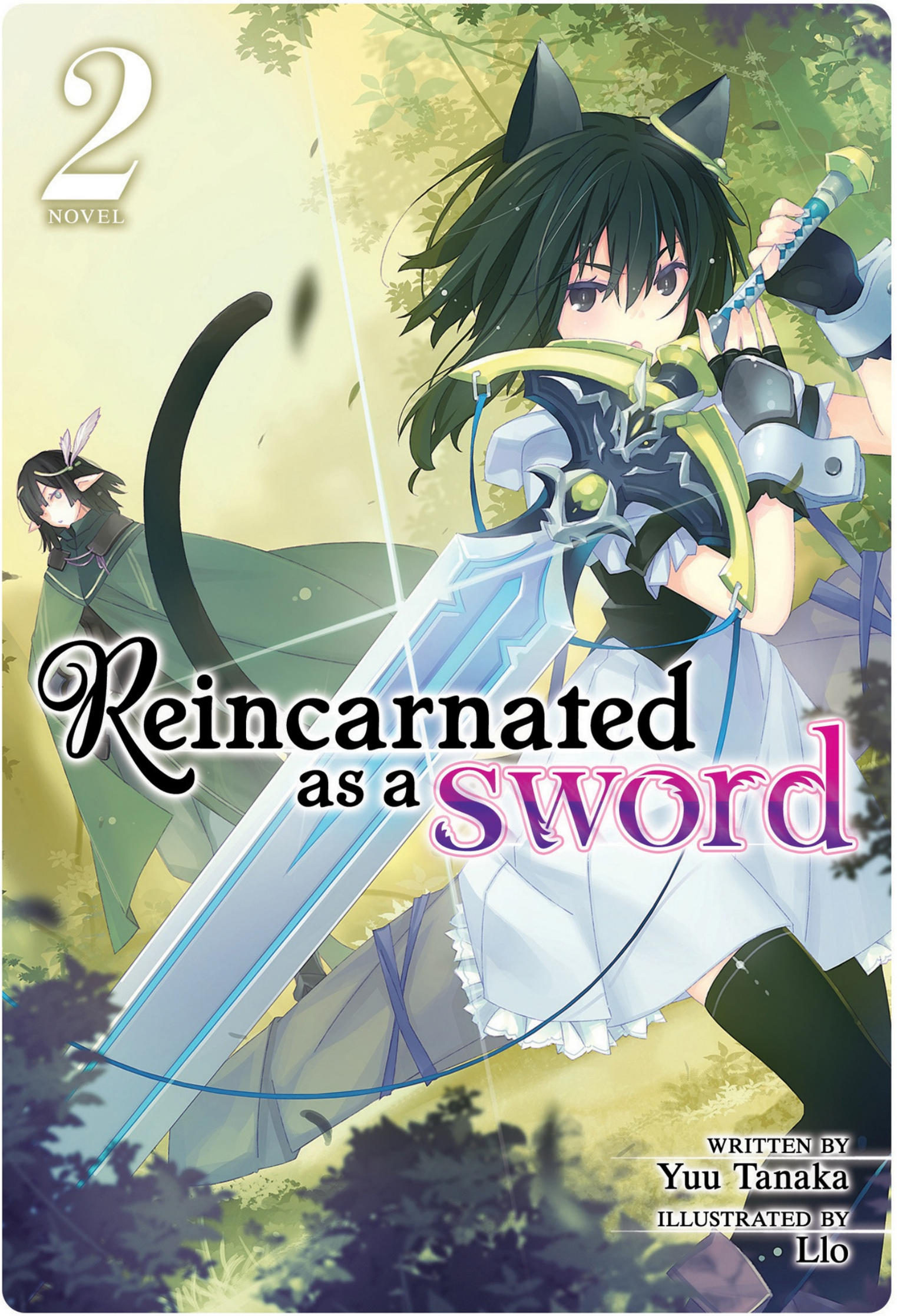

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NOVEL
Reincarnated as a sword
WRITTEN BY
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Reincarnated as a sword 2



Reincarnated as a Sword

2

written by

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illustrated by

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Seven Seas Entertainment

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD VOL. 2

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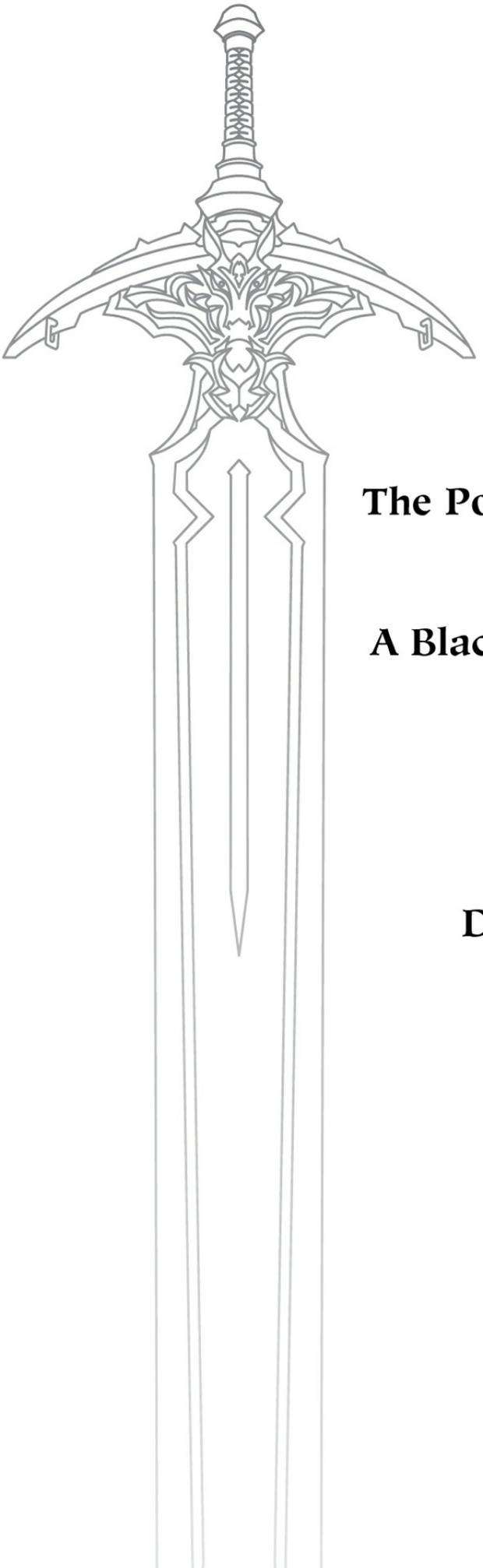
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Chapter 1:
There's an Idiot in Every World

What was this…? My mind and body felt like they were floating in thin air. It felt like I was asleep. Was I dreaming?

There was no sound. The scenery before me seemed to have a sepia filter over it—the ground, the sky, the people, everything. Not that I could make the shapes out for sure. The ones that looked like people were standing around me. It was a cloudless day and I didn't see any plant life around me. It was an odd sight to behold.

The sepia filter prevented me from seeing the hair colors of the three women surrounding me, but their facial features were otherworldly, as was their style of dress. They wore long robes that covered their bodies from their necks all the way down to their feet, decorated with various jewels and ornaments. As if that weren't fantastical enough, they also wore crowns on their heads. They looked like the Shinto priests and shrine maidens I saw in my old fantasy novels. The moment felt solemn.

They surrounded me as I lay there. They pointed at me from time to time, though I couldn't hear their conversation. I guessed I was the subject of their discussion.

Which raised the question: Where was I?

I don't think I've met these people before…

They seemed too vivid to be a mere dream.

Was I imagining them? But their faces and clothing were so detailed. I never had much of an imagination, so I doubted I could have made them up so clearly in my head.

As I watched the three women with curiosity, one of them suddenly peeked into my face. I still couldn't hear her. I thought of shaking my head but it wouldn't move. Moreover, it seemed that I had lost control over my body. I

raised my arm and squeezed the woman's hand in return. My body kept moving of its own accord. It seemed to be dreaming of its past and all I could do was watch. Eventually it brought me to a pedestal where a lone sword was lying on an intricate velvet cloth.

Where had I seen this sword before…?

Again, the sepia filter prevented me from knowing its actual colors, but the hilt and blade seemed awfully familiar.

Then I knew: this sword was me. At least, that's what I thought.

The braiding on the string attached to the hilt. The three lines running straight down the blade. The sword was a spitting image of me.

That was, until I noticed the sword's guard. My guard had the dashing image of a wolf. The guard on this sword had the image of four women with their eyes closed. Four wings connected each sculpture to the other. Was it some kind of four-faced angel, or were they four separate women? I couldn't tell.

One of the women pulled my arm to bid me to stand. She led me to the sword and made me touch it. And then—

Bwuh!

What was that? Was I dreaming? I, who lacked the capability of sleep?

Let's see. I was at the inn, lying next to Fran as she slept. I was looking at the moon when—when what? I couldn't remember. Where did that dream come from? It was my first dream since I reincarnated here. Or maybe it was just my imagination. But then…

I don't get it.

"Mm…"

Oh, I shouldn't be making such a ruckus. Don't wanna wake Fran up.

I was talking to myself again. Was it because I was human again in my dream? Did I long to be human again? The thought had never crossed my mind the entire time I'd been a sword. In fact, I had been grateful that I was a sword,

especially after meeting Fran.

I wondered why. People reincarnated as objects should probably long to return to their human bodies. Was I more adaptable than most?

Well, no use thinking about it now. Longing to become human again would be quite a nuisance. I had Fran to take care of. She was my User. We were fighting together. That was the important thing. Besides, how was I supposed to become the strongest sword in all the land if I went back to being human? Now was not the time.

Yeah, that's it!

