's good to see you again! I've been itchin' to have another tangle with a real behemoth of a dragon like you, even if it's meant bein' the dog of a tight-laced, gloomy broad like the saint!"

With a flick of his wings, Beelzebub flitted around me. Last time I went up against him, my eyes couldn't keep track of his quick movements while he was in human form. This time, however, I could track his movements with ease.

Beelzebub had to be Lilyxila's greatest asset in a fight against me. In his beast form, his power was unmatched; in his human form, he was the only one agile enough to stand a chance against

me. On top of that, he had the Beast Realm Path Sacred Skill. If I could take him down, I'd basically have Lilyxila in a choke hold.

Because of that, I thought Beelzebub might choose to retreat once he realized he'd been fooled. But instead, he decided to come at me with all he had. I'd been expecting a short, decisive fight, but it seemed like he really did want to decide the outcome of this battle here and now.

All right then. Let's finish this once and for all! Lilyxila was probably worried she'd wear her troops out if they fought for too long, but I'd rather make this quick too. I didn't want this fight to drag on for any longer than it had to—the longer the fight, the higher the risk that Allo and the others would get hurt.

A large number of silhouettes began to appear in the fog further behind Beelzebub. His Inhale had cleared some of the fog out, so their forms were easier to see.

After a few moments, I was able to piece together what these shapes were: dragons. Astride the dragons—each about three meters long—were humans clad in the shining armor of Lialum's Holy Knights.

Species: Zephyr
Status: Normal
Lv: 50/65
HP: 525/525
MP: 114/114

The Zephyrs were rank C+ dragons with sharp, angular faces and crystalline green scales. As far as I could tell, there were about two dozen of them flying around behind Beelzebub. *Whoa…I never imagined Lilyxila's forces—her* human *forces—would be this powerful.*

Within the army, I caught sight of long white hair and familiar robes. Although I couldn't see her face clearly from this distance, the woman was unmistakable: It was Lilyxila.

She was astride a Zephyr of her own. Two dragon riders flanked her on either side, guarding her.

“Now, men!” I could only just catch Lilyxila’s faintly audible cry. “Let us seize that wicked dragon’s other head and restore peace to the world of man!”

Restore peace? What the heck’s she talking about? That’s rich, after I risked my life to defeat the slime Demon King for her! And I caught that “other head” dig at Partner. She’ll pay for that!

Part 4

I SCOWLED AT THE FIGURE of the saint in the distance. Okay then. If she was gonna do this to me, then I was gonna make her regret it. She was still far enough away that I wasn’t sure if the attack would hit, but it was worth a shot.

I raised my paw into the air and swung at Lilyxila with my Dimension Claws, which would make my claws connect from a distance.

The space in front of me distorted. In an instant, my claws gouged through Lilyxila’s shoulder, chest, and leg.

“Wh…ah?! Ah…!” Her arm tore clean off and shot away into the distance as blood spurted from her wounds. Her Zephyr mount, who also sustained deep wounds on its back from my claws, fell to the ground. Lilyxila’s body, too, was tossed to the ground, where it lay unmoving.

N-no way…

It’s over? I never thought it’d be that easy… I was stunned; I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

Gained 390 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 390 Experience Points.

My Divine Voice piped up to announce my Experience Point gain. It was then that I realized what was going on. *Only 390 Experience Points? That’s way too few for the saint…!*

That’s it! It wasn’t her, it was a fake! She had a body double!

At that moment, my skin began to tingle as the air around me was filled with magical energy. It was so unexpected that I didn’t have time to react.

Suddenly, my vision was blinded by a bright light, and I felt a white-hot burning sensation across my entire body as I was enveloped by what seemed like a massive bolt of lightning. I could feel my scales scorching to a crisp and the rough hide underneath beginning to burn.

I knew this skill. I’d felt its effects once before. The one who’d used Lightning Bolt on me was none other than my Dragon King father, Eldia the Diabolos.

A large figure crept along the forest floor. With its sparkling black hide and four gigantic wings, there was no mistaking it—it was Eldia.

Eldia

Species: Diabolos

Status: Spirit

Lv: 130/130 (Lock)

HP: 1697/1697

MP: 1284/1316

There weren’t that many monsters in the world on the same level as Eldia. He was a close confidant of the last Demon King, Noah, and his attack power was even higher than that of the current Beast King, Beelzebub. There was no better candidate in the world to take the empty Spirit Servant slot left by the death of Seraphim.

I should’ve known. If I’d considered the nature of the Spirit Servant skill and the type of person Lilyxila had shown herself to be, I should’ve expected to face my father in this fight. Lilyxila had met Eldia the Dragon King on the Island at the Edge of the World—the western island populated with Adams. But his sudden appearance caught me off guard.

‹E-Eldia...?› I tried to call out to him with Telepathy but was met with only silence. It wasn't just that he didn't respond; it was almost like he didn't react to my message at all. It seemed like even if I managed to get a message through, he wasn't aware enough to feel anything.

Compared to Beelzebub, who could speak freely, it seemed like Eldia's consciousness was very faint. It was as if he was an empty husk who'd lost every facet of his own sense of self.

Unlike Lilyxila's other Spirit Servants, Eldia possessed a fierce and burning hatred for humans. Maybe the power of Lilyxila's Spirit Servant skill wasn't enough to successfully bind Eldia to her while keeping his personality intact? It made sense that Lilyxila was forced to use some sort of mental restraint on him so that he wouldn't turn on his master.

So Lilyxila went after Eldia, huh? When she and I fought Eldia together, she chose to escape instead of taking the chance she had to defeat him then and there. After she betrayed me, I figured she did that to prevent me from leveling up, but it seemed like she had a bigger ulterior motive. When we left the island together, she might have already decided to turn Eldia into a Spirit Servant behind my back.

I'd hoped that Eldia would let go of his hatred and anger, stay out of any major battles, and live out the rest of his days on that island in peaceful solitude. But instead, Lilyxila took control of him and dragged him straight into the middle of this conflict against his will.

Being used as Lilyxila's puppet had to be humiliating for Eldia. The only thing I could do for him now was free him from the shackles of her Spirit Servant status.

Eldia's eyes turned to meet mine; they were soulless and empty. Then he leapt up, spread his wings, and took off into the sky. I thought he'd follow up with his signature skill, Drago Flare, but instead he flew closer.

Guess he wants to join Beelzebub in close combat.

Lilyxila wanted to decide the war between us with this clash; there was no alternative I could think of. She'd used a body double

to protect herself without using any of her skills and revealed her trump card—her second Spirit Servant.

“Don’t forget about me, Illusia!” Beelzebub cackled. He swooped down at me from the sky, while Eldia soared up at me from the ground. They’d caught me in a pincer attack.

She must’ve planned this from the very start. She drew me in with her body double, then surprised me with Eldia’s Lightning Bolt while I was still in shock from killing her, then sent him and Beelzebub after me before I had time to collect myself.

“Darkness Rain!” Beelzebub spread his wings wide. A large magic circle appeared in the air behind him. Within moments, tiny drops of purple light began to fall like rain. He was attacking me with a wide-range, steady skill.

An attack like this didn’t really fit Beelzebub’s typical fighting style—it had to be Lilyxila’s idea.

I quickly weighed my options: dodge, defend, or charge up and attack Beelzebub or Eldia and risk getting hit.

The Holy Knights on their Zephyrs were still approaching as well, but even if they attacked, they wouldn’t do much damage. They were my lowest priority right now.

Illusia
Species: Oneiros
Status: Normal
Lv: 105/150
HP: 3849/4261
MP: 4172/4394

At this rate, I could take the full damage of their attacks ten times over before I’d need to heal. Back when I was an Ouroboros, two hits like that would’ve been fatal, but now there was no need for me to be so cautious.

The important thing for me here was to find a way to reduce my enemy’s strength. In that case, Beelzebub, with his impressive

evasive ability, shouldn't be my first priority; it should be the slow, hulking Eldia.

‹Eldia…I'm sorry. But I can't afford to hesitate anymore!›

I turned my gaze from Beelzebub for the time being and swooped down toward Eldia. The purple beads of light from Darkness Rain pierced through my back, gouging little holes in my flesh.

Thanks to Beelzebub's rather low magic stat, this ranged magic attack was on the weaker side. Even so, the damage was nothing to sneeze at; however, it was a necessary price to pay. After getting caught up in a pincer attack, I had to expect to take a certain amount of damage. My main goal was to reduce my enemy's strength here, whatever the cost. I couldn't just try to run away from their simultaneous attack. That wouldn't save me.

As I flew down at Eldia, I saw him start to raise his foreleg into the air, so I quickly struck out at it with Dimension Claws. The attack tore through his flesh in a spray of blood, and his raised foreleg fell back down, lifeless.

I can do this. At this distance, I can take Eldia out before he has a chance to retreat. I'll finish him off with a direct attack. It's the most reliable attack method I've got.

I didn't want to give Beelzebub time to intercede and allow Eldia to recover. With the considerable difference between our stats, I'd be able to defeat him if I used a continuous barrage of melee attacks that prevented him from going on the offensive.

My eyes met Eldia's. I thought he'd attack me at once with a Scorching Breath or Freezing Breath, but instead he just stared at me with vacant eyes and made no move to engage me.

Before long, the two of us were in close-combat range. I swung my paw down at him in a fierce swipe but missed by mere centimeters. Not because Eldia avoided me or because I hesitated; instead, my body was suddenly jerked backward through the air.

Black walls appeared out of thin air around me, trapping me on all sides. I recognized the translucent black cube as one of Lilyxila's skills: Gravirion. It was a vicious attack that trapped its target inside a cube that would quickly shrink, crushing whatever

was inside. Apparently, it also dragged whatever was in range of the skill into the center of the Gravirion box.

The black walls began to close in almost instantly, compressing my legs, head, and tail painfully against my body—spatial compression caused by hyper-gravity in a single area. From what I saw when Lilyxila used it against Eldia on the island with the Adams, there was a bit of time between when the skill's user specified the skill's location and when the skill was actually activated, so it seemed like a difficult skill to use against a moving opponent. However, if she'd realized just before activating the skill that I'd chosen a close-combat battle with Eldia, it didn't seem impossible that she'd be able to guess my position.

Had Eldia missed his chance to use one of his mid-range attacks earlier so I'd get close enough to be in range of Lilyxila's Gravirion?

But where'd Lilyxila's magic come from...? Almost as soon as the question crossed my mind, I spotted Lilyxila as she alighted on top of Eldia's head through the translucent walls of my Gravirion cage. She had me firmly trapped at the pointed end of her outstretched staff.

Her clothes were drenched in saliva. *H-has she been hiding in Eldia's mouth from the start to try and trick me?!* Did she assume I was going to attack Eldia first, then lure me closer and use Gravirion from inside his mouth as soon as she had an opening?!

I'd been had. I cursed myself for not being more careful back when I'd realized I couldn't see the real Lilyxila. But I wasn't going to give up that easily!

"Groooooooooh!"

I used Bellow to let out a deafening roar, straining against the dark Gravirion walls with all four of my legs. The cube shuddered, then began to expand once more.

When Eldia had been caught in Lilyxila's Gravirion, he was unable to resist the skill's powerful compression magic. But with the current stat difference between Lilyxila and me, it seemed like I'd be able to muscle my way out before I took much damage.

The problem, though, was that Gravirion's constraints had resulted in a significant opening in my defenses.

Eldia and Beelzebub were both now flying diagonally above me: Eldia to the front, and Beelzebub behind me.

Eldia created a massive ball of fire in front of him, then closed his jaws around it and swallowed it whole. Beelzebub kept his mouth closed, eyes focused on me. I knew this move—it was the windup action for Eldia's Drago Flare.

Lilyxila was going to trap me between Eldia's Drago Flare and Beelzebub's Fly King's Gale. The range of Beelzebub's attack would be somewhat tame compared to what I'd seen before because he didn't get a chance to enhance the attack with Inhale, but it was still a major threat. There was no way I could take both skills at the same time.

It'd cost me some MP, but maybe I could use Dragon Mirror to disappear temporarily? That way, I could get out of this Gravirion and reappear after their two skills... Nah...that wouldn't work. I'd be totally exposed when I reappeared. Maybe I'd be able to catch them by surprise and escape, but with Lilyxila in command, I couldn't underestimate them.

All right...guess I'll have to get outta here at the very last second! Time for the skill that contorts space to let me move from one spot to another through a separate dimension: Wormhole!

I activated my Wormhole skill, still resisting the compressing walls of Gravirion. A black light enveloped me. And at the same time, the same black light began to appear next to Eldia—right where I'd assigned the skill's destination spot.

C-crap! This damn skill! This is way too obvious!! My mistake for not trying the skill out in advance!

Lilyxila furrowed her brow, staring at the black light that had suddenly appeared. If this was the first time she'd seen this skill, maybe she wouldn't be able to deal with it right aw—

"Diabolos! Stop preparing your Drago Flare and use Lightning Bolt from a distance!"

What the heck?! She figured it out immediately! Did she know the skill and work backward to find a solution or something?!

As soon as I went through the Wormhole, my vision was blinded by white light. Red-hot pain shot through my entire body as I was hit by Eldia's Lightning Bolt, but I had to pass through the lightning, taking damage as I went. There was no time to try and avoid it.

When I made it through, I closed the distance between Eldia and me at once and unleashed Gravity. A ring of black light appeared around me, and Eldia slumped over from the sheer force suddenly pressing down on him from above.

I swung at Eldia with my paws, aiming for a direct hit, but he used the gravitational force from Gravity to drop just out of reach.

Thanks to that, though, I managed to buy a bit of distance between us. I quickly used Dimension Claws with my other front leg, aiming for Lilyxila where she remained standing on top of Eldia's head. Eldia was still bent over on himself from the Gravity, so I had a clear shot.

My claws tore through Lilyxila's clothes and sliced her back to shreds, blood quickly soaking the white fabric.

Yes! I hit her! That one must've done some serious damage too!

The attack sent Lilyxila flying off Eldia's back. Eldia moved toward me, blocking my view. Meanwhile, Beelzebub—who'd reverted to his human form—swooped in and caught Lilyxila's bloodied frame in midair.

Guess I failed to deliver the finishing blow, huh? Still, the fact that the other two were prepared to risk it all to save Lilyxila created a large gap in their defenses.

"Damn... For someone so sure of herself, you sure got off to a rough start, didn't ya, Miss Saint?" Beelzebub crowed as he flew away with Lilyxila in his arms.

As far as I could tell, it seemed like a fatal wound. Lilyxila had some healing magic, but since she didn't have Regenerate, she couldn't mend her damaged body.

Lilyxila's mouth moved slightly. I couldn't tell what she said, but at her words, Beelzebub frowned a little and looked at Eldia.

"*Hmph...* So that's how it is, huh? It's a shame we gotta retreat, but at least this means the real fight to the death is about to begin."

Beelzebub licked his lips, then took off into the air again and flew away from me. “All right, you lot! The saint has spoken! We’re falling back to recover, which means she wants the rest of you to join forces with the Diabolos and risk being made into dragon food to hold him back!”

At his orders, the Holy Knights on their Zephyrs immediately flew forward to protect Lilyxila from me.

“The saint has been injured!”

“We must buy her some time!”

She’s gonna retreat with Beelzebub? Beelzebub’s human form was lightning fast. Even now, chasing that tiny human frame through all this thick fog while keeping an eye out for counterattacks would be next to impossible. With Eldia still around to mess with me, it would be even more difficult.

Even so, I was surprised that Lilyxila decided to leave Eldia behind at this point. He was the strongest monster she had and the offensive tool most likely to defeat me. If Lilyxila’s forces managed to surround me, he could use his handy Lightning Bolt skill to attack me repeatedly.

But if Lilyxila just left Eldia behind as a decoy, I’d almost certainly be able to defeat him. If it was just one-on-one, I’d barely even have to worry about running out of HP or MP.

If Lilyxila was falling back, then my best option was to stay and focus on defeating Eldia.

“Groooooohhh!” The dragon riders flew around Eldia as he roared. A bright red light began to gather inside his mouth. I managed to interrupt him before, but this time, it was coming for me: Eldia’s ultimate skill, Drago Flare.

“Even if we cannot defeat you, we shall give you the first taste of your coming retribution!” The dragon riders raised their swords as they gave a rallying cry. “We’re coming for you, Evil Dragon!” These Holy Knights were incredibly brave, daring to face down a Legendary rank dragon like me. They seemed to be in high spirits as they prepared to attack.

How could they just leap into battle with me, knowing full well that they were gonna die like a swarm of flies? Did they really

understand how outmatched they were? No matter how many of them attacked me, they'd only be able to buy a moment's time at best, even with their dragons. Did they really place so little value on their own lives?

Was my Sacred Skill really worth that much to them?!

I raised my paws and opened my mouth wide.

"L-Look out, men! Something's comi—"

"Guraaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!" I unleashed a Bellow of my own. As it echoed through the area, the Zephyrs fell into a state of panic. Forgetting about the dragon riders still on their backs in their fear, they lurched in random, frenzied directions.

I swung my paws around, shooting arcs of Whirlwind Slash out at random. Instead of focusing my MP on one big slash, I used it to shoot out a bunch of weaker attacks instead. I didn't need Dimension Claws to take them down.

There was no need for my attacks to be particularly fast or powerful either. Whenever I grazed one of the dragons, it fled, taking its rider with it. Countless blades of wind whirled around me, wreaking havoc across the entire area.

The sword raised by the leader of the dragon riders was sliced clean in two, and the rider fell to the ground below. With all the bursts of wind flying through the air, the Zephyrs struggled to stay airborne; some clutched at trees as they tried not to get swept away. The blades of wind sliced through the fog in clean arcs before falling and gouging massive slashes in the dirt.

For the dragon riders, this must've felt like a nightmare. Their Zephyrs darted around in uncontrollable terror as deadly attacks flew past at a speed far beyond their ability to react and tore the ground around them to shreds.

‹If you don't want to die a meaningless death, then I suggest you stay back!› I called out to the army with Telepathy. *‹Don't think for a second that you can hurt me. This is the last time I'm gonna grant you mercy. Next time, I'll cut the heads off everyone here!›*

The Holy Knights and their dragon mounts froze.

"D-do not falter in the face of the Evil Dragon's threats! We swore to put our lives on the line for the Holy Land and the saint,

did we not?! Do not be daunted! We have the Dragon King on our side! I will not retreat!”

A lone dragon rider jumped in between me and Eldia and brandished his sword. With a twitch of my paw, I unleashed my Dimension Claws. They tore the dragon’s wings almost entirely off its back and split its rider in half at the torso.

“Gyaaaagh…!” The dragon fell to the ground, its one remaining wing flapping frantically to try and slow its descent. The two halves of the Holy Knight’s corpse followed suit.

Gained 410 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 410 Experience Points.

As expected, no one else stepped forward to challenge me after that. The Holy Knights simply remained still, staring at me with wide eyes. It seemed like they’d finally realized just how pointless it was to risk their lives fighting me.

Lilyxila was guilty of a truly terrible thing, sacrificing these knights. There was no way she didn’t know that these two dozen knights would only be enough to stall me for a few seconds. What she’d done was inexcusable.

Eldia, apparently finished gathering his magic, turned to face me. Then an immense column of thick flames shot out of his mouth toward me. In the past, this skill used to really freak me out. But with how high my agility stat was now, Drago Flare just wasn’t a skill I had to worry about hitting me in a one-on-one fight.

I ducked low in midair to avoid the pillar of flames. It tried to give chase, but I evaded it with plenty of room to spare. As I dodged, I flew closer to Eldia and aimed my Dimension Claws at his face. The blow tore a deep gouge from his forehead to his neck, effectively closing his mouth, and the Drago Flare ceased.

I closed the distance between us. Eldia tried to create more by swinging his tail at me and flying higher into the air, but I caught his tail between my claws and swung it down hard.

Eldia spread his wings to catch the wind underneath them and avoid being tossed to the ground. That just left him wide open. I struck his abdomen with my front paw. Eldia's enormous frame slammed to the dirt and the whole area shook from the impact.

Now covered in blood, Eldia rose to his feet. His shoulders bent at unnatural angles, and his stomach was still dripping from the severe gash. It seemed like he was using his Physical Barrier to raise his physical resistance, as well as Regenerate to recover from the attack.

I thought for a second that the battle was over here, but Dragon King Eldia wasn't finished yet.

"Ohh, ooohhhnn..." Eldia groaned in pain. Suddenly, the image of Eldia warmly welcoming me when I first descended into the ruins on the giant tree island on the western edge of the world passed through my mind.

Eldia...I'm sorry. I know we had our disagreements in the past, but...I really wanted you to live out your days on that island in peace. I'll end this as soon as I can so you can finally have the rest you deserve.

I swooped down toward Eldia. His wings began to flap, but I swung my paw and gouged at his back with another round of Dimension Claws.

I didn't give him a chance to get back into the air. It was time to end this.

I used Gravity. A ring of black light surrounded me, pinning Eldia to the ground with the added gravitational force.

When I raised my paw again, Eldia gave a massive heave and managed to raise his own foreleg up, straining against the crushing pressure.

"O-oh...ohhhnn...!"

With the difference in our statuses, I thought my Gravity would keep him down. Eldia had also accumulated a considerable amount of damage, despite his attempts to heal with Regenerate. I thought he'd be down for the count. But Eldia's toughness exceeded my expectations.

The Dragon King's fist swung down toward me in a counterattack and slammed straight into my head.

…Or rather, what *looked* like my head.

In a close-combat situation like this, where my opponent was pressured into a corner, my Illusion skill could really shine. In truth, I was flying slightly behind my fake Oneiros.

Eldia, having spent the last of his strength on that counterattack, fell to the ground, unable to endure the pressure of my Gravity.

He was wide open. The Dragon King, lying motionless before me, was defenseless. I swallowed, closing my eyes. Then I reached out with a front paw and clawed at Eldia's chest, leaving deep slashes between his scales. The Dragon King's huge body, still pinned to the ground, scraped against dirt as the force of the blow sent him rolling back.

The black light of my Gravity dissipated as I ended the skill. Eldia's body rose up slightly once more, convulsed, and then collapsed on the spot.

Even so, my Divine Voice still didn't pop up with an Experience Point gain announcement. I checked Eldia's status. The wound I gave him was grave; it looked like he would die of blood loss any minute.

But I didn't have time to wait. As I stood here watching my dragon father's life force drain away, Lilyxila and her men were likely headed straight for Allo and the others. And although I didn't know the specifics of how Lilyxila's Spirit Servant skill worked, if I took my time here, it was possible that she might be able to recall Eldia and heal him.

I can't afford to hesitate. I…I've gotta kill Eldia while I have the chance.

Eldia began to stir…but suddenly, he was washed in blue light as strange chain-like links appeared across his body as if to stop him.

Huh? What's going on…?

I'd seen these chains once before—they were on Beelzebub when he reached the limit of Spirit Servant's skill range and was forced to stop pursuing me.

Something's about to happen. I need to end him as soon as possible. As soon as I thought it, Eldia's eyes rolled in his head, and he looked straight at me.

‹You…you are the two-headed dragon I met, aren't you?› Eldia was using Telepathy. It was immediately clear what had happened; he'd come back to his senses. Perhaps being so close to death weakened the power of Lilyxila's hold over him. The chains of light seemed to indicate some sort of change in the strength of her Spirit Servant skill.

I couldn't make myself bring down my raised paw in a finishing blow and instead held it in the air, frozen.

‹I…remember you. Faintly, but I do. And the time that the saint bound me in her chains. From the moment I saw her, I knew. Hmph! You were so devoted to her, and yet, she betrayed you. I tried to warn you then.›

Eldia cleared his throat with a slight *"Hmph!"* as he spoke with a lighthearted tone, as though nothing was wrong.

‹Eldia, I'm…I'm so sorry. For all of this.›

‹It is all in the past now, young one. And I am truly happy. I was finally able to meet the successor to the last Demon King, King Noah. The five hundred years I have walked this world after him have not been in vain. Ahh, I see. Heh heh. Is this the moment my divine revelation was leading to?›

Five hundred years ago, Eldia participated in the great battle for the Sacred Skills as a close friend and advisor to the Demon King. After the battle between the monsters and humans ended, he heard what he called a divine revelation—from who I had to assume was the one behind my Divine Voice—that instructed him to live on and serve the Demon King of the next generation.

From what he was telling me, it seemed like the Spirit Servants had shared memories that meant he already knew I was a Demon King with the Demi-God Realm Path.

‹You understand now, don't you? That humans are cowardly beings afraid of all who possess more power than themselves; arrogant fools who are not satisfied unless the world revolves around them. King

Noah often said the same. It is almost as if they were created to stand in opposition against us monsters.›

‹Yeah…I understand. You might be right.› I still didn't know why Lilyxila was so intent on killing me. The Divine Voice was apparently the one who instigated her actions, but that was about the extent of my knowledge. That didn't feel like a good enough reason to betray me on its own, but maybe Lilyxila was just afraid that if she didn't, I'd betray her in the end instead.

But even so, I wasn't interested in forgiving the woman who sent Partner to her death and killed Eldia to bind his soul to her and use him as her pawn.

‹My time on this world…is coming to an end. But I do not fear death. I am far more afraid of being used against my wishes by detestable humans for eternity. I…have one final favor to ask of you.›

‹What is it? I'm pretty short on time right now, but if it's something I can do, then I swear I'll do it.›

‹Win, Illusia. Win this battle, take their power, kill every human who stands in your way, and create a world where monsters can live in peace. Swear to me. Then I can finally disappear in peace.›

I wanted to tell Eldia that he was wrong—that things were different from how they seemed. He mentioned before that King Noah said it was as if humans and monsters were created to be in constant conflict with each other, which was true enough.

But the one to blame for that wasn't humans or monsters; it had to be the one behind the Divine Voice, who sculpted this world as they pleased through thousands and thousands of years, sometimes causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the process with impunity. They were the one who passed the Sacred Skills off from one being to the next, who inspired humans and monsters to continue their never-ending feud that caused nothing but war and destruction.

The only way to end the war between humans and monsters wasn't to wipe out one side or the other—it was to strike down the Divine Voice and end their rule over this world, just as Mia the Hero had realized five hundred years ago.

‹Ahh…yes. I will. As the Demon King, I'll hunt down every last human and destroy them. I swear it.› I lied. But it was a lie born of kindness toward my father, the Dragon King.

At my words, Eldia breathed out a sigh of relief. *‹Thank you… Now I can finally reunite with King Noah in peace. It is a pity that I will not live to see you in action, my son.›*

‹Wh…what?! W-wait! How… When did you find out I'm your son?!› I asked, eyes wide in shock.

Eldia's mouth twisted into a small, satisfied smile. Then his eyes slowly closed, and the Dragon King went still.

Gained 14,040 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 14,040 Experience Points.

Oneiros Lv 105 has become Lv 109.

The Divine Voice announced my Experience Point gain. Eldia's body began to glow with a white light, then dissipate into the surrounding fog. Since Spirit Servant was a skill that only bound a creature's soul, there would be no body left behind.

Title Skill "Dragon King's Son" Lv — has become "Dragon King" Lv —.

Eldia's final words echoed through my mind. My eyes began to burn. Water gathered behind them, which soon spilled over into tears.



But there was no time to mourn. With Lilyxila retreating, I needed to join up with Allo and the others, and fast.

Chapter 2:
The Two Devils

Part 1: Volk

“OH! WELCOME BACK, Atlach-Nacha.”

Shortly after Illusia went to confront Saint Lilyxila, Atlach-Nacha returned from her scouting mission.

“All right, everyone!” I announced, turning to address the Magiatite, Lacerta, Allo, Treant, and Atlach-Nacha. “We will now retreat to the mountainside and keep our distance from the battle.”

Allo looked worriedly back at the path Illusia had taken away from us.

“I’m sorry, Allo, but we are not strong enough to take on our enemy’s main fighting force,” I told her. “We cannot be caught in this conflict.”

Finally, she nodded, and we began to make our way up the mountain.

Treant had transformed into an egg-shaped creature about the height of a child that wore a wooden mask on its face. It was apparently a tree spirit, but it was a rather unsettling sight for some reason. Along the way, Allo occasionally patted Treant’s head.

‹Do I look cute?› Treant asked her.

“There were a bunch of spirits in my forest back home who looked like you,” she replied. “I feel extra safe with you around.”

So there are many of these spirits around? Interesting… I’d heard that Allo was from the Lithovar tribe who lived deep inside Noah’s Forest. Once I’d learned that, I decided I should be a little more prepared than I initially planned on when I finally went deep into that forest myself.

Treant, having caught me staring at it, came up to me and offered its head. *‹You may pat me as well, Master Volk.›*

“Ahh… I appreciate the offer, but I cannot afford to let my guard down right now.” We could get dragged into a fight with the

Fly King, Beelzebub, at any moment. Although I'd never met Beelzebub before myself, I was well aware of his cruelty and fearsome power—and the fact that he was being controlled by the saint. Illusia himself said that he'd been no match for him when he was still an Ouroboros.

Beelzebub had a broad range of attacks and was an expert in aerial combat. The current Illusia would not be outmatched by him alone. But…if Beelzebub and Saint Lilyxila moved as a pair, used an army of soldiers as diversions, and steadily wore him down with combat, it was easy to imagine this battle turning into a long and painful war of attrition.

A rumbling roar echoed from far off in the distance, as if a storm was brewing. Allo stopped and turned around, peering at the distant sky behind the thick fog. Her face looked pained.

"Are you worried, Allo?"

"More distressed than anything. I know Master Dragon is in a lot of danger, and we're just running away…" Allo sighed, frustrated.

"I know. But the one thing Illusia wants the most right now is for all of us to make it through this fight safely." *And I want the same for him.* I chuckled to myself. I'd always thought of myself as a lone wolf. Who would've expected that I'd find myself at home among a pack of monsters?

"But…"

"And regardless of what he wants, it is unlikely that we will simply be able to run away from the danger." In this land covered by fog, we would not be discovered by the enemy so easily—under normal circumstances, that is. But from what I'd heard about the saint, it seemed she was vicious, relentless, and, above all else, thorough. She would stop at nothing in her quest to hunt Illusia down.

Right now, we were Illusia's greatest weakness. That was why Illusia hadn't been able to escape to this foggy island on his own in the first place. I couldn't imagine the enemy not trying to attack us while we were separated. Without a doubt, they would attack us somehow soon.

I heard a whoosh of wind whistling through the air and looked up. A smallish, green dragon soared through the foggy skies above me. I looked closer and spotted a knight clad in armor atop its back.

“Kraaaaaaaaaaaah!” The Zephyr gave a high-pitched screech, almost as if it announce its position. Then it flew higher into the sky and disappeared into the fog.

“Is it running away…?” Allo tilted her head in confusion.

“No… It is calling for backup. They won’t attack us individually; they’ll use their numbers to their advantage.”

Sending a battalion of Shard’s dragon riders to explore this island of fog was a desperate maneuver at best. The Zephyrs were revered symbols of the kingdom of Shard, and their numbers were few. It was a miracle that the saint had even managed to borrow them.

“I’d thought we would be able to strategically reduce the ranks of the regular soldiers pursuing us this way, but I didn’t expect them to attack us from the skies! If we don’t act, we will be at a grave disadvantage. I cannot fly, of course, and I do not have any skills to pursue an opponent who has taken flight.”

Allo had magic that would be more fitting for this battle than mine, but it would make little difference if we allowed the skies above us to be our enemy’s safe zone. We didn’t want to be in a position where our enemy could avoid all of our attacks if they simply flew a little higher into the air. We would continue to be forced into unfavorable conditions.

Enemies we failed to finish off would be able to retreat and recover endlessly, and that leeway would do wonders for their morale. *If only we had a single anti-air attack…*

I looked at Atlach-Nacha, but she shook her head. “Do not…be hopeful. It is possible to get up high with my webs, but we would have limited options. And with many enemies, we’d be exposed.”

Right… That made sense. But if our enemies were swooping down at us from overhead, it would be next to impossible to escape and continue to avoid them.

‹Leave it to me, Master Volk!› Treant piped up. *‹I can probably fly in my Tree Spirit form!›*

I appreciated the enthusiastic offer, but it didn't seem like Treant would be able to do any serious fighting in that form. "Perhaps…it is better that you do not?" I doubted Treant had the mobility to take to the skies by itself and change the course of this battle for the better.

"Kshiii!" Lacerta squealed, leaping in front of me. It flapped its small, bat-like wings. Well, it could definitely fly, but its combat skills left something to be desired.

We were up against the prized battle dragons of the kingdom of Shard and the Holy Knights who were said to be the strongest military force in the world. Lacerta trying to combat them on its own would be suicide.

Treant, who'd been quietly withdrawing, stepped up to Lacerta's side. *‹It says it wants you to ride on her back, Master Volk.›*

"Oh? Interesting. That could work…" If Lacerta and I took to the skies with my Magiatite blade while Allo, Atlach-Nacha, and Treant battled from the ground, we could potentially avoid being put in any unfavorable situations. "Yes, let's do that. No doubt they will show up in numbers soon. Let us give them a true reckoning and reduce the saint's forces. However, it is vital that our air and ground teams stick close together in this battle, so be mindful of that."

Even for the saint, gathering the numbers for a force of top-notch swordsmen and battle Zephyrs was no easy feat. If we succeeded in reducing their numbers without any casualties of our own, we would limit the saint's future options.

I would ride atop Lacerta's back and attack the Holy Knights from the sky with my Magiatite blade. Allo, Atlach-Nacha, and Treant would attack the knights approaching on the ground. This way, we wouldn't be left without a way to defend ourselves from an air attack.

If the saint and the Fly King Beelzebub showed up, we'd have a difficult time dealing with them on our own, but my assumption was that they would be focused on the fight with Illusia. By battling him, they wouldn't be able to send their main force after us.

"They're coming," Atlach-Nacha murmured. As though her words had summoned them, a number of figures appeared in the

foggy sky overhead. Twenty—no, perhaps twenty-five of the saint's Holy Knights and Zephyrs came into view.

Lacerta lowered its head and looked at me, as if asking for permission.

"Yes, let us fly!" I agreed. "It's time for us to give the saint's soldiers a proper welcome!"

"Kshhiii!" Lacerta spread its dark wings, kicked off from the ground, and soared into the air. I raised my Golden Magiatite Spirit Sword high.

Two dragon soldiers appeared in front of us, leading the pack. They split to the left and right and flew toward us, attempting to flank. Just then, I noticed Lacerta puff out its cheeks.

