

Chapter 3 - Getting out at any cost

"Sensei! Look!"

"Another one!?"

Cindy points at the stone wall behind the pedestal that served as the dragon golem's station to replenish its mana.

Suddenly that wall falls apart with a clattering, and a huge dragon golem, modeled after a Chinese dragon, appears on the other side. Moreover, looking closely, this dragon golem has a construction at his lower body half that seems to move like a caterpillar.

"A dragon tank!"

"Earl Baumeister, that is exactly what it is called."

For there to have existed tanks during the era of the Ancient Magic Civilization. But then again, it's not a gun turret, but the upper body of a dragon that's been installed at the part equal to a tank's upper frame. It seems it's not a tank firing a cannon, but one with a dragon head spitting out a breath.

"(I feel like there was such a kaijuu in ○traman...we gotta escape!)"

When I look behind me at once, I spot the stairs leading to the upper floor. Since there's apparently nothing like stairs or corridors on the other side of the wall from where the dragon tank came, it should be safer, or rather, less of an energy waste to not awkwardly fight here, and instead escape backwards.

"Sensei, we're not going to defeat this?"

"No need!"

I curtly answer Betty's question.

"We're exhausted after being suddenly transferred to this cave, and fighting against the rat and a dragon golem. Given that we don't know the precise location of this place, we can't escape through 『Teleport』 either. In short, it's unclear when we might be able to leave this place."

"While at it, I should add that it is possible that we will not get any chance to take a rest." (Arnest)

As a result of us having destroyed the rat, the underground ruin has become genuinely pissed off, and set us as targets for a thorough removal.

I wonder, is that dragon tank only the beginning?

"We will escape by climbing the stairs behind us!"

Going by how the dragon tank is built, I doubt that it'll be capable of following us upstairs.

As it's not like it's necessary to fight the tank and win, escaping and preserving our mana and stamina will raise our chance of survival.

"In the end, we don't know in what way we will be able to return to the surface, with me still being a child for a while. Avoid any unnecessary battles."

""""Yes!""""

"Arnest, we're running. Lend me your back."

"Eh? Me?"

You still haven't realized? And yet you call yourself a scholar...

"I'm in such a state, right!?"

Even if I were to run at full speed, I can't believe that I'd be able to get away from the approaching dragon tank. It's not like I can get Agnes or the other two to carry me either, so the only choice left is Arnest.

"I am someone working by using my head."

"You can also leave me behind and run, but I don't care what happens to you afterwards, okay?"

Arnest being able to carefreely work as archaeologist in the Baumeister Earldom as a demon is based on my patronage and the Kingdom's toleration. If he were to desert me here and run away, the Kingdom wouldn't be lenient with him any longer. I'm pretty sure they'd have him slave away until his death for the sake of the Kingdom's benefit.

"If you're fine with that, go for it."

"You do say something very typical of a high-ranking noble while looking like this. I suppose it can not be helped."

Arnest picks me up, and starts to run towards the stairs. His pace is quite steady. I see, it looks like his legs and loins are quite strong since he's also doing field work, although he calls himself a scholar.

"Earl Baumeister, I think you already know, but..."

"Incoming!"

The dragon tank spit its breath as it chases after us. Upon my signal, Arnest deploys a 『Magic Barrier』 behind him, blocking the breath. He has tried to emphasize that I should be the one to make the call then to deploy the 『Magic Barrier』, since he himself doesn't have the spare time to check his back because he's carrying me, and if he kept up a 『Magic Barrier』, even at times it's not necessary, he'd run out of mana sooner or later, even if he has a big mana pool.

"Sensei, you okay?"

"I'm alright, so go up the stairs as fast as you can!"

""""Okay!""""

Anyway, we've gotta get out of this shitty ruin as quickly as possible. Seeing how we don't know on what floor we're right now, and what kind of traps and mechanisms have been installed on the floor above, we should avoid any unnecessary exhaustion.

"With that structure of the lower body half, that thing should have difficulties to climb the stairs. As long as we manage to get away..."

"Sensei! It's climbing up the stairs!"