"Hm…"

Whoops, what was I doing? I almost woke Fran up.

Fran?

Fran didn't answer.

Phew! It was going to take a million more strikes before I became the strongest sword.

A week had gone by since the great Goblin extermination. It was late and we were using the kitchen at the inn to cook up all the ingredients we had gathered. Materials stored in the Pocket Dimension didn't rot, so by that same token, Fran could have hot delicious meals any time she wanted, so long as I had cooked and stored them in advance.

We were in the kitchen since I wanted to cook in bulk for the next time we headed out. Fran was with me since an autonomous floating sword would cause quite a commotion. If we sensed anyone come close, I would immediately place my handle in Fran's hand. A little girl swinging around a sword in a kitchen was an odd sight, but it was easier to explain than a floating sword.

The owner of the inn had allowed us to use the kitchen after closing hours. We went to the market earlier and bought a ton of ingredients and seasonings. I might have gotten a little carried away by the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. I went with my instincts and bought anything that looked usable. I

purchased jugs of sauces and big bags of spices. I also went ahead and bought several pots and pans.

In total, I ended up spending around 100,000G. All in the name of cooking delicious food for Fran, of course. Besides, our coin pouch was filled to bursting, thanks to the Goblin raid. We got 30,000G from selling Hobgoblin horns and their equipment, as well as the Beetle Army remains. Not bad for selling trash mobs. There were also some weak magical items which turned out to fetch quite the price.

Add to that the reward money for participating in the raid. Participants originally got a flat 30,000G, but it was increased to 40,000G because of bonuses. Fran got an extra bonus which amounted to 300,000G. Selling our materials earned us a total of a cool 400,000G. That said, we did treat the Guild to a round of drinks, which cost us 100,000G. The other adventurers thanked us the next day. They must've gotten respectable bonuses, too.

We spent the last week taking on various quests to gain experience and raise our Adventurer Rank. We went to a poisonous marsh to exterminate some fish monsters, and we gathered some rare medicinal herbs. We hatched a plan to drain the swamp with the Pocket Dimension to make our fishing easier. The fish monsters were as large as sharks and hid in the vast marshlands, but they were helpless after all the water was gone. The Pocket Dimension was a useful tool, indeed. The fish monsters looked tasty but their crystals didn't amount to much. We didn't run into any other monsters this week, so my crystal count only went up by 7. It highlighted how special of an event the Goblin Stampede was.

"Teacher, what's wrong?"

It's nothing. Let's get cooking.

Right, I had to focus now.

Dundundundun…

"Dundun?"

Dunununuh!

"Huh?"

Hello, and welcome to the Restaurant to Another World.

“Ooh?”

Fran didn’t seem like she understood the reference but she clapped anyway.

For our first course we have…

“Meat?”

Correct. We have thirty kilograms of Rock Bison and Crash Boar mince.

I also had some vegetables which looked like spring onions, golden chicken eggs, and a variety of spices.

If you would knead those for me, Fran.

“Sure.”

Let’s just make as much as we can while we’re at it.

“Now I can eat your cooking every day.”

You have the Master Chef title, too, Fran. You should be pretty good at cooking by now.

“I can’t cook what I don’t know.”

True.

Fran wanted to eat Earth cooking, after all, and I was the only one who knew the recipes. This world might have some close equivalents but they were bound to differ in the finer details.

I proceeded to dice the spring onions with Aura Blade. I usually cleaned my cooking through boiling and Cleansing Magic. I had Poison Fang and the blood of countless monsters on my blade, which worried me. Fran had never raised any complaints so far but I wanted to stay on the safe side of cooking hygiene.

With the spring onions diced, I then sautéed them in a frying pan.

To your mince we’ll add the spring onions, along with the spices. Now you can mix it again.

“Got it.”

I stirred the remaining mixture with Telekinesis. We ended up making sixty

kilograms of burger mixture. It seemed a little much, but there was no risk of it rotting once I stored it away in the Pocket Dimension.

Now we're going to cook the patties.

"Uh-huh."

We wouldn't be able to cook all of it in one go, even with the gigantic oven. This was going to take some time.

Let's move on to the next step while we wait. We're going to cut our vegetables and toss them into a pot.

"'Kay."

To the pot we'll add water, spices, and wine.

I used magic to add more heat to the fire and used Telekinesis to make a puree out of the vegetables. When we were done, we had a pot of demi-glace sauce. The fragrance must have been amazing; I suddenly missed my sense of smell. I then taught Fran how to make tomato sauce, consommé soup, and chicken bouillon.

We spent the next day cooking, too. I took our freshly-killed fish monster and made various dishes out of it like stew, salt grill, and tempura. French cuisine is nice, but nothing beats traditional Japanese cooking! Not that I was able to eat it myself.

We also caused a bit of a ruckus after draining the poison swamp. People were telling ghost stories of the disappearing marsh. I think Nell had a feeling that we had something to do with it, but she kept quiet about it. Draining an entire ecosystem might have been a step too far…

I used the fish stock to make a Chinese-style soup and stir-fried vegetables. I had to make sure that Fran's diet was perfectly balanced. She was still growing, after all. It had been bothering me for a while after seeing the other kids in town. Fran was comparatively thinner than most of her peers. She'd need all the food she could get.

I had various staples prepared too, of course. I wasn't expecting to find rice in Alessa so I was pleasantly surprised when they sold it in the marketplace. The

city was located at the intersection of the North-South trade route, which was why her citizens ate both wheat and rice products. It had udon, bread, naan, and noodles, to name a few.

Rice and naan called for one specific kind of food.

Alright, we're going to cook up a very special dish.

"Special dish?"

Fran's eyes glowed with wonder. *Don't look at me like that, Fran. You'll make me work extra hard.*

"What is it?"

It's a super, hyper, special dish! It's called curry!

"Curry? I've never heard of that before!"

Heheh. Just you wait.

Curry had always been one of my favorites. I couldn't eat in my current form, and I had zero appetite to boot, but I wanted Fran to enjoy the wonderful taste of curry!

So you crush all these spices and mix it all together.

"So fancy."

Spices weren't as valuable as gold, but they were still expensive. This made curry an upscale dish because of all the spices it used.

This is how you make delicious curry.

"And you stir-fry it?"

That's right. You need to keep the pan moving to get it evenly cooked.

"Right."

An hour later, we had three industrial-sized pots filled with delicious curry.

We started out making them in a normal-sized pot, but once Fran got a taste of it, she devoured the entire pot in no time. After that, I used all the spices we had to make a huge amount of curry to meet Fran's demands.

Each pot was made differently. One was sweet, one was mild, and one was spicy. I changed up the meats and vegetables I used in each pot, too. They were my finest dishes yet. If I brought these back to Japan, I could start my own restaurant.

"I was born to eat this dish."

That good?

"Thanks, Teacher."

I think this is the most sincere thanks you've ever given me.

I had to be careful so Fran wouldn't become a curryvore.

The food we had cooked over the past two days would be good for about two thousand servings. Theoretically it should be enough for a year. However, Fran had an extremely fast metabolism and a voracious appetite, so we might run out of food before then. At least I wouldn't have to worry about food for a while.

"Anyway, I'll have one more plate of curry."

You just had some.

"Please."

… Oh, fine. Just one more.

"Yeah!"

Fran was an active girl, so one more wouldn't hurt.

We stopped by Garrus's shop since we had time between jobs. As usual, jealous merchants glared at us as they circled the smithy.

"Hey."

"Oh, if it isn't the little lady and her teacher! It's been a while! To what do I owe you the honor?"

How's the armor coming along?

"Gahaha! Perfectly! It'll knock you off your feet when you see it."

“Can’t wait.”

“That all you here for?”

Well, there was one other thing I wanted to ask you.

I explained how I got stronger by absorbing monster crystals. Garrus was the only one other than Fran who knew I was an Intelligent Weapon. He was the only one I trusted enough to ask.

“I see… Didn’t know you had such a feature. So you’re wondering if it’s okay to let other people know about it?”

Yeah. What do you think?

“I don’t think you should.”

“Are swords like Teacher that rare?”

“Very. Hell, I never knew magic weapons could do that.”

The preeminent blacksmith of the land never heard of such a thing? Not even in legends or rumors?

“I knew Teacher was amazing.”

“A little too amazing. Being an Intelligent Weapon is shocking enough, but getting stronger by absorbing crystals… That makes me think of a Divine Sword.”

Divine Swords. Legendary weapons which were the pinnacle of enchanted armaments. They were superweapons that were magnitudes beyond my dull blade.

“The Divine Swords keep the nations of the world in check.”

They’re that strong?

“That’s right. I only know of five in existence, and each comes with its own terrible tale. First is Alpha, the first of the Divine Swords. The Mad Sword, Berserk, which destroyed an entire country. Chariot, so named after destroying thirty thousand men in a single ride. Diablos, which sealed the Demon King himself. And I already told you the tale of the Flame Sword Ignis. There have been accounts of these swords being put to use and the results are never

pretty. Thousands killed in a single battle and severe destruction of the land, just to name a few."

These sounded less like swords and more like weapons of mass destruction. Their power was unthinkable. It only made sense that they kept the nations' militaries in check. I was nowhere near as powerful as they were. The only category I could imagine beating them in would be the cuteness of my User.

"I'm sure there's a healthy dose of exaggeration in those stories. Still, it don't change the fact that they are magnitudes stronger than other weapons. All of the countries are secretly looking for them, of course. Or rather, they're looking for the Divine Smith who made them, not that they know where he is. We don't even know if the Divine Smiths of old are still with us or if there are new Divine Smiths that have taken their place."

"Why'd they disappear?"

"Beats me. Maybe they hated the government taking advantage of them. Some say the gods hid them away. There's a lot of talk but we have no way of knowing for sure."

How do we know they're still around?