"What are you…"

"Ksshhiii!" A cloud of poison vapor shot out of its mouth at high speed. The dragons coming toward us shut their eyes to avoid the vapor and veered blindly off their path.

"*Hng!* Fall back and regroup, then come at 'em again!" one of the dragon riders shouted. They careened to either side and put some distance between us.

"You're up, Magiatite!" I called. With that, I raised my blade once again and swung out in a sideways slash. As I moved, the sword transformed into a long, thin blade within seconds.

"Wha—?! *Aagh!*" With its impressive new reach, the Magiatite blade sliced through the right knight's breastplate and the left dragon's wing in a flash.

The knight on the right placed his hand over a gash in his armor that was dripping blood, gritted his teeth, and soared back up into the sky in a wide circle. The knight on the left tumbled to the ground, casting Rest to try and heal his dragon's shredded wing.

"Hmm… Perhaps it would have been better to target one enemy at a time. We'll just have to whittle down their numbers as we go."

I peered up into the sky. The dragon riders overhead furrowed their brows and stared back.

"What a lunatic…"

“His mount and his blade are one thing, but is that man a monster himself? He’s not just some random adventurer, is he? Striking down a Zephyr and cutting through Holy Knight armor in a single slash? He’s far more fearsome than we thought!”

“We can’t take him down from up close! Men, surround him and unleash your magic!”

Several of the dragon knights turned their gaze toward me.

“Very well then!” I called. “Let’s see what you’ve got. Be it ten or twenty of you, you spineless fools are no match for me!”

“Damn you…!” One of the dragon knights brandished his sword and moved to engage me. But before he could, another man flew out from behind him and pressed his sword to the other man’s chest, restraining him.

“Clear out the monsters on the ground and leave our friend here to me,” the man commanded, leaving little room for protest.

“K-Knight-Commander Alexio! Yes, sir! Right away!”

The man who came forward was tall, with blond hair and blue eyes. While many of the Holy Knights had serious, knightly expressions, the look in his eyes was more akin to that of a beast enjoying the hunt. His Zephyr’s wings were much larger than the others; it was safe to assume that it was the most powerful of all the dragons around it.

I’d heard the name Alexio before. This man had to be Alexio Azrod, the most skilled swordsman in the Holy Land of Lialum and the knight-commander of the Order of the Holy Knights.

“Your life is mine to take, Volk the Dragonslayer.” Alexio raised his sword. Its blade was long and thin, almost frail-looking. But Alexio wouldn’t wield a blade he feared would break during battle. It had to be made of some sort of enchanted metal that was far more robust than normal.

The silvery, mirrorlike surface of the blade shone in the sunlight. It was beautiful.

“An impressive sword. It seems a somewhat troublesome opponent has shown himself.”

“Only somewhat? I’ll show you just how troublesome I can be!” Alexio snarled.

I glanced at Allo and the others out of the corner of my eye. A few dragon knights were already headed in their direction.

My purpose during this fight was to distract our enemy so that Allo and the others on the ground would not be bombarded from the air and unable to fight back. A one-on-one battle with Alexio was not part of the original plan, and he wasn't an opponent I wanted to fight while distracted.

"Ordinarily, I would welcome the chance to cross blades with a swordsman as skilled as yourself, but I cannot waste time on such things now. Let's finish this quickly."

"To Hell with you, Dragonslayer!" Despite his words, Alexio grinned broadly. His dragon screeched and swooped toward me.

"I hear you're not a fan of magic! Let's see what you make of this!" The tip of Alexio's sword began to glow, and a ring of magic spread out from the center. He swung his blade through the ring, and a large, flaming orb appeared.

"Fire Sphere!"

The orb shot at me with alarming speed. Lacerta moved to try and dodge out of the way, but I stopped it. "Don't worry. Leave this to me!"

The fireball slammed into the center of my sword, then slid along the blade's edge and shot past me. The Golden Spirit Sword had high resistance to magic, so it could stop, repel, and deflect magic attacks. Although the Blade of Exorcism was more reliable for blocking magic, doing so cost MP, which meant its use was limited.

"Now things are getting interesting, eh, Dragonslayer? How about this? Lucent Luna!" Alexio raised his sword to the sky. The sunlight glinting off his blade focused in on a single point aimed straight at me. Lacerta dove down to avoid it, and I swung my sword to deflect the light it couldn't dodge.

Alexio flew toward me. I swung my sword in a wide arc.

"Shockwave!"

"Shockwave!"

Almost entirely in sync, Alexio and I unleashed our sword skills. The waves of magic collided in midair and exploded, creating a massive gale of wind.

“Ksshiii!” Lacerta sprayed more poisonous mist from its mouth to curb Alexio’s onslaught.

“Pay it no mind! Fly through it, Zephyr!” Alexio shouted. Then the two of them swooped directly into the poison mist.

“Ksshh?!” Lacerta let out a bewildered hiss.

With the poison cloud obscuring them, it was difficult to follow the movements of Alexio’s sword. *I didn’t expect him to jump into the middle of it with no hesitation…*

But if this is how things will be, then so be it. Rather than fine skill, this battle would be based on pure instinct and sword speed. Fortunately, these were two areas in which I excelled.

“Haaaaaaah!”

“I’ve got you now, Dragonslayer!”

Our swords clashed. The force of the blow made my hands go numb. Alexio was powerful—more powerful than anyone I’d ever crossed swords with.

I was not very gifted with magic. Instead, I had a natural gift for the sword—or so I liked to believe. I also thought that humans each had individual, innate talents for certain things in this world, and that mine were mostly geared toward swordsmanship. This felt similar in nature to the “statuses” that Illusia mentioned at times.

But this man was different. He was so adept at magic that he could use it in single combat. Being able to attack an enemy at a distance as a group and being able to wield both magic and swordsmanship to give you an edge in combat were two entirely different realms in terms of skill. On top of being able to use magic, he was more powerful than I was. His swordsmanship was the best of the best.

I had no idea a man this impressive was in the Holy Land all this time…

“But even so, I won’t let you push me aside so easily…!”

“Hmph. You must possess a great deal of power if you’re able to contend with me!” Alexio hefted his sword and immediately swung from the opposite direction. I managed to block it with my blade, barely, but it was a fast, heavy blow.

Alexio shoved the sword I blocked with away and flew past me. Then he turned back around and pointed his sword at me once again. “Oho… It’s been a long while since I’ve faced a human opponent who can put up such an impressive fight. It’s a shame, really; if I wasn’t acting on the saint’s orders, I would’ve liked to have a bit more fun with you. But alas, it’s time to finish this.”

Lacerta puffed out its cheeks as its mouth filled with venom. But I shook my head. “Not now. It will only obscure our vision.” Not only that, but in a high-speed aerial battle like this, Alexio would simply be able to hold his breath and fly through it like he did earlier. Normally that would act as a sufficient deterrent, but he leapt into the cloud of poison without hesitation. Given my inferior strength, simply blocking both of our vision could put me at a disadvantage.

“Kssshh…” Lacerta swallowed the venom in its cheeks with a gulp.

“Ready yourself, Dragonslayer! Here I come!” Alexio flew toward me, swung his sword, and unleashed a Shockwave. I shot it down with a Shockwave of my own.

As he closed the distance between us, Alexio murmured, “Quick.” A magic circle appeared around him, and his body was enveloped in light.

“What…? Has he been saving his agility-increasing magic until now?” Alexio was already faster than me when we crossed swords before. But he had only been toying with me then; he wasn’t going all out. And now that he’d enhanced his physical stats with magic, he was going to be even faster.

Alexio adjusted his sword stance, presumably to compensate for the sudden increase in speed. The Zephyr and Lacerta passed each other in the air.

“Let’s see if you can see my sword now!” Alexio swung his sword at me. I moved to block it with my own.

But instead of our swords meeting with a clang of metal, mine met only air. Alexio was still in the same position, sword poised to swing.

It was a simple feint. Just a single moment, a single beat of pause before action. But what set Alexio's feint apart from those of an ordinary swordsman was just how precisely he executed it. Alexio was one step ahead of me in every way, even swordsmanship.

I barely deflected the first, second, and third slashes. By that point, my stance was broken. The feint had taken its toll.

The fourth blow knocked my sword down and out of the way. With the fifth blow, Alexio slashed across my chest in a wide arc. I tried to pull myself back as Lacerta veered away but didn't have enough time to avoid Alexio's blade. My blood danced through the air in a spray of red.

Lacerta and the Zephyr started to move away from each other once again.

"Hngh...!" I'd tried to discourage a cut to my stomach and encourage Alexio to swing at my chest instead, intending to dodge out of the way and counterattack. But Alexio's blade was even faster than I thought.

"You have truly lived up to your name, Volk the Dragonslayer. You should be proud!"

That's rich coming from someone entirely unharmed.

I pressed my hand over my chest wound to staunch the bleeding, then used Regenerate to heal my sliced flesh. The wound was deep but not fatal.

Alexio's eyebrows raised. "Oh? Not quite enough to kill you, eh? You're even sturdier than they say. I'll come finish you off then, quick and clean." He swooped toward me again and we clashed for the third time.

Alexio started to raise his sword to release another Lucent Luna. But halfway up, he lowered his arm back down again. "No, there's no need for petty parlor tricks. Neither of us are weakhearted enough to be cowed by an attack from this distance." He returned to his swordfighting stance.

"Your blade's movements are too large. It is not a bad sword, but do not think it will go through me!"

Alexio thrust his sword straight at me, but I struck from above, knocking it to the side and aiming for his neck. When he pulled his sword back to block me, I spun around and struck him from the other side of his head.

“What?!”

“Haaaaaaaah!” I swung at his vulnerable neck with a horizontal slash. Just before my blade met flesh, Alexio regained his posture and blocked with his own sword.

Maybe I am swinging a little too wide… I really thought I’d hit him.

“Your turn, Lacerta! Back me up!” I called.

“Kssshii!” Lacerta turned and flew toward Alexio.

“I had no intention of being careless, but to think I’d be outmaneuvered so easily… Even so, it will not happen a second time.”

Our swords clashed for the fourth time. I blocked Alexio’s blade and lowered my own to divert the recoil, then turned my wrists and quickly slashed down.

The tip of my blade passed right over Alexio’s as he pulled back, and gouged deep into his shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound, coating both my blade and his face in red.

“Wha—?! Why…why wasn’t I fast enough?!”

“Farewell, Knight-Commander Alexio. You were a formidable foe.” I slashed down at him from above.

“Hng…!” Alexio swung his own blade in an attempt to stop me. But it wouldn’t make it in time. I could see it with my own eyes.

Suddenly, a voice called out from above my head. “All right, that’s enough.”

A hand appeared and shoved my sword to the side, knocking it off course. Then a leg kicked Alexio’s thrusted sword back, and the opposite one kicked me in the shoulder.

The man who appeared dropped through the gap between the two of us and landed on another Zephyr flying below.

“Forgive me, but I have to cut in here.”

I leaned forward on top of Lacerta to get a good look at him. Although he was short and slight enough to be mistaken as a

younger boy, he was older, with a prominent, neatly trimmed mustache.



Where in the world did he come from? We're battling in midair! I looked up. There was a single riderless Zephyr right above me. *This old coot just dropped down on us from the dragon?!*

"Er, did you just…drop down from that dragon to the other dragon, stopping both our swords and kicking me along the way?" Even as the words fell from my lips, I could scarcely believe them. It was a feat so extraordinary that no human should've been able to perform it. But that was the only logical explanation I could come up with.

I put a hand to my kicked shoulder. It didn't hurt that much; there was no need to use Regenerate. *Strange. If he's so skilled with a sword, he should possess an extraordinary amount of strength…*

"What is the meaning of this?! You dare interrupt us, Howgley?!" Alexio bellowed.

I froze. "Did you say…Howgley?" I knew that name. It belonged to Anise Howgley, the legendary swordsman who'd gone off the grid and whose whereabouts were currently unknown. The same Howgley I'd been in search of for more than ten years.

I'd only heard dubious rumors of where he'd gone, which made me question at times whether the legendary swordsman was truly nothing more than myth.

And this tiny old man in front of me is supposed to be the swordsman from those legends?

"Interrupt you? That man was about to defeat you." Howgley responded to Alexio.

"Don't be absurd! I had it all planned out! If I took that slash, then I'd be able to—"

Howgley cut him off. "Perhaps you didn't notice, but you were falling further and further behind with each strike." He spoke calmly, unperturbed by Alexio's fury. "Your blade has already been bested. You might have been able to overcome that sword's strike; that's true. But the next time your blades met, you'd be the one meeting your maker."

"Wh-what did you say…?!"

"The Dragonslayer is tough. He's no stranger to being on the receiving end of a blade; that's why he's so skilled at reading the

swordplay and combat patterns of opponents faster and stronger than him. If the battle drags on for too long, he'll know so much about you that you'll never win against him, let alone manage to kill him."

At Howgley's remarks, Alexio's face went bright red. He clenched his teeth. "You don't know that! Stay out of this, Glutton!"

Howgley had received the title of Howgley the Glutton due to the tales of his exploits in regions far from human habitation. During his travels, he forbade himself from hunting any monsters that he couldn't cook and eat himself. It was said that he always ate what he hunted, no matter how poisonous or strange the monsters seemed.

"You are the one in command of the saint's forces right now," Howgley told Alexio. "Do not lose sight of your purpose, or you'll disappoint her."

Alexio looked like he was about to say something back, but instead he put a hand to his forehead and shook his head. "Yes… you're right. I am in your debt, Sir Howgley." He lowered his sword and used Rest to heal the cut on his shoulder. It seemed like he was ready to end our one-on-one duel.

I considered continuing my attack, but if I pursued them too far, not only would I distance myself from Allo and the others on the ground, but I'd also have to face off against Howgley.

"Wait… What is Howgley doing here anyway? Did the saint bring him?"

It seemed I'd underestimated Saint Lilyxila. I'd spent ten years searching for clues about Howgley the Glutton's whereabouts and barely found a trace of him anywhere. He was notorious for his strong aversion to both staying in one place and working for anyone other than himself. The fact that she'd recruited Howgley so easily was unbelievable.

A shiver ran down my spine. Howgley was the greatest swordsman of our time—the greatest of the past few centuries, even. There was no one alive who could hold a candle to him in swordplay.

I wanted to see if my sword could reach this living legend. The desire was so strong that I couldn't suppress it. Beyond that, I had several other questions in mind. The first was whether Howgley's abilities truly lived up to the stories I'd heard.

Based on the minimal damage he inflicted to my shoulder, he didn't seem particularly strong. The fact that he managed to stop both our swords at the same time was astonishing, to be sure, but I still had my doubts about his abilities as a swordsman.

What's more, Howgley was not carrying a proper sword. All he had was a long dagger tucked into his waistband. Did he intend to fight with that?

Most powerful swordsmen and monsters I'd faced had an intimidating air about them that was completely absent from Howgley. He just looked like a frail old man.

Considering all of this, I couldn't help but want to cross blades with Howgley. I wasn't sure what to expect from him, but I was certain that a fight with him would be different from all the formidable opponents I'd faced until now. The entire reason I began traveling far and wide in the first place was so that one day I could meet Howgley on the battlefield and surpass him.

But my role in this conflict wasn't to best Howgley; it was to stave off the dragon knights and prevent them from attacking Allo and the others from the air. And while Howgley's sudden appearance was unexpected, it didn't change much.

No, I was better off not engaging an unknown like Howgley in single combat. My best course of action here was to keep my distance from him and regroup with Allo and the others to launch a flanking attack and give ourselves an edge in this fight.

Howgley put a hand on the dagger at his waist and looked back at me. "Now then, we'll let the knight-commander return to his commanding duties...and in his place, I'll be your opponent." His eyes met mine. "It's been a long time since I've had to kill a human being... Forty years, perhaps. I never thought I'd get another opportunity."

A chill ran through me. The moment Howgley touched his dagger, the alarms of previously silent warning bells began to clang

raucously in my mind. In that moment I was sure that if I got into a real fight with Howgley, I would be killed.

Part 2: Treant

MASTER VOLK STRADDLED Lacerta's back, raised his Magiatite sword, and flew off toward the group of Lilyxila's dragon knights circling in the sky nearby. After I saw them off, I strained my entire body and stretched out my trunk to its maximum height. My mission this time was to help Miss Allo and Miss Atlach-Nacha intercept the knights coming toward us from the ground.

I was fired up with a newfound sense of purpose. During the battle of Alban, Master Dragon decided I was not strong enough to participate in the fight, so I was left behind in Alban Mine. But now, here I was, standing on the battlefield with the rest of them.

By taking part in this battle, I wanted to live up to Master's expectations, as well as avenge the death of his left head and protect Allo and Atlach-Nacha. My desire to protect my friends was probably the reason why I'd evolved into the tyrant guardian I was today. If I didn't stand and fight now, it would have all been for nothing. I wasn't as fast or skilled as Allo or Atlach-Nacha, but in terms of raw attack power, I was the one on top.

"Treant!" Miss Allo called out to me. I bent toward her and nodded in acknowledgment.

Don't worry, Miss Allo. I've got this. I'll take every attack they send our way. My time has come to show my true potential as a tyrant guardian.

"Use Physical Barrier on me, please! And Atlach-Nacha too! Hurry, they're getting close!"

‹O-oh…right.›

In an ideal world, I'd be able cover all of the enemy's attacks, but they outnumbered us. It was important to have some additional protection in place. Allo had a good point.

"And once you're done, hide behind me! Master Dragon said you're a lot less sturdy in your tree spirit form!"

Hmmm…?

‹Do you think I should go back to my original form, Miss Allo…?›

Allo's mouth fell open in shock, and she shook her head vigorously. "N-no, don't! If you go back to your giant tree form, they'll surround you in a heartbeat!"

"If you're that huge, you won't be able to avoid getting attacked," Atlach-Nacha agreed, turning to face me.

‹Y-you're probably right about that. But…but I'm the most durable one out of all of us, so I can—›

"That won't make much of a difference. Besides, Volk is way more durable."

Oh…really? I hadn't known that. And honestly…maybe I didn't want to. If I wasn't as fast as Volk, and I wasn't as durable as him either, then what exactly *was* my specialty?

I looked up. There were about twenty dragon knights circling above us. It felt like if I was attacked by four or so of them at once, they'd take me down in an instant.

‹Ahh…okay. Th-then what should I do…?›

"Umm… Well, can you, uh, use magic in that form?" Allo asked with fear in her eyes.

‹Er, yes, I think so. But using things like Tremor or Heat Beam in this form might be a little difficult…›

"Then focus on healing Atlach-Nacha as needed and use your magic to attack with me!"

‹Okay… Got it.›

I would've liked to get in on the action a little more, but I guess it is what it is.

I used Physical Barrier on Miss Allo and Miss Atlach-Nacha to increase their resistance to physical attacks. I'd reapply the skill as soon as it wore off. It didn't feel like I could do much else, to be honest…

I flapped the tiny wings on my back and floated in the air behind Allo. She turned her head slightly to look at me, then did a double take.

‹Is something wrong, Miss Allo?›

“Sorry, Treant, but can you stay on the ground? You’re distracting me…”

‹O-oh! Forgive me!› As I plopped to the ground, I saw Master Volk slash at a dragon knight in the distance. At long last, the battle had begun. Ten of the dragon knights swooped down to engage us at once.

“Gale!” Allo shouted, unleashing a wave of wind into the air.

At the same time, I sent out a Clay Sphere and Atlach-Nacha sent out a Dark Sphere. The three skills created a whirling tornado that shot out toward the dragon knights.

…Unfortunately, my Clay Sphere didn’t hit a single target. But one of the dragons screeched in pain as blood spurted from a hole in its chest from Atlach-Nacha’s Dark Sphere. It spiraled to the ground and laid still.

A-all right! If we keep at it, we should be able to cut down the enemy’s numbers in no time.

One of the dragon knights—a larger man—called out to his comrades: “According to the saint, our enemy’s ranks range from B+ to A-! Don’t get impatient! Take your time and fight carefully! Don’t overdo it, and if you’re in danger, don’t hesitate to fall back! Slow and steady wins the race!”

It seemed like their plan was to wear us down until our magic power ran out. But with a plan like that, we would likely have the advantage. If the dragon knights stayed in the air for safety and tried to wear us down, then Master Volk could wipe them out midair without much difficulty. With fewer numbers to worry about, I could get closer to reduce the amount of MP I was wasting, end my Tree Spirit Transformation, and go on the offensive in my original form…!

“I never expected to meet the legendary swordsman, Howgley the Glutton, on an island at the edge of the world! As a fellow swordsman of some renown, I challenge you to a duel! But not here, where there are too many distractions. If you accept my duel, then follow me!”

I looked to the sky and saw Master Volk flying away from us atop Lacerta’s back. After a few moments, a dragon with two riders flew after him.

‹M-M-Master Volk?! That wasn't part of the plan...!›

We were stuck on the ground, so Master Volk had taken to the skies to prevent the enemy from taking advantage of being airborne. He was the one who suggested this plan in the first place! I never thought he, of all people, would be the type to simply throw away a plan he'd decided on himself...

"Wh-what's going on...?" Miss Allo asked, looking anxiously up at Master Volk's back as he flew away. Another dragon, which seemed faster than the others, soared through the air and halted next to the larger knight's mount.

"That man's fate is now in Sir Howgley's hands. I will be taking command of this battle from now on."

"Yes, sir, Knight-Commander Alexio!" Atop the dragon that just appeared sat a man with blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"That's the man Master Volk was going head-to-head with a second ago," Miss Allo murmured.

‹H-he was fighting on equal footing with Master Volk?!› I couldn't believe it. There were still plenty of other dragon knights to fight. How were we supposed to fight a man who'd faced off against Master Volk and lived by ourselves?

"If we draw this battle out too long, the Evil Dragon may decide to show its face. All units, attack at once! I will take the lead!"

Alexio raised his sword and swooped down toward us, overtaking the other dragon knights as he went.

Immediately, I knew I couldn't let this man pass. It was clear from his confrontation with Master Volk that he was on an entirely different level than the rest of the dragon knights.

Atlach-Nacha, who seemed to be of the same opinion as me, raised her hand toward Alexio. A black light shone in the center of her palm. It looked like she was going to attempt to shoot him down with a Dark Sphere.

I decided to follow suit and targeted Alexio with my own Clay Sphere.

Although the other dragon knights were drawing closer as well, our best bet was to focus on taking Alexio out first and

foremost. Allo and Atlach-Nacha could deal with the other dragon knights themselves if needed, but he would be more of a challenge.

I timed my Clay Sphere to release shortly after Atlach-Nacha's Dark Sphere and shot it toward Alexio. The black orb flew toward him, with the clay orb following after.

Alexio's dragon dove down to avoid the Dark Sphere. Then he threw the sheath of his sword forward to deflect the Clay Sphere, which was about to hit his dragon's snout.

"Gale!" Allo released a whirlwind directly at the dragon's new trajectory. She timed it perfectly; the wide-range Gale attack destroyed the Zephyr's only escape route when its momentum prevented it from going any other way.

Alexio tried to evade by diving even lower, but instead his figure was caught up in the whirlwind and disappeared. His dragon's screech echoed through the clearing.

"K-Knight-Commander!" the other dragon knights cried out in panic.

‹Nice work, Miss Allo!›

Allo's magic was much more powerful than either mine or Atlach-Nacha's—powerful enough to be lethal to even a man like Alexio. It was possible that Allo's Gale could do enough damage to defeat him.

The whirlwind slammed Alexio's mount to the ground. Its body was covered in blood from countless slices. The dragon's eyes were open, but no life remained inside them, and its breath was still.

But most importantly, Alexio was nowhere to be seen.

A moment later, the knight-commander leapt out from the shadow of the dragon's corpse and charged toward us. "I am far faster on my own than atop a dragon mount!"

He was right; he *was* much faster on his own. There was no way we'd be able to hit him with a long-range attack. He had a slash across his face, but it was shallow. And thanks to his armor, his body seemed more or less uninjured.

There was no way he took so little damage from a direct hit. He must've used his dragon mount as a shield to protect himself from Allo's Gale.

‹Against someone that fast, I'm the only one who can stand a chance.› The telepathic message came to my mind as Atlach-Nacha stepped forward.

She wasn't wrong: She had strong melee skills, high magic power, and impressive agility. Between her stats, Allo's magic skills, and my decent endurance, the three of us had a pretty balanced range of strengths. But try as we might, Allo and I couldn't match Alexio's speed. We'd have to find ways to compensate by supporting Atlach-Nacha somehow.

Atlach-Nacha held her arms out in front of her. Webs extended from each of her ten fingers, then wove themselves together to form a life-size replica of herself. It was the same skill she'd used during her scouting mission—Doppel Cocoon. It was a smart idea. Creating a clone of herself would make up for some of the difference in power between herself and Alexio.

‹Wait...but doesn't it cost a lot of MP to upkeep a copy that big?› I asked her.

"Yes, but it's my only option. If I'm too worried about conserving magic, I won't make it out of this alive."

Alexio raised his sword. "Lucent Luna!"

Sunlight glinted off his blade. I suddenly had a terrible premonition and quickly used Clay Wall to create a wall of earth in front of Alexio, blocking his line of sight.

Dozens of balls of light shot out from the center of Alexio's sword at high speed. They pummeled my Clay Wall, destroying it in seconds.

S-so many attacks, and so fast... This man sure is powerful!

Atlach-Nacha pointed her finger at Alexio. The broken pieces of my Clay Wall floated into the air and shot toward him, seemingly of their own accord. After a second, I realized Atlach-Nacha was using her webs to grab the pieces of rubble and throw them.

Alexio protected his head with his arms and batted away the clumps of clay.

Allo also moved as if to attack Alexio—but as she did, she glanced at the sky and froze, her gaze transfixed on a point above her. Alexio was completely forgotten for the moment.

I followed Allo's gaze, curious what had caught her attention. In seconds, it was clear: The other dragon knights were coming closer.

"Gale!" Allo shot the attack into the sky. The three dragon knights who were in range quickly gained altitude, escaping into the air above them. But two other dragon knights swooped in from a different direction and closed the distance between us in moments.

I used Clay Wall to make another barrier in front of the dragon knights, and they narrowly avoided crashing into it. The knights would make quick work of the wall, but it bought us a bit of time before they reached us.

In the meantime, Allo packed her left arm with clay to enlarge it. She dashed toward the gap in the Clay Wall created by one of the Zephyrs when it tried to claw through with its talons. Then she reached through the hole with her massive arm and slammed it into the dragon on the other side.

"Clay!" At Allo's cry, a sharp spike shot out from my Clay Wall toward the second dragon and pierced through its chest. As the Holy Knight rider jumped down from their dead mount, sword drawn, she grabbed them with her enlarged arm and used Mana Drain to suck up their MP before slamming them to the ground.

We'd managed to respond to their attacks in time so far, but only just. There was no time to spare.

The first dragon knight Allo hit—who seemed to have only sustained a minimal amount of damage—was using simple white magic to heal his dragon while watching us from a distance. Several more dragon knights flew down from above to engage us. I felt bad forcing Atlach-Nacha to face Alexio all on her own, but Allo and I had our hands full dealing with the other dragon knights.

If only Master Volk were here to distract Alexio or take care of more of the dragon knights, maybe this battle would be a little easier... But he's not. He left. So now it's up to us three to take care of Alexio and the dragon knights on our own.

The dragon knights flew down to attack us again and again. I blocked their assaults with Clay Wall and shot Clay Spheres at them whenever I saw an opening. Allo swapped between magic and melee attacks to repel them one after the other.

While Allo and I dealt with the dragon knight hordes, Atlach-Nacha was really getting into it with Alexio. She seemed to be fending him off through a combination of help from her Doppel Cocoon clone, attacking with her deadly Thread Slice skill, and swinging her clawed arms at him to keep him off her.

But even so, it was clear that she was outmatched. She was using all of the skills she could to try and create an advantage for herself, but Alexio and his sword were much faster. Allo and I tried to help by sending magic attacks whenever we had a chance, but Alexio deflected them all without so much as a glance.

Atlach-Nacha shot another Thread Slice from her fingertips. As she did, her Doppel Cocoon clone approached and raised its arm.

Until now, Atlach-Nacha had only attacked Alexio from a distance with her ranged skills, and her actual body and her web clone were focused on trying to keep him away. Now it seemed like she finally decided to join the fray for real.

I was trying to help Atlach-Nacha as much as I could, but I didn't have much time to spare either. The dragon knights swooped down to attack and then flew back up to rest and heal in turns, wearing us down little by little. Allo and I managed to kill six of them somehow, but there were more than twice as many still left to fight. If Atlach-Nacha was making her move, then I wanted to give her support, but right now, I was too busy to back her up.

Alexio readied his sword as the web clone's arm swung at him and slashed through it. *He really is way faster than Atlach-Nacha. Did she rush in too early?*

Alexio slashed horizontally across the web clone's torso. The only reason Atlach-Nacha had been able to hold out this long was because she had the web clone supporting her. There was no way she could take him on her own...

I was preparing for the worst. But then, something unexpected happened.

"Wh-what?! These webs, they're...!"

Not all of Atlach-Nacha's web clone's torso was severed; it dangled to the side, a single web keeping it tethered. Unfortunately

for Alexio, the torso fell upon his sword and arms. The clone's sticky web body clung to him like glue.

Miss Atlach-Nacha's webs are called Dark Sticky Thread, right? I remembered her mentioning that they were difficult to break, and had the added bonus of continuously reducing the HP and MP of anyone they touched. I hadn't expected them to be quite so effective, though…

The Doppel Cocoon had physical abilities on par with the user's original body. On top of that, if it was hit with a melee attack, it could turn into a clump of webs that stuck to its opponent to hinder their movement and deplete their HP?! Talk about a useful skill!

If only I had something that handy…

"Guh!" Alexio tried to take a big step backward, but the webs still clung to his sword and arm, rooting him in place. He struggled, but the Doppel Cocoon webs only stretched tighter.

"I won't let you get away!" Atlach-Nacha bent over and slammed her palms onto the ground. A web of black threads sprayed out in a circle with her at the center. Alexio, still struggling to move, couldn't get out of range in time. The webs wrapped around his legs, tethering him firmly to the spot.

"R-ridiculous! A mere monster is…!" Oily sweat began to form above Alexio's brows.

This was it. Atlach-Nacha had seized Alexio's arms and legs. He could no longer use his full power to attack us. All that was left was to finish him off before he escaped from the webs.

"Knight-Commander Alexio!" One of the dragon knights called, swooping down to rescue him.

"Gale!" Allo's wind magic intercepted the dragon knight.

"Dark Sphere." Black light formed into a sphere in front of Atlach-Nacha's lowered arms. When Alexio saw it, he gritted his teeth.

"Don't you dare underestimate me, you filth!" He took a step forward and swung his sword at Atlach-Nacha. But his impatience and inability to break free of the webs took their toll, and he swung

his sword in an arc so slow and wide that even I could see its trajectory.

Atlach-Nacha stepped back to stand just outside the range of his swing. His blade slashed right in front of the lower half of her spider body.

Alexio's eyes widened.

The moment his blade swung down, it sliced cleanly through the Dark Sphere Atlach-Nacha had positioned right in front of her. The Dark Sphere exploded, cracking Alexio's breastplate and blowing him back. He landed on his hip in the dirt, hard. After a moment's pause, he spat blood from his mouth and staggered back to his feet.

The explosion had freed Alexio from his web restraints, but he looked like he'd taken a significant amount of damage. If he was still relatively unharmed after such a decisive blow, I would've been afraid that we couldn't beat him—but now I could tell that we had a chance.

"Hmph... What a nuisance. I haven't lost too much blood, have I?" Alexio grumbled, then looked up at the sky as if considering whether he should fly to safety and heal himself with magic.

But I wasn't going to let that happen. Atlach-Nacha had risked her life to give us this opportunity—I wasn't going to waste it. Allo and I regrouped, poised to fend off any dragon knights who came down to try and rescue Alexio, and Atlach-Nacha shot a Thread Slice at Alexio from her fingertips.

"Hng!" With a grunt, Alexio cut the threads with his sword and stepped back. But his reaction time was much slower than before. If Atlach-Nacha had done this earlier, he would've avoided her attack with ease and already closed the distance between them. The damage had taken a toll on him.

Instead, Atlach-Nacha was the one to close the distance, and she fired another Thread Slice. Alexio tried to fend it off with his sword again, but this time, the Thread Slice grazed the edge of his blade and cut through his nondominant hand. It was getting harder and harder for him to respond to our attacks in time.

The battle seemed to be about half over. If the fight continued the way it was going, Atlach-Nacha should be able to defeat Alexio.

“You fight like a coward!” Alexio growled, then lowered his sword and moved his shoulder up and down. Atlach-Nacha moved one step forward. She was much closer now; with Alexio slowing down, she was probably confident that she could handle it if Alexio decided to slash at her.

That step was all the provocation Alexio needed. “Bring it on, spider girl!” he shouted, readying his sword.

Part 3

ONCE WE INJURED ALEXIO, the fight turned into a battle of endurance.

Allo and I attacked the dragon knights that flew down from above with our magic skills to drive them back into sky. Seeing that Alexio was in dire straits, the dragon knights kept trying to get close enough to rescue him. Allo grounded them with Gale, then used her reinforced clay arms to finish them off.

Atlach-Nacha continued her battle with Alexio, sending out Thread Slice after Thread Slice to steadily reduce his health. While she wasn’t quite as venomous as Lacerta, she was still highly toxic. With each new wound she inflicted, Alexio’s movements became slower and slower.

Meanwhile, one by one, the number of dragon knights threatening our group decreased. The group of more than twenty dragon knights we faced at the beginning of this fight had fallen to a mere ten.

Alexio, having apparently reached his limit in the face of Atlach-Nacha’s precise venom attacks, fell to his knees at last.

“I-Is this…the end for me? It cannot be! I am… I’m Knight-Commander Alexio Azrod, the finest swordsman in the Holy Land!” he shouted, casting his eyes to the dragon knights flying overhead. “S-someone, one of you, come down to get me at once! That is an order! Hurry!”

At long last, thanks to Atlach-Nacha, it was finally over. Since she'd evolved from her previous Nightmare evolution, she'd gotten a lot craftier with her battle strategies—to say nothing of her impressive physical abilities.