Damn! Just as Cindy has pointed out, the dragon tank slowly but steadily begins to climb the stairs.

"Tsk! So it can get up stairs as well, eh!?"

"Sensei, we've got no choice but to destroy it!"

"Wait! Don't waste your mana!"

I don't know how much further we must go. It's possible for us to recover our mana, but we might get successively chased by other traps and machines of this ruin from now on. No matter how well our mana might recover, if we continue in a tired state, we won't be capable of using mana decently, and in the worst case, even moving itself will become difficult.

"To be honest, we're in a fairly terrible situation. That's why, you've got to economize on your mana and stamina."

"Got it. But sensei..."

"A method like this exists as well!"

I get off Arnest's back, take out several sheets from my magic bag, and spread them out as if to cover the stairway.

"Earl Baumeister?"

"There's still more to come."

Next I soak the sheets with plenty of plant-based oil as it's used in cooking. It's still a new, unused bottle, but now's not the time to whine about waste.

"The only one considering such things in a situation like this is you, Earl Baumeister."

"You don't need to comment each and every little thing! It'll be fine with this."

Once I check the situation down the stairs after climbing the stairs to some extent, the dragon tank's

caterpillars slip on the oil-soaked sheets, unable to continue climbing, just as I've planned.

"For there to exist such a way...sensei, you're amazing!"

"How did you come up with this?"

"Sensei, aweso——ome!"

Most people living in this world have never seen anything like a tank moving on caterpillars, so it's no wonder that Agnes and the other two highly praise me for being able to deal with the tank on a first sighting.

In reality, it's knowledge from a manga I read in my previous life. But even if that's the truth, it's not a problem as long as it's not exposed. I've got to retain my dignity as a teacher.

"It works surprisingly well. And here I thought about giving you advice after seeing the structure of the dragon tank."

"I'm really sorry about that. I'll leave the next to you then."

That Arnest sure is amazing to spot the dragon tank's weak spot when seeing it for the first time.

"Sensei, what are you going to do next? Set it on fire?"

"No, I think we can simply ignore it."

Agnes suggests to me that it might be safer to destroy the tank by igniting the oil soaking the sheets, but I reject that proposal for several reasons.

"First, I'd like to avoid wasting mana since we don't know where to find the exit of this ruin. Second, the dragon tank might be able to start climbing the stairs again once the oil burns down."

Given that the tank is unmanned, there's no guarantee that setting it on fire will stop its functionality. I think it's safer to leave the tank in its current state where it can't get up the stairs as it keeps slipping downwards.

Besides, a much higher temperature than one would expect is needed to ignite vegetable oil, which is at room temperature.

"Sensei! In front!"

"It looks like we won't really have the leeway to bother with the dragon tank in the back, doesn't it?"

One object after the other heads in our direction from the entrance to the next floor at the top of the stairway. Looking closely, they are small, metallic dragon golems with a length of around 50 centimeters. They are flying through the air while making use of their small wings.

The number...around ten, I'd say?

"That means, the next floor is a nest of those small dragon golems. It seems we will not be allowed to take a rest."

"Seems so..."

Just as expected, the ruin doesn't intend to give us the time to recover our stamina and mana.

"Got it, Agnes? The goal isn't in sight, and we won't be readily given the chance to rest up. Saving on mana plays a crucial role here."

"Okay. So, what are we going to do?"

"Well, we've got no choice but to destroy the small dragons either way. Please do it while keeping your mana usage as low as possible."

""Yes, sensei!""

It might be a result of their education. Agnes' team destroys the small dragons floating in front with concentrated 『Wind Cutters』, and with that we finally succeed in clearing the first floor. The number of floors left...is unknown.



"Now a maze, huh...?"

"It is a setup to prevent intruders from escaping."

Once we reach the next floor, we're greeted by a huge maze. Considering it's an underground labyrinth, the ceiling is rather high. Every now and then, openings similar to hatches are visible on the ceiling, and whenever we get close to one of those hatches, it opens up, and small dragon golems, just like the ones before, rush out in droves.

"It is quite troublesome as it's very narrow here."