"Because they show up from time to time, leave some exquisite work behind, and immediately disappear again. Never mind the Divine Swords; even their enchanted gear is of extraordinary quality. They're not divinely strong, but they're strong enough. That's why the nations keep their eyes peeled for Divine Swords."

That strong?

"That strong. And if people heard that you might be a Divine Sword, well… They're going to take you. By force. You might not be a Divine Sword for all we know, but they'll grab you first and ask questions later."

There was a possibility that nations and factions would fight over me.

"And if they heard anyone was walking around with a Divine Sword they might ambush or poison the poor fella. Still, they might go easy on the little lady and talk her into handing you over to them."

So we're better off keeping it to ourselves.

"Yep. I'm glad you came and talked to me about this, but be careful who you share this info with from here on out."

The risk of exposing my abilities were too great. We were going to have to keep quiet for the time being.

We spent the next few days completing quest after quest.

Not like we had anything better to do.

"Too bad about today."

Nothing but bugs.

"I didn't break a sweat."

I only got seven crystals over the last ten days.

Unfortunately, the only available quests were Gathering and Exploration quests. They didn't give us the crystals or EXP we needed to grow.

You're at Level 25 now, right?

"Yeah."

I don't think you're going to level up as fast as you have been so far.

"Right."

Still, we can't find any decent mobs. Just when you need a lot more EXP to level up.

"Do I have to run Dungeons?"

It's either that or Haunts.

I heard that Haunts had just as many strong monsters as Dungeons did. Explained the name, I guess.

The Direwolf Plains where I woke up was one such Haunt. Looking back, ninety percent of the creatures living there must've been monsters. I ran into a lot of them, too. The Plains' monster population density only hit me once I started running quests on ordinary fields.

Still, I'd like to avoid going there if at all possible. We'd have to pass through the Withering Woods and I didn't want to be within a mile of that accursed place. Having the mana-sapping forest next to the Plains made it all the more dangerous.

Some adventurers had gone to investigate the Direwolf Plains right around the time Fran and I reached Alessa. They wanted to look into the territorial battles between the stronger monsters. In fact, the fights had been between me and the area bosses. They came back with reports of B-Rank monster sightings; I never saw the shadow of one when I was there.

There were several ways that monsters could come about. One was through breeding, but sometimes they spawned from an excess of mana in the area. The monsters in the Plains must've been born out of the latter method. That meant the B-Rank monsters came about shortly after I left the Haunt.

That was close!

If they had spawned a little earlier I wouldn't be here right now. I barely survived a fight with C-Rank monsters.

There was a possibility that some A-Ranks might have spawned as well, so the research team was still carrying out their investigation. It would be too risky to wander the Plains, so I guessed they were watching from the safety of the Withering Woods. They had more guts than I did.

But for an A-Rank to spawn…

The Plains did feel like a strong monster could show up at any time. In fact, I found it odd that the monsters were overly weak when I encountered them. I got lucky.

"Let's just go to a dungeon."

I'll take it into consideration.

We got lucky in that last Daemon fight. If the thing had stayed calm and closed the distance between us we would've popped that Return Feather without a single word.

Although I think we should hold back on fighting Daemons and other such

Boss-level monsters and go for something easier.

We'd need to do some research on Dungeons and Haunts, although we wouldn't be able run either of them until Garrus had finished fixing Fran's armor.

There was a place called the Reference Room located on the second floor of the Adventurers Guild. It was open to all adventurers once you signed up to use its facilities.

"Why, hello there. Is this your first time here?"

"Yes."

"May I have your Adventurer Card?"

The Reference Room was run by a small, old man. He was bald, though his bushy white beard stretched all the way to his chest, and his eyes were almost covered with his fluffy silver eyebrows. With his robe on, he was the very picture of a hermit.

He looks very much at home in this place.

"So you're the Spellsword I've been hearing so much about."

"Am I?"

"I believe so. People have been talking about you, girl. I could tell as soon as you walked in."

Gossip was inevitable with how Fran conducted herself. They didn't seem to be bad rumors judging by the old man's reaction to her.

It sure is quiet here.

It was difficult to imagine hard-brawling adventurers would come up here to read books. Not to say the place was completely deserted. There were some scouts and mages looking up quest information in their frontline comrades' stead. Research came with the territory of being the smart one in an adventuring party.

We got information on some dungeons after some reading.

The closest dungeon to Alessa would be Ulmutt.

Ulmutt was a dungeon town to the far south of Alessa. It was built on the bustling trade of items and materials you found in the dungeon. Still being part of Granzell, we wouldn't have to go through the trouble of crossing any national borders to get there.

The other one was the recently founded dungeon in Alessa. We asked the old man about it and he said that entrance to it was currently regulated.

"Why?"

"Because only the Core is left in that dungeon. You are aware that you can manage a dungeon once you kill its Dungeon Master, yes?"

Donadrond had explained that to us before the raiding the Goblin Dungeon. If you could manipulate a Dungeon Core after killing its Dungeon Master, you could produce some items and monsters within said dungeon.

"Alessa's dungeon is one such dungeon. It is now set to produce various necessary materials. It's like a mine that way. The Adventurers Guild maintains it and regulates entry."

I see. They're monitoring it so adventurers couldn't strip the dungeon beyond its means. That eliminated Alessa from our potential list of dungeons.

Which left Ulmutt…

Ulmutt sounds interesting, Fran said telepathically. *I wanna go.*

Me too. Let's look into it some more.

All right.

Where should we start?

Ulmuttian delicacies.

I think there're more important things to look into.

Like travel expenses and routes.

True.

I'm glad you agree.

We should look into the specialties of the towns we might find on the way.

Oh, right.

After entertaining Fran's wishes, I looked up the routes and rest stops for Ulmutt. There was both a land route and a sea route.

If we went by land, we would be able to stop by various towns, eat delicious food and see beautiful scenery along the way. There would definitely be some fantastic sights, too. Going by sea would have us travel by boat. It would be a wonderful cruise. Warm sunlight would warm our faces as the fresh sea breeze cooled it. Dolphins—if this world had any— would playfully keep pace with our ship.

Which one do you like, Fran?

The land route is cheaper.

Can't argue with you there. By the way, have you ever been on a boat?

Once, when I was a slave. They shoved all of us in the cargo hold.

Oof. Sorry. Fran's only memory of being on a ship wasn't fond at all. That wouldn't do!

I-I see. How about we take the sea route then? It'll be fun.

Fun?

Uh-huh. It feels great to be on a ship. You get to eat delicious seafood, too.

…Fish?

And shrimp and crab and a whole host of deliciousness.

In that case we have to go by sea.

Fran nodded as she wiped the line of drool that was creeping out of the edge of her lips. I knew food would convince her.

With that, we set our eyes on getting to Ulmutt by sea.

Two hours later, we were making our way to the outskirts of Alessa. We took on an herb gathering quest after looking up info on dungeons and magic. We

planned to hunt down some monsters while we were at it.

“Hey, off to another quest?”

“Yeah.”

Delt, one of the gatekeepers, called out to Fran. He was the same guard who greeted us on our first day in Alessa. We were on friendly terms with the guy, now that I thought about it. It wasn’t hard to imagine why. We went out practically every day, and Fran did stand out. Still, he never failed to send Fran off with a smile despite her coldness.

I could see through her, though. Despite her seeming unfriendliness, Fran treated Delt better than the other guards. It was proof that she was warming up to him. He seemed to be aware of this too, and he gave Fran extra attention because of it.

“You’re looking cute today, as always.”

… *You’re not a kiddy fiddler, are you, friend?* I thought to myself suspiciously. I’d have to rethink our relationship if that were the case.

“By the way, did you hear about Baron Allsand?”

“Hm?” Fran tilted her head. I guess she’d already forgotten. I couldn’t blame her since she didn’t seem interested in the guy.

It’s that noble who barged into the Guildmaster’s office and started whining.

“Oh. Little League Lieutenant.”

Delt’s eyes bulged before he broke out laughing.

“Hahaha! That’s right. Little League Lieutenant.”

“What about him?”

“I heard that he’s been looking for you. You be careful out there. One of his lackeys asked me if I’d seen you the other day.”

How suspicious.

“He’s an aristocrat so he can do whatever he wants in this city. To make matters worse, he has that skill that allows him to see through lies.”

“I know.”

He *had* that skill, to be precise. It was mine now.

“It’s a very handy skill to have in the aristocracy. It allows him to figure out the weaknesses of his political enemies and blackmail them out of power. You know lying is like breathing to those folks.”

Delt was my kind of man. He had an extreme prejudice towards aristocrats. Just hearing the word brought up images of stuck-up snobs who had nothing to be proud of except their lineage.

“That’s why the baron’s family lets him do whatever he wants. If he causes any trouble, they snuff it out. You can see how that’d get to his head. I don’t know what he might do to ya.”

Did she catch his attention when we met at the guild? Klimt was the one who talked him down but I guess Fran just happened to be there.

“Thanks. I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ve been hearing some unsettling rumors lately.”

“Rumors?”

“Yeah. Baron Allsand has been acting crazier than usual as of late.”

“How do you mean?”

“He’d been acting weird so we thought he’d finally gone and lost his mind. Apparently he angered someone in the royal family. I don’t know the details, but it was so bad that his house is planning to disown him for it. It only went downhill from there. Now folks are saying that he’s been cursed or possessed or something.”

So he might be stalking us? Now there was a scary thought. He might come after Fran once we left the gates. We’d have to stay on guard.

“You stay safe out of there.”

“I will.”

As we walked down the highway looking for herbs, I took the chance to look

at our status screens.

You still have Contract in your status, Fran.

“Yeah.”