Alexio's raw strength and speed made him a threat. But apart from that, he was a traditional swordsman who fought his opponents head-on, without any unusual attack methods. That fact likely made him an easier opponent to beat than most for the web-slinging Atlach-Nacha.

Just as I was sure we'd won, I saw a dragon knight dive down from above and dodge past Allo's Gale.

Hmm? Allo's managed to keep the dragons at bay until now. Did she run out of MP or something? She must've been getting low...

I peered up at the sky again and noticed that this dragon was a different color than the rest. Not just that, but it looked...strange.

The dragon's entire body was covered in mottled red spots, and its eyes seemed out of focus. It was skin and bones, its hide creased and wrinkled. It had a massive scar on its neck, like some beast had taken a huge chunk out of it.

But despite its ragged appearance, it was much faster than the other dragons. *No wonder it made it past Allo's Gale...*

"That dragon...is dead." Allo said, staring at the eerie dragon.

‹I-If it's dead, then why is it moving?!› I asked, but Allo didn't answer. From the look on her face, she was just as confused as I was. Some kind of Special Skill, perhaps...?

Atlach-Nacha, who was about to deliver the final blow to Alexio, leapt back and hid behind him. Moments later, a smallish figure jumped down from the dead dragon's back.

It was a girl. She dropped straight down and landed right next to Alexio. As soon as she left the dead dragon's back, the now-riderless dragon plunged headfirst into the ground, its neck snapping, and toppled over in a spectacular heap. It seemed like it had reverted to being a motionless corpse.

The sudden newcomer was a green-haired girl in a black dress. She didn't look like a soldier, but her landing made it clear that she possessed unusually impressive physical abilities. No

typical human would be completely unharmed after dropping down from that height, but the girl didn't have a single injury to speak of. On top of that, she had an eerie, grotesque air about her, as if she were also a corpse.

"The Devil of the Great Prison...? What's *she* doing here?"

"The saint said she wanted to use her to fight the Evil Dragon..."

There was a strange atmosphere among the dragon knights as well. Although they'd just received reinforcements at a dire moment, they seemed somewhat unsettled.

"Y-you're...Miss Aluanne, yes? You've come to save me...?" Alexio asked her timidly.

The green-haired girl—who he'd called Aluanne—looked surprised, as if recognizing him for the first time when he called out to her. Then she gave a mysterious smile.

"You'd make the third one, so it should be okay, right? Miss Saint said I could have five of you. Y'see, well, I get hungry. And bad things happen when I get hungry. So it should be fine, right? I mean, it looks like you're dying anyway. You are, right? Bet you'd be more useful to the saint this way. Okay?"

"Wh-what're you..." Alexio backed away, suddenly on guard. The air flashed as Aluanne darted behind him, then sank her teeth into his neck.

It all happened in a single moment. Alexio flailed wildly, trying to shake her off, but the girl didn't even twitch.

The well-built man who gave Volk a run for his money in their own battle was completely unable to move the girl's slender arms away from him. It was an extraordinary sight to behold.

Within seconds, Alexio's body drained of muscle, becoming thin and emaciated. Red welts appeared on his skin, just like the ones we saw on the dragon. Then Aluanne unlatched her jaw from him and stepped back. Alexio collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

"*Ahh...*the knight-commander's blood is so tasty. Nothing satisfies me quite like fresh human blood! It's the only thing that hits the spot!"

Aluanne wiped Alexio’s blood from around her mouth with the back of her hand.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around the scene in front of me. Allo, Atlach-Nacha, and I just watched, completely dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events.

What in the world is that…thing? There’s no way she’s human. Did Lilyxila bring her along?

“The Devil killed Knight-Commander Alexio!”

“I knew we should’ve never brought her along!”

The dragon knights shrieked in fear and flew away. With a sated and serene look in her eyes, Aluanne counted the figures growing smaller in the distance.



“Nine…ten…*mmm.* I know I promised to not let others see me eat, but…this was an emergency. Okay? I had to…” Aluanne mumbled as she watched their retreating backs disappear into the fog. She cocked her neck to the side like a broken marionette doll, then turned her gaze toward us. Her eyes studied us for a few seconds. Then she smiled hungrily.

Seeing her smile convinced me that this human—or rather, this creature—was definitely not someone we could handle ourselves.

Part 4: Volk

MY IMPRESSION UPON SEEING the man known as Howgley for the first time was that he looked nothing like what I expected. Even after seeing the acrobatics he pulled to stop my and Alexio’s swords, I couldn’t believe that this short old man was someone to be feared.

Was this truly the legendary swordsman Anise Howgley? And if he was, then was he really powerful enough to be called a god of swords, like all the rumors said? That was the real question.

Howgley had short brown hair and a well-groomed, pointed beard. He was so short that he could be mistaken for a child from afar. The blade at his hip looked no more imposing than a dagger used to train children before they were large enough to pick up a sword.

But after getting a good look at him up close as he and another of the Holy Knights flew behind me on the same Zephyr, I was suddenly struck with a sinking feeling.

I…won’t be able to defeat this man in combat. Why have I been so eager to challenge such a beast all this time?

It wasn’t that he was particularly intimidating, or that he possessed the monstrous aura that distinguished powerful swordsmen. But I could sense it. This man was no swordsman; at least, not a type of swordsman I knew. He was a monster from an entirely different dimension.

When I faced swordsmen and monsters of higher rank than myself, I always found myself full of excitement rather than fear. I was curious about what kind of techniques my opponent would show me, what moves they made, and whether or not I was stronger than them.

But Howgley was different. Looking at him felt less like looking at a human being and more like I was peering into the gaping maw of a molten volcano.

If I jumped in, I'd be dead in an instant. This wasn't a fight; it was suicide. My instincts screamed that truth at me so loudly that my head ached.

But that was why I had to do it.

I closed my eyes and said a mental farewell and apology to Allo and the others. I knew they would see me leave and label me a traitor. After all, I was the one who suggested I should fight from the sky to prevent the dragon knights from resting.

But there were no other options.

I opened my eyes and pointed my sword at Howgley. "I never expected to meet the legendary swordsman, Howgley the Glutton, on an island at the edge of the world! As a fellow swordsman of some renown, I challenge you to a duel! But not here, where there are too many distractions. If you accept my duel, then follow me!"

At that, I turned my back to him and shot through the air on Lacerta in the opposite direction.

I wondered if he would be able to keep up with our pace, but when I checked behind me, I spotted the other dragon he was riding with the Holy Knight following behind me.

I was glad I'd achieved my goal. If Howgley had stayed there, with the rest of my comrades, he would've killed them all. Now I just had to go as far away as possible to delay his return as long as I could.

And once I'd achieved that, well, my work here would be done.

"...Forgive me, Lacerta, Magiatite. I couldn't leave him there to kill the others, and now I've dragged you two into this."

"Kssshi..." Lacerta gave a mournful hiss.

“But…I do not intend to lose this fight.” It was a lie. For the very first time in my life, I could not picture what I would look like after fighting Howgley and surviving.

“S-Sir Howgley,” protested the Holy Knight who was accompanying Howgley, “rather than facing this duel yourself, I would much prefer to aid you in fighting those monsters…”

“You may remind the saint that while I have complied with her order to accompany her into battle, I will be doing so my own way,” Howgley replied matter-of-factly.

After that, we flew in silence for a while, moving steadily forward in a straight line.

I looked around. The ground below us was hazy with fog, but there was a row of sharp rocks that seemed to mark the edge of a large cliff.

“This is far enough,” Howgley spoke up from behind me.

But we needed to be farther, as far away from the others as possible. “There is a place up ahead that is fit for a duel between swordsmen,” I insisted. “Follow me, Glutton.”

“No.” Howgley’s answer was immediate. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to buy time. I followed because of your willingness to risk your life as a decoy to save your friends. But in truth, I realized your intentions at the very start, and I cannot trouble the saint any further with my own selfishness. This ends here.”

A chill ran down my spine. He saw right through me.

“What is it? Do you wish to break our agreement and flee for your life? That’s fine. I would not judge you as a coward for doing so. I know that you have your own burdens to bear. But you ought to know that at this distance, there is no escape.” Howgley’s words rang with finality.

Even so, Lacerta and the Zephyr seemed to be on equal footing in terms of speed. With a few choice skills, escape seemed entirely possible. In fact, it felt like our best option—I didn’t understand what Howgley meant by there being no chance for escape.

But I was inclined to take him at his word. It didn't seem like he was the type to bluff. Besides, he probably wouldn't have agreed to the duel and followed me if he needed to bluff in order stop me anyway.

Either I'd run away like a coward and get stabbed in the back, or I'd take on the duel and lose my life fair and square. Perhaps I'd still have a better chance at surviving if I risked my life to try and escape, however slim the chance was. But…if I was going to die, I wanted to die fighting. However selfish that made me.

"…Very well. Then let us descend to fight on the ground."

"No, no. We'll fight as we are. You battled Knight-Commander Alexio in the air, didn't you? Surely you didn't bring me all the way here so you could have a proper swordsman duel." Howgley gave a slight shake of his head. "You risked your life to draw me out here, away from your friends."

"I…yes. You're right," I murmured, then drew my sword. "Turn around, Lacerta. I'll strike him down here and now."

At my words, Lacerta turned in a wide arc to face Howgley and his Zephyr. Pushing the Holy Knight aside, Howgley moved forward and put his hand on the dagger at his waist.

"Face me, Glutton!" I howled and raised my sword over my head.

I pretended to bring it down in a vertical swing but then twisted my body at the last moment and swung the blade in a broad horizontal arc instead.

But the attack did not connect. As if he knew my intentions in advance, Howgley bent down—rather slowly—to avoid my sword.

As the Zephyr and Lacerta passed each other, pain blossomed across my back in a long slice.

"Tch…!" It seemed like Howgley had cut me with his dagger as we passed.

Fortunately, the attack didn't do much damage. Howgley's movements were slow, and he was not particularly powerful. Perhaps his level was not that high after all…?

I turned to face him again, certain I would slay him with the next pass. But as I did, I felt a sharp, searing pain across the cut I

received, as if Howgley's blade was gouging me from the inside out.

At the same time, my consciousness began to fade. The world began to shake violently around me. No, it was Lacerta shuddering beneath me. Right in front of my eyes, her large black wings fluttered weakly, spurting blood.

When Howgley cut me, he'd also slashed through Lacerta's wings and back. How he'd managed to do so with such a short blade was beyond me.

"Farewell, Dragonslayer."

Howgley's quiet murmur reverberated through my mind. The next time my vision returned, instead of seeing the sky above us, all I saw were two rocky outcroppings at the edge of a cliff. The fog was so thick that I could not see what awaited us at the bottom.

"...Forgive me, Illusia." I whispered a final apology in my fading consciousness as my body tumbled through the air. From far off in the distance, I heard Lacerta's mournful cry.

Part 5: Treant

"LET'S SEE...mmm...a tree, an undead, and a spider, huh?" Aluanne studied us, wrinkling her nose. "They sound so gross that they'd make me sick."

It was at that moment that I sensed it. Aluanne looked like a girl, but her eyes were those of a predator staring at its prey. She felt less like a human and closer to one of the manticores I sometimes saw walking by when I was living as a tree, or even one of the strange monsters that prowled this island.

Aluanne swayed unsteadily on her feet, then dropped into a crouch and sprinted straight at us.

She was several degrees faster than Alexio, who'd just battled Master Volk. Behind her, Alexio's corpse got to its feet and began to run as well. He was emaciated, with dull gray skin and red welts all over his body as if he was afflicted with some strange disease. His eyes, too, lacked the spark of life.

Despite this, he moved quite a bit faster now than when he was alive. Alexio's condition matched that of the dragon Aluanne rode to meet us.

Maybe Aluanne had a skill that allowed her to take control of corpses and enhance their stats? The skill seemed similar to Allo's Undead Maker, which allowed her to use corpses as weapons but focused in on a specific target instead. She'd abandoned her Zephyr steed immediately, so the skill might be limited to a single corpse as well.

However...Undead Maker didn't improve its target's physical abilities and movement like this skill did.

Aluanne stretched her arms and opened her mouth wide, displaying sharp fangs hidden in the back of her mouth. They were clearly not human. When she stretched her arms out, sharp, talon-like red claws extended from her fingertips. Aluanne wasn't just a monstrous girl—she was a true monster through and through.

‹M-Miss Allo, Miss Atlach-Nacha! Let's get out here!› I called to the others via Telepathy.

But Allo—gaze transfixed on Aluanne—shook her head. "...We can't," she said softly.

Atlach-Nacha didn't respond, perhaps stunned into silence. After what we'd just seen, I didn't blame her. Allo was right. With the difference in our speeds, it would be impossible for us to even escape.

No...this is no time to let fear win. We have to fight and find a way to beat her somehow. That's the only way we're all getting out of this alive.

It wasn't like there was no chance of us surviving. Atlach-Nacha excelled in physical attacks and Allo excelled in magic. If we worked together and all attacked at once, we were powerful enough to defeat even enemies who were much stronger than us. Aluanne wasn't impossible to defeat. We just needed an opening, and I felt like maybe I could make one.

Our chances were slim at best; I knew that. But if I was too afraid to act, then we'd have no chance at all. We needed to act as a perfect team, or else it would be over for us. If I chickened out and

ran away now, both Allo and Atlach-Nacha would be killed. And it would be my fault.

All this time, I had stayed on the sidelines and let myself be protected by others. During the battle of Alban, I was the only one Master Dragon considered unfit for battle. I was made to stay behind in the mine while my friends risked their lives.

But this time…*this* time, things would be different! I'd protect Miss Allo and Miss Atlach-Nacha in this battle, even if it cost me my life!

Allo and Atlach-Nacha were standing still as Aluanne approached, desperately trying to come up with a plan to intercept her. I stepped in front of them.

"Treant…?" Allo looked at me, confused.

‹We need to use our numbers to our advantage! I'll distract her; you two, wait for an opening and attack! That's the only way we'll hit her!›

If Aluanne's only means of attack were through melee skills, then even if it was only a small one, she'd always leave an opening when she attacked. And I was certain that in that moment, Miss Allo and Miss Atlach-Nacha would be able to strike.

"N-no way! You want to be our decoy?! Absolutely not! Go back!" Allo shouted, panic in her eyes.

‹I have no intentions of sacrificing myself. I'm doing this so everyone can survive and laugh around the campfire together again when this is over.› I ended my Tree Spirit Transformation. In the blink of an eye, my body shot up to over ten meters tall, expanding as I returned to my tree form.

I reapplied my Physical Barrier on myself, then used Decoy. The skill was used to more easily attract an enemy's attention.

Alexio, running alongside Aluanne, raised his sword in a wide arc.

There was still ample space between us and Aluanne. Confused, I watched the sword fall in a massive slash directed right at the center of my trunk.

Suddenly, I realized what he was doing. *‹He's using the same skill as Master Volk! Shockwave!›* Did this mean Aluanne could control

the skills her corpse used too?!

Alexio's Shockwave sliced through the center of my trunk, its crackling heat piercing deep. All of my strength left my body. I couldn't even fight back as I was knocked to the ground with ease. Just a single, direct hit and I was down for the count. I felt like my life was hanging on by a thread.

Miss Allo shot had me down when I suggested acting as their shield, but I still had some faith in my own durability. I was naive. A bit of defense was nothing against an opponent as powerful as Alexio or Aluanne. I was still completely helpless.

I couldn't make my body move the way I wanted it to. My vision was hazy, teetering on the edge of consciousness. *How deep did that attack cut into me…?*

Suddenly, Allo came into my field of view as she stepped in front of me.

"Gale!" A whirlwind flew out from her extended arm toward Aluanne and Alexio. But the two split to the left and right, dodging the attack with ease. With the difference in our physical abilities, none of our skills would hit either of them, no matter how many times we tried.

After dodging Allo's Gale, Aluanne sped up even more. She looked like a blur at this point. *She's going even faster now? Was she just taking her sweet time before?*

Aluanne leapt at Allo in front of me, claws extended. At the current distance, Allo had probably assumed Aluanne was still too far away to initiate melee combat. She was no doubt thinking of which long-range attack to use over and over in an attempt to hit her target.

Now Allo stood, dumbfounded, arm still raised, as Aluanne approached her. In truth, it happened so fast that she didn't have any time to react. Aluanne went from several hundred meters away to right in front of Allo in an instant.

"Sorry, undead girl. I'm sorry," Aluanne said with an eerie smile as she swung her blood-red claws. Suddenly, Allo lurched back in an unnatural movement.

I understood what happened a moment later—Miss Atlach-Nacha had yanked her back with one of her webs.

Th-that was a close call…

I expected Miss Allo to land on her feet after being pulled back. But instead, she crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had all been cut at once. Then her stomach split open, splattering blood and flesh everywhere, and her body folded over on itself. Just as I had felt a moment of relief that Allo was safe, it was taken from me.

‹M-Miss Allo…?›

Allo's eyes went wide, and her mouth opened and closed like a fish pulled from the water.

She couldn't avoid it. Aluanne's claws had just managed to slice their way through Allo's flesh.

Part 6: Atlach-Nacha

FOR A MOMENT, I thought I'd pulled Allo back in time with my web.

But I was wrong.

Just when I thought I'd gotten her out of harm's way, Aluanne's red claws lengthened even further.

Allo collapsed on the ground, holding her gouged-out abdomen.

"Th-thank you…Atlach-Nacha…" she said weakly.

I wasn't the best at speaking, so instead I nodded. For some reason, the right-headed Master always grinned like a pleased idiot when I spoke up, so I tried to make a habit of it. But I couldn't focus on something as trivial as words right now.

Allo was desperately trying to heal herself with Regenerate, and her torn stomach seemed to be rapidly mending itself back together. But considering the amount of damage she just took, she

was in no condition to just slap a proverbial bandage over her wound and return to battle.

In fact, maybe deciding to try and fight this creature had been a mistake in and of itself.

Aluanne's retractable red claws seemed to be made of blood—blood that was magically enhanced with her skills to harden and sharpen into wicked points.

"I really, really, *really* don't like monster blood. I don't wanna drink it. It's *sooo* disgusting, and suffocating, and bitter, and makes me choke…I hate it! But I have to. For the saint, I have to." Aluanne moved toward us, eyes scanning Allo like she was judging the quality of a piece of meat. The newly undead knight, Alexio, followed closely behind her.

Aluanne's facial expressions and tone of voice were both monotone, her emotions completely unreadable. She made my skin crawl. Her voice was soft and sweet, like a child trying to wheedle something out of their mother, and her eyes were filled with sympathy and pity. But her mouth, with its many teeth, was that of a demon toying with its prey. Perhaps that was the only honest part of her.

Or perhaps Aluanne truly had no idea that what she was doing was wrong. The more I thought about it, the more I believed it was true. It was not uncommon for monsters to live solely according to their instincts. And it seemed like there were humans who lived the same way, although this was the first time I'd encountered it.

The tree was still recovering from the damage it took, and Allo was in no state to return to battle. Our opponents were a rank A devil and her rank B undead follower. What in the world could I do against them?

I'd already gotten rid of my second Doppel Cocoon to let Master know of the dire situation we were in. Doing so should have alerted him that something had gone wrong on our end.

However…it was unlikely that he'd be able to immediately rush to our rescue in all this fog. And, Master being Master, I doubted he was in much of a position to afford to come to our aid right now anyway.

What was my best course of action in this situation? Was there any other option than to await our complete annihilation?

I was confident that I was a bit more cunning than the purehearted Allo or the cheery buffoon of a tree who didn't seem to have a single age ring inside its trunk when cut.

There had to be a way out of this somehow...

"Hmmm..." I pointed my finger at Allo, who'd just gotten to her feet, and shot a web from my fingertip.

"Huh?" Allo looked at me, confused.

"Allo, take Treant and get out of here. I'll buy you some time."

Allo frantically shook her head. "N-no way! I can't do that! You'll...you'll..."

"I'm the only one fast enough. And I don't have many injuries. Besides, right now, you two are just a burden. Just take the big lug over there, make it small, and go."

‹M-Miss Atlach-Nacha...?› Treant's body jolted in shock.

"But—"

"Hurry! If you two escape, I can use my webs to catch up to you." I wiggled my fingers at Allo as I hurried her along. Allo looked at my fingertips, then nodded, still looking confused.

Treant looked like it was about to say something, but instead, it began its Tree Spirit Transformation. Perhaps what I said to rush them along did the trick.

Well, good. If they take too long, then we're all dead.

Allo enlarged one of her arms and ran off with tree spirit Treant on her back. As they ran, Treant looked back at me the entire time with an inconsolable look on its face. Honestly...what a wimp.

"Wow, Miss Spider...you're real kind, aren't you? But too bad, too bad for you! Even if you split up, it's no good, no good at all!"

Alexio, who was running alongside Aluanne, split off from her and sprinted toward Allo and Treant.

"See? See? If you do that, then I'll have to do this. Sorry, okay? Sorry!" When Aluanne reached me, she stopped and peered into my face, seemingly looking for my reaction. "Because, y'see, I know. I

know you lied to them so they'd run away without putting up a fight."

I remained silent.

"It's strange, you know, a little strange. The one thing I can't stand is a liar. I hate liars. If you lie, I can always tell right away."

...Aluanne really was a creepy little girl.

But she was right; I told Allo that I'd catch up to them with my webs so that she could focus on escaping. I once managed to move really fast by attaching my webs to another fast monster and having them pull me along, which Allo saw. So I thought if I stuck a web to Allo and told her that, she'd assume that I'd be able to catch up to them by winding the web back up and using her to pull me along in the same way.

But of course, I didn't actually have a skill handy enough to allow me to do that. My webs didn't retract that quickly, and if they got tangled, they'd be useless. If it were possible for me to do that, I would've already set up webs in a bunch of different spots to give myself a bit of insurance.

I was afraid that if I explained it in detail, it would be too obvious that it was a lie, so I only hinted at it to hide the truth.

"Sorry, but it's over for all of you."

Aluanne's words almost made me smile. Of course, I knew that despite my two friends' injuries, they'd be the one ending the undead for good.

"No...just me," I replied.

The undead Alexio had already caught up to Allo, who was carrying Treant. He swung his sword wide, then went strangely rigid, flailed his blade around wildly, and slammed it into the ground, making him fall. He got up immediately, but Allo and Treant were already a good distance away.

"Ah..." Aluanne's mouth opened in surprise.

"That's all they could do? Well...better than nothing, I guess."

Just as I thought.

Allo's skill, Undead Maker, was able to manipulate the corpses around her to use as weapons. It seemed like it also worked with

undead Alexio, although he'd already been controlled by Aluanne somehow—at least enough to stop his movements for a moment if he got close enough.

To be honest, it was a bit of a gamble whether it would work or not. But I was pretty sure they'd manage to get away with that skill at Allo's disposal, especially if there was a limit on the range of Aluanne's undead controlling skill. It was a last resort, and full of uncertainties, but it was the only shot they had, so I had to hold out hope.

"Oh, dear. I'll have to hunt them down myself!" Aluanne said, waving both arms. Her claws, which had been finger-length at most before, immediately grew to more than five times their original length. Aluanne was now carrying ten red pointed blades at her fingertips.

"Sorry, but you won't have the chance." I raised both of my arms into the sky and used Doppel Cocoon. This wasn't the time to preserve my MP; I could be killed at any instant. Instead, I used Doppel Cocoon with the intention of using all of the MP I had left at once. Dozens of red webs extended from my fingertips to form identical clones of myself—there were four in total.

"Because…you're gonna get in my way? Is that it?" Aluanne tilted her head in confusion, as if to say, "You really think you'll stop me with those?"

But I only told her that to mislead her.

Allo had a skill called Fog of the Dead. On an island as foggy as this one, it would be next to impossible to chase her if she had a decent head start. And with no information to go off of, I'd like to see Aluanne try.

My four Doppel Cocoons pounced at Aluanne at the same time. She leapt to the side to escape the clones closing in. Then she began to sprint in a wide circle around me. My clones could no longer easily catch up to her.

Aluanne kicked off from the ground and jumped at me in an open space between my spider clones. There was no time to recall them to me. Instead, I swung my arm and released five Thread Slice attacks in a horizontal arc from close range.

Aluanne's dress ripped, and blood ran down her skin.

But my attack barely pierced her skin. I was hoping they'd tear her to pieces, but it was better than nothing. She was terribly tough. I'd have to hit her with a much heavier attack to do any real damage.

I mean, I knew that already. But I'm not the type to let her beat me without a fight. That's all.

Aluanne appeared in front of me, and the world suddenly felt like it was in slow motion. I tried to use this to my advantage to avoid her attack, but my body moved just as slowly, as though I were wading through mud.

Ahh…I don't think I'll be able to avoid this.

Strangely, I wasn't afraid. I felt like my work here was finished. All that was left was for Allo and Treant to get away safely…

I just hoped the right-headed Master will defeat that blackhearted woman and come out in once piece.

It was a little funny when I thought about it. At the end of the day, I considered that buffoon of a tree a pretty dear friend.

While I felt like I could be a little more proud of myself right now, I felt a strong sense of regret for forcing Allo and Treant to take care of the rest of this fight on their own. My death would be a difficult burden for them to bear.

Yeah…I think the left-headed Master must've felt the same way.

At that moment, a long red claw stretched across my neck.

Part 7: Lilyxila

"DAMN, YOU REALLY TOOK a beating, Saint! Humans sure are fragile, eh? One hit, and you're down for the count!" Beelzebub cackled as he flew through the foggy sky, Lilyxila in his arms. Lilyxila had already used Hi-Rest to heal herself, but she hadn't been able to raise her left arm since Illusia tore through her shoulder with Dimension Claws.

The injury on her waist was so bad that she couldn't move her legs well either. She needed to meet up with Regeneration Master Oulu so that he could heal her with Regen.

"Y'know...don't you think it's a bit of a problem that you can only get the lay of the land and meet up with the others through my eyes? I'm a pretty talented guy, to be fair, but still!"

"Yes, I do appreciate having your abilities at my disposal. Without you, I would have inherited the Beast Realm Path myself and used some other monster as my pawn instead."

"Ha! You really know how to tell it like it is, Saint! Oh, looks like Oulu is nearby," Beelzebub said as he glided along.

"Once you drop me off, please tell Aluanne and Howgley to return. Alexio is dead, yes?"

"I only saw it from a distance, but yeah, no doubt about that. And Aluanne missed out on two of 'em, but she had the third one in her sights, just like you told her to. I thought she'd kill 'em right away, but that little brat is a lot more obedient than I thought."

Thanks to Beelzebub's Followers' Eyes skill, Lilyxila had a rough idea of everything that was going on in this foggy land. She knew of Howgley and Volk's duel, Alexio's death, and that Aluanne had *captured* one of Illusia's monsters.

Lilyxila's decision to discard her secret weapon—Eldia—so quickly was part of her plan to bring in a new, more powerful asset. She wanted a chess piece on the board that would give her some leverage over Illusia and his extraordinary stats. In short, she aimed to use Spirit Servant to turn one of Illusia's friends into her minion.

"Two of them escaped, you said? That's...unfortunate. I would have preferred she subdued the rest of them after capturing the first. They could have served as backups once my third Spirit Servant is destroyed. But subjugating a spirit servant drains a large amount of MP, so that isn't a strategy I'd prefer to use regardless."

"Oho, those are some dastardly thoughts, Madame General. And humans say us monsters are the evil ones. Talk about prejudiced. There weren't any monsters nearly as wicked as you back at home in the Great Ravine. We were just cute, innocent little monsters who ate when we were hungry and laid out in the sun

when we were sleepy.” Beelzebub’s words were tinged with an air of distaste.

“Who is currently escorting Oulu?” Lilyxila asked, ignoring him.

“Huh? That damn coward’s escort hasn’t changed since you assigned her to him. Anyway…we’ll meet up with ’em soon.” As he spoke, Beelzebub landed on the ground. In front of them—along with one of Beelzebub’s fly minions—was a lone Zephyr. Atop its back sat Regeneration Master Oulu and the Holy Knight Alphis. When she saw Alphis, Lilyxila let out a small sigh of relief.

“Saint Lilyxila?! You’re hurt…!” Alphis exclaimed.

“It is of no issue, so long as I don’t die. Thankfully, we have Oulu here to make sure of that.”

Oulu gritted his teeth and glared at Lilyxila. “A winnable battle, you said! What’s winnable about this?! You told me even if we lost, it wouldn’t be a battle where all of our lives were at stake! And it was all a lie! You tricked me, you bastard!” His eyes filled with tears. “I just…I just wanted to go back to my village! Why are you doing this to me? Why?! What have I done to deserve this?!”

Oulu and Alphis had been watching the battle between Allo and the dragon knights from the rear. They had been tasked with recovering the seriously wounded and using Oulu’s magic to heal them.

However, they ended up mostly unable to complete this task because Oulu started panicking, and they had to withdraw from the battlefield entirely as soon as Aluanne was sent out.

“I know you were considering this as well, Saint Lilyxila, but… perhaps you should have brought Oulu along with you instead?” Alphis asked her.

Lilyxila shook her head. “No, the only way to get him to truly understand the situation at hand as quickly as possible was for him to see the field of battle firsthand. I doubted he’d be able to operate under these conditions from the very beginning. But thanks to him, I was able to risk exposing myself to the Human Realm Path user directly.”

Alphis forced Oulu to dismount and stand on the ground. Lilyxila stood in front of him. “I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused

you, Oulu. But I cannot pretend to be anyone more than who I am. Alphis, if he does not listen, I will permit you to use a bit of violence, but nothing that would force him to use his own regeneration magic on himself. We wouldn't want him to waste his MP."

"So that…that is how you're choosing to operate, *Lilyxilaaaa*?!" Oulu howled, lunging for her. Alphis drew her sword and placed it against Oulu's neck, blocking his movement. "You devil! Both of you, devils! You call yourself a saint?! Of the Holy Land?! Blasphemy!"

Alphis had no words with which to respond to his outburst. Oulu had followed Lilyxila's instructions, but he did not believe that her actions were justified. "Saint Lilyxila…he, well, it may be difficult to convince Master Oulu to fulfill his duties as promised, especially at a critical moment," she said anxiously.

What Alphis really wanted to ask her was, "Is it truly okay to continue down this path?" But she couldn't get the words to come out.

Lilyxila gave a small, curt nod. "I cannot go to the trouble of convincing him in the middle of a war zone. I've thought of a countermeasure. It may be a little much for him, but…"

Chapter 3:
Deal with the Devil Girl

Part 1

As I rested from my battle with Eldia, relieved I'd come out of it more or less unharmed, I noticed something.

The second of the three knitted spiders Atlach-Nacha attached to my stomach had disappeared. Their original purpose was to relay messages about her scouting mission. But there was no reason for me to remove them after she finished, so I left them.

With the second one gone, I had to assume Atlach-Nacha was in some kind of trouble. *Oh man... Did Lilyxila really head for Allo and the others like I was afraid of?*

I leapt into the air and flapped my wings, suddenly eager to rejoin my friends as fast as I could. As I flew through the fog, I kept my eyes trained on the ground below, looking for any disturbances. If Lilyxila or Beelzebub caught up with the others, they could wipe out the entire group without batting an eye.

I wasn't sure exactly where they were right now, though... I'd told my group to head for the mountains so they'd avoid getting caught up in Beelzebub's initial attack.

Hmm... If they'd run into any trouble, there'd probably be some fallen Holy Knights near where the fight took place. There should be some signs of them, at least. Between that and my Psychic Sense, it shouldn't take too long for me to find them.

Suddenly, I heard the telltale sounds of a fight off in the distance. It sounded like someone kicking off from the ground, flying into the air, and hitting the enemy. I flew toward the sound as fast as I could.

By the time I arrived, the fight was already over. I spotted Allo kneeling on the ground, gasping for breath. She had slashes all over her body.

‹Allo! Treant! Are you okay?!› I called out to the two of them with Telepathy.

Allo looked up, and her face brightened when she saw me. But her expression soon clouded over again.

“Master Dragon! I’m so glad you caught up to us! But Atlach-Nacha, she…she said she’d meet up with us soon, but there’s been no sign of her…”

Treant shook its head and lowered its gaze. *‹Miss Allo…I don’t think Miss Atlach-Nacha is coming.›*

“What…? What do you mean, Treant?”

‹I noticed it at the time, but it’s…it’s unusual for Atlach-Nacha to speak out loud when we’re in a pinch. And now…I have a feeling she might have been lying to us.›

Allo’s face paled. She turned to look at me again, and tears began to well up in her eyes. I didn’t know the details, but I could piece together the basics of what happened. Atlach-Nacha probably told Allo and Treant to flee when Allo got injured and took on the task of holding off whatever powerful enemy they’d faced by herself to give them time to escape.

“Wh-why, Treant? If you noticed something was off, why didn’t you tell me?! Don’t you care about Atlach-Nacha?!”

Treant—its gaze still pointed downward—gave another small shake of its head. *‹I couldn’t. I saw the determination in Miss Atlach-Nacha’s eyes, and I just couldn’t let it go to waste. I’m so sorry, Miss Allo…›*

Allo realized there was no point in pressing it further, and, like Treant, she fell silent and lowered her gaze to the ground.

As for me, I still had a lot of unanswered questions swirling around in my head. Who did Atlach-Nacha stay behind to stall? And where were Volk, Grandpa Magiatite, and the black lizard? I was worried…

‹Keep it together, you two! Atlach-Nacha’s out there somewhere! I’m sure of it!› At my words, Allo and Treant looked up. *‹I know she’s still alive, at least!›*

“R-really…?”

‹But she was in a lot of trouble…› Both Allo and Treant seemed doubtful.

Wordlessly, I twisted to show them my belly.

“Oh…! The knit spider!” Allo shouted in realization.

The last of Atlach-Nacha’s three mini Doppel Cocoon clones was still crawling around on my stomach. For the clone to keep its shape and cling to my scales like this, the skill constantly drained a small amount of MP from its user—its existence was ironclad proof that Atlach-Nacha was still alive. And that was all that mattered.

‹C’mon, let’s move! You can fill me in on the way!› I crouched down and urged the other two to hop on my back.

“Y-yeah! Let’s go!” Allo scooped Treant up and jumped onto my back with little effort. She pointed at the trees. “Atlach-Nacha was back that way!”

I leapt forward and took off in that direction.

As I ran, I checked Allo and Treant’s statuses. Both of their HP levels were dangerously low. I used Fake Life on Allo and Hi-Rest on Treant to heal them back up while we were on the move.