The golems are small, but that doesn't change the fact that they're modeled after dragons. Once you get close to them, the dragons will spit their breath at you. Those breaths unexpectedly pack quite the punch, which means a human would suffer terrible injuries or burns if basked by the flames without adopting any countermeasures.

Accordingly, Betty and Arnest timely deploy their 『Magic Barriers』, blocking the flames for us.

"Sensei, Agnes-chan, Cindy-chan, stay together as close as possible."

"Sure."

If we're hit by the flames, we'll bear serious injuries, but on the other hand, it makes it easy to block

them. Consequently, they must deploy 『Magic Barriers』 each and every time, and moreover, we won't be able to proceed onward unless we destroy the dragons in our way.

It's a truly nasty setup that continues to gradually whittle down our mana and stamina.

"Sensei, how should we advance?"

"In a maze you always advance while following the left wall!"

It was definitely impossible that we'd be able to clear this underground ruin by just ascending one floor. Not to mention that we don't have any detailed information about this labyrinth-like floor. Always advancing along the left wall, the basics of getting through a labyrinth, is the most efficient method here, I think.

This is knowledge that's also taught at the adventurer's guild, but Agnes, Betty, and Cindy seem to have completely forgotten about it after getting totally panicked.

It was the same for us in the past as well. It's something that's inevitable since they're beginners.

"Eeey! Drop dead! Drop dead!"

"Sensei! It's annoying as they keep appearing one after the other!"

"Agnes! Cindy! Don't think about killing all of them!"

There are hatches installed all over the ceiling on this floor, and small dragon golems keep rushing out of there. Agnes and Cindy attack all the dragons surging out from there with magic, but I have them stop that.

Even if every single dragon is small and weak, it'll take a lot of mana to wipe out all of them.

"We will run while following the left wall and blocking the breath attacks with 『Magic Barriers』! Stay together as much as possible, and control the mana used on the 『Magic Barriers』!"

"Sensei, we can recover our mana with magic gems."

"No, doing it too frequently is a bad idea."

I shoot down Cindy's objection.

If you consider that the dragon tank tried to chase after us, even going as far as climbing the stairs, the small dragons of this floor might pursue us as well. In other words, it's obvious that we won't be allowed any decent break until we get out of this ruin.

"Even if you can recover your mana, the same can't be said for your stamina and mental fatigue. It would be nice if we could take a break somewhere, but going by the events so far, we likely won't be able to take much of a break."

Even if we were to try to rest between the floors, a golem group from the lower floor would

immediately come after us. We've blocked the dragon tank, but the small dragon golems can fly and have big numbers. If we were to take it easy by sitting around, we'd be likely surrounded by many small dragons in no time.

"Moreover, we've also got the problem of healing magic."

I'm the only one who can use healing magic within this party, and on top of that, I've got only mana at an elementary level as a child right now. I can only heal small injuries. Hence, if someone gets heavily injured, the party will wipe, or we won't have any other choice but leaving that person behind.

"Let's hide somewhere until you return to normal, sensei."

"I think that will be difficult."

I reject Betty's suggestion as well. It's because none of us knows precisely when I will return to normal.

Arnest's guess is ultimately just that, a guess. If I'm unlucky, it's possible that I'll stay like this for another week. And I can't imagine at all that we'll find a place to hide where we won't be attacked by golems during that time.

"As such, we've got no choice but to keep escaping upwards. Save your mana, and crush the minimum necessary amount of golems and traps standing in our way."

The replenishment of mana itself will work out sufficiently with magic gems, but if you use that method several times a day, the mental exhaustion becomes terrible.

"Not only crushing invaders through sturdy combat units, but turning the invaders into children with magic, sending them to the lowest floor with the 『Deadly Inversion Regulation』. which was fairly popular during the Ancient Magic Civilization's era, and killing the enemies by making the gradually tire out. This underground ruin must be an army facility from the era of the Ancient Magic Civilization."