I first noticed it when I checked her stats after leaving the dungeon. I thought she was somehow enslaved again but that didn’t seem to be the case; her status then was Slave, after all. Now she was in a Contract, specifically, with me. How it came to be, I didn’t know. But at some point she entered into a contract with me.

There were a lot of things about this steel body of mine that were mysteries to me. Nothing I did seemed to get rid of the Contract status. I tried putting physical distance between me and Fran, I asked her to unequip me. It didn’t work. If anything, I found out that I couldn’t get rid of the status no matter what. It didn’t seem to have any benefits or ill effects so I figured we might as well leave it alone for now. Fran didn’t seem to mind it, either.

We carried on our quest for herbs when I sensed someone tailing us.

Teacher.

I know. Someone’s after us.

There were two of them. One of them was a greenhorn. He didn’t even bother to conceal his presence. We broke from the highway to see what would happen. Our stalkers followed suit. Our suspicions confirmed, we tried to lose them in the forest but they dropped all pretenses and caught up to us.

“Y-you there! Stop!”

The angry shouting sounded familiar. I couldn’t believe he took the bait hook, line and sinker.

“Is that… the Little League Lieutenant?”

Probably… Baron August… Right?

We turned around and paused, perplexed. One of them was a man who looked like a Fighter. Probably hired help. I’d never seen him before but he was definitely one of the Fighter classes.

The one standing next to him confused us. I expected it to be Baron August but I couldn't tell immediately by looking at him. It had only been a week since we last met and he had changed drastically. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes bloodshot. His hair was falling out and in tatters; it looked like he was balding. You could see the baron's facial features under all that madness but only after looking at him for a few minutes. He looked like something out of a horror movie. I wasn't sure if he was an undead or not.

What happened to him? I didn't like the guy but I couldn't help but feel sorry for him after seeing him in such a state.

"Y-y-you!!!"

Oh boy, here he comes.

"You'll pay for the shame you brought me at the Guild!"

He wasted no time with introductions and started yelling at us. I had a bad feeling about this seeing how messed up he looked.

"And you are?"

"Wh-what? A-are you saying you forgot who I am?!"

"Never seen you in my life."

"R-really? N-no, you're lying! Stop that!"

"Seriously. You got the wrong person."

Fran didn't want to get involved with him, either. Was her smokescreen going to work? No, he couldn't be that stupid.

"R-really? H-have we never met? N-no, it can't be!"

Or could he?

"I'm serious. Anyway, I'll be going now."

"Wait, what? She's not… What?"

Was it because of his madness? He was really buying her story. We might be able to get off without a hitch.

"No! That sword! You're the Beastman from the guild!"

Sorry, Fran. I blew our cover.

“I knew it! You were lying to me! You’re all liars, all of you!”

You’re one to talk! Your lies almost got us thrown under the horse carriage!

“N-now… g-give me that sword!”

“No.”

“Silence, you filthy animal! You dare talk back to a noble like me?! Give it here!”

“Nope.”

“D-do you know who I am?! I am the Baron August Allsand!”

The baron screeched as he clutched his head with his right hand. He dug his nails into his scalp and began tearing out patches of hair. Blood trickled down his forehead. He looked like a psycho out of a horror movie. Soon he began tearing out his hair with both hands.

“So?”

Honestly, I didn’t want anything to do with him. We were either going to have to run or cut him down. As we discussed our options, the man next to him came forward.

“Calm down, Lord August. I’ll take care of this.”

“Urgh…”

“I’ll just rough her up a little bit.”

“Y-you’re right. D-do your job! Heheh.”

He let out a disgusting giggle. He might have had a mental breakdown but that didn’t get rid of his rotten character.

“You heard the baron. Hand over the magic sword.”

“No.”

“Heheheh. It’s in your best interest. Before you get hurt.”

“Th-that’s right! Gyuran’s a top-notch mercenary!”

“See? Now, hand it over.”

“I said no.”

“You shouldn’t talk back against your betters, you little shit. Don’t you know how much stronger I am compared to you?”

How strong was Gyuran, exactly?

I Identified him but he wasn’t anything impressive. He wasn’t weak, but he wasn’t strong either. If anything, he was slightly weaker than Fran. So much for “top-notch mercenary.”

“Hm? You… Are you a Black Cat?”

“…”

“I’m a Blue Cat. Do you hate me? Well?”

“Blue Cats…!”

Fran shook with fury. I had never seen her so hostile before.

Fran, what’s wrong?

The Blue Cats are a race full of slavers, Fran replied telepathically. *A lot of them deal in the black market.*

Like the ones who enslaved you?

Yeah.

This man might be one of them. He certainly had the skills for it: Trade, Intimidate, Capture.

Five hundred years ago, the Blue Cats betrayed the Black Cats into slavery. They’ve been our sworn enemy ever since.

The Blue Cats fooled the Black Cats?

They befriended us before selling us into slavery. They captured many Black Cats and sold us off. We brought this matter to the King of the Beastmen but Black Cats are among the weakest tribes. They wouldn’t listen to us.

What a terrible story. I’ll have to remember the Blue Cat Slavers. Any enemy of Fran’s is an enemy of mine. This guy in front of us included.

“You got quiet all of a sudden. Scared? Well, it’s too late. I’ll rough you up some to remind you how powerless you are! Don’t worry, I won’t leave any lasting scars. Wouldn’t want to damage the merchandise!”

Well, he’s obviously involved in the slave trade.

Yeah.

“Let me hear you cry!”

The man drew his sword from his hip. It was flowing with magical energy. It seemed quite strong.

Name: Enchanted Phantom Augite Blade

Attack: 650, MP: 200, Durability: 600

Mana Conductivity: B

Skills: Phantom Strike

It wasn’t just his weapon, either. I could feel mana emanate from his entire body.

Is all his gear enchanted?

Yeah, seems like it.

Should we take it?

Can’t hurt to try. Get ready to use the Pocket Dimension.

I had been wondering if the Pocket Dimension could store an opponent’s equipment mid-combat. It’d be insanely strong if it could.

We had been experimenting with the Pocket Dimension’s capabilities. Did time really freeze for anything that was stored inside of it? What about temperature fluctuation? We figured out the answers to those specific questions early on when monster materials wouldn’t decompose and the food I cooked came out piping hot as if straight out of the oven. Time really stopped for anything that was stored within the Pocket Dimension.

So I had been wanting to try this idea out for a while. We fought monsters most of the time which obviously had no equipment… But this encounter presented the perfect opportunity.

“You wanna go, little girl?”

Fran grabbed my hilt. Gyuran was sneering at her, not once reaching for his sword. He wasn’t expecting a child to put up any resistance.

“Hmph.”

Fran drew me. Gyuran fell.

“Aaaaargh!”

She was now standing next to Gyuran, whose legs rolled helplessly against her feet. She’d gone for his legs to prevent him from running.

Let’s give the Pocket Dimension a try. First, the armor.

“Eeegh!”

Fran stabbed me into Gyuran’s shoulder as he crawled, desperate to get away.

“Eeeaaagh!”

Despite his Pain Reduction skill, it didn’t nullify all pain. Noting that, I used the Pocket Dimension…

No, I can’t store it. It looks like we can’t store anything that’s equipped.

Too bad. That would’ve been really helpful in a fight.

What if we detached it from his body?

“Aaagh!”

Fran swung me and lopped Gyuran’s arms clean off his elbows. He had an enchanted bangle on one of his arms.

Try storing it now, Teacher.

O-okay.

She was merciless. She was quietly angry today, more so than usual. Fran paid no attention to the writhing man as she touched my tip against the bangle.

That worked.

It looked like we could store anything that wasn't attached to its User.

Now the sword.

Sure.

We took the sword into storage, too.

"How could this—! Goddammit!"

I was amazed he could still talk in his state. Was it because of his Pain Reduction skill?

"Why?! My skill… There's no way you could be this strong…! P-please, just spare my life…!"

What was that about his skill? Oh, he must be talking about Strength Sense. It was a skill which allowed him to detect if someone was weaker than him. He must've sensed that Fran was at a lower level than him. Add that to the fact that she was a Black Cat, and a girl, and you had the world's most unfortunate misunderstanding.

We got everything except his armor.

Yeah, stripping him would be a pain.

So it'll work as long as we kill the User.

I suppose… Look, I'll do it.

Gyuran was unlike all the goblins and monsters we had fought up to now. I could hate him all I wanted, but he was still a person. I thought Fran would've hesitated but…

No, it's okay. I'll do it myself.

Fran swung me without a second thought.

"Aah… Heee…"

With his throat cut open, the man drew his last breath. His life poured out of him as blood flowed down his neck. He stared at Fran, the color draining from his face. It was a blank stare full of nothing. His trembling lips seemed to send

shivers down to the rest of his body. He reached his stump arms to the sky in exhaustion before he finally rolled over and expired.

Well, that was unsatisfying.

You all right, Fran?

It was bound to happen at some point. I'm glad I did it with my own hands.

She was exceedingly calm for taking her first human life. Their races had been sworn enemies and he was a scumbag to boot, so that might have helped.

She wasn't putting up a front, either. I could sense no remorse in her. Calm Mind must be kicking in, too. It was a skill which allowed its User to reduce any reservations they had about killing. It was a good thing I took it.

We could debate later whether this was the right thing to do but I chose to let it slide for now. The important thing was that killing this man wasn't weighing down on Fran's conscience. I never liked wimpy protagonists anyway. They'd go and kill a guy and get depressed for ten volumes; that was terrible writing.

Anyone who said that you should never let children kill anyone under any circumstance had a naive outlook on reality. A moment's hesitation could get you killed in this world. Teaching Fran such childish kindness would put her life in danger.

Alright, let's try storing it now.

"Hm."

Let's start with the armor.

I took everything: armor, boots, shield, dagger, and choker. The Pocket Dimension could take things from a corpse with no problem.