“Thanks, Master Dragon…”

‹Your MP is low too. You can both take some of mine.› Allo could use Mana Drain, and Treant could root in me and suck up some of my MP that way.

Allo gave me a summary of what had happened since I left them: the battle with the dragon knights, the appearance of the mysterious swordsman Howgley the Glutton and Volk’s departure, and their fight with a green-haired girl with devilish eyes named Aluanne who could control corpses.

From what Allo was telling me, I had to assume Aluanne’s stats were quite high—nearly on par with Lilyxila’s, even. She seemed like a real piece of work.

Is there really another human in this world who’s as powerful as Lilyxila? Or maybe…she’s not actually human after all? She could be a monster who’s using Human Transformation…

Volk, the black lizard, and Grandpa Magiatite’s fight with Howgley the Glutton was also concerning to me, but for the time being, my priority had to be rescuing Atlach-Nacha from Aluanne.

As I flew, I occasionally turned my head to check on the little knitted Atlach-Nacha on my stomach. I never thought I'd be using this little knit spider to make sure Atlach-Nacha was still alive…

If the mini clone disappeared, Atlach-Nacha was gone. I squeezed my eyes shut. *Don't die, Atlach-Nacha…!*

Part 2

I USED PSYCHIC SENSE to search for signs of Atlach-Nacha or Aluanne. Allo and Treant showed me where they'd parted ways, and I searched the area. But they were nowhere to be found.

‹I'm pretty sure they were around here, but I'm not sure where they went after that…› Treant said behind me via Telepathy.

Hmm… What if Aluanne took Atlach-Nacha somewhere far away? It might be pointless for us to keep searching here…

No, there was no point in thinking about what-ifs right now. This was the best lead we had, so we had to follow it as far as it'll take us.

According to Allo and Treant, Aluanne didn't flinch in the face of three high-rank monsters. That meant she had to be a high-level A rank of some sort. But in that case, it wouldn't be difficult for her to take down Atlach-Nacha herself. So why was her last knit spider still alive? Had she managed to slip away from the battle somehow? Or was Aluanne keeping her alive for some purpose? It was frustrating having no clue what was going on around me…

Maybe I should fly around for a bit? The fog made it hard to see much, but it might be easier to spot any disturbances from a higher vantage point. That'd definitely increase the risk of Lilyxila spotting me, though… I mustn't be fooled into thinking I could take on the entirety of Lilyxila's forces at once if they came to her aid.

Lilyxila never revealed herself during battle unless there was a chance at victory. During our first run-in, she'd shaved off a bunch of my MP with all kinds of tricks, and she managed to get away before I could finish her off. Even if I could defeat Lilyxila, Atlach-

Nacha's life would be in danger from the moment I let her distract me.

Between my bouts of fretting, my Psychic Sense picked up on a presence nearby. But it felt strange…almost creepy.

Is this really the girl they're talking about? Aluanne? The figure did look to be about the size of a typical human girl, but it was just… not quite right. There was no doubt about it; Aluanne was going to be a very different opponent than any other powerful humans I'd faced before.

‹Hey, Allo…are you sure this Aluanne is really human? She's not a monster, is she?›

"*U-uhm…"* Allo struggled to come up with a response.

At that moment, the suspicious presence my Psychic Sense picked up suddenly changed direction and began to move away from us, as if fleeing.

Shoot…did they sense our presence too? I can't let them get away! I leapt into the air and took flight, headed for the signal's source.

From up high, I could see my target. It was a green-haired girl astride a large black wolf with four eyes—a fenrir. Two rose clips adorned either side of her head. Her features matched the ones Allo gave me; without a doubt, this was Aluanne.

She was small and slender, and wore a black dress. Although she didn't look like a battle-ready adventurer, the fact that she'd managed to tame a fenrir more than five times her size was a clear indication of her high level. She also exuded a menacing air that was more monstrous than human.

The fenrir's stomach was slashed through, and it bled as it ran through the trees. *Did…Aluanne do that?* All four of the fenrir's eyes were looking in different directions, and the wolf itself was acting strangely.

Aluanne turned and glanced at me flying in the air behind her. Our eyes met. With the playfulness of a girl whose mischief had been discovered by her parents, she stuck her little red tongue out at me.

For someone who noticed me first and was trying to run away, she sure seems to have a lot of leeway…

I looked around. I couldn't see any sign of Atlach-Nacha… Had she run away? Should I try and look for her first?

No…I couldn't just let Aluanne get away after I came all the way here. She was the best lead I had. I was gonna crush her and make her tell me where Atlach-Nacha was.

Aluanne
Species: Elfingle-human
Status: Hungry (Major), Berserk (Slight)
Lv: 90/90 (MAX)
HP: 666/666
MP: 751/751
Attack: 991
Defense: 375
Magic: 571
Agility: 821
Special Skills:
Vampiric Blood: Lv —
Ravenous Impulses: Lv —
Mind-Reading Gaze: Lv 6
Grecian Language: Lv 3
Psychic Sense: Lv 6
Resistance Skills:
Physical Resistance: Lv 4
Magic Resistance: Lv 5
Poison Resistance: Lv 6
Hunger Resistance: Lv MAX
Loneliness Resistance: Lv MAX
Frenzy Resistance: Lv 9
Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4
Curse Resistance: Lv 4
Confusion Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:
Blood Doll: Lv 7
Bloodsuck: Lv 7
Venom Fangs: Lv 5
Blood Frenzy Claws: Lv 5
Dark Sphere: Lv 3
Title Skills:
Mutation: Lv —
Ancestral Type: Lv —
Cannibal: Lv 9
Devil of the Great Prison: Lv —
Calamity: Lv 9

Man…no wonder Allo and the others couldn't beat her. She was far stronger than Volk, who was the strongest regular human I'd ever met, and her stats were even on par with Saint Lilyxila's. If we were just talking physical stats, she even surpassed her.

How was this girl even real? She shouldn't even be considered human…

Looking at her skill lineup, I grew horrified. Cannibal?! That was a Title Skill I'd only ever seen on monsters. The first time I saw it, I was shocked by the gruesome reality of the monster world. But Aluanne's Cannibal skill level was the highest I'd ever seen.

Cannibal…Devil of the Great Prison…Calamity… This girl was very clearly an enemy to all of mankind.

After I got over my initial shock, I checked her unfamiliar skills.

Special Skill "Ravenous Impulses." When inflicted with Hungry, Berserk status is also inflicted, and user's physical stats improve. When active, the user's primary goal will be to cure their hunger.

This must be what's causing her weird status condition. Berserk was a status effect that caused one's mind to go hazy. But instead of slowing movement, it heightened all stats, making whoever was inflicted by it a fearsome, mindless opponent. Maybe she was intentionally maintaining the status conditions to raise her stats? I didn't know exactly how much Berserk increased stats, but from prior experience, I guessed it was boosting Aluanne's stats by 20 percent or so beyond the numbers I could see.

Normal Skill "Blood Doll." Allows user to manipulate their own blood at will. If their blood is inserted into the body of another living creature, the afflicted creature becomes their puppet. However, the afflicted creature may be able to resist, depending on its status. If the target is a corpse, the user can manipulate it regardless of its status.

This had to be the skill Allo mentioned that let Aluanne control corpses. She was probably using it to control her fenrir as well.

The zombie fenrir—with Aluanne still on its back—sprinted away through the trees. Aluanne turned around and looked up at me, then gave an eerie smile.

They were fast, to be sure. But not as fast as me. I swooped down, closing the distance between us with ease. As I passed the zombie fenrir, I tore through its chest with my Dimension Claws.

The zombie fenrir toppled over. Aluanne leapt off, kicking it in the head as she went, and landed on the ground.

‹Allo, Treant, hold on tight!› I spread my wings and spun on a dime. As I landed in front of Aluanne, I thrusted a pointed claw into her face.

Aluanne was strong, unusually strong for a human. I knew very little about her, but judging from her status and skills, all I could say was that she was an oddity created by the twisted whims of fate. But despite her strength, she had few skills, and none as handy as Lilyxila's Spirit Servant. Even if Lilyxila, Eldia, and Beelzebub attacked me together, I could more than hold my own against them.

In comparison, Aluanne should be a quick fight. But first, I had an important question for her.

‹Where did you take Atlach-Nacha, Aluanne?› I sent the thought to her with Telepathy.

Aluanne remained silent, staring at me—right into my eyes—with the same creepy smile on her face.

A chill ran through my body. I felt a nasty sensation, like she was trying to peer straight into my brain. But it stopped almost as quickly as it started.

What was that…? I suddenly remembered one of the Special Skills she had: Mind-Reading Gaze. Thankfully, with the vast difference between our Magic stats, she probably wasn't able to break into my mind properly.

‹Don't you understand the situation you're in? Answer me, or I'll rip you to shreds!›

But Aluanne stayed silent, her smile widening to an even more eerie grin.

Our staring contest continued for a few moments. I put all of my strength into my paws, trying to intimidate her. Aluanne licked her lips. A trail of drool began to run down her chin, but she didn't seem inclined to wipe it off.

"Oh, what'll I do… You're not a human, Mr. Dragon, but you sure do look tasty. If I had a meal as big as you, well, even *I'd* be full!"

Did she really not understand the danger she was in right now? When I looked at her status, I noticed she had a few traits that pointed to her being a mixture of vampiric and elven blood. Her girlish appearance notwithstanding, she was a very high level. I had to assume that meant she was much older than she looked.

Her mental age, however, seemed quite a bit lower than her appearance would suggest. Aluanne's words were repulsive, but I wasn't afraid or creeped out by her. More than anything, I was just annoyed. I wanted to figure out what happened to Atlach-Nacha and end this fight as quickly as I could.

I used Dimension Claws. The zombie fenrir's fur barely moved before its stomach was torn out completely, spilling reddish-black

blood and organs onto the ground.

‹The next time you say something that isn't Atlach-Nacha's location, I'll start cutting off limbs. If you don't tell me what I want to know, you'll just be a torso and head by the time I kill you!›

Aluanne's expression didn't change as I threatened her. But she tilted her head to the side as if confused.

"If I tell you, what'll you do to me, Mr. Dragon? What if I'm honest? Will you let me go? Will you? Or will you kill me either way?" Aluanne's head tilted from one side to the other with each question like a marionette being pulled by strings.

Naturally, I wasn't going to let her go either way. She was part of Lilyxila's team, and while I didn't know the particulars of her lineage, what I did know was that she was a cannibalistic demon. Alone, she didn't pose much of a threat, but if she came at me alongside Lilyxila and her Spirit Servants, she'd be a serious nuisance. Her Blood Doll skill also seemed rather foreboding...

‹I'm the one asking the questions around here. What'd you do with Atlach-Nacha? Judging by your attitude, it seems like you don't want to tell me.›



Aluanne squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them wide and gave another creepy smile.

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you. It's okay. I, well, I don't really need to risk my life to obey the saint. See, I need to do my best, so the saint will like me later, but if *you* can free me instead, Mr. Demon King, then that works too!"

Wait, is she…not loyal to Lilyxila or working toward the same cause? I mean, a creature this strange…it doesn't make sense for her to have such a straightforward motive. From what she was saying, it sounded like she'd been imprisoned somewhere or about to be killed, and Lilyxila agreed to grant her freedom in exchange for her help.

"If you let me go and take me off this island with you after you kill the saint, then I won't fight you. I'll even give that spider girl back! Okay? And…and…I can, you know, spy for you. If I want to switch sides, then I have to win you over, right, Mr. Dragon? Or else I'll be in trouble!"

‹Are you…being serious?›

"Yes! Oh yes, I'm very serious. I mean, well, there's no reason for me to follow her orders. And plus, the saint…oh yes, she looks like she'd be a tasty meal!"

Jeez… Lilyxila always seems like she's so careful, but here she is, carrying a girl-shaped bomb on her back. From her status to her skills to her words and actions, there wasn't a single upstanding quality to be found in this girl. But it seemed like she knew Lilyxila didn't have a single person who could stand a chance against me, and she couldn't afford to be choosy.

‹Atlach-Nacha's alive, right?› I already knew she was because the Doppel Cocoon was still on my stomach, but I asked anyway to see what Aluanne would say and whether she'd have more information.

"Yes, she's still alive. But can I, well, can I keep her for now? If I'm still alive when everything is over, I'll give her back to you then. Okay?"

‹I'm…open to your proposition. But I'm not interested in compromising. If you don't want to die, then you need to take me to

Atlach-Nacha. Right now.›

"Uuuh…mmm… Okay, that's fine. I will. I don't really have a choice but to obey anyway." Aluanne's shoulders slumped forward in an exaggerated manner, and she made a face of clear dismay. It smelled like a complete act. She didn't even seem like she was trying to hide it. After that, she returned to her previous uncanny smile.

"Okay then, Mr. Dragon! You promise? You'll take me away from here? You pinkie promise? Cross your heart and hope to die?" Aluanne extended her arm toward me, pinky outstretched, the picture of innocence.

‹C'mon, let's go. Are you trying to buy time for yourself with a bunch of unnecessary steps or something?›

At that, Aluanne shrugged her shoulders and lowered her arm.

I wasn't planning on keeping my promise to Aluanne. I didn't trust her. There was no guarantee that she'd side with me against Lilyxila and refrain from hurting Allo and the others in the coming battles. And either way, Aluanne was hardly someone I'd want to drop off and leave unattended in a human settlement after this was over.

Part 3

ALUANNE CLIMBED ON TOP of the fenrir carcass lying on the ground, then bit into its neck like an animal. Between bites, I spotted large, pointed fangs inside her mouth.

The fenrir's corpse had organs leaking out of its stomach from my Dimension Claws attack, but when Aluanne bit into it, its eyes snapped open, and it rose to its feet in an artificial, almost mechanical motion.

I assumed Aluanne had fed her own blood to the fenrir's corpse in order to control it with her Blood Doll skill. It seemed like enough damage would stop the corpse to some extent, but perhaps this was because the blood she'd fed it had dripped out of its body.

Once she pumped more of her blood back into it, it became her pawn once more.

At that moment, I was overcome with a strange feeling. When I looked at the zombie fenrir's stats, I realized that even when its stats were enhanced by Blood Doll, its agility wasn't much different from Aluanne's. Why was she even riding the zombie fenrir in the first place?

Moreover, Aluanne probably caught the zombie fenrir after her fight with Allo and the others. With no idea when I'd arrive, why would she go out of her way to fight and capture the fenrir for herself?

Maybe she was just restless unless her ultimate weapon—Blood Doll—was active, but still…it felt a little suspicious.

I ran behind Aluanne and her fenrir with Allo and Treant still riding on my back. After a few minutes, I spoke up again.

‹Did you capture Atlach-Nacha on Lilyxila's orders? And if you did, does that mean she wants to turn her into a Spirit Servant?›

Aluanne looked back at me and gave two large nods. "Yes, yes, that's right. I thought she'd be fine as a new Blood Doll, but the saint said she wanted her as a Spirit Servant so her spirit would stay intact! So, yes, I did my best to catch the spider girl instead!"

Her cheerful disposition as she said this put me on edge. I slammed my feet into the ground hard as I ran to blow off some steam. Aluanne didn't seem to notice. She probably wasn't trying to rile me up with her flippant attitude—she was trying to say it earnestly, without any malice behind her words.

Regardless, thanks to the information she gave, I was able to make a hypothesis. In order for Lilyxila to turn a monster into her Spirit Servant, it seemed like she needed more than just a monster's corpse. If I was right, then she needed to start the process while her target was still alive. That would explain why Atlach-Nacha hadn't been killed yet.

‹Then…why'd you leave Atlach-Nacha on her own after that?›

"Huh?" Aluanne cocked her head to the side, confused. I clenched my fangs in frustration.

I couldn't seem to get the most important part of the story out of her. She spoke so easily about other parts of it, but she stopped at the crucial point. I'd already kind of assumed from her less-than-stellar answers so far, but it seemed like Aluanne wasn't particularly bright.

‹I'm asking why you left Atlach-Nacha—the one you set out to capture—and rode out alone on a fenrir! I know your Blood Doll can work on living monsters! Wouldn't it have been easier to take control of her while she was still alive and take her that way?!›

Aluanne's shoulders trembled as if she was frightened. "O-oh, um, well, y'see…there are some things about my Blood Doll that don't work as well if my target's still alive. I couldn't control the spider girl's movements very well, so I decided to hide her away for the moment."

That…checked out. Blood Doll's description mentioned that it could be resisted if the target was still alive, depending on their status.

Normal Skill "Blood Doll." Allows user to manipulate their own blood at will. If their blood is inserted into the body of another living creature, the afflicted creature becomes their puppet. However, the afflicted creature may be able to resist, depending on its status. If the target is a corpse, the user can manipulate it regardless of its status.

Aluanne didn't seem like she was lying. About this, at least.

‹Then why'd you hunt down a fenrir to run around on as your Blood Doll? What were you planning to do after you captured Atlach-Nacha?›

"Well, it's just…I'm so *hungry.* So, so, you know, I was trying to fill myself up!"

My head started to hurt. I wanted to understand Aluanne so I'd have some basis upon which I could trust her, but I couldn't grasp her thought process at all. *Maybe it's a mistake to try and fully understand the motives of a creature who's neither entirely human nor monster…*

“Master Dragon…” Allo spoke up from her perch on top of my back in a low voice. I turned my attention to her. “This path feels… strange. It’s hard to be sure with all the fog, but it seems to me like we’re slowly moving away from where we left Atlach-Nacha…”

All at once, a rush of apprehension washed over me. I was immediately certain of it; what I was doing, trusting Aluanne, was a mistake. I stared at the girl riding the zombie fenrir ahead of me.

After capturing Atlach-Nacha, Lilyxila would’ve wanted Aluanne to return to her at once. She would’ve told Aluanne to do so explicitly. With Beelzebub’s fly minions buzzing around everywhere, it wouldn’t be difficult for her to meet up with them.

But if Aluanne’s Blood Doll skill didn’t work on Atlach-Nacha, then it would’ve been impossible for them to quickly meet up with Lilyxila. In that case, the reason for her choosing to subjugate the fenrir—which originally didn’t make much sense to me—became clear. She was going to use this zombie fenrir to carry Atlach-Nacha away, wasn’t she…?

With that knowledge in mind, I realized that I’d discovered Aluanne after she’d hidden Atlach-Nacha, then found a fenrir to control so that she could use it to carry Atlach-Nacha.

And if so, then we were going the wrong way.

When I first caught sight of Aluanne, she was heading in a different direction than we were now. If she’d run into me on her way to Atlach-Nacha, then we should’ve continued going in the direction she was heading before.

Then…where were we heading now? Was I overthinking this? I wasn’t sure… Allo didn’t seem wholly convinced we were going the wrong way either… And the zombie fenrir’s purpose being to carry Atlach-Nacha was just my own speculation too. Besides, Aluanne’s words and actions had been consistent to a point. I doubted she was smart enough to keep a lie that massive straight.

Even so…I should probably grill her a little more.

‹Aluanne…your story doesn’t add up. I need you to be crystal clear with me. If I don’t feel like I can trust you, then I’ll tear you to pieces right here and now.›

“Huh…?” Aluanne looked back at me curiously.

‹If you were planning to switch sides from the beginning, you must've known that messing with Atlach-Nacha wouldn't make me inclined to trust you. So why'd you go along with Lilyxila's instructions until that point?›

My question was as open-ended as you could get. She could answer it any number of ways. If she answered it with "I just saw an opportunity to negotiate and decided to switch sides," that'd be the end of it. But I was going to analyze her response as deeply as I could. If any part of it felt suspicious, then I'd attack immediately.

In truth, Aluanne's story added up in my eyes. But some parts of it nagged at me, and I needed to push her with threats to make absolutely sure she wasn't twisting the story to suit her own goals. Following Aluanne around was risky in and of itself, and I couldn't afford to take any more risks.

Aluanne's mouth fell open in surprise. Then she looked me dead in the eye.

‹What? Answer my questio—›

"Mmm. Looks like the jig is up, huh? The jig is up!" Suddenly, the zombie fenrir dug its claws into the dirt and whirled around to face me. Then it leapt straight at me, reaching for my throat.

The switch happened in a single moment. I'd thought Aluanne was playing me, tricking me somehow. But I didn't expect her to turn on me and attack the moment I voiced that suspicion.

I immediately used Dimension Claws. But because I wasn't expecting Aluanne to turn on me so quickly, my aim was slightly off. Instead of hitting her, my Dimension Claws ripped through the zombie fenrir's neck. It crumpled to the ground as its head was torn clean off.

‹M-Master?! What happened?!› Treant asked, bewildered.

‹This girl was never going to switch sides and work with us! She saw that my guard was up, and she chose to act accordingly! Aluanne knows she looks like a harmless, clueless little girl, and she uses that to her advantage!›

Aluanne wasn't stupid. In fact, she was more crafty and cunning than most humans I'd ever met. And when I caught on to

her game, she didn't even bother to stick with her story; she just swapped back over to the other side without hesitation.

Part 4

ALUANNE KICKED OFF from the zombie fenrir's back and leapt at me, arms raised. The nails on her fingers turned a bright blood red, and grew until they were long, sharp claws.

Claws made of blood… This must be her Blood Frenzy Claws skill.

I had the upper hand by a long shot in terms of status. In a solo battle, this girl didn't stand a chance.

Just then, my Psychic Sense picked up on a presence in the sky above me. I looked up to see a four-armed man with fly wings flying toward me at a tremendous speed.

Beelzebub. He was in his human form. *You gotta be kidding me… They timed that perfectly! Even with Beelzebub's minion's eyes all over the place, there's no way he could've found Aluanne in the fog and joined up so quickly when he was needed!*

No…that's not what happened. Aluanne led me here. It was then that I finally grasped her true intentions. Aluanne planned to zombify the fenrir, then use it to carry Atlach-Nacha…to *Lilyxila.* In other words, she knew where Lilyxila was.

When she ran into me out of the blue, she chose to put off retrieving Atlach-Nacha, use her as bait to convince me to follow her, pretended to not understand my questioning to buy herself some time, and then brought me to Lilyxila herself. That was the only explanation that made sense.

And rather than having her precious forces getting wiped out one by one in the wilderness, Lilyxila would definitely prefer to strike as a team.

All of my assumptions had been based on surface-level things, like Aluanne's speaking ability and status. But it wasn't a question of whether she was intelligent or suspicious. Aluanne was clearly very sharp and able. The fact that such a willful, calamitous monster

seemed to be obediently following Lilyxila's orders still nagged at me, but…

"Ahh, there you are! Right on time! Darkness Rain!"

A purple magic ring appeared behind Beelzebub. Within seconds, raindrops made of purple light began to rain down onto us.

I leapt back. Aluanne also jumped back and out of range. The ground between the two of us was ripped apart, ravaged by the onslaught of purple rain. A cloud of dust erupted from the torn earth.

I looked around. Far off in the distance, I spotted another Zephyr. Atop it was a female figure with bright white hair. *Lilyxila.*

Next to her, I saw another Zephyr with Alphis and a man I didn't recognize astride it.

I met Lilyxila's gaze, staring deep into her jade-green eyes. She must have sent the speedy human-form Beelzebub ahead to assist Aluanne. It seemed like there was still time before she herself rode out into the fray.

Well, if she wanted to end things here, then so be it. I'd finish Beelzebub and Aluanne off, and then I'd take her down. Then I'd rescue Atlach-Nacha from wherever Aluanne had hidden her, and go rescue Volk and the others too. And then the battle will finally be over.

Allo spoke up anxiously from my back. "M-Master Dragon, what should we…"

‹You two, stay on my back! Don't ever get off! You're no match for these guys! If you let your guard down for even a second, they'll kill you!›

Beelzebub soared over my head, then turned around, facing my back. Aluanne, moving in time with him, leapt at me from the front.

"Gah ha ha ha ha ha! Don't think too badly of me, Illusia! It ain't in my nature to sneak around in this form on the sly, but what the saint wants, the saint gets!"

I looked behind me at Beelzebub. Another large magic circle was growing behind him. He was going to unleash a round of Darkness Rain at me again.

So he's going to take advantage of his speed to get behind me and shoot a bunch of ranged magic attacks that're difficult to avoid...? That definitely seemed like a strategy thought up by Lilyxila.

‹Sorry, but that's not gonna work on me!›

I used Gravity at maximum power. A black circle of light spread out around me.

"Guh...!" Beelzebub's altitude dropped. He frantically flapped his wings to remain airborne. I thought I'd be able to take him to the ground, but the vertical distance between us seemed to lessen the amount of gravitational force pulling him down. However, the magic circle he made to unleash Darkness Rain disappeared as he struggled to maintain his altitude.

Aluanne, on the other hand, took the full force of my Gravity as she leapt toward me from the front. She was stuck to the ground, sitting on one knee, completely unable to move.

I swung my claws in a wide arc straight at Aluanne. *I'll take her out with a single blow!*

Aluanne stared at me with her large, probing eyes. In the face of her imminent peril, the grin on her face had disappeared, leaving her blank and expressionless. She forced herself up from the ground, then thrust her arm out in front of her. A purple light appeared at her fingertips, which expanded to become a glowing orb.

"Dark Sphere!" The purple orb of light exploded in front of her hand. Her petite frame flew into the air, propelled by the explosion's gale.

She self-destructed in order to avoid the fatal blow. Not bad... But my claws were much faster than the Dark Sphere's blast. They sent Aluanne's body flying away from me as soon as she left the ground.

Aluanne's body contorted in midair, and one of her arms fell to the ground. She rolled, creating a trail of blood as she went.

Shoot...I didn't get her well enough to take her down. I must've been off target. In most situations, I'd consider cutting her arm off a mortal wound, but considering how strange and unpredictable she was, I didn't want to assume anything. There was no telling what she'd do. I wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible.

“I’ve got ya now!” roared Beelzebub, who’d been released from Gravity’s pull. He swooped past me, slashing his claws at my stomach and face as he went. The attacks hit but didn’t cause much damage; they only scored a thin line across my scales.

In human form, Beelzebub’s attack power was reduced by half. He wouldn’t be much of a threat to me. I could just ignore his physical attacks for the time being.

“Tch! It’s ’bout time I go back to my original form and go on a little rampage of my own… Oho, look! You’re in for a real treat, Illusia! The Glutton’s come to play as well!”

I followed Beelzebub’s gaze and saw a Zephyr approaching from a different direction than Lilyxila’s. On top of it rode a small, elderly man and a male Holy Knight.

They must be part of Lilyxila’s crew…but are they strong enough to worry about? The pair flew toward me on their normal Zephyr with little regard for caution. I also couldn’t feel the intense aura of power that typically emanated from powerful humans and monsters.

“Master Dragon!” Allo called from my back. “That man…he’s the one Volk was going to fight!”

Wait, is that old guy the weird swordsman Allo was talking about?! I suddenly got an intense feeling of dread. *If he’s here, then…what happened to Volk, the black lizard, and Grandpa Magiatite?*

No, I couldn’t worry about that right now. I had to focus on the battle at hand. Once I made it through this fight, and wiped the ground with every last person here, I could search for Volk and the others.

Stay calm. Just gotta stay calm. If I screw up now, I’ll never get Atlach-Nacha back, and I’ll get Allo and Treant killed.

Lilyxila’s crew hung back, wary of my Dimension Claws. But this old man riding the dragon flew straight for me.

Okay, fine. I’d just take *him* down with my Dimension Claws. I didn’t want any more enemies added to the fray. If that old man’s status was anything like Aluanne’s, I’d be in trouble.

The fact that Volk, the black lizard, and Grandpa Magiatite didn’t manage to finish him off themselves made me almost certain

that the man was likely an A-class opponent. Like Aluanne, he was probably around level 90…or higher, even.

All right then. I'll make eliminating him my top priority! I pointed my claws at the old man's flying steed.

"Oy, oy! You gotta lotta nerve, takin' yer eyes off me! What're ya doin', gazin' off into the distance, huh? You lonely or somethin'?!" Beelzebub swerved around me to slip between my chest and outstretched arm, then slashed at my neck with his wicked claws.

The sharp, stinging pain made me look at him, but he quickly slipped out of my reach before I could attack. From the stinging pain, I surmised that he'd used Venom Claws on me, but they didn't have much effect.

Although Beelzebub's attacks didn't cause much damage when he was in this shape, his small human form buzzing around me at high speed while I was trying to ignore him was distracting, to say the least. I needed to find an opening and take him down soon too.

"Tch! Damn it, you can't even feel that, can you?! Come on, Saint! Why don't you let me get outta this pathetic human form and give 'em all a proper show?!" Beelzebub snarled in frustration.

I would've also preferred that, but I doubted Lilyxila would go for it. If Beelzebub transformed into his massive, slow fly monster form, I'd be able to take him down with my Dimension Claws in seconds—which would cripple Lilyxila's fighting force and her ability to act effectively.

For now, I ignored Beelzebub's circling form and returned my attention to the dragon flying toward me. The old man and the Holy Knight were closing the distance between us, but they still seemed far enough away that their attacks wouldn't reach.

I raised my front leg and tore the Zephyr to shreds with my Dimension Claws. I didn't know what kind of foe I'd be facing in the old man, but the Zephyr, at least, definitely couldn't avoid my attack. The dragon fell, taking its two riders with it. Its head was severed from its body at the shoulders, and it slammed to the ground in a spray of blood.

Gained 480 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 480 Experience Points.

Unfortunately, the only foe I’d felled with that attack was the Zephyr. Behind the spray of blood, the old man landed on the ground with the Holy Knight on his back. He seemed to have kicked off from the dragon a moment before it hit the ground.

A fall from that height, with so much speed and momentum behind it, should have left him with serious injuries. But the old man’s landing didn’t even kick up a cloud of dust around him.

Just before he landed, the old man seemed to freeze in midair for a split second, before gently dropping to the ground. Was he using some kind of gravity manipulation skill or something…?

From the look of things, Lilyxila was probably counting on that old man to be some kind of asset in this battle. However…

Anise Howgley
Species: Earth-human
Status: Normal
Lv: 55/55 (MAX)
HP: 424/424
MP: 265/294
Attack: 321+19
Defense: 225
Magic: 263
Agility: 371
Equipment:
Weapon: Dagger of False Dreams: B
Special Skills:
Grecian Language: Lv 8
Swordsman: Lv MAX
Resistance Skills:
Poison Resistance: Lv 6

Blade Resistance: Lv 7
Falling Resistance: Lv 4
Normal Skills:
Armor Pierce: Lv MAX
Paradise Whirl: Lv MAX
Blade of Exorcism: Lv MAX
Godspeed Flash: Lv MAX
High Jump: Lv MAX
Godfeller: Lv 3
Title Skills:
Giant Killer: Lv MAX
God of Swords: Lv —
Glutton: Lv —

This guy's level…is a little below average, even among the Holy Knights…? Did Volk really lose to this old man…this Howgley?

Based on his status, I seriously doubted Howgley could defeat Volk in a fight. I knew more than most just how advantageous it was to have higher stats than your opponent. The first thing I thought of that might've allowed Howgley to defeat Volk was his skills, but nearly all of his skills were ones I'd seen before.

Maybe his weapon gave him some kind of extra ability? The +19 his sword added to his attack power seemed suspiciously low in relation to the weapon's rank.

Dagger of False Dreams: Value B. Attack +19. It is said a certain noble family commissioned an alchemist to create this dagger in order to slay a giant dragon. Although capable of slicing through even the hardest of scales, it would take thousands of swings to defeat a giant dragon with such a minuscule blade. Able to deal minimal damage to any opponent, regardless of difference in status.

Well…it's a weird little sword, to be sure, but it doesn't seem like anything special.

If the legend about it was true, I doubt I'd lose a fight with a sword like that either. What was Howgley thinking, bringing a knife like that to this fight?

If his sword wasn't it, then the source of Howgley's strength had to lie in his skills. But only a few of them aroused any suspicion.

Godspeed Flash was a skill I remember being used by Nell, one of the Hungry Hunters. It was a sword skill that provided its user a burst of speed just before they sliced into an enemy. Other than that, there were only two Normal Skills that were new to me.

Normal Skill "Paradise Whirl." The sword is thrown into the air in a spinning motion, which its user is able to freely control as though it were an extension of their own body. An ultimate display of swordsmanship.

This also doesn't seem like the skill I'm looking for… Guess it's gotta be the last one?

Normal Skill "Godfeller." A sword technique which encroaches on the realm of the divine. A series of ten thousand sword slashes, capable of bringing down even a god.

W-wait…it's not this either…?

"Hmph. Go hide away somewhere," Howgley said to his riding companion. "I know you Holy Knights are prepared, but against a foe like this one, you wouldn't even be useful as bait. You'd just die like a dog."

Then he picked up his dagger and dashed across the ground toward me. But his speed was in line with his status; he was much slower than Beelzebub or Aluanne.

What the heck? Does he really think he can hurt me? With a status and sword like that?

My Psychic Sense alarms didn't even ring for Howgley. The ominous sense of foreboding I got from Lilyxila, Beelzebub, and Aluanne was completely absent when I looked at him. That was what was so…*eerie* about him. Even as I faced him on the field of battlefield, I still had no idea what made Howgley powerful enough to be a contender in this fight.

Part 5

HOWGLEY RAN TOWARD ME, steadily closing the distance between us.

According to my instincts, there was no reason for me to consider him a threat. But that was exactly why I didn't understand how he could've withdrawn from his battle with Volk and why he was now coming straight for me, in the flesh, with such an ostentatious title attached to his name.

I…definitely can't let Howgley get close to me. In normal circumstances, with the immense gap between our agility stats, there was no way I'd allow any of his attacks to land. There was no way he'd be able to dodge my attacks for long either. But here, I needed to be extra careful and focus on taking him out as fast as I could.

I raised my front leg and struck out at Beelzebub to keep him in check. He was a nuisance of an opponent, but he was an important military asset for Lilyxila—that was clear from her refusal to allow him to end his Human Transformation. But if I was able to take care of him with minimal fuss, then he wouldn't have the chance to go on the offensive for real.

As expected, Beelzebub gave my swipe a wide berth. While I had an opening, I focused my attention back on Howgley.

I was going to do everything I could to finish him off here and now.

I used Dimension Claws. This skill differed from Whirlwind Slash in that it could distort space around it, allowing it to attack a target at any distance. Although it was less accurate from far away, I was certain Howgley wouldn't be able to avoid it.

My claws crossed the distance between us in the blink of an eye and tore through the earth in a gigantic slash. But they didn't hit Howgley.