I see. I had wondered why the first dragon tank used a caterpillar at its lower frame, but I guess it's because of the risk of it being easily destroyed due to its weight if it had used four legs to walk while tracking the enemy. It wouldn't be necessary to worry about something like that if you could place it on top of a pedestal as gun battery replacement, but it'd be meaningless if that dragon tank couldn't move.

Caterpillars to lower the maintenance burden, and a stressing of a mass production nature for the small dragon golems so that they could keep overwhelming the enemies with numbers. Arnest notices that those characteristics are biased towards weapons.

"Thus, I also agree with the plan to destroy the least necessary amount as proposed by Earl Baumeister."

Seeing that we don't know how many golems dwell in this ruin, we have no option but to advance while making sure to not get exhausted as much as possible.

"Well, we also have a burden with us, to put it diplomatically."

"I'm sorry, okay!?"

At first I believed that turning the invaders into children was for the sake of lowering the mana pool, but for there to actually have been another aim...

With me having become a child, I have low stamina, and my running speed is slow as well. I had planned for us to run through this floor without defeating the small dragons as much as possible, but to be frank, I've become the biggest hindrance to that plan. In short, an underground ruin exploration is too much of a strain for a child.

"Sensei has sacrificed for me, so even if I have to carry him on my back..."

"That's a big no."

Given that Cindy is the youngest one among the three, it'll be hard on her to run while carrying me, even if I might be a child. Since she also must use magic depending on the situation, that would be extremely harsh.

"We have Arnest with us for such times."

I tell Arnest to lend me his back once more. This guy is often doing excavation work outside, so he got strong legs, and quite a bit of stamina.

"I know." (Arnest)

"You will be able to explore this place as much as you like once we get out of here, okay?"

Though, that deal's off if I die.

"Excavating such a huge ruin with many golems has a charm I cannot resist."

Once Arnest carries me on his back, the party's travel speed goes up right away.

While we follow the left walls of the labyrinth, Betty blocks the breath attacks with her 『Magic Barriers』, and Agnes as well as Cindy mow down the individuals and groups that would hinder our advance with offensive magic. At the end of the line, Arnest blocks the breaths spit by the big amount of dragons chasing after us with timely 『Magic Barriers』.

"Earl Baumeister, the swarm in the back is starting to become a problem!"

The dragons we left untouched behind and new dragons from the hatches in the ceiling have turned into a large flock. This means, we have to find the stairs to the upper floor quickly.

"Sensei!"

"Since we have no map for this maze, it will take time, but we got no choice but to follow the left

wall."

There wouldn't be anything worse than us returning to where we came from after unwisely trying to take a shortcut. In the end, it's 『Slow and steady wins the race』.

"Sensei, wouldn't it be better if we wiped out the flock of dragons with magic once?"

"I'm pretty sure that this is the aim of the one who designed this ruin."

Sweeping the entire flock will consume a lot of mana, and it wouldn't hold back further dragons from coming out. Having said that, our front and rear is packed with masses of small dragons. Now then, what should we do about this...?

"Everyone, immediately squat down upon my mark!"

"Sensei?"

"Agnes! Where's your answer?"

"Okay!"

"You others, too!"

""""Yes!""""

It's fine if they got it.

Several seconds after that, I order everyone to squat on the spot, "Now! Crouch down!"

Immediately after everyone does as told, the breath attacks of the group in front passes above our heads, directly hitting the group in our rear. The small dragon golems can spit fire and are great for mass production, but it looks like their defensive capabilities are rather limited, as I thought.

The flock of dragons hit by their allies' breaths didn't break apart flashily or melted into goo, but they crashed to the floor in succession after being damaged. It looks no device to skilfully command and coordinate the attacks efficiently has been installed in the small dragon golems. It's probably because it'd have made them unsuited for mass production and prevented keeping them small-sized if something like that had been added as well.

"That's all for the example. For now, we gotta advance at full speed!"

""""Okay!""""

We gather up once more, and keep advancing with Betty and Arnest blocking the breath attacks of the dragons that continued to increase in numbers. While maintaining a path by exterminating the small dragons through friendly fire with the method I had shown earlier, once their numbers increased too much, we finally arrived at the stairs leading to the third floor.