"Heee, hee!"

The Little League Lieutenant August let out something that could either be a shriek or a giggle.

"I-Impossible! H-he was a war hero in the Rouze War! Th-the superman…! Killed a thousand men…! How…?"

August, he pulled a fast one over you. All you needed was to take one good

look at the guy to figure that out.

He tricked him?

I'm as bewildered as you are, but he must've. He's not so smart for a rotten aristocrat.

Wait, was this my fault? Could he not tell the difference between the truth and a lie because I took Essence of Falsehood away from him?

He must've had that skill all his life so it was easy to assume that he'd use it in every conversation he'd ever been part of. He'd have no way of judging truths from lies if he suddenly lost that skill.

Definitely your fault.

You think so too, huh?

Yeah. Very good.

Why, thank you.

She showed no mercy to her enemies as usual. Well, the guy had it coming. He had the misfortune of crossing us and tried to take advantage of us. None of this was my fault.

"Wh-where did you hide Gyuran's equipment! I-I bought those for him! They were all very expensive!"

Gyuran played him like a fool. He fed him lies and treated the poor bastard like a living wallet.

What should we do with him?

…Leave him.

Hmm, I don't know about that.

We decided to store away Gyuran's corpse for the time being; he'd turn into an undead if we left him out here. We'd have to dispose of the body later but it couldn't be helped. We also took the 20,000G he was carrying on him. It would do for consolation money. Besides, it'd be a shame to let it go to waste.

But what to do with August…?

Arrest him? Kill him? Ignore him? Brainwash him? He was still a noble, after all.

A new presence approached us as I pondered this question.

Teacher…!

I can feel it. It's pretty strong. Be careful!

"Yeah!"

Fran ignored August and readied herself. The strong magical presence approached us at high speed. It was an odd magical signature, though. I had never felt anything like it before. It wasn't a monster or a person. Was it targeting Fran? No, there was the possibility that someone sent it after the idiot noble. Whatever the case might be, we couldn't afford to let our guard down.

"Wh-why did you draw your sword again? Do you want to fight?!"

August was screaming at us again. He could distract us in the middle of the fight so we needed to silence him for the moment.

Fran.

"Alright."

"Wh-wh-what…"

August fell with a thud after Fran knocked him out with the side of her hand. A few minutes later, an odd, half-transparent thing appeared before us. The thing was a ball of water floating in mid-air which constantly shifted and squirmed. It didn't seem hostile, but what on earth was it?

"You didn't kill him, did you, Fran?"

A voice called out to her.

"…?"

Was it coming from this thing in front of us? It didn't have a face or a mouth that I could see but the voice must've come from this formless thing. It sounded familiar, too.

"Guildmaster?"

“Yes. Aah, I suppose this is your first time seeing this. This is one my Spirit familiars. Worry not.”

Klimt’s familiar looked nothing like I imagined. I was expecting something humanoid—maybe a Sylph or an Undine. Fran tilted her head, equally confused.

“It looks weird.”

“What do you mean, weird?! It lacks human form because it’s not one of the Greater Spirits but I’ll have you know it’s just as cute!”

“You should’ve gone for a cooler-looking one.”

“I’m not going to summon a Greater Spirit outside of combat.”

So the Guildmaster had the ability to summon humanoid Greater Spirits. Still, I was getting a strong mana reading from this intermediate spirit, and I wondered how strong the Greater Spirits were. That he could summon such powerful spirits was a testament to how strong the GM was. No wonder he made Guildmaster.

“What do you want?”

“Right. I heard that Baron Allsand left town.”

Word travelled fast considering it happened just today.

“Delt, the gatekeeper, told me. He said that the baron left town to look for you and wondered if you were alright.”

Delt, I’m sorry for calling you a kiddy fiddler. You are a genuinely good person.

“He’s here.”

“I knew it! We had a request to capture the baron while keeping it under wraps. You didn’t kill him, did you? Did you? It would be problematic if you did!”

“I didn’t.”

“R-really? Thank goodness! We would like to bring him in. You’ll be compensated, of course.”

“Sure.”

Honestly, I didn't want to deal with him anyway. The Guild was doing us a great favor.

"Really? Wonderful! We're coming over right now, so could we bother you to secure him for us?"

"No problem."

"If you'll excuse me!"

And with that, the messenger spirit disappeared.

The Guildmaster arrived in person ten minutes later, all out of breath. This must've been an urgent commission.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Fran."

"Hm."

"Now, Baron Allsand… Oh, there he is. Hey, over here."

The adventurer the Guildmaster had brought with him slung the unconscious Baron Allsand over his shoulder and carried him away.

"Where are you taking him?"

"He'll be under the care of Count Olmes, now."

Never heard of that name before.

"Count Olmes is the Baron Allsand's father."

"His own father is arresting him?"

"Yes. This is strictly between us, but Baron Allsand is a problematic character. The Count never disciplined him because he wanted to use his Essence of Falsehood."

The benefits of the skill far outweighed the drawbacks of his rotten behavior. It was an understandable decision.

"However, he suddenly lost that skill a few days ago. Nobody knows why. This doesn't happen very often, you see. Perhaps the gods have had enough of his nonsense and saw it fit to punish him for it."

That’s right. It was divine punishment. Please go with that angle.

“I was as surprised at his sudden transformation as everyone else. It was inevitable if you had to rely on your skill to judge when a person was lying. Without it, he couldn’t trust anyone.”

That might have been an oversimplification, but the fact remained that it broke Baron Allsand. I thought I’d acquired a powerful skill but I was going to have to be careful with it. I didn’t want to end up like the baron. I was no exception to its ill effects.

“He caused trouble during an audience with the royals a few days ago. They had come for their routine check-up when he leaped up and grabbed them, screaming at them to stop lying.”

Geez, that’s rough. Fran and I might not be trained in etiquette but even we wouldn’t go that far. Wait a second. We did take Royal Etiquette away from him, too. Was that why…?

“Having been arrested, he escaped and took a large amount of money out of the family coffers. He used most of it to buy expensive gear, and that’s how we were able to track him down.”

He was most likely being led on by Gyuran at the time. Once he captured Fran he was planning to leave Alessa and never look back. Anything went for that idiot baron.

“Count Olmes would rather keep this quiet. He sent a request to the guild in secret to apprehend the baron before he could cause any more trouble.”

“In secret?”

“Yes. This is my personal opinion, but I assume he is going to keep the fact that the baron lost his skill a secret so he can keep using him. I don’t know whether he’s going to use a double or cure him. That’s why he needed to capture the baron. He wants to prevent the truth of the situation from being revealed.”

“Impossible.”

“I agree. Well, whether it succeeds or fails has nothing to do with me. Doing

favors for people in power never hurts. The commission and hush money are good, anyway.”

I see. Commission money, huh…?

“Uh-huh…”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’ve marked this request as completed under your account, and I also gave you a nice bonus.”

“Of course.”

“You know what to do, right?”

Fran puffed her chest and nodded while the Guildmaster tossed her a worried look.

“Keep my mouth shut.”

“Please do. Our client is a powerful aristocrat. Upsetting him would be problematic for us.”

We’d rather not be involved in aristocratic family matters, either. We wouldn’t spread rumors even if you asked us to.

“Ah, he also told me that we didn’t need to recover any of the baron’s personal effects.”

He might as well have told us to take the baron’s gear and money. I felt like we were beginning to owe the Guildmaster a lot. He later told the Count’s side not to bring up Fran’s name. I didn’t think the great count would be interested in a commoner, but you never know.

We got an extra 200,000G in completion fees, bonuses, and hush money. The windfall doubled our purse in a day.

Those crazy aristocrats spared no expense in getting their problems fixed.

Chapter 2:
The Power of an A-Rank

A few days had gone by since the commotion of August Allsand. We were at the Adventurer's Guild looking up quests as usual. Garrus told us that he was a week away from completion. We were going to have to stay in Alessa until then.

Are we going herb picking again?

God, I'm getting bored of that.

Hm? What's all that noise about?

There's a lot of people gathering, too.

Fran opened the door and found the guild in an odd ruckus. There was a lot more adventurers today than usual.

"Nell, what's going on?"

"Oh hey, Fran. The high-rank adventurers just came back from scouting the Direwolf Plains."

I see. So that's why a lot of these people looked strong.

"I don't think you've met any of them before."

"No."

High ranks are A and S adventurers, right?

"Are there any S-Ranks today?"

"No, no S-Ranks. But we have one A-Rank and a couple B-Ranks."

An A-Rank was strong enough to consistently beat B-Rank monsters. Meaning they could beat that Daemon we got lucky with without any problems.

"They left to investigate the Direwolf Plains about a month ago. A lot of the F- to C-Rank guys left with them, too, for experience. We were short on manpower during the goblin raid because of that."

If the A-and B-Ranks had been here, they would've been able to clear the

dungeon a lot faster. But then we wouldn't have been able to beat the Daemon and get all his goodies. We came at the perfect time.

I thought Donadrond was the strongest here.

"Hm."

"What is it?" Nell asked.

"Don's not the strongest," Fran observed.

"Donadrond is an instructor because he has a knack for teaching. If he had continued being an adventurer, he would be in B-Rank. But he said he wanted to show everyone the ropes and became an instructor. He's been one for fifteen years now, and a lot of the B-and C-Rank adventurers in Alessa used to be his students. That's why everyone listens to what he says."

No matter how pig-headed some of these adventurers were, they were bound to listen to their instructor who had been taking care of them since they were newbies. No wonder Donadrond was at the frontline during the goblin raid.

"The A-Rank, too?"

"Oh, not her. Doesn't take orders from anyone, that girl. Honestly, she's a little too 'unique'."

"Wow, Nell. Are you badmouthing me behind my back?"