I couldn't believe my eyes. My agility stat was over five times higher than his! How could he possibly have avoided it?!

Wait... He didn't even dodge or do anything different. Maybe I just missed? While fending Beelzebub off, I fired a second and third shot of Dimension Claws at Howgley.

Neither of them even came close to grazing him. Howgley jumped over the cracks I sliced in the ground with his High Jump skill and continued toward me in a straight line.

At that point, I knew it wasn't just a coincidence. I also noticed something else.

The moment before I released my Dimension Claws, Howgley moved just out of their range. He did it so naturally that it looked automatic, even though it bordered on superhuman.

I was at a complete loss. All this time, I'd been fighting with the ability to view my opponent's status. That was why I knew just how reckless it was to challenge an opponent with such a vast difference in statuses. But I'd never seen anyone pull off such a feat. In fact, it should've been impossible, regardless of status.

Even with the evidence right in front of my eyes, I couldn't understand why my Dimension Claws couldn't even touch Howgley. It just didn't make any sense.

In that moment, I finally understood why I felt no sense of danger from Howgley. With no impressive status or skills to boast of, he was a completely different opponent from any I'd ever experienced before.

That being said, the added effects his weapon gave him had a...strange feel to them, somehow.

Dagger of False Dreams: Value B. Attack +19. It is said a certain noble family commissioned an alchemist to create this dagger in order to slay a giant dragon. Although capable of slicing through even the hardest of scales, it would take thousands of swings to defeat a giant dragon with such a

minuscule blade. Able to deal minimal damage to any opponent, regardless of difference in status.

I already knew that Howgley's dagger was capable of dealing damage to superior opponents, even ones with thick skin or scales like me. But I had no idea how he was planning to take me on. I doubted he'd even be able to get close to me, and even if he did, there was no way he'd beat me. With his stats as low as they were, I believed he simply wouldn't be able to hit me with enough attacks in close combat to make a dent in my HP.

But apparently, somehow or some way, he could. At least, Howgley thought so, and Lilyxila believed it enough to call him in to fight me. Howgley really did intend to challenge me head-on and hack me to pieces with that little dagger of his.

Even someone with Lilyxila's status would think twice before approaching me so recklessly. The ease with which he challenged me drove home the fact that as far as I knew, Anise Howgley was the strongest human on the face of this planet. Lilyxila's trump card was neither Beelzebub nor Aluanne, it was this short old man with the dagger strapped to his waist.

"Grr-grrraaaaaaaaaaah!" I roared, then raised my paw high.

If I continued to bombard Howgley with attacks, I might find some sort of gap in his defenses sooner or later. Finding it was the only way I'd be able to hit him. Otherwise, the conclusion to our battle would be unavoidable.

I turned my attention back to Howgley and attacked with a barrage of Dimension Claws. The ground around him exploded in a ball of dust, but Howgley continued moving in a straight line toward me as each attack missed their target. The closer I looked, the less I understood.

How did he keep avoiding my attacks? To me, it seemed like he was relying purely on chance, or maybe his own instincts. Could he see into the future or something?

Regardless, this moment was about to be the turning point.

I used a chunk of MP to fire off a horizontal line of Dimension Claws at once. The claws dug into the ground, forming a deep

trench in the earth.

The only thing Howgley could do to get over it was jump.

As soon as he did, I fired another shot of Dimension Claws over Howgley's head. Several trees around him were cut down in a single slash. Then, I unleashed a final slash in the center of the circle of trees.

I expanded the range of Dimension Claws to its maximum and fired three claws in rapid succession. It was a long-range, unavoidable attack that took complete advantage of my stats, skills, and scope of abilities—the complete opposite of Howgley's attempts to compete with me on raw talent alone.

Although the barrage ate up more MP than I would've liked, I couldn't pull any of my punches with a foe like Howgley. If doing so meant I could beat him, then it was worth it.

After the dust settled from my Dimension Claws, I looked for Howgley, but he was nowhere to be found. Had he been blown away by the force of that hit? I waited, expecting my Divine Voice to pop in with an experience point gain announcement at any moment.

"Looks like you've got some extra time on your hands, little Illusia! How about I try this one more time, eh? Darkness Rain!"

I looked up at Beelzebub flying above me as another magic circle spread out behind him. In seconds, a purple rainstorm poured down on me. I raised my wings over my head to protect myself. Sharp, burning heat flashed across the surface of my wings. While I could ignore Beelzebub's physical attacks while he was in human form, his magic attacks still did some serious damage.

Even so, the Experience Point gain announcement didn't come. Did Howgley seriously manage to dodge all three blows? I peered through the holes the Darkness Rain made in my wings. After a moment, I spotted Howgley.

He was sprinting toward me from one of my blind spots. At long last, he'd closed the distance between us. And so far, he had not sustained a single injury.

No way. That was impossible.

Based on his position, my Dimension Claws should've hit him and sent him flying. There was no freaking way he made it out of that without a scratch.

Was I dreaming or something? Howgley had avoided every single attack I'd made. Despite managing to corner him and land what I thought was a direct hit, he was completely unharmed. What the heck was I supposed to do against such an untouchable enemy?

No, come on…think. If Howgley had a technique that completely negated attacks, he wouldn't have bothered evading in the first place. Nullifying damage like that probably had some sort of risk attached to it.

Beyond that, it was hard to believe he could've survived taking that much damage based on technique alone. There had to be some sort of trick to it, like how the slime used several skills at once to recover MP for what seemed like no cost.

When Howgley was thrown from the Zephyr he was riding, he'd managed to negate the impact of the fall for both himself and the Holy Knight he was riding with somehow. My guess was that it had something to do with that. There was something about Howgley that I was unable to detect from just looking at his status.

Beelzebub was still flying around me in wide circles. Between him and the unknown variable that was Howgley, I was in a bit of a tough spot.

"Master Dragon!" Allo cried out. "The saint, she's…!"

I looked at Lilyxila, whose dragon was now starting to move toward me. It seemed like she was planning to attack as soon as Howgley was in range.

Was she gonna use Howgley and Beelzebub to settle the score between us…?

No, not just them. While I was focused on Howgley, Alphis had carried a bloodied Aluanne on her back and brought her toward Lilyxila's Zephyr. She was probably following the saint's instructions.

If they went out of their way to rescue Aluanne, did that mean they were planning to use her again after this? I considered prioritizing getting rid of Aluanne, but I didn't have the luxury or means to do so at the moment.

“You should watch where you step, Evil Dragon!” Howgley shouted, leaping up at me from the ground. At the same time, I jumped into the air to try and create some distance.

There was a limit to how high Howgley’s High Jump would take him. And once he was airborne, his sword wouldn’t be able to reach me…or so I thought.

Howgley’s figure wavered in midair for a moment, and then his body ascended further, even faster than before.

Wh-what just happened?! Was there something hidden in the fog that he used as a foothold?! Or does his have some sort of skill that lets him create something like that?!

Howgley held his dagger in his hand. At long last, he was coming in to attack.

All right, don’t be hasty, me. In terms of speed, I had the clear advantage. The accuracy of my Dimension Claws wasn’t that great, but direct combat would be a different story.

I followed Howgley’s movements with my eyes, then swung at him with my front claws. I thought I had him. But suddenly, Howgley was standing on top of my claws.

Seriously…? What the heck? My physical abilities were far superior to Howgley’s, but no matter how hard I tried, I still couldn’t land an attack on him. Was this really just an accuracy issue?

The fact that Howgley was able to completely negate both fall damage and direct hit damage couldn’t be explained by pure skill alone. I was immune to illusions, so it shouldn’t be anything like that, but, even so, this guy had some sort of sneaky trick up his sleeve. Somewhere, tucked away inside my thoughts in a spot I couldn’t quite see, I had to be able to figure out the true source of Howgley’s power.

I raised my paw higher to throw him into the air. But just before I could, Howgley leapt from my claws and came up to my face.

I opened my massive mouth and prepared to bite him. He kicked off from my fangs, jumped across my front legs, and ran to my back. But that was where Allo and Treant were. And I couldn’t let those two face off against Howgley for even a second.

‹Let 'er rip, Allo!›

"You got it! Gale!"

A whirlwind whipped up behind me. *Nice going, Allo!* She managed to successfully sense my intentions and act right when I needed her most.

The only way I'd be able to beat Howgley would be in midair, where his movement was limited, or with a ranged attack he was unable to avoid. With his unidentified damage nullification skill, it might not be enough to kill him, but either way I needed to figure out how to get past his evasive maneuvers if I wanted any chance at getting out of this alive.

Howgley leapt from my back and seemed to fly far farther into the air than usual. I was expecting him to use his Blade of Exorcism skill, but thankfully, he left Allo and Treant unharmed.

With Howgley now airborne, it should've been a piece of cake to hit him for real this time. I inhaled and wrenched my neck around to face him, then used Scorching Breath to spit a raging flame at Howgley in midair.

Howgley bent forward, then dropped in the air with a strange, lurching motion, allowing him to neatly dodge the flames. My eyes widened.

H-he did it again! That weird, distorted move that seems to defy gravity! What the heck was that?!

Until I figured out what exactly Howgley was doing, throwing him into the air wouldn't do much. But I was stumped. I had no clue what I needed to do in order for my attacks to hit. This was the first time I'd ever faced an enemy in this world who felt truly untouchable.

Maybe I could hit him with Hell Gate...? Nah, probably not. While it was a ranged attack, it was also much slower than Dimension Claws. To use it, I had to specify the coordinates for the skill, wait for a magic summoning circle to appear, and then watch as the fiery pits of hell were conjured on the earth's surface. I doubted Howgley —who managed to evade even my fastest attack skill, Dimension Claws—would wait around long enough for me to put it to any use. If there was any chance at all, it would have to be used in

combination with other skills to completely cut off Howgley's escape. But going that route would cost me a lot of HP and MP—too much, especially if it ended with the same outcome as all my other attacks.

I glared at Howgley overhead. He stared back at me, his dagger raised high in the air.

"Get ready, Evil Dragon! Godfeller!"

Howgley's body swirled into a furious spin, flipping upside down as he dropped toward me. I swung my claws at him, but he dodged them with ease. Spinning like a dreidel in midair, he swung his dagger and slashed at my shoulder with more cuts than I could count.

The skill's attack method seemed to be for Howgley to move while spinning his entire body around on its axis, unleashing a barrage of slashes in every direction. It was a sword technique that focused on making as many attacks as possible as quickly as possible.

"Guh!" Countless fine lines appeared across my scales, blood seeping from each one. It seemed like the special trait of Howgley's Dagger of False Dreams was also having an effect. I got the feeling that the number of times I took damage from that attack was much higher than it seemed. And with every slice, I took around five points of damage.

The Dagger of False Dreams could inflict damage that was unaffected by armor, even against far superior opponents. And that was how Howgley intended to take me down. Each slice only inflicted a tiny bit of damage. But if he cut me with that dagger dozens, or even hundreds of times, the damage accumulated would be too much to ignore.

I slashed at Howgley with my claws. He kicked off from my paw, slipped into the blind spot near my neck, swung his dagger, and then quickly kicked off of me again to move out of the way.

My enormous size was really doing me dirty in this fight. If Howgley continued to stick to me like glue, he'd really shave down my HP fast.

If my size isn't helping me here, then why don't I just use Human Transformation?

With Howgley's measly stats, even a relatively weak attack would be enough to kill him if it hit him head-on. My attack and defense being halved wouldn't matter much against him. But with Beelzebub and Lilyxila here, there was no way I could pull off a wild scheme like that, which would leave me so vulnerable to their attacks.

‹Allo, Treant! Get down!› I used Gravity. A circle of black light formed around me. *I'm gonna knock him to the ground, shake him off me so he can't attack anymore, and then finish him off for good!*

"Oh...? Is another Gravity coming? Let's see it." Howgley kicked off from my shoulder and moved to my back. Lines of sharp pain erupted all along my back as he continued his onslaught.

"Hng...!" By using the force generated by my Gravity, Howgley's sword speed increased with the speed of his fall.

Even so, all he could do now was hit the ground. The impact of his body slamming into the ground should render him immobile. *I'll unleash a follow-up attack while he's stiff as a board!*

I swung my paw down at Howgley's head. But as soon as the old man hit the ground, his body lurched to the side. Despite the gravitational force holding him down, he still moved several times faster than he usually did.

No way... Not even Gravity works on this guy?!

Suddenly, I noticed that Howgley was moving his dagger around in minute and seemingly random patterns. *Is he cutting my magic...?*

It occurred to me that Howgley had the Blade of Exorcism skill, which could cancel out magic skills. Even so, he definitely didn't have enough MP to continuously cancel out my Gravity. I couldn't make heads or tails of his strange status or actions, but for one reason or another, he could completely block my skills.

But now, it was clear to me: Howgley was fighting this fight with the help of something completely outside my field of knowledge.

Suddenly, I felt an ominous presence draw closer from behind me. I didn't even have to check to know for sure what it was; Beelzebub had reverted from his human form back into his original giant fly monster form. He'd officially gone off the rails!

‹Ha ha ha ha ha haa! That's right, I've gotta be in this form to do this!› Beelzebub's engorged stomach split open to reveal a huge mouth, which snapped its fangs at the base of my wing. I heard the sickening sound of flesh being crushed to pieces as Beelzebub snapped down on the base of my wings with his fangs. My entire body seized up from the pain.

"Ghh...aaaagh!"

I slashed out with my front claws and tore them across Beelzebub's flesh. His stomach compressed together with the impact of my blow as Beelzebub shot backward at high speed. The warped fangs in his abdomen, which were snapped by my blow, fell to the ground. But the impact also ripped off the part of my wing he'd bitten into clean off.

Ugh...this sucks. While I was distracted by Howgley, Beelzebub's monster attack had hit me point-blank.

In his monster form, Beelzebub's attack power was comparable to Eldia's. His attacks could pierce through my dragon scales with ease to score an extra-large hit. Now that he was in his monster form, his attacks would be some of the most important to avoid.

If I were facing either Howgley or Beelzebub alone, I might've had a shot at taking them down. But together, they were simply too much for me.

With one of my wings being ripped off, I couldn't keep my balance in the air. Somehow, I managed to heal myself with Regenerate and right myself in time to slow my fall before I hit the ground.

‹Ah! Master! That wicked saint is using her magic!›

As I managed to fully repair my wings, a mass of black light flew straight at me. That was Lilyxila's Gravidon! She was finally entering the fray for real!

“Clay!” Allo conjured a mass of earth to cover part of my stomach.

Lilyxila’s Gravidon crashed into the surface of the Clay Wall. The impact shattered my makeshift armor immediately, but it managed to suppress the full force of Gravidon’s explosion. I still took some damage, but if the attack had been a direct hit, it would’ve blown a crater in my stomach through my scales.

‹Thank you, Allo… You’re a lifesaver.›

Without her help, on top of Howgley’s barrage of paper cuts, I would’ve taken direct hits from both Beelzebub and Lilyxila one after the other. I’d managed to avoid the worst-case scenario, but even so, the situation didn’t look good for me.

Illusia

Species: Oneiros

Status: Normal

Lv: 109/150

HP: 3125/4397

MP: 2724/4534

I’d taken a considerable hit to my stats.

Howgley’s dagger alone had shaved off a total of nearly two hundred HP from me. Compared to Beelzebub and Lilyxila’s firepower, this wasn’t particularly impressive, but the fact that I couldn’t counter any of Howgley’s moves made it much worse.

My MP had also dropped a lot more than I expected. I was definitely being too liberal with my use of Dimension Claws against Howgley—especially when they hadn’t hit him even once.

It was difficult to keep track of everyone’s attacks when I was facing so many enemies by myself. But even so, I was letting myself get hit by Beelzebub’s Darkness Rain way too easily. Since I fought Eldia, I’d been constantly at the mercy of Lilyxila’s hit-and-run battle tactics, and it was slowly starting to wear me down.

And Howgley, well…Howgley was stacked with absurd qualities. At first glance, they all seemed like individual strengths

but that was simply not possible. He had to have some kind of single, overarching strength that coincided with his swordsmanship skills. That must have been what allowed him to survive this many head-on encounters with me.

I glanced around at my foes, checking their positions. Beelzebub was in the air in front of me, Howgley was below me holding his dagger, and Lilyxila was off in the distance, her staff raised. I wanted to join Beelzebub in the air and get rid of him first, but that just wasn't going to be possible. Howgley had the High Jump skill. If I concentrated on aerial battle, he'd jump up to me at some point and deliver another volley of dagger slices.

As I considered my options, I spotted a Zephyr flying away off in the distance. On top of it sat Lilyxila's retainer, Alphis, who was carrying the blood-soaked Aluanne. Behind them sat a timid-looking man. He was dressed differently from the Order of the Holy Knights, but he still had to be one of Lilyxila's men. That dragon was moving away from us, out toward the distant sky. They were obviously trying to get the seriously wounded Aluanne out of the line of fire for the time being in order to heal her. It hurt to see Aluanne flying away before I managed to finish her off, but to be honest, knowing I wouldn't be facing her on top of the other three was a relief.

Aluanne's fighting abilities rivaled those of a rank A monster. I felt much safer knowing she'd withdrawn from battle completely than if she'd stayed on the fringes of the battle, threatening to recover and return at any moment. If it took a while for her to heal, I might even be able to finish the battle before she returned.

At that moment, Aluanne, who'd been frozen in a deathlike stupor, jerked upright in Alphis's arms. She opened her doll-like eyes, then realized one of her arms was missing and licked off her own blood with a smile on her face.

Then she looked at me and opened her mouth wide.

"Mr. Dragon! I'm going to go kill that spider girl now. 'Cuz, well, there's not enough time left for the saint to turn her into a Spirit Servant. So instead, she'll be my puppet!"

Did Alphis swoop in at the last second to save Aluanne in order to kill and control Atlach-Nacha so she could use her to upset me?

Or was her goal to make me think she was doing that, so I'd be tricked into chasing after Aluanne...?

From Lilyxila's point of view, this much fighting was plenty enough to wear me down. Maybe they were planning to use Atlach-Nacha as bait to get me to leave before the battle dragged on for too long and they began losing strength. Then, after they'd regrouped, they'd try to attack me again.

Or maybe they were planning to attack me as I chased after Aluanne. In this case, Beelzebub's human form—which specialized in speed—would be the top player.

I knew that I had to make defeating Lilyxila a priority too. My MP was not infinite, and it was already almost half gone. If I kept playing right into Lilyxila's hands, I'd be forced to use up much more MP than I needed to.

However, despite knowing full well that this might be their plan, they still mentioned Atlach-Nacha, which meant I had no choice but to abandon my current fight and go after Aluanne. If I didn't move quickly, I wouldn't be able to track them in the fog.

Just as I was about to chase after Aluanne, Allo spoke up. "Leave that green-haired girl to us, Master Dragon."

‹What? N-no way. That's insane. Aluanne already wiped you guys out once today!›

"Don't worry. She's wounded, so she can barely move. I'll make her tell me where Atlach-Nacha is, and then we'll go rescue her."

Well...Allo did have a point. Aluanne was clearly gravely injured for the time being. I doubted she'd be able to fight properly in her current condition. The only enemies Allo would have to worry about were the Zephyr, Alphis, and the cowardly man who seemed to be working for Lilyxila. Allo and Treant would be able to handle them.

‹But...there are so many unknowns...!›

"If I stay here, I'll just be a liability. I want to be useful to you, Master Dragon!" Allo seemed determined to move forward with this plan.

‹I-If Miss Allo is going, then I will of course go with her! I was born into this body to protect her, after all!› Treant said to me via Telepathy.

From the very beginning, if this battle was one where I died, Allo and the others would all be killed. The current situation, where I was battling while protecting Allo and Treant at the same time, and Atlach-Nacha was being held hostage, was…clearly not ideal.

With the bulk of Lilyxila's forces facing me down, it would be safer for Allo and Treant to keep away from me than to stay on my back. If they were able to successfully take down Aluanne while she was on the brink of death and rescue Atlach-Nacha, that would create a considerable advantage for us in the battle against Lilyxila. It was a worthwhile gamble to take.

‹…All right. But don't do anything too reckless. If something bad happens, run away and hide as fast as you can. Got it?›

"Got it!" Allo jumped off my back, holding Treant in her arms. She used Gale to control the wind around her as she slowly descended through the air to land on the ground.

I quickly dropped to get to the ground before them. I needed to make sure that Howgley, Beelzebub, and Lilyxila wouldn't go after Allo and Treant.

Now that I was back on the ground, Howgley immediately went back to slashing at me with his dagger. I still didn't know how to deal with him, but with Allo and Treant going after Aluanne, I had a little more freedom to think about it. I could focus on the task at hand instead of worrying about rescuing Atlach-Nacha from Aluanne's clutches after I failed to kill her.

I looked down at the last of the three mini knit Atlach-Nachas stuck to my stomach. It had managed to survive the battle so far. And as long as I had it, I could rest assured that Atlach-Nacha was still alive.

Wait for us, Atlach-Nacha. Allo and Treant will get you out of there. I just know it.

‹I've got a downpour brewin' overhead, Glutton! And I ain't gonna worry about gettin' you caught in it, so try your best to stay outta my way!› Beelzebub's Telepathy echoed down from high in the sky. Although Howgley didn't show any reaction to his words, Beelzebub seemed to take that as an acknowledgment. In seconds, the purple light droplets of Darkness Rain began to pour down on me from overhead without mercy.

I made a huge leap backward to avoid Beelzebub's Darkness Rain. I'd been taking advantage of my hefty HP to endure the rain before now, but leaping in headfirst with the resolve to endure a bunch of tiny bombs being dropped on your head was surprisingly exhausting.

At that moment, Howgley's figure—which I could see just out of the corner of my eye—completely disappeared. He must have taken advantage of my focus being off him to dip into my blind spot. Howgley was skilled at operating around my massive body.

"Ggh!" Pain shot up my shoulder. But as soon as I realized where Howgley was, I felt him jump off my back.

"What's wrong, Illusia? If you can't handle this, we'll just keep grinding you down little by little!"

Hidden by the purple light of Darkness Rain, Beelzebub's huge fly form shrank and returned to his human form. He moved toward me, as if following the light.

I looked at Lilyxila. She was holding her staff up again and appeared to be looking for an opportunity. It seemed like a somewhat casual action for her, but Beelzebub's movements felt too intelligent for it to be a coincidence. Whether it was through Spirit Servant or just Telepathy, she had to be giving him detailed instructions.

Just then, Lilyxila's staff changed direction entirely.

Huh? Wait. It can't be... I widened the range of my Psychic Sense, which I'd kept focused on tracking Howgley's movements until now.

The tip of Lilyxila's staff pointed high in the sky...at a black lizard flying overhead, its batlike wings spread wide. On its back rode a shirtless man with long silver hair and a blade strapped to his back. *Volk.*

Although I was relieved to see them safe, I paled. They were both covered in blood and looked like they were already at their limits. I doubted they were in any condition to fight.

Volk, in particular, was bent down over the black lizard's back, clutching his Grandpa Magiatite sword and leaning on one knee.

I saw the black lizard's altitude drop with a sudden lurch. It was no wonder; it was also in rough shape, and its Fly skill wasn't that high to begin with. It must have pushed itself really hard to fly this far.

"Forgive me, Lacerta, for asking so much of you. But I must ask that you toss me toward Illusia now," I heard Volk say to the black lizard.

‹What?! D-don't be stupid, Volk! Get out of here! If you come here now, they'll kill you both!› I said to Volk with Telepathy. At that moment, Howgley jumped off of my neck and revealed himself right in front of me.

"Take this, Evil Dragon! Godfeller!"

C-crap! Here it comes!

I swiped at him from the side in a flash, and I hit him. It looked like it, and I felt my claws strike his skin—I was sure of it. But even so, Howgley disappeared again, and I felt the burning pain of dozens of slices across my stomach.

No matter what I did, I couldn't catch Howgley. I was even mixing in feints with Illusion, but they didn't seem to make a difference. What in the world was this guy seeing right now?

"Excellent, everyone is here... Holy Sphere!" Lilyxila released an orb of holy light from her raised staff. The light shot toward the black lizard in a straight line. I was too busy fighting Howgley and Beelzebub to counter it.

‹D-dodge, Black Lizard! If that thing hits you, you'll be in serious trouble!› I frantically sent another telepathic message. They were a fair distance away, but with the black lizard's injuries, they were still incredibly vulnerable. If I didn't do something, all three of them would be wiped out!

‹...I will leave the rest to you, Volk!› The telepathic message came from Grandpa Magiatite as the sword in Volk's hand—the Golden Spirit Sword—began to transform. It spread wide and formed into a half sphere between Volk and Lilyxila's incoming Holy Sphere. The orb of holy light smashed against the golden wall and dissipated.

Gold Magiatite Hearts had a powerful magic resistance skill called Magic Decomposition. That had to be what he used to block

the attack. But it must not have been strong enough to negate the orb's impact completely; a crack appeared in Grandpa Magiatite's golden wall, and then his shield shattered and fell to the ground below.

G-Grandpa Magiatite! Is he okay?! E-even if his metal broke apart, he should be fine as long as his heart was intact, but…

"Come on, Lacerta! Let's do this!" Volk shouted.

"Kssshhhiiiiii!" The black lizard spun in midair and flung Volk off its back with its tail.

H-he's coming this way?! But he's not strong enough to handle Howgley, Lilyxila, or Beelzebub!

"Dimension!" Volk reached his hand into the dimensional rift he'd opened, then drew out an ominous, cruel-looking greatsword that was the color of night. A sinister magical energy radiated out from it so powerfully that it was almost palpable.

What…is that thing?

I turned around and caught Volk in my wings, moving back to minimize the impact.

"Impossible… With those wounds, I thought there was no chance he'd rise again. I left him to his fate. But he…" Howgley growled and leapt at my wings, clearly intent on finishing Volk off.

"Ahh, yes. I had a nice nap after I slammed my head against that cliff face. Lacerta searched high and low on that cliff to find me, covered in blood all the while, and managed to pull me back up!" With that, Volk swung his greatsword.

Volk's stats were much higher than Howgley's. But—as I'd just learned all too well—that wouldn't give him much of an advantage.

"In any case, I'll finish you with a single blow. There won't be a next time, Dragonslayer. I won't allow my carelessness to sabotage me again!"

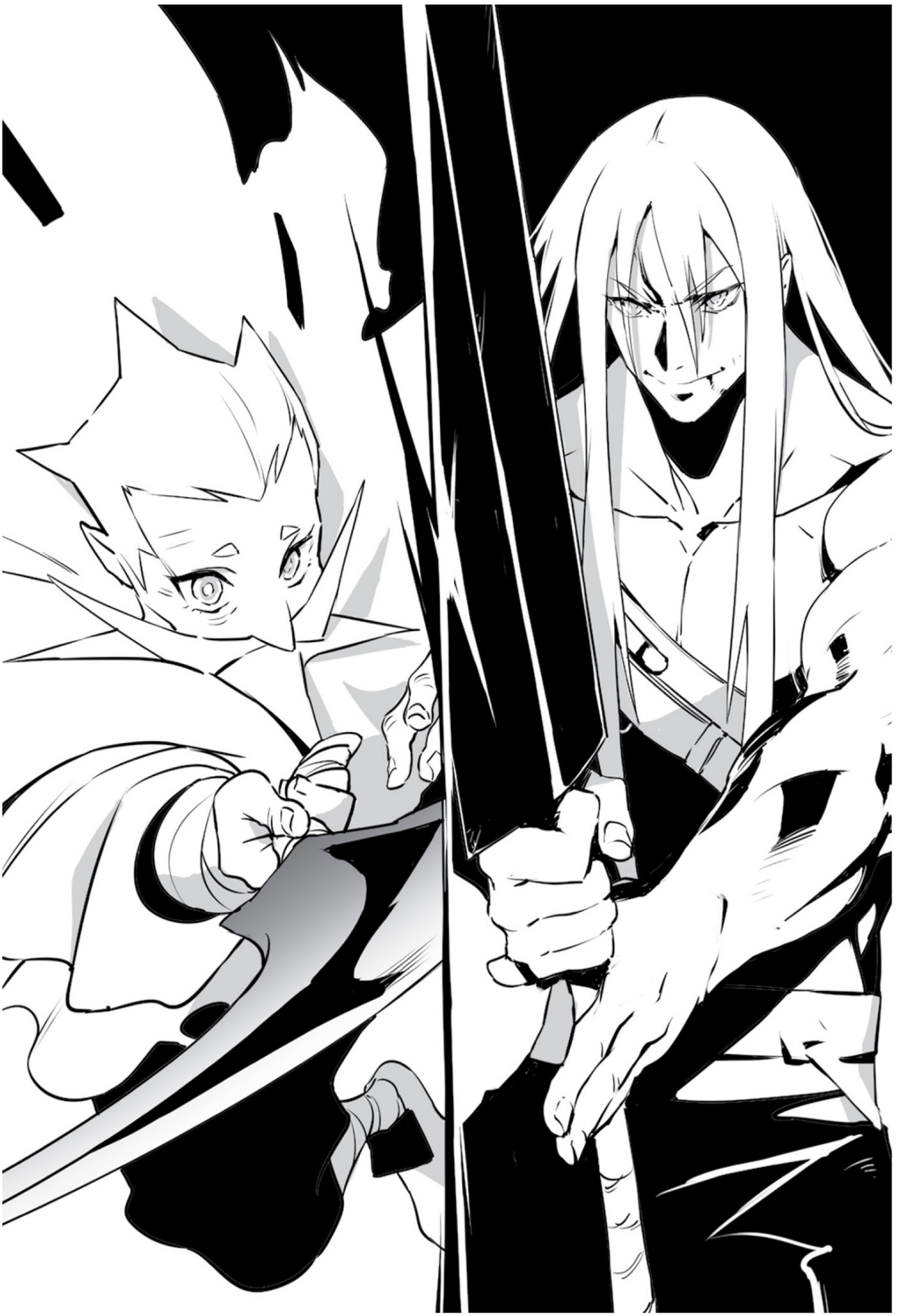
Before I could react, Howgley leapt behind Volk and sliced into his shoulder with his dagger. The blade cut deep, and blood gushed from the wound. Immediately after Howgley's attack, Volk twisted his body strangely, then stepped away from Howgley in a semi-circular motion. To me, it just looked like a move to try and gauge the distance between the two of them. But Howgley, who I expected

to attack him in that moment, simply stood there, his eyes widened in shock.

“H-how…how did you see that? It can’t be… Did you see my blade between my slices in our previous battle?”

Volk immediately swung his greatsword at Howgley in response.

Howgley leapt back, but the greatsword caught on his brown hair and sent a chunk of it flying through the air. Volk didn’t stop, swinging his greatsword at Howgley once more.



Howgley blocked Volk's blow with his dagger, but the impact sent him flying back. He slammed into my wing, then dropped to the ground.

N-no way. Volk's actually putting up a decent fight against Howgley?! He was doing much better than me, at least. Howgley had just been toying with me.

Lilyxila watched the battle from a distance; she stared at Volk, biting her lip. I recognized that look. Even Lilyxila hadn't expected Volk to be able to stand up to Howgley.

Howgley, too, stared at Volk, his face expressionless. It was completely different from the considerate attitude he'd shown his adversaries until now. He seemed to have thought his secret would never be discovered.

But now that it was, this fight was no longer a one-sided onslaught—it was a fight to the death. He'd lost his absolute certainty that he would win this battle, and that rattled him. Volk had seen through Howgley's trick.

And in that case, he could take him down. Once he figured out how to combat Howgley's unique advantage, all he had to worry about was his status; and that was even lower than the Holy Knights'. If Volk shared his knowledge with me, I could wipe the floor with him in seconds. He might even be fine taking Howgley down on his own.

Volk jumped down from my back to follow him. He glanced back at me for a moment as he landed. Sweat dripped from his brow. His face was tinged with fear. He'd had a breakthrough on how to deal with Howgley, but even so, it wasn't going to be an easy victory for him.

"Illusia, after watching you battle Howgley, I am certain this man is a swordsman through and through. And as such, only another swordsman can defeat him. Leave him to me."

Howgley slowly raised his dagger. "It is a shame, truly, to have to kill a man who can already rival me at such a young age."

"Graaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a roar, I healed Volk's injuries with Hi-Rest. His bruises and cuts healed and disappeared before my eyes.

He's…he's got this. He can do it. Howgley could compensate for his lower status with his technical abilities, which allowed him to fight well against me; but at the same time, even a single strike from Volk's blade could render him incapable of combat.

At that moment, Lilyxila, who'd been staring at Volk from afar, turned her Zephyr around and began to fly away. *Huh? Her fighting force getting destroyed one by one should be the worst-case scenario for her. But she's just gonna run away on her own?*

Well, whatever. For now, I needed to focus on supporting Volk and dealing with Beelzebub, while also trying to recover the black lizard and Grandpa Magiatite and heal them…!

The black lizard and Grandpa Magiatite seemed to be hiding somewhere in fear of being pursued by Lilyxila or Beelzebub, which was smart. But they were both heavily wounded and would be in trouble if one of the island's monster inhabitants happened across them.

"Leave the rest of this fight to me, Illusia," Volk said. "I'll take care of it. You follow Lilyxila. If we draw this out any longer, she'll get exactly what she was after." He held his greatsword at the ready. "Let us wrap things up around here. Both Lacerta and the Magiatite Heart are stronger than you think. You'd do well to not consider them a liability."

Jeez…he really called me out. I was painfully aware of my bad habit of taking it upon myself to cover all possible bases and falling behind in fights because of it. By doing that, I'd probably be playing right into Lilyxila's hands. This was the best chance I'd get to take Lilyxila out. She was isolating herself from Howgley, her most powerful weapon in this fight.

Aluanne was at death's door as well. On top of that, she was on her way to retrieve Atlach-Nacha. It was difficult to imagine that she'd return in time to protect Lilyxila. And I'd already killed Lilyxila's other Spirit Servant, Eldia the Dragon King. She was vulnerable. If I moved now, I should be able to catch up to her and finish her off. Besides, I had no idea how long it'd take to find and heal the black lizard and Grandpa Magiatite, and I didn't want to risk giving Lilyxila any more time to prepare than I had to.

I turned my head toward where the black lizard and Grandpa Magiatite fell and bowed my head. *I'm sorry… I'll be back for you guys as soon as I'm done beating the crap out of Lilyxila.*

I kicked off from the ground, leapt into the air, and went after Lilyxila.