A woman suddenly cut into our conversation.

"Argh! Amanda! Don't use your Stealth skill to sneak up on me like that! This is why you're hard to get along with!"

The woman seemed to be the A-Rank in question. She had perfectly concealed her presence before getting the jump on us.

"Heh. I don't mind it. Saves me the trouble of being someone's lapdog."

Her words were sharp, but they were both laughing. They must've been close if they could joke with each other like this.

"Let me introduce you, Fran. This is Amanda. Don't let her appearance fool you. Our A-Rank ace."

“Excuse you, I think I look the part.”

Amanda was quite the looker. Her long black hair was neatly trimmed as it flowed over her back. Her gentle voice gave her a familiar Japanese air of comfort. But the conversation she had with Nell made it obvious that she was no pushover.

“She’s not a bad person. Also she likes kids! Just look at her titles…”

“Shut up, Nell! You’re embarrassing me!”

“What? I think that title suits you to a T.”

“Just, shush! Ahaha. I’m so sorry you had to see that. Pleased to meet you, young lady. My name is Amanda.”



“Hi. Fran.”

“You’re so strong at such a young age… You’ve got a future ahead of you!”

“You can tell?”

“Of course!”

The A-Rank adventurer was able to judge Fran’s potential just by looking at her. And she didn’t have Identify. It must’ve come from experience.

Name: Amanda

Age: 58

Race: Half Elf

Class: Storm Warrior

Level: 70

HP: 646; Magic: 825; Strength: 327; Agility: 451

Skills: Intimidate 7; Speed Cast 6; Stealth 8; Disassemble 8; Wind Magic 10; Stubborn 5; Flash Step 7; Abnormal Status Resistance 7; Omnidirectional Awareness 6; Elemental Sword 7; Throwing Weapons 8; Whip Mastery 10; Greater Whip Mastery 5; Whip Arts 10; Greater Whip Arts 6; Storm Magic 4; Magic Resistance 6; Mana Sense 6; Spirit Manipulation; Dragon Killer; Storm Magic Up; Mana Manipulation

Unique Skill: Beloved of the Spirits

Titles: Protector of Children; Dungeon Raider; Dragon Killer; Wind Mage; Monster Exterminator; A-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Sky Dragon’s Beard; Hydra Hide Armor; Venom Gecko Mantle; Mad Eye Bull Boots; Armlet of Sacrifice; Thunderbird Feather; Barrier Ring; Shock Owl Throwing Feathers x 24

Amanda possessed a title called Protector of Children. This must be what Nell was talking about. Did she get this title because she liked kids?

She was strong, though. Looking through the Guildmaster's and Don's stats had thrown me for a loop, but Amanda was stronger than both of them. I was a little afraid of her, to be honest. If you thought about it, she could hunt down a Daemon with little effort. We had better stay out of her way. I couldn't imagine any way we could win even if we caught her off guard.

She's strong. Don't piss her off.

I know.

Fran nodded; she understood how strong Amanda was.

"The others told me how you were the fastest growing adventurer this guild has ever seen. They also told me how you were a small, cute Beastman who wielded an enchanted sword!"

What? It was nice that people were singing her praises but I felt that they were all based on her appearance. They better not be making light of Fran because of her looks!

"The Guildmaster warned me not to underestimate you, though. He said I'd be in a world of hurt if I did!"

What are you telling this A-Rank, GM? Although I would be grossed out if he swooned over how cute Fran was.

"Oh, that's right. Now that you're here, Klimt wanted to see you in his office."

"Now?"

"If you don't mind."

"Sure."

"Aww, that's too bad. I was going to take you out to lunch. But I guess if the GM needs you…"

"See you around."

"Oh my god, she's so cute! I want a sister just like her!"

"At your age, she'd be your daughter, Amanda."

"Nell, just because you're younger than me doesn't give you the right to say whatever passes your mind. Besides, half elves are slow to age!"

“All right, all right. You’re still young at heart, Amanda.”

Fran left Nell and Amanda to catch up with each other and headed for the GM’s office. She climbed the stairs and knocked on the door.

“You don’t have to knock so loud!”

She walked into the room.

“You called?”

“Oh, Fran. There’s not much point in knocking on the door if you don’t wait for my response, is there?”

“Whoops.”

“Just… be mindful next time.”

Sorry, GM. I’ll teach her proper etiquette some time. I didn’t stop her because I wanted to see how you’d react.

“What do you want?”

“There is a quest that I need you to take.”

Nothing good could come out of *that* request.

“Some people are doubting your capabilities. I vouched for you of course, but they wouldn’t believe me since they’ve never seen you in action. I need you to take on a certain quest to silence these dissenting voices.”

I was getting annoyed. He was the one who gave her all those promotions. It was a little late for that now.

“The guild was the one who promoted me.”

“I understand… However, it turns out more people are jealous of you than I anticipated. There are those who are in full support of you, of course. The D- and C-Ranks, in particular. Most of them saw you fight firsthand. In fact, you’re so popular among them you’ve become something of a mascot for them.”

The mid-rank adventurers had good judgment to be sure. But a mascot… Well, Fran was incredibly cute so I agree!

“But many of the lower ranks are opposed to your position. Some of them are

still E-Rank after many years of adventuring. It's only natural that they resent you for moving into D-Rank in such a short period of time."

"Let them say what they want."

That's right! This had nothing to do with us! They should just work harder so they could make it to D-Rank!

"As much as I want to, I can't. Some people are saying you paid your way to D-Rank. Others say that you knew I was into little girls and seduced me. Such baseless rumors…" the GM mumbled to himself. "How could anyone think that I am into little girls?! Honestly! What I like in a woman—"

Did the Guildmaster ask us to go on this mission because he hated the idea of people thinking he was a lolicon?

"I don't have to accept, right?"

"Now, now, let's not be rash. I've prepared some bonuses for you so just hear me out."

The Guildmaster was desperate. He really didn't want people to think he was a lolicon.

"I'll increase your reward fee, of course. I'll also give you the permission to enter the dungeon in Ulmutt."

"… How did you know that?"

"It was obvious enough. All I needed to do was ask the caretaker of the Reference Room."

We did ask the old man to look things up for us, but the GM sure kept his ears to the ground.

I hadn't known we needed a permit to enter a dungeon, though.

"Can't anyone just walk into a dungeon?"

"Of course not. There are several requirements you need to fulfill. One is your Adventurer Rank."

"Ulmutt's a D-Rank dungeon."

"While your Adventurer Rank is sufficient, there are other criteria to fulfill.

You might not be allowed in if you haven't gone through inspection."

"And I haven't?"

"It would be hard to believe you had, judging by your appearance."

If a cute Beastgirl walked up to you and said she wanted to explore a dungeon, you'd be hard-pressed to let her in. Even if we managed to get a permit somehow, it'd take a lot of time.

"I can give you a permit. With it, you won't need to go through any evaluations. You'll be able to enter the dungeon whenever you want."

The shrewd elf grinned as if he already won the argument. We needed this permit.

"… I'll hear you out."

"Thank you. Here are the details."

The Guildmaster took out papers related to the quest. We were to investigate the dungeon near Alessa and gather materials.

"I thought people weren't allowed in the Alessa dungeon."

"So you know the circumstances? Good. Normally, people aren't allowed into this dungeon, but once every couple of months we dispatch a team of adventurers for the purpose of evaluation. You'll be gathering resources alongside controlling the monster population inside of the dungeon."

"Control? Not exterminate?"

"Yes. We are able to control a dungeon using its Core, but we can't manipulate all of its variables. At most, we can tweak the rate of monster and item spawns, and that depends on how much mana the Core has. The Alessa dungeon can only spawn F-Rank monsters and a few items here and there."

There wasn't much point to it, was there? We'd be much better off if the dungeon could spawn stronger monsters and produce stronger items.

"What if you injected the Core with mana?"

"If only it were that simple. Even if you took five dozen mages and channeled all their mana into the Core, it wouldn't amount to much."

“So how do you charge the Core?”

“The Core can pull mana from the ground and the air. That includes the monsters and adventurers who happen to be in the dungeon. I’m sure a Dungeon Master would have other methods of charging the Core with mana. They wouldn’t be able to maintain the labyrinth otherwise.”

Summoning a Daemon must have required a lot of mana. It was hard for me to believe that the Dungeon Master managed to summon it just using the mana in the atmosphere.

“So it’s important to let monsters live in the dungeon so the core can have mana to feed on. Without the proper mana levels in the air, the core can’t function properly.”

So we should reduce the population of monsters? Wouldn’t it be better if there were more of them?

It wasn’t that simple, however.

“We need monsters, but if there are too many of them, we wouldn’t be able to mine for resources. If we leave them alone too long, they’ll multiply, evolve, and we’ll have another stampede on our hands. We have to trim their population.”

The rewards looked pretty good. However, there was one problem. The document said that we would conduct the investigation with “several parties.” I’d rather not team up with those idiots we ran into on our first day in Alessa.

“Don’t worry about that. The related teams have already signed up.”

“What are they like?”

“This quest is actually a promotion exam to get into D-Rank. There will be two parties of E-Ranks, nine members each, along with one party of three C-Ranks. I can vouch for their competence. As for their personalities… You’ll have to see for yourself.”

The Guildmaster dodged the question. This quest was optional but…

Fran, what do you think?

“Hmm…”

As Fran weighed her options, the Guildmaster hurriedly took out a small pouch and put it on the table.

“Tell you what. I’ll throw you in a personal bonus out of my own pocket.”

Well, this was interesting.

“Have a look.”

The Guildmaster emptied the contents of the pouch and out rolled twenty crystals. They were sizable, too. There was no way of telling how good they were but they were bigger than goblin crystals at least.

“What’s this supposed to be?”

“Call it my secret savings. They’re crystals I got when I still worked the field. All of them came from D-Rank monsters and above.”

One could sell crystals or use them to make equipment. They were much more valuable than cash. But the Guildmaster stared at us like he was looking for something… Was he on to us? Fran wasn’t going to sell these crystals after all.

“Why crystals?”

“Why, indeed? Are you interested?”

We might blow our cover if we weren’t careful with what we said. Best to let him think we wanted the crystals. He wouldn’t know what we were going to do with them, anyway.

“I might be.”

“I knew you would.”

Teacher, what do you think?

Unfortunately, I can’t tell what skills they have. I can barely tell what monsters they came from. Even the mana load is iffy.

I was sure we could take the Guildmaster’s word for it. At D-Rank and above they should be at least as strong as the Doppel Snake and Blast Tortoise.

But something stank about this mission…

“I’ll let you have two. You can pick whichever you want.”

“Hmm… I’ll take the job at ten.”

“What?! That’s too much… Three.”

“Nine.”

“Urgh… Alright, four!”

“I’ll settle for eight.”

“I know where you’re going with this! You’re highballing me so I’ll end up caving at six! Well, it won’t work. Four. That’s my final offer.”

“Then I’ll walk.”

“Ugh…”

“Five. As down payment.”

“Ungh…”

“Goodbye.”

“F-fine…! You can take five as down payment!”

Good job, Fran! You actually beat the Guildmaster! Why was he so desperate to have Fran take on this job? He must really hate being called a lolicon.

“Please take care of the job.”

“Sure.”

Fran nodded and turned to leave when suddenly—

“Hold it right there!”

The door flew open and Amanda charged into the room. The same thing happened with August last time. Did the Guildmaster not have any security guarding his office? Then again, maybe the A-Rank ace just concealed her presence until the last moment.

“Give me that!”

Amanda grabbed the papers that were on the Guildmaster’s table and began reading through them. Rude as she was, the Guildmaster couldn’t really oppose

her.

“I knew it! Everyone on this quest list are dudes!”

That couldn’t be helped. There were very few female adventurers around. The ratio must be around twenty to one. It wasn’t surprising that there wasn’t a single girl in a group of twelve.

“I am not letting poor Fran get surrounded by a group of sweaty guys. Count me in.”

“But there is a rank limit, you see—”

“I said, count me in!”

The Guildmaster sighed in defeat. “Fine.” He must’ve known that there was no way of convincing Amanda otherwise. “You don’t mind do you, Fran?”

“Nope. No problem.”

She didn’t seem like a bad person.

We were back at the inn an hour after our meeting with the Guildmaster.

Let’s start absorbing those crystals.

“Yeah.”

Fran laid out the crystals she got from the Guildmaster on the table. I took a closer look at them.

I really can’t tell what skills these things have…

Identify only yielded the monsters’ names. With Bestiary on, I could tell the Threat Level of a monster so long as I had its name, but its skills remained a mystery to me.

“I can’t wait to see what skills we’re gonna get.”

Fran held up the glowing crystals with restless anticipation.

We don’t know what we’ll get until we crack them open. They’re like goodie bags.

“Goodie bags?”

Yeah. It's a bag filled with dreams, hope, and a little bit of despair.

"Sounds great."

Warriors would brawl with each other to have a chance at getting one such goodie bag.

"Have you ever seen the inside of one?"

Yep.

"Wow!"

Alright, enough silliness. Let's see what crystals we got. We started with the D-Rank crystals: Hermit Crab, Sea Lion, and Trident Shark. They weren't the strangest monsters I'd seen but I had never run into an aquatic monster before. On to C-Rank: Red Colossus and Old Yeti. Unfortunately, we only managed to pick two C-Rank level crystals from the Guildmaster's collection.

Let's start with the D Threats.

"Okay."

Fran stabbed me into the three crystals on the table. Predictably enough, I got water skills like Swimming and Current Manipulation. They were going to come in handy if we ever found ourselves in an aquatic battle.

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for, the C-Rank Threats!

"Yep!"

Fran got excited and threw the two gems into the air and sliced them with a single swing.

"Ha!"

Here it comes! I hadn't had this much to eat in a while! Delicious…

Red Colossus: 196 crystals; Frenzy 1; Heat Resistance 1; Weight Gain; Strength Up (Medium)

Old Yeti: 127 crystals; Cold Resistance 1; Poison Knowledge 1; Frost Resistance 1; Magic Up (Small)

And I finally ranked up! Here were my stats prior absorption:

Attack: 434; MP: 2050/2050;

Durability: 1850/1850

Mana Conductivity: A

Evolution: [Rank 8; Crystals: 3146/3600; Skill Capacity: 70; Free EP: 2]

And this was after:

Attack: 478; MP: 2500/2500;

Durability: 2300/2300

Mana Conductivity: A

Evolution: [Rank 9; Crystals: 3630/4500; Skill Capacity: 79; Free EP: 47]

Now that I was stronger, we were ready to take on that dungeon quest.

It had been two days since we took the dungeon examination quest.

We had stopped by Randell's shop to stock up on supplies before going to the guild. His shop was as disorganized as ever, yet he still had high-quality potions up for sale. There were Necro Potions to increase the strength of Necromancies at 100,000G each. They were made using a plant called Necroweed. There were also Green Potions which increased the power of Wood Magic. I doubted anyone ever bought these potions. Still, he made plenty of business from selling regular potions.

We were at one of the guild's meeting rooms to meet the other members of the expedition.

“Alright, let’s start with introducing ourselves. My name is Cruise. I’m the leader of the Azure Guardians. These are my teammates Rig and Eizelle. I’ll be acting as your supervisor and examiner on this trip.”

Name: Cruise Riouselle

Age: 28

Race: Human

Class: Duelist

Level: 33

HP: 206; Magic: 175; Strength: 113; Agility: 178

Skills: Evil Sense 3; Stealth 2; Evasion 5; Royal Etiquette 2; Presence Sense 4; Sword Arts 5; Sword Mastery 6; Martial Arts 4; Command 2; Blink 7; Cold Resistance 4; Poison Resistance 5; Trap Sense 2; Spirit Manipulation

Title: The Upright

Equipment: Flaming Mithril Longsword; Lightweight Silver Plate Mail; 100-legged Spider Mantle; Antivenom Bangle

He was a dashing lad with a head of blonde hair. He was already C-Rank at his age. His armor was glistening white so he must have had money to spare. His surname made me think he was noble-born. His facial features were elegant and graceful. He must be popular with the ladies. Jerk! But he did have The Upright as his title. He couldn’t be all bad, so I decided not to wish death upon him as yet. If he made any moves on Fran, I’d come swinging, though. I’d make him regret being born good-looking!

“My main weapon is the sword. Let’s get along.”

I thought the C-Ranks were strong but they were nowhere close to Don. Don must be one of the strongest C-Ranks the guild had.

Cruise’s teammates were about as strong as he was. Rig was a Water Mage and Eizelle was a scout-class Thief. They were there to complement Cruise’s

abilities but they seemed to get along. Cruise must've been a fine leader.

"We are the E-Rank team Dragon Roar. I'm the leader, Krad. The spear's my specialty. With us on the job, we'll clear this dungeon in no time!"

Krad had ash gray hair and a light brown tan. Standing at 180cm, he looked like your typical young rebel. He scanned the room, tossing condescending looks at everyone. The kid was so cocky I wanted to slice him into shreds.

Name: Krad

Age: 23

Race: Human

Class: Fighter

Level: 20

HP: 127; Magic: 68; Strength: 67; Agility: 49

Skills: Transport 2; Acrobatics 4; Danger Sense 3; Hunger Resistance 3; Spear Arts 1; Spear Mastery 4; Intimidate 3; Climbing 3; Spirit Manipulation

Equipment: Fine Steel Spear; Stone Bull Armor; Stone Bull Gauntlets; Giant Spider Boots; Rock Spider Mantle

He wasn't very strong, but that was to be expected of an E-Rank. The other four members of his party were also spear users so they had the same basic skillset. However, Krad was the only one who had unlocked Spear Arts. What he lacked in flexibility he made up for by being tenacious.

From my observations the C-Ranks seemed to be at Level 35 and above, the D-Ranks at 25 and above, the E-Ranks at 15 and above, and F-Ranks at 10 and above. Anything below that was G-Rank.

There were exceptions, of course. The people who messed with Fran on her first day at the guild were at Level 15 but their capabilities were much lower. They neglected to diversify their skillset and instead power-leveled their way through in the name of perceived clout. August Allsand was a similar case. He

was at Level 30 which would put him close to a C-Rank but any E-Rank could beat him in a straight fight.

All this made Krad perfectly average. He was just strong enough to make D-Rank. His personality left a lot to be admired, however. He'd been glaring at Fran ever since the meeting started. What kind of sick person did you have to be to glare at this cute girl? Or maybe he'd actually fallen for her? If he made any funny moves on Fran I'd make him regret it. I wondered if he could go on being an adventurer after a night of being chased around by a sentient sword.

"My name is Furion. Leader of the E-Rank team Eye of the Forest. I am not trained to use physical weaponry, but I can use Spirit Magic among other things."

Blond elf. That was about all I could say about Furion. Nothing about him stood out in particular. He looked like a younger version of our Guildmaster, I suppose. I was impressed by how plain he looked despite being an elf!

Name: Furion

Age: 49

Race: Wood Elf

Class: Sage

Level: 27

HP: 71; Magic: 233; Strength: 36; Agility: 66

Skills: Bow Mastery 1; Harvesting 2; Cultivation 4; Evil Spirit Sense 3; Wood Magic 3; Botany 7; Sleep Resistance 3; Spirit Magic 5; Earth Magic 3; Water Magic 3; Herbology 4; Protection of the Spirits; Mana Manipulation; Child of the Forest

Equipment: Spotted Elm Wand; Red Ape Breastplate; Tree Spider Silk Robe; Water Spout Ring

He was a Wood Elf like the Guildmaster. Even his skills were similar. This guy

could be strong. If nothing else, he was more well-rounded than Krad. It was amazing how much magic elves could use. His team was composed of two Fighters and one Archer; a well-balanced party.