"Oh no you don't! We're settling this here and now, *Illusiaaaa*!" Beelzebub howled, flying up to block my way.

‹I thought you'd go with Lilyxila, to be honest,› I said. *‹It'll be even harder for you guys to win this fight if you split up.›*

"*Heh heh…* Do you really think that girl's gonna voluntarily put herself in an unfavorable situation? A word of advice, Illusia… Make no mistake, that gloomy saint is the craftiest and most resourceful being in the world. Even without her Sacred Skills, she would've found some way to get her name remembered in legends for centuries to come." Beelzebub chuckled, his many eyes staring at me. "Now then. One final battle, just you and me. Let's have ourselves a bit of fun, shall we?"

‹Sorry, but I don't have the time to goof around with you. I'm gonna finish this as soon as I can.›

"Bullshit!" Beelzebub raised his altitude to create some distance between us, then created a magic circle. "Darkness Rain!"

A wave of purple droplets of light rained down toward me. But this time, it was just me versus Beelzebub. If I stayed calm and didn't get pressured into a close-combat fight, a single long-range magic attack wasn't going to hurt me.

I used Mirror Counter to create a magical barrier of light above me. The barrier reflected several of the purple lights and shot them back up at Beelzebub.

"*Ha!* You got too hasty, *Illusiaaa*!" Beelzebub, not bothering to evade my reflected Darkness Rain droplets, dove down straight toward me. He probably thought I wouldn't expect him to attack after I'd just reflected his attack to deter him.

But he did exactly what I thought he would. Beelzebub had a Resistance Skill called Dark Absorption, which meant he could absorb all damage from Dark magic. He mistakenly believed I thought the repelled droplets would hurt him and immediately dove

in to attack. But I did so intentionally, to provoke him into attacking me directly.

Due to Beelzebub's aggressive nature, I was sure he'd take the bait and attack. He didn't have Lilyxila around to give him instructions anymore. Beelzebub was small and fast, but he was easy to hit once you knew how he moved.

I fired my Dimension Claws at Beelzebub's destination.

The attack connected; slicing off everything below his left shoulder. One of his fly wings fluttered through the air on its own. Beelzebub dropped toward me, splattering green bodily fluids.

"I'm…I'm surprised, you know, Illusia. You've gotten way too strong all of a sudden. Ahh, if only she'd let me use my original form…"

I readied my claws, preparing to tear him to shreds as he fell.

The reason I'd failed to finish Beelzebub off before now was because he had Lilyxila commanding him and because my attention was mostly focused on Aluanne and Howgley. But in a one-on-one battle, Beelzebub wasn't particularly challenging to defeat for me as I was now.

I swung my claws at Beelzebub. At that moment, he gave a low chuckle, as if worn out. "Unfortunately, once that snake of a woman puts her ideas in your head, that's just how it is. She's already made me kill all my flies from Multiply Followers. Seems like that was a useless tactic from the very beginning."

At first, I didn't know what he meant. But then I understood.

I swung my paw at Beelzebub. It passed through his body without resistance as Beelzebub's body began to disperse, then fall to the ground below as a glowing mass of light.

"Well, Illusia…I guess this is farewell. You may have won this battle, but at the end of the day, I think I'll… No, our friendly saint will be the one winning this war. Looks like I won't get the chance to face you again, but I'll be watching from Hell to see whether it's you or the saint left standing at the end."

Beelzebub's face wavered as he spoke, then broke into glowing particles and dissipated.

I…I did it. I beat him. Lilyxila and Beelzebub had probably already agreed to kill off the flies created by Beelzebub's Multiply Followers skill as a signal. Seeing it done, Lilyxila had deactivated her Spirit Servant skill.

Beelzebub was so badly wounded that I doubted he'd be a threat to me, but it was still quite possible that he could recover and return to the fray.

But even so, I could end this fight soon. I just had to go after Lilyxila and give Beelzebub one more good beating, and then the fight would be over. That was it.

Chapter 4:
The Devil Girl's Snare

Part 1

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, in the Holy Land of Lialum, a mysterious incident occurred. In a wealthy family's home, the head of the house, a young married couple, and several servants were found slaughtered.

The surviving servants testified that their murderer was, according to them, a young girl who had been locked in the basement of the family's home. The girl had been born with extraordinary powers, and the family had kept her locked away and continued to raise her.

Occasionally, a baby was born into the world in possession of rare skills. It was believed that these rare skills came about through a complex combination of bloodlines, ancestral abilities, backgrounds, and experiences, but no one knew exactly how or why for certain.

However, babies born with unique skills often went on to become swordsmen, mages, and the like, and perform great deeds that would leave their mark on history for years to come. In the Holy Land of Lialum in particular, these skills were revered as "blessings from the Holy God."

As it so happened, that girl, too, was born with skills worthy of being considered a blessing from the Holy God. However, in exchange for her unusual power and abilities, she possessed a fiendish, malevolent nature that viciously craved human blood.

Once she was discovered, the girl fled deep into the forest, killing and devouring the brutal monsters that lived in the depths, villagers in neighboring settlements, merchants trying to pass through the forest, and even top-class adventurers who came to subdue her. When Knight-Captain Beranger of the Order of the Holy Knights finally captured her, it was not before she managed to eat nearly half of the order's Holy Knights alive. The girl was feared by many to this very day.

Part 2: Alphis

HAVING JUST LEFT THE FIELD of battle after recovering the seriously wounded Aluanne, Alphis flew through the sky atop a Zephyr to retrieve the Atlach-Nacha Aluanne had captured. By using either Lilyxila's Spirit Servant or Aluanne's Blood Doll to make the Atlach-Nacha their pawn, Lilyxila intended to prey upon Illusia's emotions to weaken him. She was no match for him in terms of physical prowess, so she was forced to resort to other means.

"Please hurry and heal Aluanne's wounds, Master Oulu," Alphis commanded Regeneration Master Oulu, who rode behind her on the dragon.

But Oulu remained motionless, his body hunched over.

"I…I will not," Oulu said in a small voice that was nearly lost to the wind.

"I would ask that you put your own selfishness aside in our hour of need. This is the entire reason you were brought to this island." While polite, Alphis's words were tinged with impatience and frustration. Aluanne had not only the status and skills to be a decisive combatant against Illusia but the ability to subjugate Atlach-Nacha in order to deal Illusia a devastating psychological blow as well.

And just when Alphis thought she'd managed to recover this boon before they lost it—at the risk of her own life, even—an unexpected obstacle stood in her way: Oulu, the man she depended on to heal Aluanne, was refusing to do his job.

Instead, he sat frozen, with his head in his hands, refusing to listen to any attempts to persuade him.

And to top it off, the main topic of this dispute, Aluanne, seemed to be amused by the entire crisis—even though she was the one *in* crisis—and had a silly, mindless grin plastered on her face.

"…I will remind you, Master Oulu, that the Evil Dragon's undead minion is pursuing us as we speak. We are faster, but it

already knows where we are headed. If we detour to try and shake them off, they may retrieve the spider monster before we do."

Alphis cast her eyes back behind their Zephyr. The undead girl under Illusia's command chased after them from the ground, riding atop the corpse of a dead dragon. She seemed to have an ability similar to Aluanne's, which allowed her to control corpses, but the dead dragon's wings were apparently not intact enough to fly. The undead girl was accompanied by a strange-looking monster with a wooden mask attached to its face. Alphis knew that it was another form taken by the Treant working with Illusia.

"If we do not save Aluanne, we will have no means with which to handle the undead. It will kill us both, Master Oulu. You know that, and yet you still choose not to act?" Alphis asked, her voice raising. Her hand grazed the sheath of her sword.

"Th-then let it kill me! This is…all of it, it's absurd! I won't listen to a word of it! I refuse! You're asking me to…to restore such a vile, demented creature?! Just let that devil die!"

The current circumstances had certainly gotten to Oulu's head; he was in a state of confused terror, and it was difficult for Alphis's words to reach him. He had been this way since they first saw the battle and seemed content to remain so no matter what she said.

But in truth, despite Alphis's frustration, she sympathized with Oulu's sentiments somewhat. She had been reluctant to release Aluanne from her cell in the underground prison at first as well.

Despite Saint Lilyxila's scant ranks, she'd believed bringing Aluanne along was too risky. She feared that the Devil of the Great Prison would betray them at the worst possible moment. If they were going to make use of Aluanne's powers and then dispose of her at a safe point, now might be their last chance to do so. Such thoughts also swirled around Alphis's mind.

Lilyxila's orders were to take Aluanne from the battlefield, have Oulu restore her, and then recover the Atlach-Nacha. She had set out to follow them without question, but the closer she looked at Aluanne, the more doubtful she became about whether this was truly the right thing to do.

Although she'd risked her life to rescue Aluanne, she was still weighing her own thoughts against Lilyxila's orders.

“Hey, hey, Mr. Oulu. Are you really, really not gonna heal me, even a little? I’m bleeding so, so much, and my body, it’s all messed up. It hurts all over, a whole bunch.” Aluanne raised her bloody face and cocked her head to the side. “So? Why? Why, Mr. Oulu?”

“*E-eep!* D-don’t, don’t look at me! Don’t touch me, you devil!!” Oulu leaned as far as he could off the Zephyr’s back and away from Aluanne—and lost his balance and let out a short scream as he almost fell to the ground far below. Alphis lunged at Oulu to grab his shirt and yank him back to safety.

“I told you, Saint Lilyxila… I told you time and time again that this coward may not be of use when we truly needed him. And yet, here we are.” Alphis muttered to herself under her breath. Aluanne watched her with a puzzled look on her face. But when their eyes met, Aluanne blinked and then broke into a wide grin.

“Oh? So the saint, she was expecting this kind of situation, was she? Was she?” Aluanne suddenly sat up.

“Miss Aluanne? What are you—”

Lightning fast, Aluanne crawled around on top of the dragon and threw her arms around Oulu from behind.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! Stop, stop it! Let go! Let go of me, you devil! Stop it, stop it…! Please, I beg you, please stop… I, I said I’d definitely return to my village one day… I promised my parents…!”

“Awww… Poor, poor Mr. Oulu. You’re so frightened, you poor thing. I feel sorry for you. I’m sorry, Mr. Oulu. I’ll kill you soon, okay? Okay?”

Alphis drew her sword as quickly as she could upon seeing Aluanne’s strange behavior—but not quickly enough to stop Aluanne’s fangs from sinking deep into Oulu’s neck.

“Please, don’t! Let me go! No, no… *Ah, ahh, aaaaahhh!!*”

Aluanne’s fangs tore a large chunk from Oulu’s neck. Blood gushed from the wound. The life faded from Oulu’s eyes, and he slumped to the dragon’s back. Aluanne licked the blood from around her mouth with a serene expression, then bent down and began to suck more blood from Oulu’s neck. In no time at all, the Zephyr’s back was covered in Oulu’s blood.

“Wh-what the hell did you do?!” Alphis shouted, still brandishing her sword.

As if in response, Oulu rose from the dead. His eyes were blank, his skin blackened, and red, diseased-looking welts rose to the surface of his skin.

By feeding Oulu’s corpse some of her blood after sucking his blood, she’d turned him into a minion she could manipulate at will with her Blood Doll skill.

“Re…Regen.” Oulu used his ultimate white magic skill, Regen, on Aluanne. She was enveloped in white light. In seconds, her ravaged body and missing arm were completely restored.

Aluanne’s Blood Doll skill allowed her to reproduce and use the corpse’s skills. Alphis already knew this.

“N-no…it can’t be,” Alphis said, lowering her sword with a pallid face.

When Alphis suggested to Lilyxila that Oulu might not be willing to listen to them, Lilyxila said that there was nothing she wouldn’t do to get him to do as he was told. Apparently, that included using Aluanne’s Blood Doll skill to turn Oulu into an obedient walking corpse.

Aluanne rotated her newly formed wrist, then looked over her body to check how she was faring. Then she turned her eyes toward the undead girl who was chasing them from afar.

She was a fair distance away, but even so, despite the island’s heavy fog reducing visibility, she was somehow able to keep up.

“All right! Now, now, I can get rid of that girl. As long as I can move, killing her will be a piece of cake.” Aluanne licked her lips, then turned her attention to Alphis, who still had her sword drawn. “Could you put that sword away now? You’re the saint’s friend, aren’t you, Miss Alphis?”

“I-I…”

“Aren’t you? I mean, if you want to play with me, then I’ll play with you. You see, I’ve always wanted to try a taste of *you*, Miss Alphis. You’re so strong and good-looking, and you’re friends with the saint too. I’ve thought about eating all kinds of people, but to be honest, I think you’d taste much better than the rest of them.”

Aluanne opened her mouth, displaying her razor-sharp fangs.

“Wh-what’re you saying?!”

Aluanne’s nails, molded by hardened slivers of blood seeping from her body, transformed into sinister, deadly claws. She raised her claws and tore at the dragon’s back. The dragon shrieked in pain, then began to fall through the sky.

Alphis screamed and clung to the dragon’s body. She barely managed to hold on to her sword and, by extension, her pride as a Holy Knight. But to Aluanne, who held her claws up nonchalantly as they fell, Alphis looked completely defenseless.

“Thank you for the meal, Miss Alphis.”



As Alphis fell, holding on to the dragon's back, Aluanne raised her arm again.

The usual light smile that always seemed to be on Aluanne's face was gone now. Instead, Alphis was face-to-face with a wicked devil, whose eyes stared deeply into her own, as if peering straight into her mind.

The moment Alphis felt the jarring thud of her body slamming into the ground—the impact only somewhat negated by the dragon beneath her—she prepared herself for death. But instead of going into her, the claws Aluanne swung down simply grazed her cheek, then slashed through the dragon's flesh.

Aluanne raised her arms, removed the coating of blood crystals from her fingernails to turn them back into pure blood, and then licked the blood from her fingers with her tongue. Then she extended all five of her fingers and re-bent them one by one, as if counting.

"Hmm... Is that five, with Mr. Oulu? Five humans, counting him? Ahh, I completely lost count..."

"Wh-what're you talking about, you devil...?!" Alphis shouted, then pointed her blade at Aluanne once more.

"Ohh, I see...so the saint really didn't cheat and tell you, did she?" Aluanne said, impressed. "Mmm...interesting. I really thought she would."

Alphis couldn't understand a single word she was saying. She was frozen in place, her sword still at the ready.

Aluanne gazed off in the direction they had come, turning her back to Alphis.

"You should go somewhere else, Miss Alphis. You're too weak; you'll just get in my way. I can handle those two monsters just fine on my own. You know it too, don't you? You can't even guard me on your own. So go on; if you stay here any longer, I'll have to kill you next."

Alphis slowly lowered her sword. Nothing Aluanne said made any sense to her, and she couldn't understand what guided Aluanne's actions. However, she could tell that Aluanne meant every word. Even if she put up a proper fight, Alphis knew she was no

match for Aluanne. Rather than challenging her, she decided to back down and return to Lilyxila to let her know about Oulu's death and undead revival, as well as Aluanne's deranged behavior.

"Oh, but don't go to the saint, okay? The saint's no good. You'd definitely get in my way then, Miss Alphis. It'd be *such* a drag, you know. You should just cower in some corner of the island until this is all over. That's all you can really do, anyway."

"Don't dismiss me so easily, devil. If my alternative is to sabotage the saint, then I choose death. That is what it means to be part of the Order of the Holy Knights. And the saint comes before anything else."

"Yes, well, the saint is a sinner, just like me. But really, Miss Alphis, you're better off not going back. I know that, at least. I know it for sure."

"I…I don't get you. I don't understand anything you want to do or say. You're nothing but a freak—no, a *devil.*" Alphis spat on the ground, then ran from the scene. From the direction she headed, it was obvious that she was going back toward Lilyxila.

Aluanne stared at Alphis's back as she retreated, face blank, but then immediately turned in the other direction.

"You guys should've just run away too. I bet Mr. Dragon wouldn't have blamed you, you know?"

As Aluanne watched, Allo and Treant appeared in the fog, coming right for her. Behind Aluanne, Oulu's corpse slowly stood up.

Part 3: Treant

I HAD USED MY Tree Spirit Transformation skill to transform myself into my small, adorable alternative form, and clung to Miss Allo's enlarged left arm as we moved through the forest.

In my normal form, I'd be able to run as fast as her if I ran at full speed, but a giant tree sprinting across the ground seemed like it would be a *little* too conspicuous. Considering our many enemies and the possibility of being attacked with long-range magic, I chose

to disguise myself in my smaller form and let Allo do the running for the both of us instead. This way, I also hoped it would be much easier for us to conceal ourselves from our target as we chased them through the fog.

Allo and I were going after an enemy dragon knight that carried a severely wounded Aluanne in order to defeat her and rescue Atlach-Nacha.

Although we'd nearly been wiped out by Aluanne before, she was apparently mortally wounded from her fight with Master. Because of that, Miss Allo and I believed we had a chance at defeating her, and that's why we followed her.

However, when we finally caught up to Aluanne, we realized we were sorely mistaken.

"You guys should've just run away too. I bet Mr. Dragon wouldn't have blamed you, you know?"

Aluanne, looking healthy and hale, walked up to me and Miss Allo out of the fog. I was relieved to see that she'd parted ways with Alphis, the swordswoman in the saint's entourage, but I was not expecting Aluanne's wounds to already be completely healed.

The last time we fought her, we had Atlach-Nacha on our side, meaning we outnumbered her three to one; and even so, we were completely outmatched. In hindsight, if we were going to be fighting a fully healed Aluanne, we should've worked out a better strategy beforehand.

Beside Aluanne stood a middle-aged man who seemed to be in an undead-like state. He stared at us with vacant eyes.

‹H-how...? How is she unhurt? Does Aluanne have Regenerate? Did she heal herself and just pretend to be hurt to draw us in...?› I said to Miss Allo.

She shook her head. "I think...that man healed her with his own magic."

‹How would you know that?›

"Well, I don't have any proof, but...it all connects, when you think about it. The reason she intentionally killed and controlled him, why she didn't use any healing abilities immediately after

being injured, and why her and Alphis got in a fight and split up. It's dangerous to assume anything, but I think it's highly likely."

‹Mmm...?› I tried to connect what Allo was saying together in my head, but it was too confusing for me to understand. Unlike her, I wasn't that great at thinking things through. *‹Ahh, I see... You might be right.›*

For the time being, I decided to go along with what Allo was saying. I didn't want to interrupt her train of thought by shooting her down for no reason. Besides, I had a general idea of what she was trying to say. And it made sense to assume that.

"R-right..." Allo's eyebrows lowered in disappointment.

H-hnn... I didn't think Miss Allo had Telepathy, but it seems like she can tell that I'm not grasping the conversation very well...

The corners of Aluanne's mouth lifted, creating a crescent moon smile on her face. "Wow, you're real smart, undead girl. Me, well, I'm so dumb. Just a big dummy. I can't tell what other people are thinking at all. I'm jealous, you know. *Super* jealous."

Aluanne waved her hands. Bright red blood coagulated on the tips of her fingernails, forming long, vicious claws.

"See, the truth is, I don't have much time to spare either, so I can't take my time and play with you. No playing allowed! I'll just finish you nice and quick instead."

At that, Allo froze.

From our previous battle, we both knew that we were no match for Aluanne in close combat. If we tried to fight her head-on, she'd rip us to shreds with those claws in seconds, just like she said.

Instead, Allo's plan was to keep her distance, use her skills to gain an advantage, and counter Aluanne with ranged attacks when she came close. We already knew exactly how fast she was and what kind of attacks she had in her arsenal.

‹H-here she comes, Miss Allo! Leave it to me! I'll repel her ranged attacks!›

"It's okay, Treant. Just stay in that form for now, okay?"

‹B-but...!›

“I doubt Aluanne herself will use any long-range magic. When we fought her before, the only magic she used was Shockwave, and that was from the Holy Knight guy she took over. I don’t think she wants to waste her MP on fighting weaklings like us. That man might have some magic attacks, but if he’s a healer, then I doubt she’d make him use up his MP on attacking.”

‹O-oh, I see… I think?›

Allo gave a weak chuckle.

H-hey! I really do get it this time! At least…mostly.

‹But I cannot allow you to put yourself in harm’s way, Miss Allo! I’d never be able to show my face in front of Master again!›

“Treant…I’ve got a favor to ask of you. No matter how well I do, I don’t think I can do enough damage to kill Aluanne on my own. If that man is a healer, then we need to take her out with one big hit, or he’ll just heal her.”

‹S-so…what do you want me to do?›

“I’m gonna try to find a way to make an opening. The moment Aluanne is vulnerable, I want you to end your Tree Spirit Transformation and take Aluanne down. You have that skill Master Dragon helped you develop, right?”

Th-that skill? The one Master proposed to me when we were all raising our levels? B-but I don’t know if that would even affect Aluanne…

‹B-but Master and I basically just developed that skill as a joke while we were goofing off… I’m not sure it’d even do anything against such a tough enemy…›

“If you manage to hit her with it while she’s weak, I think it’d be strong enough to kill her. If we want a shot at beating her, despite our status differences, then we’ve gotta get the drop on her somehow, and to me, that skill seems perfect.”

Well, I doubted she’d expect it, at least, but it wasn’t very accurate to begin with. And if I missed, Aluanne would kill us both.

But…I wasn’t sure if there was any other way for us to take down Aluanne when she was fully healed.

‹All right, Miss Allo. Let’s give that evil vampire girl a beating she’ll never see coming!›

The ground in front of Allo rose up and formed into two clay figures that resembled her as she used Clay Doll. While the figures made with Clay Doll could only execute basic actions, their movement abilities were similar to their host's.

Allo couldn't survive a melee fight against Aluanne. Instead, she was planning to direct her Clay Dolls to attack from a safe distance to wear her down somehow.

‹Oh! Miss Allo! Wait just a moment!› I jumped down from my perch on Allo's arm and ran up to the two clay figures. Then I brushed against them with my wings, willing my magic to be absorbed into them. The clay figures contracted together, becoming slightly smaller.

The skill I'd used was Gravity Compression, which added gravitational force to an object to increase its density and improve its status. It might not do much in the face of Aluanne's absurd strength, but it was still better than nothing.

As the two clay figures began to move straight toward Aluanne, I jumped behind them and returned to my spot on Allo's enlarged left arm.

"Stay away from Mr. Oulu. Okay? Stay away. I don't think there's anything to worry about, but I'd like to leave a bit of insurance behind against an opponent who believes they have a chance at beating me," Aluanne said, then took a big step forward—away from the undead man, whose name seemed to be Oulu. Allo moved in a circle, avoiding Aluanne and trying to get closer to Oulu.

Oh, I see. Allo's plan was to use the clay figures to distract Aluanne so she could take Oulu out first, since he seemed to be Aluanne's healer.

But did we really have the luxury to go about this fight in such a roundabout manner? I felt like we had a better chance of winning if we focused all our firepower on Aluanne and went all-out, whatever the cost…

But Miss Allo was smarter than me. I was sure she had something in mind.

"Ooh, not bad, not a bad move at all," Aluanne said as the two figures split apart and flanked her on either side. "But you won't

even get close to me like that, you know?"

She swung her arms in either direction. Her long claws of coagulated blood tore through both of the clay figures' torsos. Their heads and arms were severed from their bodies and fell to the ground.

It all happened in the span of a single moment. Even though I'd strengthened them with Gravity Compression, they were no match for Aluanne's claws.

Aluanne turned to look back at me and Allo, then immediately started sprinting toward us. Because we were aiming for Oulu, we weren't very far from each other.

‹M-Miss Allo! We…we should prepare another Clay Doll or something to intercept her! If she gets too close, we'll wind up in the same situation we ended up in last time!›

"Treant, I need you to trust me. Let me do this." With that, Allo sprinted straight for Oulu.

"Oh, Mr. Oulu, you wait right there, okay? I'll be right over, and I'll save you, don't you worry!" Aluanne was about to turn toward us again when a clay arm stretched out from behind her and grabbed her. The arm raised her high into the air.

"Wh…what? What is this…?"

Dozens of long clay arms extended from the remains of the Clay Dolls Aluanne had destroyed. It seemed like Allo had put her binding skill, Lingering Rope, into the Clay Dolls in advance. Following the many arms, the Clay Dolls' broken torsos drew closer to Aluanne.

"Hey, hey! Don't get in my way!" Aluanne ripped off one of the clay arms wrapped around her and tore through the Clay Doll's torso with a vertical slash from her claws. Another clay arm attempted to wrap itself around her, but she quickly severed it from its origin point.

Th-that won't hold her for much longer! She'll be on us soon! We needed to take Oulu out quickly, then get away from Aluanne as fast as we could.

‹I can't do much, but I'll do everything I can!› I used Clay Sphere to create a floating orb of clay, then strengthened it with Gravity

Compression and shot it straight at Oulu.

The orb caught Oulu directly on the chin. I heard the crack of his neck breaking, and his face turned toward the sky.

‹I-I did it! That was a direct hit!›

With another cracking noise, Oulu's head jerked straight back to face us. His neck—which should've definitely been broken—returned to its original shape as if nothing had happened. The approaching footsteps did not even slow; it was like our attacks had no effect whatsoever.

‹Wh-what...?!›

"Sorry, sorry, but it's no use. I'm the one controlling it, you know. As long as I'm around, no matter how much you break him, even to bits, Mr. Oulu won't die. In fact, he *can't* die. You should just give up now, okay? It's better that way. Or maybe, maybe we should try cutting off your arms, legs, and head, and grind them up real fine, like we're making candy?"

Having already shaken off the last of the Lingering Rope, Aluanne came toward us once again.

S-so it was impossible to kill the healer first... I didn't know when he would heal himself, but either way, we didn't have the luxury of taking him down while avoiding the main threat.

I'd thought Miss Allo's original plan was to strike Aluanne down at once, without giving her the chance to recover. Did she change her strategy when she realized Aluanne wasn't moving the way she wanted? If so, then our current situation wasn't great.

"It's all right, Treant. So far, this fight hasn't been too far off from what I was expecting."

‹B-but...Miss Allo, if we can't kill Oulu, then what was the point in risking so much to create this situation?!›

"I'm gonna be taking a bit of a gamble here, but if Oulu's healing abilities are important to Aluanne, then I think it'll work," Allo said, watching Oulu.

I didn't have a single clue what she was talking about. Was Miss Allo trying to use psychological warfare against Aluanne?

As I stood wondering, Allo jumped on Oulu. *W-wait. Didn't my Clay Sphere just confirm that we couldn't kill Oulu? What in the world is she trying to do?*

Regardless, if Allo was getting into a close-combat fight, she needed protection. I used Physical Barrier. Light began to glow around me, then shot out to envelop Allo's body.

"U-uuuhnn, aaagh...ghaaaagh..." With unfocused eyes, Oulu drew his sword and slashed at Allo. I flew into the air. Allo swung her overgrown left arm to meet Oulu's blade. It cut a wide gash in her arm, digging deep, but she managed to stop it in the process.

"Uhh, uhhhhhnn, uuuh..." Oulu's movements slowed. It seemed like Miss Allo was using her own corpse-controlling skill, Undead Maker, to interfere with Aluanne's Blood Doll and hamper Oulu's ability to move. With him sufficiently slowed, Allo darted around to Oulu's back and threw her arms around him.

"Uoooooh?! Uooooooooohhh!!" Oulu writhed in distress as Allo used Mana Drain.

Oh, that's smart. He may be semi-immortal and full of useful magic, but none of that matters if he runs out of MP.

However, Aluanne was already heading our way. The closer she got, the more overpowering Oulu's physical strength became. There was no way Allo could cling to him long enough to suck all of his MP out.

"Uh-oh... That's not good, that's not good for me at all, you know..."

I finally realized what Miss Allo was trying to do. From Aluanne's perspective, we were opponents she could deal with however she liked. She wouldn't want to lose Oulu, her insurance policy, fighting nobodies like us. She still had a fight with Master ahead of her. If Aluanne was really intent on helping the saint win, she should be rushing to Oulu's side as fast as she could to try and save as much of his MP as possible.

Allo's aggression had made Aluanne wary, and she had Oulu on standby to heal in case it was necessary. However, for Aluanne, this battle was one she wanted to fight without risk. At the same time, though, she couldn't afford to be worn out unnecessarily. With

all of that in mind, Allo had successfully lured Oulu into the open, and would now use him as a hostage against Aluanne. So far, the one in command during this fight was Allo, without question.

But the real battle started now. Allo was undoubtedly planning to take advantage of the opportunity she'd be presented with when Aluanne leapt toward them without protection and finish her off. Allo's plan from the very beginning was to defeat Aluanne by hitting her with all we had at once.

This next clash between them would decide the victor. And as for me, my job was to finish the devil girl off once and for all.

Two Allo-shaped clay figures appeared in front of her. It seemed like she was planning to use her Clay Dolls to keep Aluanne in check.

Aluanne raised her blood claws in preparation for the two clay figures coming at her. With Oulu still trapped, it seemed like she intended to slash her way through them head-on and make a beeline for Allo.

After seeing the quick work she made of them earlier, I was sure Miss Allo knew that two Clay Dolls wouldn't stand a chance against Aluanne. Hiding a Lingering Rope inside them before was smart, but I doubted she'd fall for the same trick a second time.

Holding down the struggling Oulu with her arms, Allo closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then looked at Aluanne again. Her expression had hardened; she seemed equally as nervous as me.

We'd successfully captured Oulu and made Aluanne begin to panic. However, we were still stuck with the same overwhelming disadvantage we'd had since the beginning. If we allowed Aluanne to attack us outright, both Allo and I would soon be left incapacitated.

"Treant, could you cast Guard Lost on Aluanne?"

‹I-I can try...›

Guard Lost was a skill I learned when I evolved into my tyrant guardian form. It raised its target's attack; but in exchange, it lowered their defense. Using it on Aluanne in this situation would be dangerous, to say the least, but if we couldn't take her down,

then she'd kill us. Aluanne getting a slight boost to her attack power shouldn't have a significant effect on our current battle situation.

While Aluanne was busy attacking the two Clay Dolls, I used Guard Lost. An orb of magical light flew toward her. Aluanne glanced at it, but it seemed like she chose to focus on taking out the Clay Dolls without getting injured, rather than avoid the orb.

My Guard Lost hit its target. Now, any attacks we dealt would cost her a bit more damage than before. At the same time, this meant Aluanne's attack power—which was already frighteningly high—had also increased.

At that moment, Allo grabbed me with her enlarged left arm.

‹M-Miss Allo...? Have I...made a deadly mistake...?› I called out to her, afraid she was angry. But when I turned to look, Allo's gaze was fixed on Aluanne, her expression serious.

"Treant, you're only going to get one shot at this, so...don't hesitate."

‹O-okay...?›

With that, Allo hurled me into the air with her massive arm.

‹M-Miss Alloooo?!›

Just as my body was launched into the air, Aluanne dismembered Allo's two Clay Dolls with her claws. Allo slammed Oulu, who she was still holding on to, down to the ground, then quickly thrust her arms forward. Her arms began to glow as she gathered her magic there; it was brighter than I expected, like Allo's arms had gobbled up even more magic than usual.

"Ultimate Gale!" she shouted. A whirlwind whipped up beneath me, propelling my body even higher.

‹Uwah?!› My vision spun as I flipped through the air. But somehow, I managed to catch sight of Aluanne. It was vital that I didn't lose sight of her.

Right when Allo released her wind magic, Aluanne leapt forward as if she was going to jump into it. No, that wasn't right—Allo shot Gale right where Aluanne was about to jump. Aluanne was in a rush to get Oulu back, and she was also wary of the Clay Doll and Lingering Rope combo. Once she took down the Clay Dolls,

she'd leap forward to escape their clutches and reach Oulu. And Allo knew that too.

"Kyaaaaa! Aaaah! Ow, ow ow, owww!"

Allo's Gale sliced into Aluanne's body. With her defense lowered by Guard Lost, the attack seemed to do a decent amount of damage.

I can do this... Now that Aluanne had been damaged by Gale, I could launch my follow-up attack and finish her off! If I couldn't take her down here and now, there was no way Miss Allo and I would survive. Miss Allo had done everything in her power to create this situation, this chance for me. And now, I needed to do everything in my power to make sure I hit Aluanne!

I quickly ended my Tree Spirit Transformation and returned to my original giant tree form. Then I used Fire Sphere on myself, letting the flames spread through all of my branches, before using Statue to turn my body to steel, preventing the flames from harming me—I was now a huge, flaming, steel tree, suspended in the air overhead.

All right! It's time to crush Aluanne with Meteor Stomp while she's still damaged from Gale!

Aluanne must have noticed when Allo launched me into the air, but there was no way she could have expected me to instantly transform into a giant steel tree covered in flames and drop down on her from the sky.

Let's end this here and—

"Sorry, I'm sorry... I know you both worked *sooo* hard to come up with such a desperate plan to kill me, but...I'm sorry. I knew already, I knew all about it." Aluanne said in a deliberately pitying voice, raising her face to look up at me in the sky with calm eyes. Her eyes widened.

"See, you see, my eyes, they see *everything.* So I played along until there was no turning back for you, and now, all I have to do is dodge your big hit."

It was like Aluanne could see right through me. *No. It's over... This attack won't hit her. I failed.*

"Sorry, sorry, it's just, I can't just let you win either, so..."

At that moment, Aluanne's expression clouded over as Allo leapt into her own Gale—which covered her in dozens of cuts—and flew straight toward Aluanne.

Allo's enlarged left arm slammed into Aluanne amid the windstorm. Aluanne, moving against the wind, whirled around and counterattacked. Her claws sliced into Allo's left shoulder and cut off her larger arm, then sent her flying. In response, Allo leapt at Aluanne and bit down on her slender arm.

"Hnn, kyaaaa!"

Allo's fierce onslaught revealed an unexpected opening in Aluanne's defenses. Moments later, the long, thin arms of countless Lingering Ropes sprouted from Allo's body and wound themselves around Aluanne.

With Aluanne trapped in the ropes, she was suddenly wide open for an attack. If I used Meteor Stomp right now, it would definitely hit her. But there was also a chance I'd hit Allo.

But if I didn't use Meteor Stomp, Aluanne would rip her to shreds anyway. I knew that. I knew that, but I still didn't know what the right choice was.

Allo's words from earlier suddenly passed through my mind again. *Treant, you're only going to get one shot at this, so…don't hesitate.*

Miss Allo must not have expected things to turn out like this. Even now, she'd dashed right into combat and somehow managed to restrain Aluanne. But she might've considered the possibility that if we went with this plan, she might end up being sacrificed.

‹Oh, Miss Allo…forgive me. Please forgive me for this…!› I used Gravity to increase my fall speed, then slammed into the ground at full speed. Meteor Stomp exploded around me. My roots, which were turned to steel by my Statue skill and relatively pointed, dug deep into the ground. The ground around us shook violently from the impact.

‹I'm sorry, Miss Allo, I'm so sorry…I…I…›

Allo's Lingering Ropes, torn apart by the impact, flew through the air, no longer any more than clay and dirt. The impact flung Allo and Aluanne off in two different directions.

Allo's body rolled across the ground as she landed. My Meteor Stomp had torn her arms to shreds, and her skin was dried and cracked—the opposite of her typical fresh, hydrated appearance. I thought she'd be unable to move, but after a moment, she staggered to her feet.

"Tre…ant…" she whispered, her voice full of anguish.

‹I'm so sorry, Miss Allo…I couldn't use my full force to destroy her if it meant killing you too…›

Nearby, Aluanne's body shuddered, and then she rose to her feet with a strange movement. "Oh, wow… That really surprised me, you know. I thought I was going to die! I didn't think you'd decide to attack if it meant killing your friend too! But it seems like that little fairy friend didn't have the determination to follow through."

"Little fairy friend"? I guess she's talking about me…and she's right. I couldn't go through with it, knowing it would kill Allo. The moment before I landed, I used Gravity to slow my fall speed and dropped a branch between Allo and Aluanne to shove them both away.

I couldn't hit Allo directly with my Meteor Stomp. I just… couldn't.

Even so, I knew it was a bad move. Maybe the worst one I could've made.

Allo had used the last of her power to restrain Aluanne, and even if it wasn't a direct hit, she was still hit by my Meteor Stomp. She was no longer in any condition to fight.

On top of that, Allo and I had officially shown all of our hands to Aluanne. We had no other means of compensating for the status difference between us.

And now Aluanne would kill me, Miss Allo, and Miss Atlach-Nacha. If this was how things would turn out, I should've let my Meteor Stomp hit the both of them. At least then I could've saved Miss Atlach-Nacha and brought her back to Master. I knew saving Miss Allo would destroy her resolve too. But even so… Even so, I still couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Aww, that's no good…no good at all. You can't be greedy. You have to keep your priorities straight…like the saint does. Otherwise,

you'll never get the things you want, you know?" Aluanne said.

She, too, was in rough shape after the Meteor Stomp. Blood flowed freely from her mouth, staining her black dress a dark crimson. Her legs were also very clearly broken in several places, but somehow, she was able to stand without any issues.

"It's almost like...she's using Blood Doll on herself to force her body to move," Allo said, watching Aluanne with narrowed eyes.

I see... If she could use her own blood to freely manipulate a corpse, it wasn't out of the question for her to be able to use that same skill to ignore damage to her own body and force it to move.

"Just...a little more! One more Gale, and...!" Allo slowly raised her arm and focused her gaze on Aluanne once again.

"Ooh, you act so tough, such a toughie! But I'm sorry, Miss Undead Girl, I'm sorry. You see, I can tell when you're lying. And you are. There's no point in trying to threaten me. I can see exactly what you're thinking. 'Oh, stay away, leave my friends alone!' That's what was on your mind. And you're so desperate too," she added, gazing into Allo's eyes. "It's not because of my eyes, I don't need to rely on them to get the picture. I can tell that much just from looking at you."

It seemed like Aluanne's eyes had some sort of mind-reading ability after all. No matter how hard Allo had tried to hash out a battle plan, it wouldn't have escaped her notice from the very beginning.

"But...all right, I can do that, just for you. There's nothing to be gained from dealing with the two of you when you're so painfully desperate. I never thought you'd manage to inflict this much damage on me either. So instead, I'll leave you to the wolves."

Sh-she's leaving...?

I didn't understand. What was she thinking? Sure, Aluanne had some severe injuries, but she could still wipe me and Allo out in seconds right now if she wanted to, so...

‹Huh...?› It was when I looked past Aluanne, at Oulu standing behind her, that I finally understood. Aluanne had also suffered a lot of damage. Instead of foolhardily continuing this battle with Allo and me, she was choosing to retreat so that Oulu could heal her in

safety. She probably thought it was fine to let us go if we didn't have the strength left to pursue her.

Even if she killed me and Allo before going to retrieve Atlach-Nacha, she could only take one of us with her as her Blood Doll. And besides that, she only needed to kill one of us to shatter Master's spirit. All she had to do was kill Atlach-Nacha and make her a Blood Doll, then show her to Master and tell him she killed me and Allo as well.

Whether or not she actually killed the two of us was of little importance to Aluanne. The mental blow of losing the three of us could very well spell the end for Master. Even if Allo and I jumped into battle in time, with our injuries, we'd only be dragging Master down with us.

We wouldn't be rushing to Master's aid anytime soon anyway —that is, if we even survived at all.

As Aluanne gave her declaration, she turned and darted away from us at a frightening speed. It seemed like she was using Blood Doll on herself to force her body to move at its normal pace, despite her injuries. The undead man, Oulu, ran after her.

Aluanne was on her way to heal, then kill Atlach-Nacha. And all we could do was sit there and watch as her back disappeared into the fog.

When she was gone, I slumped to the ground, my trunk toppling over. *Wh-why...? Why am I so...so powerless to help my friends?*

"Sorry, but I...I think it's over for me..." Allo struggled to get back to her feet, but her legs gave way beneath her, and she fell to the ground.

‹M-Miss Allo!›

"Treant, just...just leave me and run. That girl said she was retreating, but...after she uses Oulu to heal and throws him away, then kills Atlach-Nacha to make into her new pawn...she'll come back, she'll come back to kill us. We're definitely not high on her priority list, so I doubt she'll spend too much time hunting us down, but..."

‹Th-then we should both leave! Together! I'll carry you on my back, and...!›

Allo looked up at the sky and slowly shook her head.

"Your normal form is way too conspicuous for that, Treant... She'd definitely find us, even in all this fog. You need to transform into a tree spirit and run away without me... For Master Dragon's sake."

‹B-but that's... You want me to leave you and Miss Atlach-Nacha to die?! I...I can't do that...!›

Aluanne's voice floated through my mind. *You have to keep your priorities straight...like the saint does. Otherwise, you'll never get the things you want, you know?*

With that...I finally came to my decision. I am an indecisive being. When Allo caught Aluanne, I couldn't decide whether or not to aim for a direct hit with my Meteor Stomp until the very last second.

No, that wasn't true. I was only pretending to be unsure. I knew what my decision would be from the very beginning. I apologized to Allo afterward, but I didn't regret my choice. There was no way I could have sacrificed her.

At the time, I was stuck between killing both Allo and Aluanne myself, or not killing either, and Aluanne killing us both instead. But because I hadn't given in, and persisted in the face of failure, both Allo and I were still alive—for the time being, at least.

Aluanne was right. I did have to keep my priorities straight. And my main priority, the one thing I wanted most in this world, was for all of us to come out of this alive. If I was going to do that, then sometimes I needed to choose to disregard paths that did not serve that goal and find my own way forward.

‹Miss Allo...please forgive me for leaving you in this state. But I will be back soon.› I gently covered Allo's face with one of my leaves, then turned away from her.

"Treant...?"

‹Don't you worry. I'll be back with Atlach-Nacha before you know it! I promise!›

With that, I took off after Aluanne.

Part 4: Treant

I RAN THROUGH THE FOG in the same direction Aluanne had disappeared in.

The vampire girl was a formidable enemy. On top of that, she had her own undead healer, Oulu, as a means of recovery. Alone, I was no match for her.

But Aluanne had already been wounded thanks to Miss Allo's brilliant and courageous plan. She had also shaved off a good portion of Oulu's MP. I wasn't sure how much this would affect either of them, but I could only hope that it would give me a decent shot.

I was well aware that my chances at victory were slim. It was difficult for me to fight a proper battle against an enemy strong enough to destroy me with a single blow. Allo and Atlach-Nacha were the tricky ones with the skills and statuses to land the powerful attacks we needed.

I, on the other hand, was an endurance fighter. That meant I could beat a bunch of lower-rank opponents in a row, but I struggled against higher-rank opponents. I knew this all too well. I had Meteor Stomp, but that wasn't a skill I could pull off by myself. I'd have to find some other way to win in a fight.

Whether I had a chance of winning or not yet was still up in the air. But that meant it was worth giving it a shot. Or at least, it would be pointless for me to stop here and just leave Allo and Atlach-Nacha to die. After careful consideration, it was easy to conclude that running away was simply not an option. And if not, then my only choice was to move forward—no matter how treacherous the path ahead might be.

I spotted a rock wall at the base of a cliff ahead of me. The path I was taking split to the left and right where it ran into the wall.

Hmm... Did Aluanne go right or left? I suppose she might've gone up the cliff as well. Are there any traces of claw marks in the rocks around here?

I scanned up the rocks and spotted a large crack in the cliff wall. This felt unlikely, so I tried to look for other options, but then, I spotted a glowing black light along the crack's edge.

I-Is that…one of Miss Atlach-Nacha's special webs? She must've left it here!

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Aluanne's story was that she'd hidden Atlach-Nacha somewhere to join up with Lilyxila for a little bit.

If she was telling the truth, then wouldn't a cave hidden in a cliff wall be a perfect spot for Aluanne to stash Atlach-Nacha?!

If Miss Allo were here, she would've noticed this cave as soon as she arrived. Good thing Atlach-Nacha left me a clue!

Although the cave seemed to be a reasonable size, it was a little small for me. I could squeeze myself in with some difficulty, but I wouldn't be able to avoid any of Aluanne's attacks. And if I moved around too much, I'd risk collapsing the cave and burying Atlach-Nacha alive.

However, if I just waited outside, Aluanne might kill Atlach-Nacha to allow her complete control over her with Blood Doll.

There was a chance that what she'd said before was an attempt to feed us fake information, and that she aimed to take Atlach-Nacha to Lilyxila to become a Spirit Servant like they'd originally planned, but…

Hmm, hmmmmm… Yes, there's no way I can just wait outside to see if Aluanne kills Miss Atlach-Nacha or not! I've already decided not to be such a scaredy-tree anymore!

I used Tree Spirit Transformation. My body shrank and took on its typical birdlike form, about the size of a human child.

As a tree spirit, I could go into the cave without worrying about how big it was. If I stayed in my original form, I wouldn't have the space to move around well, and Aluanne would make me her plaything until she killed me.

However, my tree spirit form had much lower stats than my original one. The only way I'd get out of this situation alive was to rescue Atlach-Nacha with my smaller form and then somehow escape Aluanne's clutches.

Even in this smaller form, it would be nearly impossible for me to rescue Atlach-Nacha while dodging Aluanne in a cave that didn't seem particularly large. On top of that, Aluanne would have the advantage of knowing the cave's interior already.

Going inside the cave would be foolish. I knew that. If it were just about simple odds, I'd have more of a chance of beating Aluanne if I hid somewhere outside and ambushed her. The chances that Aluanne would bring Atlach-Nacha out of the cave still alive were not zero. I knew that. But even so, I didn't want to take that chance.

Step by step, I moved into the cave, sticking close to its walls and going as quickly and quietly as I could. The cave seemed silent, the sound of Aluanne's footsteps approaching curiously absent.

Is this not the right place? No, it has to be. I checked the web I'd spotted from afar before, and it was indeed one of Atlach-Nacha's.

Maybe Aluanne already got Atlach-Nacha and left?

No, Aluanne was wounded. She would've needed to stop and have Oulu heal her, which would've taken time. If she'd already arrived, retrieved Atlach-Nacha, and left, then she was acting a little too fast for me to even try to intercept her.

Did she not go into the cave for some reason? If so, then I'd completely lucked out! All I'd have to do was grab Miss Atlach-Nacha and Miss Allo real quick and hide somewhere until Master finished that devil girl off for good. Then my task would officially be complete.

"Ooh, I just knew you'd come here, I knew it. Because, well, you're very timid, I know, but you also have the biggest heart. I can tell." A voice spoke up from behind me. I turned around to see Aluanne, alongside a bloodied and expressionless Oulu.

"This cave was straight ahead, and you had to take the bait. Sorry, sorry. I don't think any less of you, you know. I haven't seen you hit your weakest point yet, so I thought you were much more of a threat than your dying undead friend. So I led you in here to fight, where you couldn't change back into your normal form. If you didn't end up showing up here, then that meant you'd just run away, and I wouldn't have to worry about you."

They were blocking the exit. They must have been hiding somewhere in the cave, perhaps behind a rock, or further in.

I thought I'd been lucky, spotting that cave. But all my determination, all my effort, was rendered meaningless by this devil's simple trick.

"I'm sorry. You know, in a game of logic, I never lose. After all, I can see everything," Aluanne said, opening her eyes wide. Watching her, it was again clear to me Aluanne was simply not an adversary I could handle on my own.

I stood there, stunned. There was nothing I could do. Even if I tried to run to where Atlach-Nacha was, Aluanne's claws would pierce through my back before I reached her.

Forgive me, Miss Allo... Our battle was doomed from the very beginning. This devil never lets her guard down; even against us.

"All right...shall we finish this, then? I will bring you with me to the spider girl. I can only control one doll at a time, so I couldn't bring the other one with me, you see." Aluanne tossed something at me. It was bright white and covered in toxic-looking crimson red blood that I recognized from somewhere.

Then it clicked, and my mind went white. It was Miss Atlach-Nacha's leg. Somewhat faintly, I realized that Aluanne had already disposed of Atlach-Nacha, then come back to wait for me.

I couldn't move. Couldn't even think.

"Goodbye, brave little blockhead." Aluanne leapt at me. I watched as blood flowed to her fingertips and formed into sinister claws in midair.

I watched in what felt like slow motion and Aluanne leapt toward me for the kill. But even so, I couldn't quite string enough thoughts together to form a plan for how to react.

I was out of ideas, out of options. Atlach-Nacha was already dead. I was trapped, with no way to get back to Allo.

Then what do I do? What's my next move? I didn't know. My thoughts were all over the place. A dark, murky feeling welled up inside me, telling me to just give up, to let it all be over.

In a fit of reckless abandon, I released my Tree Spirit Transformation. The cave was small for me, but not so small that I

hit my head on the ceiling.

"Huh? You can't even move like th—"

‹Ohhh, oouuuhh, ooooooouuuuuuuuuuhhh!!›

I swung my branches around in fury. They shattered against the cave walls. Chunks of earth and sand fell from the ceiling, but I ignored them and swung down at Aluanne. Perhaps fearing she'd be caught under the falling rubble if she wasn't careful, Aluanne stopped her attack and grabbed my thick branch with her thin arms to hold it firmly in place. My roots swung around, trying to move a little, but she pinned them the ground with her foot.

My status was much, much lower than Aluanne's. Even the one hit I'd miraculously managed to land on her was nothing in the face of her power. Aluanne looked slightly behind me.

Suddenly, I wondered if Atlach-Nacha's body was still deep within the cave. Was she afraid I'd collapse it, making it impossible to retrieve her body? Considering the circumstances, it seemed like Aluanne wasn't interested in taking any chances with me.

Hmph. "Tyrant guardian," my butt. What was the point of being called a guardian if I couldn't even protect one of my friends, even when I was willing to risk my life in the process? I didn't just want some tanky defense that wouldn't even buy me time against stronger opponents; I wanted to be powerful enough to defeat this outside invader staring me down.

‹Berserk!›

Berserk was a skill that made its target lose its reasoning abilities and become mindless in exchange for an increase in attack power. It was typically used on enemies. But this time, I used it on myself. I needed to be more powerful; as it was, I didn't have the strength to fight back.

‹Guard Lost!› I cast this one on myself as well. It lowered its target's defense in exchange for increasing its attack.

I couldn't hit Aluanne, so I needed to use it on myself. The extra attack power from Guard Lost might give me a bit more of an advantage against her. However, if she landed a single blow on me, it would be over.

“In that state, I doubt you can hear a single word I’m saying. Yeah, definitely not.” Aluanne said, watching me intently with her big eyes wide open.

I lifted my roots into the air, then slammed them into the ground as hard as I could with my Tremor skill. The cave shuddered around us, the impact sending dirt and rocks flying through the air.

Aluanne kicked off from the ground and leapt straight at me. I didn’t have time to react. But then, miraculously, a stalactite broke off from the ceiling of the cave and shot down between us, blocking Aluanne’s path. She kicked off of it and tried to dart to the side.

Not so fast! ‹Clay!›

I immediately fired off another skill. At my words, the rubble surrounding us began to glow. Then long clay tentacles extended toward Aluanne and began to wrap around her. Aluanne writhed, trying to shake them off.

‹I won’t let you get away!!› I stepped forward, raising my biggest branch. With Statue, I turned the branch’s tip into metal and then used Gravity Compression to crush it into a hardened point. Gravity Compression enhanced other stats at the cost of sacrificing HP.

I didn’t care what happened to my body. The only thing that mattered to me was making Aluanne pay for what she did. She killed Atlach-Nacha and was planning to parade her around as a trophy to damage Master’s resolve. Such a wicked, evil creature didn’t deserve to live as long as she had.

By the time my branch came down, Aluanne had only just escaped from my Clay tentacles’ clutches. She dashed to the wall, scanned the room with her huge black eyes, and then moved up to the corner of the cave’s ceiling.

“It’s too cramped in here to avoid you…but you can’t hit me up here! You’re too big, you can’t!” Aluanne giggled.

‹Then I’ll bring this whole place down and take you to Hell with me!›

I swung my strengthened branch with all of my might. The branch’s tip scraped along the ceiling before it struck Aluanne’s torso, hard. She guarded herself with her arms, but even so, I could feel it as her body broke beneath them.

Aluanne's body was shattered from within. Blood poured freely from her mouth. She'd taken so much damage that Oulu, standing a fair distance away, collapsed on the spot.

My attack had been strengthened by Berserk and Guard Lost, and my branch was hardened with Statue and made denser with Gravity Compression. It was much, much more lethal than my last attack.

The whole cave shook so much that Aluanne's body dislodged itself and fell to the floor. I didn't let up; continuing to swing my branch down on her with all my might.

Even if I she's the only person I defeat, even if it means burying myself alive, I'm going to kill Aluanne! I won't let her use Atlach-Nacha as her pawn! And I won't let her mess with Miss Allo or Master ever again!

Just before my third blow landed, Aluanne scuttled quickly along the floor to escape my reach. Blood began to clot along her injuries as she forced her body to move.

Her neck was bent at a strange angle. Any normal human being would no longer be alive at this point. She was hunched over, with both hands on the ground in an animalistic stance. Her blood claws were much longer than they'd ever been before, and her eyes glowed with an eerily bright red light, despite her supposedly near-dead condition.

"You...really were the most dangerous one," she said.

By using Blood Doll on herself, Aluanne was able to act with the same speed and strength she had when she was at perfect condition, no matter how close to death she was. Or rather, that was Allo's theory; and apparently, she was incorrect.

Aluanne leapt up from the ground. The moment she did, she disappeared, and I heard a sound come from behind me. Using Blood Doll, Aluanne was clearly *much* faster than she was at full health.

Oulu's corpse lay crumpled on the floor. She seemed to have completely given up on controlling him. If she'd just been able to focus on her own actions, she could've made it this far on her own.

Again, I heard the sound behind me. Then it was above me, then below. She wasn't just toying with me; she was trying to get me to lose track of her completely so she could deliver a decisive blow.

I used Statue to harden my entire body, then used Gravity Compression to crush my wood in on itself and increase my defense. If I couldn't see her in time to react, then I'd react after receiving her attack. As long as Aluanne didn't survive this fight, I was prepared to die as well.

Suddenly, a sharp pain flashed across my back as Aluanne leapt toward me and dug her sharp claws into my trunk. I felt my metal body crack, felt the life begin to slip from me.

"This is the end for you...!"

‹*No, it's the end for* you*!*›

I flexed my metallic trunk behind me with Wood Counter. It was a semi-automatic counterattack whose damage output was reliant on the impact force of my opponent's leap.

Aluanne's body slammed to the ground with thunderous force. She bounced up and into the cave wall, then dropped to the ground again and rolled, her body flopping in random directions.

Then she went still.



Part 5: Aluanne

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, in a forest in a remote area of the Holy Land of Lialum, the Order of the Holy Knights carried out a plan to defeat a vampire known as Aluanne. At that time, capital punishment was forbidden in the Holy Land. On top of that, those born with unique skills like Aluanne's were revered as Blessings of the Holy God.

However, the order to defeat Aluanne ignored both of these rules and thus was carried out in secret. This was partly because of the scale of the devastation she had wrought and partly because of how terrifying the girl in question was.

Deep inside the forest where the vampire Aluanne roamed, the Holy Knights were attacked by a pack of monsters who divided their forces. It was then that they were ambushed by Aluanne.

"Knight-Commander Beranger! There's no way you'll be able to defeat Aluanne with those injuries! I've seen her firsthand, so I know! Make no mistake; that girl is no human! You must retreat!"

"I will not! Do you have any idea how many of my men have been killed by that devil?! I refuse to back down so easily! I will... I'll avenge them all myself!"

Despite all attempts his men made to stop him, Knight-Commander Beranger ventured deeper into the trees alone, dragging his badly wounded body along the uneven forest floor as well as he could. "That damn devil... I'll kill her myself! And if I can't kill her, I'll hurt her so badly that she never forgets it!"

At his waist, Beranger carried a large sword stained with both the blood of monsters and his own. He continued onward, breathing hard.

It was only when he'd reached the very heart of the forest that he came upon Aluanne. She stood in front of a large tree as if waiting for his arrival. Moonlight filtered through the trees above, illuminating her. She was covered in blood.

Beranger drew his greatsword and slowly walked toward her, every nerve in his body on edge. He knew that if he was not careful,

he would be killed in an instant. That was precisely why he didn't understand what Aluanne was saying at first.

"Please…please, Mr. Knight. Please kill me. Kill Aluanne…"

"Wh-what did you say…?"

"My mind… My mind is wrong. It's always, always been that way. I get so hungry, *so hungry*, that I can't think about anything else. I'm…I'm too strong, I can't do it myself. I'm not hungry right now, so I can think, but it'll only last a little while… So please. Please, kill me…" Aluanne sobbed as she pleaded with Beranger to take her life.

Seeing her sorry state, Beranger could not bring himself to swing his readied greatsword down on the girl, and he dropped it to the ground.

In the end, Aluanne's wish was not granted. Instead, she was taken into custody, and—by the Holy Land's judgment—locked up deep underground in the Great Prison. There, she was fed only the minimum required amount of food, thrown from the ground level down into the special pit that housed her. It did not have to be humans; a normal diet was sufficient for Aluanne to continue to be tethered to life. It was simply that she was unable to be fully satisfied with food that was not human in nature.

Since she was imprisoned, Aluanne was kept in a state of never-ending hunger and suffering. Due to the constant and extreme conditions she was forced to exist under, she had learned to maintain a certain degree of self-awareness, even while starving.

And so, one hundred years passed.

Then, one day, the thick, metal bars that sealed the stairway between the underground prison and the city on the surface opened. When Aluanne looked up from her pit, she was met with the sight of a group of soldiers in armor identical to those worn by the Holy Knights she encountered a hundred years ago. Somehow, she managed to understand that these armored soldiers had to be part of the Holy Knights of the current century.

The knights pushed two humans they were holding down toward Aluanne. They were dressed in prisoner garb, with bandages over their eyes, shackles on their wrists, and deep cuts on their

ankles. Aluanne immediately understood that they had been brought for her to consume.

Unable to resist the temptation after a hundred years of starvation, Aluanne tore them to shreds with her blood claws and drank their blood with her fangs. The knights watching looked disgusted at the sight of such a gruesome scene, and some even put hands over their mouths as bile rose in their throats.

“Who…are you? Did you come here to kill me?” Aluanne asked, looking up at the knights.

A female knight with short blonde hair and a determined look took a step toward Aluanne and cleared her throat. “We speak to the Devil of the Great Prison, Aluanne. We have come to undergo negotiations with you on behalf of Saint Lilyxila. She requires your assistance in an urgent matter.”

Aluanne was silent for a while, staring curiously at the face of the female knight who had taken charge. She, too, seemed frightened by Aluanne, and this made her overly nervous.

“Hmm… All right. I want to meet this saint. And if I like her, I could lend a hand.”

Once she agreed, Aluanne was taken out of the Great Prison.

In a back room of the cathedral, under the watchful eyes of several Holy Knights, Aluanne was brought before Saint Lilyxila. When she approached the saint, every knight in the room placed their hands on their sword scabbards. Lilyxila stopped them with a quick hand signal, then stepped forward toward Aluanne.

“Thank you for coming, Aluanne.” Lilyxila smiled softly. “Would you like to help us slay an Evil Dragon and become a hero of salvation? If you do so, your sins will be cleansed in the name of the Holy God. You will also be granted your freedom, of course.”

The room was silent for a few moments. Aluanne stared deep into Lilyxila’s face, eyes wide.

“Do you have an answer…?”

“Even I…can be a hero?”

Lilyxila seemed to think she would ask more about the particulars of granting her freedom, and so this response raised her suspicions. She seemed to be expecting this meeting to be more

about bargaining than anything. “Yes… If you contribute in the defeat of the Evil Dragon, you will be recognized as a hero in many countries.”

Aluanne giggled. *Ahh, this woman is such a liar.*

Aluanne’s eyes could look into another person’s mind and read their thoughts. However, this power didn’t work well against people with high magical power like Lilyxila, especially if the other person was wary of her. But Aluanne had seen the inner thoughts of many people in her time and was good enough at gauging their inner selves that she could guess the truth behind Lilyxila’s exterior even without her magic eyes.

Lilyxila’s expression stiffened a little. She’d detected something suspicious in Aluanne’s gaze, something she hadn’t accounted for.

Aluanne smiled. “Okay, all right. You know, I think I’m going to like you, Miss Saint. I’ll help you however you need.”

Part 6: Treant

I REELED MY FADING consciousness back to reality.

My entire body hurt. I seemed to have just healed myself with Rest half unconsciously, almost out of survival instinct.

The Berserk status I’d applied to myself seemed to have already worn off, perhaps due to the immense impact I’d endured. I’d been slammed back against the cave walls by the recoil of Wood Counter.

I thought I would surely die, but thanks to my enhanced defense from Statue, I seemed to have miraculously survived.

‹O-oh, that’s right! Aluanne, she…!› This was no time to nurse my wounds. I was still in the middle of a battle. On top of the two massive, magically enhanced strikes I’d landed on Aluanne, I’d also used Wood Counter at the risk of my own life. I had no more strength left in me. If Aluanne was still alive, I couldn’t do anything more to stop her.

‹Where…is she…?› I found her immediately: She was walking directly for me. Her arms, shredded by my attack, were held

together by nothing more than clotted blood.

“It’s a shame, really… No matter how damaged my body is, I can still move it…” Her arms ended in long, menacing claws that she extended toward me. “I’m at my limit too, but…it will be easy enough to take you with me, brave little blockhead…”

I thought I’d at least had a shot at avenging Miss Atlach-Nacha, but it seemed like that was not to be. However, Aluanne was also at the end of her rope.

If so, then I was satisfied. It meant Atlach-Nacha’s body wouldn’t be used as a pawn to hinder Master during their battle, and Aluanne wouldn’t be able to kill Allo.

I quietly closed my eyes as the sound of Aluanne’s footsteps drew closer and closer. Soon, one of her deadly claws touched my forehead.

Ahh… If I take a single hit now, it’s all over.

Master…I’m so sorry for all of the trouble I’ve caused you, but… traveling with you has made me so happy. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect Miss Atlach-Nacha. But…I hope that I’ve at least been of some use to you…?

The claws touched me slowly, lazily sliding down my trunk. I opened my eyes to find Aluanne staring at me.

“There’s no point, is there? We don’t matter in the grand scheme of this battle any longer. Neither me nor you.”

Aluanne’s body shuddered, and the arms connected to her with blood dropped to the ground. Steam began to rise from her small body…and then Aluanne collapsed in place, so easily that it was a wonder she’d been able to stand at all.

“Ahh, I’m sorry, Saint. All I wanted…was to be useful to somebody for once…” After those words, Aluanne went still. The blood that had been keeping her body together broke apart, and her parts fell to the ground in a heap. At long last, it seemed like Aluanne had taken her final breath.

Wh-what? How is that possible? Did I really kill her…?

According to Allo, she could move her body even on the brink of death with Blood Doll. But did she finally get pushed past the line

between living and dying at the very last moment? At any rate, it seemed like my victory was assured.

I'd beaten Aluanne.

It was a miracle. I could only analyze it now that things had cooled down, but this was a hard-fought victory I'd only just managed to pull off thanks to acting extremely recklessly, with no regard for my own safety.

The narrow space I'd been forced into—which should have been a substantial advantage for Aluanne—and the fact that she'd used Atlach-Nacha's remains to provoke me—accidentally ended up being in my favor in the end. It was simply a trick of fate.

Because of my mindless rampage, Aluanne was forced to try and dodge my huge body in this tiny space, while also being mindful of a potential cave-in. I didn't do it with any sort of plan in mind, but by doing so, I was able to turn a contest of strength into a game of chance.

Again, the cave shuddered violently around me. I couldn't sit here waiting for my victory to sink in; my rampage took its toll, and the cave was on the brink of collapse. I doubted I had much time to afford to take a detour, but I was determined to bring back Atlach-Nacha's remains, whatever it took.

I used Tree Spirit Transformation to shrink back down to a reasonable size and avoid damaging the cave any further, then headed deeper into the cave, dragging my broken and battered body along as well as I could.

At the far end of the cave lay Miss Atlach-Nacha's remains. Her legs were torn to shreds, and a spear of dried blood pierced through her back, skewering her to the ground. At the sight of such a horrific scene, I could no longer contain my emotions.

‹Miss Atlach-Nacha... Oh, Miss Atlach-Nacha! It's okay, it's okay now. I'm here! I'll get you out of here, even if it kills me...!›

Suddenly, a weak, faltering voice came from the scene before me. "You're...as annoying as ever. You said you'll take me out of here even if it kills you? Then I'd appreciate it if you got moving."

‹M-Miss Atlach-Nacha...? It can't be...› It was impossible. There was no way Atlach-Nacha could've survived. Aluanne had more than

enough time to kill her. She had the time to rip her legs off—it would've been no trouble to kill her after taking away her ability to move. *Am I having an auditory hallucination...?*

I nervously raised my head. Atlach-Nacha raised her masked face—contorted in pain—toward me as well.

Emotions flooded through me again, but this time in the opposite direction. *‹M-Miss Atlach-Nachaaa!›* I spread my wings wide and launched straight at her. *‹Thank goodness... Thank goodness you're okay! I-I thought you were done for! I'm so glad... I never gave up, and it was all worth it in the end!›*

"Y-you can gush about it later! Hurry up and help me! Are you planning to let me get buried alive?!"

‹O-oh, right! For now, let me use Rest to—wait, what about the thing in your back?!›

As I was panicking, the blood spear stuck in Atlach-Nacha's back began to melt to a puddle on the floor. Now that Aluanne was dead, it seemed like the power holding the coagulated blood spear together had disappeared.

Atlach-Nacha shuddered violently and nearly collapsed, but I ran forward and supported her with my tree spirit form.

A chunk of rock fell from the ceiling right next to me, and my back stiffened on instinct. *W-we really need to get out of here—and quick!*

I made Atlach-Nacha transform into a human so that she'd be smaller and then hightailed it toward the exit with her on my back.

One thing still nagged at my mind, though. Why had Aluanne kept Atlach-Nacha alive? Was she planning to take her to Lilyxila to turn her into a Spirit Servant instead of a Blood Doll?

It was difficult to imagine that our enemies could afford to do so, so I felt like it was unlikely, but...

Maybe Aluanne had waited to kill her until after her fight with me, since she wouldn't be able to use Atlach-Nacha if she lost anyway? And then tore off her leg and laid in wait to provoke me after she'd ambushed me? No, there was no reason for her to do something like that. Maybe Master would be good-natured enough

to do something like that in her position, but I couldn’t believe that Aluanne would go to such lengths.

As I made my way out, I spotted Aluanne’s corpse again and stopped. However, I quickly realized I didn’t have the time to stand on ceremony—I bolted for the exit once more.

From behind me, I heard the sound of falling rocks as they crushed Aluanne’s body and became her tomb.

Bonus Story 1:
The Dream Dragon's Day Off

Part 1

AFTER I DEFEATED the Clay Hero, my friends and I headed back down the mountain to our waterfall cave camp.

Our level grinding in the Strange Lands of the Far East had gone well enough, all things considered. I'd managed to evolve into a new species—a Legendary rank dragon called an Oneiros. Allo's level had increased substantially, while the black lizard, Atlach-Nacha, Treant, and Grandpa Magiatite had reached their new evolutions. Without a doubt, we were much stronger now than when we arrived.

We'd already seen Beelzebub's little flies off in the distance a few times, scouting the area for Lilyxila. It was only a matter of time before her army would arrive on the island, so we decided to wrap up today's leveling early and rest for the remainder of the day so that we'd be in peak condition to take on Lilyxila's forces.

We'd been in a physically and mentally demanding state constantly for a good while now. It would be smart to take this opportunity to rest up and ensure we were in perfect condition.

After everyone enjoyed a meal of smoked fenrir meat and soup made from Hades Mandragora spices, we all decided to kick back and rest and relax at our own leisure.

Of course, the Strange Lands of the Far East were also one of the most dangerous places in the world. We were all more or less used to dealing with the giant fenrirs that frequented this area, but there was no telling what would happen if one of us got cornered by a pack of them while we were alone. And it wouldn't be surprising if there were some dangerous monster lurking about that we didn't know about yet.

We didn't know exactly when Lilyxila would launch her attack. If she did so while we were scattered and unprepared, it would be a complete disaster. Therefore, I warned everyone to stay close to the

waterfall cave camp and to run back there if they ran into any trouble whatsoever.

"Then I will take my leave." Atlach-Nacha was the first to depart, disappearing through the fog toward the sea.

Does she even have a destination in mind?

‹If you want to go somewhere, then I would be happy to accompany you, Miss Atlach-Nacha!› Treant said, tottering after Atlach-Nacha.

"Don't. You stand out when you move."

‹B-but...!›

Jeez, Atlach-Nacha! Talk about blunt! Be a little more tactful, would you? Treant's sensitive!

Treant's spine straightened in shock, and leaves fell from its branches.

"Well...maybe if you use your small form," Atlach-Nacha added.

Treant's trunk quivered in joy, and it rushed straight to Atlach-Nacha's side. *‹Hooraaaay! I'll follow you for the rest of my life, Miss Atlach-Nacha!›*

"I said use your smaller form! Your giant body will draw in every monster around!" Atlach-Nacha pointed a finger at Treant and slashed her arm to the side. Treant, a fair distance away, toppled over on the spot with a loud *thunk*, spraying a cloud of dust into the air. She'd apparently shot a web from her finger to trip Treant with.

Part 2

AFTER SEEING Atlach-Nacha and Treant off, I sat down with Volk to formulate our strategy for combating Lilyxila. However, since we didn't know what our enemy's strategy or forces were like, there wasn't a whole lot for us to work off of. Frankly, it seemed unlikely that we'd manage to come up with a legitimate plan, but we needed to do *something*, at least.

We didn't want to dive into a detailed course of action that would leave us anxious and exhausted. Of course, no matter how

hard we thought, there was no way we'd be able to narrow down all of Lilyxila's possible approaches. So instead, we lightly discussed our best course of action—sometimes joking, sometimes serious.

Meanwhile, Allo and the black lizard looked on. As I chatted with Volk, the black lizard came right up to me and leaned its body weight against me.

"Ksshh, kshiii..." It made a sweet sound and rubbed its body against mine. I put one of my paws on its head and lightly stroked it. The black lizard stretched out its neck like it was enjoying it.

"Kshiii..."

Suddenly, I felt a massive surge of magic from my blind spot. I looked to the side and saw Allo's arms swelling in size.

‹H-hey! What're you—›

Allo grabbed the nape of the black lizard's neck and started to pull it off me.

"Ksshiii?!"

"Master Dragon is having an important conversation right now! Don't distract him!" Allo threw the black lizard into the air. It spread its wings and did a somersault in midair, then glared at Allo. They stared daggers at each other for a few moments, the tension between them palpable.

‹Stop! Stop it! We're taking a break right now anyway, so there's nothing wrong with asking for a couple of pets! Okay? Please calm down, Allo.›

It seemed like Allo and the black lizard weren't getting along super well with each other, despite my hopes.

"Ksshii!" The black lizard squealed in indignation, as if saying, "Did you just see that?!"

Allo puffed out her cheeks and pouted. "If you say so, Master Dragon, then I guess it's fine..." As she spoke, her enlarged arms shrank back to their original size.

Then she leaned against my paw. "In that case...I want some too," she said, looking up at me with pleading eyes.

I-I mean, that's fine with me, but...

Allo threw her arms around my paw and blushed. At that moment, the black lizard swooped in and landed on the ground, then stuck its tongue out, wrapped it around Allo, and swallowed her whole.

“L-Let me out! Let me out!! What’re you doing?!” Allo’s voice echoed from inside the black lizard.

“Kshii!”

Although the black lizard swallowed her whole, its body didn’t change shape much, probably thanks to its Storage skill.

‹H-hey! Black Lizard! You better spit her back out right now! How long are you two going to continue this pointless war, huh?!›

“Ksshii…”

Reluctantly, the black lizard spat Allo out of its mouth. Allo, covered in black lizard saliva, rolled across the ground as she regained her bearings and quickly got up.

She glared at the black lizard. “I always knew Lacerta and I would have to settle things the old-fashioned way one day.”

“Kssshii.” The black lizard glared right back.

Allo’s arms swelled in size again, and sinister claws formed at their ends. Then long, slender, multi-jointed arms began to grow from the ground around Allo as she used her skill, Lingering Rope. In no time at all, she was surrounded by nearly twenty of them.

“Ksshhii!” The black lizard hissed, and a large magic circle formed around it. The ground inside the circle transformed into a swamp of purple muck. I immediately recognized its Poison Swamp skill.

“Sorry, but poison doesn’t work on me.” Allo said triumphantly.

The black lizard didn’t react to her provocations; instead, it simply observed Allo’s surroundings without saying a word.

“What? You look like you’re planning something.”

Allo and the black lizard glared at each other in silence from their respective territories. Then, so simultaneously that it almost felt planned, they sprinted at each other.

I leapt in between them and gently pressed both Allo and the black lizard to the ground with my front paws.

“Mmgh!”

“Ksshii!”

‹Please, you two. At least stop fighting in a way that’ll deplete your HP and MP. Lilyxila could show up at any second,› I lectured the two of them. They both sheepishly lowered their heads.

“Okay… Sorry…”

“Ksshii…”

After that, I was forced to continue my battle strategy meeting with Volk with Allo on my right side and the black lizard on my left.

What’s with this situation…?

“Now, if Lilyxila herself did not move from this position, and only Beelzebub came in his human form… Hmm. Perhaps this diagram is getting a little difficult to understand.”

Volk was using a monster fang to draw a map on the ground to help us visualize the situation, but between the arrows drawn for our positions and the enemy’s movements, it was getting too jumbled to read.

“Hmm… Perhaps I should use stones or something to represent our forces instead?” Volk felt around in the dirt and dug out one of the stones buried near him. Miraculously, it was shaped just like Treant’s face, with subtle depressions for eyes and a nose-like protrusion. Volk and I stared at it in silence for a few moments before Volk let out a *“Pfft!”* and I burst into laughter as well.

“If we drop *this* on them, we’ll be sure to win…” Volk said in an intentionally serious voice, dropping the Treant stone on the spot where Lilyxila’s main camp was marked. The Treant stone—decidedly larger than the other map figures—completely wiped out the markings for Lilyxila’s camp.

My mind was immediately filled with the image of a gigantic Treant dropping down from the sky and crushing Lilyxila with its Meteor Stomp. I lowered my face to my paws and laughed, trying to stifle my voice.

“I can make something like that,” Allo quipped as she looked at the Treant stone.

‹Oh…? What do you mean?› Instead of answering, Allo stretched her arms out in front of her, palms facing up.

“Clay.” A light began to glow in Allo’s palm, and then a cute little slightly deformed clay figure of Treant appeared.

‹Whooooa! Awesome!› Its face looked even a little goofier than Treant’s actual face, which seemed to reflect its inner self well. Allo was a master when it came to using her Clay. It was no surprise, considering how frequently she used it in battle.

After that, I asked Allo to make several more figures with Clay. They weren’t that large, so they didn’t seem to drain much MP. She’d be able to recover everything she used up naturally with plenty of time to spare.

Allo made herself, Atlach-Nacha, Volk, and Grandpa Magiatite. On the enemy side, she did Lilyxila and Beelzebub, Beelzebub’s flies, a few Holy Knights… On and on they went.

I was blown away by the quality of all of the figures. With those skills, Allo could be a craftswoman for the rest of her life.

“And this one’s you, Master Dragon!” Allo said cheerfully as she created an Oneiros statue large enough that she had to hold it in both arms. The detailing was wildly intricate—much different from the slightly deformed figures she’d made so far.

How the heck did she make such an elaborate figure so quickly? And it’s way too big to use as a battle figure!

“Allo, that one’s too big. We’d fill up the entire map just by setting Illusia down,” Volk said.

“O-oh, right. Here…” Allo began to rework my figure. Its size was corrected to match the other pieces, but at that size, the detailing was wildly intricate. Despite being a small figure she made in seconds, there were signs that she tried to replicate the texture of my wings. It was a complete masterpiece.

‹Wow… I can’t believe you made something that good so quickly,› I said, shocked.

“Eh heh heh… It’s made with love,” Allo glanced at me, her cheeks red.

“Hmm… It is incredible, but I feel like both figures’ faces are more chiseled and angular than the real Illusia’s. Perhaps it is due to

the angle of their eyes?" Volk murmured as he gazed back and forth between the statues and my face.

‹O-oh? You think so?› I asked, peering closer.

"Indeed. They are made with Allo's idealized details. You are not nearly this slender and chiseled."

I couldn't really notice any difference, but maybe that was because I didn't see my own face that much.

"I-I was trying to make them look true to real life…" Allo mumbled, looking down in embarrassment.

‹But still, I can't believe how amazing these look so far. Mm…huh?› Treant, Atlach-Nacha, Allo, Volk, Grandpa Magiatite, and me. Aren't we missing someone…?

"Oh, right. And here's Lacerta." Allo tossed a crude, sloppy representation of the black lizard on the stump with the rest. It was shockingly poor quality, given the masterpieces we'd seen so far.

"Ksshiii!" The black lizard flew at Allo. Allo already had her hands up to intercept it, as if expecting it.

You two actually get along, don't you?

I pinned them down again, admonished them, and then used the new clay figures to continue discussing our plans with Volk.

In the middle of our strategy meeting, I decided it would be better if I could move the pieces too, so I used Human Transformation. Oneiros's traits drastically reduced the MP consumed by Human Transformation, so I wanted to get into the habit of using it more when I had the chance. And since I could make clothes with Dragon Mirror, I didn't have to worry about exposing myself in front of Allo either. I really was glad that I chose to evolve into Oneiros.

I stretched my shoulder and leg joints to make sure I could move easily in my newly humanized body, then plopped down on the ground. Unlike before, the black lizard was now much larger than me, so I leaned against it as I sat.

"In theory, we can minimize the risk of losing someone by using this formation. Although…I'm not sure how helpful it will be in reality," Volk said as he rearranged the pieces.

I nodded my head, listening attentively as Volk went on. Suddenly, I felt a cold, slimy sensation on my cheek from the right side.

“Uwah! That startled me… Was that you, Black Lizard?” I looked to my right and saw the black lizard sticking out its tongue. It must have licked me.

“G-gross!” Allo leapt to her feet angrily as she denounced the black lizard’s actions. The black lizard glared back at her. “You licked him?! That’s…that’s filthy! You’re gross, Lacerta!”

I-It is…? I mean, it’d be weird if it was a human doing it, but the black lizard was just being affectionate. Actually, it’d been licking me like this since I was a Young Plague Dragon.

“It doesn’t really bother me, so…” I looked at Allo, eyebrows raised.

“B-but…but…!”

“Hey, Illusia. What would you do in this situation?” Volk interjected.

“Oh, s-sorry…” I quickly looked back down at the figures. “Uh… What was the last formation again?”

“Here, I’ll move things back a step.” Volk moved Lilyxila and Beelzebub’s pieces back to where they were before.

Allo stared at me, looking a little peeved, but then sat next to me again on my left. I wasn’t sure what was bothering her so much, but I was relieved to see she seemed to have calmed down, if only temporarily.

Even so, Volk and I had been busy chatting for a while now, and I felt like maybe we’d been neglecting Allo and the black lizard a little too long. Maybe I should give them a bit more attention, or chat with them more to help them relax? That might be why they seemed a little more on edge than usual.

“Hey, Allo…” When I looked to my left I was met with the sight of Allo, her eyes tightly shut, her tongue sticking out, and her reddened face dangerously close to my cheek.

“Uh… What’re you doing?”

Allo jolted, opened her eyes wide, and immediately turned her head away. “N-n-n-nothing!”

“O-oh, okay. If you say so…”

“Ksshi shi shi!” The black lizard hissed at the blushing Allo, poking fun at her.

“U-urgh…” Allo bit her lip and glared at the black lizard.

Yeah… They’ve gotta be friends underneath all that, right?

Afterward, I continued discussing battle plans with Volk, still sandwiched between Allo and the black lizard.

“So if this happens, should I move here and go for Beelzebub?” I lifted my piece and placed it in front of Beelzebub’s.

“If you did, they may move like this,” Volk replied, moving Beelzebub away from me and moving Lilyxila and the Holy Knights toward the lone Allo.

“Hmm… That’s a tough one. Is that even possible?” I asked, rubbing my forehead.

“I doubt they could read the situation that well in this fog, but you never know.”

“It feels like we’re playing a game of shogi or chess…” I muttered to Volk, who cocked his head, curious.

“Oh? What are those?”

“Oh, uh…they’re board games where you move pieces that look like soldiers according to their specific movement rules in order to try and take your opponent’s king. What, have you never heard of them?”

It wouldn’t surprise me if a similar game existed in this world, but…

“No, I’ve never heard of such a game. But it does sound quite fascinating.” Volk grinned. He seemed to be somewhat interested in board games.

“I see. Well, you wanna try playing one of ’em? We’re supposed to be resting anyway. Allo, mind making a few extra pieces?”

“No problem! Leave it to me!” Allo said enthusiastically. “What kind of pieces do you need, exactly?”

“Well, let’s see… They don’t have to be super detailed, as long as their shapes are recognizable.” First, I needed to decide whether we’re playing shogi or chess. Shogi had eight types of pieces, while chess had six. It might be a little easier to understand the rules with fewer piece types. Plus, the whole rule about using the pieces you’ve won might be a little complicated for a beginner like Volk… Okay, chess it is then.

“We need pawns… Well, I guess that doesn’t mean much to you. Let’s say eight infantry, two knights, two bishops, two towers, and one king and queen each.”

“Towers? Are those…pieces that stay in the same spot the entire time?” Volk frowned, confused.

“No, they can actually zoom from one side of the board to the other super fast.”

“Whaaat? Towers that can move?”

“Hey, don’t ask me, I didn’t make it up.” *Actually…why* are *there moving towers in chess?* I knew the towers were sometimes considered chariots, but it seemed like towers were way more mainstream. Maybe it was because it’s a lot easier to make a tower shape?

“And what is the queen doing out on the battlefield? Wouldn’t it be bad if she were taken hostage?”

“Actually, the queen is the strongest piece.”

“Wh-what? Why?”

I don’t know, Volk! Because that’s how the game works! What do you want me to say?! Admittedly, it did seem a little strange when I thought about it. But it seemed like the names of the pieces other than pawns, knights, and kings were just kind of randomly assigned anyway, so maybe it was just that the creators couldn’t come up with a more fitting name for them.

It took Allo maybe ten minutes or so to make all of the pieces with her Clay. “How’s that, Master Dragon?” she asked, pleased with herself.

When I looked down, I saw a bunch of mini Treants all lined up in a row. *Sh-she made all the pawns Treants?! But Treant would make a perfect tower!*

Treant would probably have something to say about being put out on the front lines. I doubted Allo did it maliciously, though—she just used us as her inspiration for the pieces without considering their roles much.

The knights were the black lizard, the towers were Volk with his Grandpa Magiatite sword, and the bishops were Atlach-Nacha. Allo made herself the queen and me the king. “Look, Master Dragon! It’s like we’re husband and wife!” Allo exclaimed, delighted.

U-uh, okay, that’s a bit awkward…

Even so, in some strange way, the pieces Allo chose to assign to each of us all kind of made sense. The black lizard’s swooping aerial attacks were similar to how the knight piece moved, and Volk’s straightforward combat style matched the tower’s straight vertical and horizontal movements. Atlach-Nacha’s tricky fighting style matched the bishops’ diagonals, and Allo was the most reliable in terms of strength, so she was the closest thing we had to a chess queen.

And Treant, well…Treant… No, I wasn’t going to get specific with that one.

The pieces for both sides were the same shape and color, but they were so elaborately made that we could distinguish them based on the direction they were facing. I scraped a grid of squares into a tree stump with my claw, then poured bluish-black fruit juice on the stump to make the lines easier to see.

“All right, let’s get started. First, I’m going to move this Treant forward two squares.”

“Hmph! Then I will also move Treant two squares.”

“Wh-whoa… It feels so surreal,” Allo said softly, watching the board with bated breath.

Part 3

“WHAT’S THE MATTER, Illusia? I’m going to take another one of your Treants.”

“Ugh!” Two enemy Volks were bearing down on my Treant on the chess board’s front lines. *You evil Volks! How dare you, ganging up on my Treant like this?!*

The chess match was already entering its midpoint. Despite this being Volk’s first time ever playing chess, I still had to play hard if I wanted a shot at winning.

W-well, to be fair, I moved my pieces in the beginning to explain the rules and let him capture some of them, but still. Volk was very quick to catch on to the rules of the game. I found myself at a disadvantage against him almost immediately.

“And with that, your Treants are blocked. You’re running out of usable pieces, Illusia.” Volk’s Treants stood toe-to-toe with my few remaining Treants. Pawns couldn’t advance when another piece was placed directly in front of them. Volk was using his pieces to eliminate all my remaining options one by one; he was almost sure to win at this point. I never could’ve imagined using a strategy like this the first time I played chess.

J-jeez… I’ve always thought so, but this guy really is much more than just a sword-wielding musclehead!

Volk’s Allo queen—the strongest piece in the game—stood directly behind the two Volks, making it impossible to defeat them. If I took one of them out, Allo would immediately strike down the offending piece. Volk was rapidly coming to understand the rules of chess in the middle of our match.

“All right, well… I guess I’ll just have to take my chances here.” I set Queen Allo down in front of me—the king. The queen was the best piece. So far, I’d just used her to defend me, but if I didn’t move, then I’d just keep slowly losing pieces until I lost the game. My only chance now was to go on the offensive and find a way to trap the enemy king in a checkmate.

“Are you sure about that? Because now, I can do this…” Volk suddenly brought his black lizard knight to the front.

N-no! He’s using the knight’s unique movement to create a fork! Both my king and queen are in danger!

I’d completely overlooked it, and in my haste, made a terrible mistake—quite possibly the worst mistake I could have made. There

was no way to reverse it, nothing I could do. I had to move the king to safety and sacrifice my queen.

Should I yield to Volk and ask to back our game up a move? This mistake is gonna cost me the game. No, no... I can't do something that pathetic against a complete beginner...

Allo gently placed her hand on my knee.

"Allo..."

"It's okay. If I have to die in order to protect you, then I have no regrets, Master Dragon." Allo's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry, Allo! Forgive me! I-I'm nothing but a disappointment!" Also fighting back tears of frustration, I moved my king to the side.

"And now, your queen is mine." Without a shred of mercy, Volk's black lizard knocked Queen Allo to the ground.

"Alloooo! Noooo!" I shouted, reaching for my fallen queen.

"Ksshhi!" The black lizard wagged its tail, looking satisfied.

After that, the match became even more grueling than before. Losing Allo was costly—so costly that I could no longer defend myself or attack effectively. Against the two rampaging Volk towers, I was completely out of options.

"If only I still had Allo, I might've still had a chance, but...!" As I sat there, my head in my hands, Allo looked at the pieces on the board. For some reason, she didn't look nearly as despairing as I felt.

"Forgive me, but I will be taking your me from you with my me. Now your army has no real strength left. All you have are a few useless Treants."

Aside from a few Treants spread through the board, I only had my king self and half of my Atlach-Nacha bishops left. I was still holding out hope that Atlach-Nacha might save the day, but the bishop couldn't break through all of Volk's defenses on its own. There were no spots left where I could launch a proper attack.

"D-dammit...!"

"'Taking your me with my me'... Now *that* isn't a sentence I expected to hear," Allo muttered calmly from beside me as I cursed.

“W-wait! Since you sent the Volks in to attack, your last row is empty! I’ve got you now!” I moved one of my Treants to the last row.

“No! I was in such a hurry to achieve my victory that I didn’t even think about it! How could I have possibly overlooked that?!” Volk shouted.

There was a rule in chess called “promotion,” which allowed any pawn that reached the last row of the board on the enemy’s side to transform into a piece of the player’s choice. Yep, that’s right: Treant was about to evolve.

“And obviously, I’m turning Treant into Allo! Allo’s coming back to life!” I took Allo from my pile of defeated pieces, moved Treant out of the way, and put Allo in its place.

“Treant evolved into…me?” Allo looked at the board and made a complicated noise. “Is that going to be enough to save you?”

“I see… Once you allow an enemy to promote their infantry, the game is sure to be much more difficult. I was not careful enough,” Volk growled. “I don’t have many pieces to spare either… If I am too aggressive, I might not be able to finish you off.”

Volk thought for a moment, then moved one of his Treants on the edge of the board forward. “Yes. With this, I will fortify my defenses by increasing my number of Allos!”

“Wh-what?!”

“Uhh…” Allo stared intently at the board with a deadpan face.

“D-damn it! I can’t block him!”

“Now, then. I will also discard my Treant in favor of a second Allo. Hey, Allo, since we don’t have any more of you, would you mind making another Allo piece for me?”

“Um…sure,” Allo replied, her face blank.

Oh, man. It’s over… It’s so over… I slumped over in disappointment. If Volk managed to drive me into a corner with his two Allos, I’d be dead in no time at all. My Oneiros would be caught between the two Allos and defeated. Checkmate.

However, on the next turn, instead of attacking, Volk began to move all of his pieces back to defend his final line. I would have

thought that he'd realize he could easily clog up the board with Allos, considering how fast he caught on to the game, but…

"What're you doing, Volk? If you attack me with your two Allos, then you'll be able to wipe me out in no time."

Volk, with his defenses solidified, started to push his remaining Treant forward. "I thought it would be fun to make a third Allo."

"C-c'mon! You've already won the game, man! Let's end it already!"

"Do whatever you want," Allo muttered and began to make more Allo pawns with Clay. The number of clay Allos began to pile up next to her.

Suddenly, I noticed Treant and Atlach-Nacha's presence with my Psychic Sense. It seemed like they'd finally returned from their mystery walk.

I looked up to see the pair of them coming toward me in the distance. Treant was holding what looked like a wooden basket with several fish inside it.

Oh? Where'd that basket come from? Did Treant weave it itself? Treant seemed to be able to twist its tree branches around and move them like limbs, so it might be able to make a basket that intricate if it tried, but…

I stood up and stepped toward Treant and Atlach-Nacha.

From the look of things, it seemed like Atlach-Nacha's destination had been the sea, so she could do some fishing. With her webs at their disposal, it wouldn't have been hard to craft a simple fishing rod. Treant probably went along to keep her company.

Back in the forest near the Lithovar tribe settlement, Atlach-Nacha had liked to build webs and wait for unassuming monsters to get themselves caught. Her habit of waiting patiently for prey in order to hunt for food must be ingrained in her instincts.

‹Masteeeer! We caught a bunch of strange fish!› Treant said, trotting toward me with its basket resting on its wings. Well, I was glad Treant had fun. Once I'd checked the status of the fish, I decided I'd simply grill them and share them with the others.

Turning to the basket, I saw it was full of fish with heads that looked like monkey heads. *Uhh…these feel…a little gross, don't you think?* I couldn't help but wonder if these things breathed with lungs or gills. Either way, it looked like we were out of luck in terms of normal fish to eat around here.

Seeing those fish reminded me of when I went fishing in the Harunae Desert with Ballrabbit and Nina once, and we caught a bunch of weird, nasty fish. The fish around here, on the Far Eastern island, were probably a lot worse. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some toxic fish in the mix as well.

Treant came over to me and put the basket on the ground. Then it stuck its wing into the basket to show me one of the fish.

‹Look, Master! What do you think? Doesn't this one look tasty?!›

This fish had two flesh-colored, humanlike legs attached to its lower half. It was apparently still alive, because its legs were flapping around wildly.

D-delicious? It looks more like its existence is a grotesque affront to the universe. Maybe eating fish and monster at the same time would be a tasty experience, but to me, it didn't look even remotely appetizing. It felt like some kind of strange chimera, like the Adams. I wasn't even sure it could be considered a fish.

At least it was still relatively small. If it'd been human-sized, I would've been traumatized for sure.

‹We almost caught a fish like this that was much, much bigger, but Miss Atlach-Nacha let go of the line halfway through. It was a real shame.› Treant stretched its wings out wide to try and show me its relative size.

Oh, man! So there are bigger ones out there?! For real?!

"I dropped it on purpose," Atlach-Nacha said, sounding annoyed.

Oh, good. Glad it's not just me who thinks they're gross. Turns out Treant is just weird.

Judging by Treant's outstretched wingspan, it looked like it was about a meter long or so. If there was a monster that large, with that appearance, then it was definitely an A-class monster. Thanks to my run-ins with the Adams and Eves, I'd learned that any

chimera-looking monsters were powerful and high-ranked, no matter how silly their combinations looked. Their unsettling appearances basically acted as a warning that they were dangerous.

With Atlach-Nacha and Treant back, I was confident we'd be able to defeat any of the monsters that lived around here. But even so, I wasn't looking to get into a deadly fight with an A-class monster right now, when there was no telling when Lilyxila would arrive. Atlach-Nacha had made the right decision.

‹Now, now, Miss Atlach-Nacha! No need to be such a sore loser!› Treant flapped its wings as it made fun of Atlach-Nacha.

Wow, Treant, I see you. You're the type to make fun of girls you like, huh?

"Yeah, whatever," Atlach-Nacha replied, still annoyed.

She's completely disgusted with Treant, isn't she?

‹Hmph! You're so cold, Miss Atlach-Nacha...› Treant mumbled sadly.

C'mon, Treant, how much attention do you want from her?

"Hey, sit back down, Illusia," Volk called out. "Our match has not concluded yet!"

I turned back around. "B-but...the game's basically over at this point..." Frankly speaking, I didn't want to drag out a game I'd already lost any longer. I'd much rather finish the game by resigning.

Well, it *was* Volk's first time playing chess, so I could understand him wanting to play until the end. Okay, so be it. He could torment me until the very last move.

I returned to the board and sat back down, scratching my head.

"Fine. But just so you know, I'm beating you next time."

I...I just went too easy on Volk in the beginning. He'd figured out the game a lot faster than I expected, and underestimating him was my biggest mistake. I didn't expect him to go completely on the offensive halfway into the game. Next time would be the real test. I'd take the game seriously from the very beginning and take Volk down!

...Maybe.

‹What is that, Master?› Treant asked, flapping its wings to hover over to me.

“Oh, this is a board game called chess. Allo made the pieces for us.”

‹Oooh?› Treant landed, looked at the board, and then tilted its head.

“I will now bring this Treant to the last row again. Naturally, I will promote Treant into Allo, to give me a fourth Allo.”

‹Oh?›

“With that, my final Treant is now an Allo as well.”

‹Ohh?›

“All right, Illusia, let’s finish this. You only have one Allo and two Treants who are unable to promote on your side. They are nothing more than placeholders; I will finish them off soon enough.”

‹Ohhhhhh...?›

With each of Volk’s sentences, Treant became more and more confused. I mean, I’d probably be confused too, if I heard Volk say he was changing Treant into Allo without any context.

“S-sorry, Treant... We ended up borrowing your name to use in this game.”

Treant gently placed its wing on my shoulder. *‹Master, that feels...a little discourteous...›*

‹S-sorry...› Treant had a point. We were just so caught up in discussing countermeasures against Lilyxila that we just went with it.

Bonus Story 2:
Atlach-Nacha's Far East Fishing Trip

AFTER FINISHING OUR MEAL, we were all free to go out as we pleased for a much-needed break. Treant and the others had all successfully evolved by fighting the monsters in this area, and Allo was already a highly skilled fighter. It wouldn't be a problem for any of them to roam freely near their waterfall cave camp.

Treant was sleeping in front of the waterfall cave, happily napping in the sunlight. It had slept soundly through the night as well. Treant was a pro at sleeping, to be sure.

The black lizard, believing there might be some good-quality poison mushrooms in the area, went out to look for them. Volk and Grandpa Magiatite went with it. I was worried about it going alone and running into some monster, but with those two along, I could rest easy.

The black lizard had invited me to eat with it if it found some good mushrooms. *I mean…I have good poison resistance, so I should be fine, right? Right…?*

"What are you going to do now, Master Dragon? If you have time, would you like to go for a walk with me?" Allo asked, flapping her arms excitedly.

‹Oh, sure! Sounds good.›

"Yaaaay! Date with Master Dragon! Date with Master Dragon!"

Sheesh… Children from the Lithovar tribe are so precocious these days.

‹Wait…where'd Atlach-Nacha go?› She'd disappeared before I noticed. I didn't even hear where she was headed.

"I saw her heading in the other direction," said Allo. "If you're worried, do you want to go check on her?"

‹Mmm… I see. Sure, let's do that.›

"Okay! Got it! This way!" Allo began to lead me through the foggy landscape.

It wasn't long before we found Atlach-Nacha. She'd attached her web to a tree branch and was using it to hang down over the

river.

‹Hey there, Atlach-Nacha,› I called out to her. *‹Gone fishing, huh?›*

Atlach-Nacha looked up at me briefly and gave a small nod. Back near the Lithovar settlement, she used to build spiderwebs between the trees and wait for her prey to come to her. It was no wonder that fishing came naturally to her.

‹Catch any interesting fish?› As I moved closer, Atlach-Nacha held up her hand toward me. I froze in my tracks.

“Don’t…get too close. You’ll scare my prey away.”

O-oh, right… Th-that scared me for a sec.

I found myself standing a ways off from Atlach-Nacha, watching her fish alongside Allo. I didn’t have any particular place to be at the moment, so I didn’t mind. Besides, I wanted to see how Atlach-Nacha caught her fish.

The first ten minutes passed without so much as a nibble. Allo, who’d been cheerfully watching the show thus far, got a little bored and began to make a bit of a fuss.

“Huah…mmm…” When she noticed me looking at her, Allo blushed and covered her mouth with both hands. “Ah, nothing! Don’t mind me!”

“…It’s just a little quiet at the moment. They’ll start biting soon,” Atlach-Nacha said, glancing at Allo with a scowl.

“S-sorry, Atlach-Nacha… I wasn’t thinking you weren’t going to catch any fish at all or anything. It’s just, um…”

“Just watch. They’ll start flowing downstream soon, see?” Atlach-Nacha said grumpily. She was surprisingly prideful. Or maybe stubborn was the better word.

Then, as we watched, the line of Atlach-Nacha’s handmade fishing rod twitched.

“Oh! Here it comes, Atlach-Nacha! Go for it!”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I already knew. And stop shouting.”

After about ten seconds of tugging and pulling, Atlach-Nacha caught a bright red fish that was about a meter long. She tossed it

on the ground nearby, where it flopped wildly. It was big and plump, and looked quite tasty.

The fish was still so lively that it looked like it might escape back into the river if it was left unattended, but Atlach-Nacha quickly impaled the fish with her claws, killing it.

“All right!” Allo cheered. “I knew you’d do it, Atlach-Nacha!”

“Obviously.” Despite her words, she seemed somewhat proud of herself.

Within a matter of minutes, Atlach-Nacha caught a total of three fish. Was this what she’d meant by them all flowing downstream in a second? I’d thought she was just unwilling to admit defeat.

I looked into the river and realized that the number of fish I saw in the water had increased. Maybe Atlach-Nacha had just been waiting for this bigger group of fish to arrive?

As I sat there, impressed, the ground around me began to shudder with a *shunk, shunk, shunk.* Naturally, Atlach-Nacha’s face instantly clouded over.

I turned to see Treant’s enormous trunk running at us from a distance, the impact of each step making the ground rumble.

‹Master! Miss Allo! Miss Atlach-Nacha! There you are!›

The shadows of the fish disappeared in an instant.

Atlach-Nacha set down her fishing pole, then pointed her claws straight at Treant. Allo grabbed her arm, desperately trying to hold her back.

“Looks like I found some new fishing rod material…”

“Wait, Atlach-Nacha! Calm down! Treant didn’t mean it!”

Afterword

HELLO, this is the author, Necoco.

Thank you very much for purchasing *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 11!

It's been five months since the last volume was published. I'm sorry to jump right in with my recent life updates, but I started living on my own in July, around when Volume 10 was published. I was living in a company dormitory before, but that was an apartment for two people, so this is my first time living alone.

I had to spend a lot of money on buying things like a fridge, a desk, bedding, a washing machine, and so on. Even if you try to find the cheapest options possible, it still adds up. I'm still struggling to pay for my rent, gas, electricity, water, Wi-Fi, and phone bills alone, but I'm getting by, all things considered.

I remember when I was still riding the high of living on my own for the first time, I decided on the spur of the moment that I wanted to get a massive water dispenser that I didn't really need. If my parents and friends hadn't launched a joint intervention, it would've taken up an entire corner of my room.

Let me serve as your reminder that making a major decision based on just pure impulse will lead to regrets later, so please be careful! Especially when you're just starting to live alone, it feels easy to get pulled in by all the various agreements and advertisements...

The cover of Volume 11 features Allo and Aluanne! It's a very cool-looking cover; it feels so flowy and dynamic! I love the way their arms cross in the center!

This is a very unimportant topic, but it feels like while people talk about feeling a sense of flow and dynamics from a pose, they don't often talk about a sense of bouncing. I just realized this as I was writing the afterword, but, hmm... I've heard people describe bouncing as a more vigorous movement, and flowing as a lively activity. I guess that makes sense? I think the nuance is slightly different, but I don't understand it very well. Between the two

meanings, I feel that “bouncy” is more appropriate than “flowy,” but I don’t know.

Whoops. I feel like writing about that kind of thing kind of shows the flaws in my writing abilities.

This is a bit off-topic, but Volume 11 is the first cover without Illusia. In Volumes 4, 5, and 8, he was in his human form instead of his dragon form, and especially in Volume 5, he was pressed up next to Partner, but this is the first time that he’s completely absent from the cover. We decided on this because Illusia isn’t directly involved in the defeat of the devil girl Aluanne, who’s the main boss of Volume 11. After I talked it over with the illustrator, NAJI Yanagida, and my editor, we decided to use Allo and Aluanne as the main characters for this cover. There was some discussion about giving Treant the main spot since it played such a major role in the volume, but in the end, it ended up floating above Aluanne’s head as a tree spirit. Sorry, Treant.

Treant is a little…difficult to make look good on the cover, so it is what it is. If it were in its tyrant guardian form instead of its tree spirit form, it would be difficult to balance the size difference between it and the other characters, so if we ended up doing it, we probably would’ve had to fill the entire background with its tyrant guardian form. Hmm…

To be honest, I was particularly invested in seeing Allo and Aluanne on the main cover, and I think it was a decisive factor in my decision to write the story the way it ended up being. The quality of the cover illustration was above and beyond my expectations, and I was delighted when I saw it for the first time. Allo and Aluanne look really cool!

…Sorry, Treant.

This is the first time that Treant has graced the cover since Volume 5. Do you remember it? The tree that Partner has her claws on is Treant. If you have a copy, please check it out. It may be a little hard to make out since Treant’s face is obscured by the text around the spine, but still…heh heh.

M-man, Treant really is a little tough to make look good on the cover. Sorry, Treant…

—NECOCO



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