“Me next. I’m Amanda. Nice to meet you.”

Amanda skipped the pleasantries of class and rank. A simple ‘hello’ was enough for her. Of all the adventurers in Alessa, Fran was the only one who didn’t know about her until three days ago.

The E-Ranks looked surprised although they didn’t say anything. An A-Rank taking on a D-Rank quest was unheard of.

Young Krad was the only one stupid enough to raise his voice.

“Wait, what… Why?!”

“Why what?”

“What’s an A-Rank doing taking on a D-Rank quest?! You might be able to clear this in your sleep but this is our promotion exam! If you’re doing this for kicks you might as well stay out of it!”

He was acting tough but I still had to give props to the kid for talking back to Amanda. Maybe he was at the age where he wanted to stick it to the man.

Bad move, though.

“Graargh!”

Amanda blinked over to Krad and grabbed his face with her hand. With the Iron Claw applied, she lifted the youth’s body off the floor. As he began screaming in fear and panic, Amanda drew close and whispered threateningly.

“Who said I was here to fool around? Besides, I already cleared it with the Guildmaster. I don’t suppose we have a problem, do we?”

“No! There’s no problem! Please let me go!”

She gave his skull one last squeeze for good measure before letting him go. As Krad fell on his bottom, he looked at Amanda with fear and trembling.

“Okay… Let’s move on to the young lady. If you will.”

Cruise cut in before the situation got any worse. It was probably too late for

damage control but as head examiner of the crew he had responsibilities to uphold. When you put an A-Rank as independent as Amanda and a rookie as rebellious as Krad together, sparks were bound to fly.

“Fran.”

“Is there… anything else you’d like to tell us?”

“D-Rank. Beastman. My favorite food is curry. I don’t have any particular dislikes.”

“Pssh!”

Krad was shooting daggers out of his eyes now. Just a few seconds ago he was apologizing to Amanda, on the verge of tears. He hated Fran so much that he seemed to have forgotten all about Amanda’s Iron Claw.

He couldn’t accept the fact that this small girl was in D-Rank and he wasn’t.

“I mean, what weapons do you use?”

“Look, kid. Like I said earlier, we’re not playing games here. If you’re treating this like a picnic then go back home and suck on your mommy’s tits!”

Krad had such a foul mouth on him. He was barking like a rabid dog. He was even using his Intimidate skill, not that it had any effect on Fran. He really wanted to make her cry.

“My mother’s dead.”

“Oh dear…”

“… Tch.”

Fran’s statement brought a decisive end to the argument. If Krad had said anything against that I would’ve questioned his humanity.

Amanda looked at Fran sympathetically before sending Krad the full weight of her death glare. The rabid puppy immediately turned blue in the face.

“How dare you raise your voice against a child like that! What the hell is wrong with you?! Fran, are you okay, sweetie?”

“Totally fine.”

Krad's level of intimidation was nothing compared to facing down a Daemon. He was about as intimidating as a yelping puppy. He was trying to get a reaction out of Fran, not that it worked.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"All right! Now that we're done with introductions let's move on to the briefing."

Cruise, not wanting the situation to get any more out of hand than it already was, moved the conversation forward. Good luck, Cruise. We were off to a rocky start and I couldn't help you if I tried but I was sure it would all work out! Maybe.

"Let's all do our best to cooperate. Okay?"

"Hmph."

"Meh."

"Okay. Cooperation makes it happen."

"I'm glad you agree!"

Cruise responded to Fran's expressionless assent with a tone of obvious desperation. He spoke louder during the briefing although it did little to disguise his panic.

"We are going to investigate the dungeon in Alessa called the Spider's Nest. We'll mine some Rune Ore and trim the monster population while we're at it."

The dungeon had six floors and was infested with bug-type monsters. The fifth and six floors were home to spider monsters.

"Rune Ores are generated in the Dungeon Core Room, so that's our main objective."

"So we'll be mining Rune Ores?"

Furion was surprised. These ores sounded important.

"Hey, can I just kill all the monsters I happen to come across? We don't have to let some of them go, do we?"

"Feel free to. Trimming the monster population is part of the mission."

“Heheheh. I’m looking forward to this.”

The Trap Spiders which populated the dungeon were rated as F-Rank. They were perfect for low-rank adventurers wanting to level up. Krad must’ve been used to the spiders, too.

“A word of warning. The spiders may be weak on their own, but they have the ability to use traps. They have also been known to swarm you so be careful.”

“Come on, I’m not gonna lose to an F-Rank monster. They’re cheap EXP.”

“Monsters aren’t the only things you need to be wary of in a dungeon. There are traps, too. While this dungeon doesn’t have that many of them, you should still watch out for Teleport Traps.”

Teleport Traps transported you to a different area of a given dungeon. Once activated they were virtually impossible to override. They were a threat even to experienced adventurers. The Teleport Traps in the Spider’s Nest transported its victims to a monster room so we’d have to keep our eyes open.

“Teleport Traps have been known to transport more than one victim at a time so be careful out there.”

“Yeah, yeah. We know the drill.”

He clearly didn’t know the drill. Now I was worried. This guy was weak *and* reckless. One wrong move and he might drag the whole raid down with him. I was going to have to look out for Fran on my own.

“Alright, move out!”

It took us half a day to reach the dungeon from the guild. It was a bumpy trip, mostly because of Krad.

He didn’t like any of the other party leaders because he felt like he was the great general of this expedition. He kept objecting during every discussion we had. That was fair enough, but what surprised me was how he would fiercely talk back to Cruise.

How did Krad expect to get promoted to D-Rank by leaving such a bad impression on his examiner? Was he trying to show him that he wasn’t afraid to

voice his opinion? Was he trying to impress him by showing how assertive he was?

Then again, maybe he wasn't thinking at all.

Amanda, being just as domineering, didn't like his attitude one bit and they would get into an argument every couple of miles. All of them would end with her shutting him up with the Iron Claw. He really should've gotten a clue by now. Furion just watched, preferring to stay out of their squabbles. That said, he didn't stop them either. Cruise ended up having to mediate between the two. And Fran? Well, everyone had their strengths and weaknesses.

We ran into some fights along the way and I entertained myself by watching Amanda fight. It was quite the spectacle. Fran had never seen anyone use a whip in combat before so her eyes sparkled with curiosity. She was also a master at Wind Magic, although I doubted she was using her full power since she was up against trash mobs.

We were supposed to reach the dungeon by sundown, but it was already night by the time we got there. All the petty squabbles we had along the way slowed us down.

"All right. We were supposed to run through the first and second floors today and finish the rest of the dungeon tomorrow. However, since we're running late, we'll camp out tonight and go into the dungeon early in the morning."

"Why bother camping out? We should just go in now and get this quest over with. The monsters inside aren't any real threat, right?"

Whose fault do you think this is?!

Cruise frowned before answering Krad.

"The monsters inside are weak, true. But we run the risk of fighting while exhausted. We're camping out."

"I agree."

"Me too."

"Sounds good."

"Hah! Wimps!"

We stayed quiet during the exchange. Krad should understand how dangerous running a dungeon after half a day of walking was. He probably felt the need to tell Cruise off to satisfy himself.

I hated this type of person, to be honest. He reminded me of the guy who would hold up discussions in class by overriding the agenda with his own faulty logic. He just wanted to stand out and be noticed. Everyone in class would be thinking, 'Can you just shut up? We need to decide on something so we can go home already,' but he would always argue against the popular vote. Krad's party members didn't help since all they did was agree with him. He was out of control.

"Hey, Fran! Do you wanna sleep in my tent tonight? We'll let the guys watch over camp."

"I'll pass."

"Aww, come on."

"We'll take turns to watch over camp. Fran, you'll be first on guard. My party will go next followed by Krad, and finally Furion."

Cruise assigned Krad to the late night watch. He got a little payback for all the lip he'd been giving.

"What about Ms. A-Rank? Is she not doing watch?"

"Lady Amanda is only an observer. Besides, asking her to do the heavy lifting for you lot would defeat the purpose of this examination. She can run this dungeon in under an hour. If she were to do that, you would all fail the test."

An A-Rank was so strong that they could finish most quests in no time flat. Amanda was almost a nuisance on this quest. It was best to think of her as insurance in case of emergencies.

"Tch, fine."

The watch went on as Cruise planned. Krad complained the entire time but Amanda shut him up when he got too loud.

"I hope you all remembered to bring food and camping gear."

Of course. We bought high-quality bedding at Randell's the other day which

used a bird monster's feathers. It made for amazing insulation and heat retention. We also bought a sleeping bag, a blanket, and a pillow. It totalled up to 7,000G.

Food was no problem with our Pocket Dimension storage. We wouldn't be able to eat until after our watch.

"Hey, is that kid really going to be okay by herself?"

"Piece of cake."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

He was really getting on my nerves but he had a point. It was hard to trust a tiny girl like Fran to be on guard for the night.

"She's a D-Rank. That means she's stronger than you. If she says she can keep watch for the night, then she can keep watch."

"Yeah… that's the thing! How is this twerp a D-Rank? It doesn't make sense! Did you sell your body to that lolicon Guildmaster? Fess up!"

So this was the guy who started us on this evaluation quest. He had never seen Fran fight before. It was hard to measure how powerful an adventurer was at this rank. Krad suspected foul play contributed to Fran's meteoric rise in the guild; she was exceptional, after all.

That didn't mean I was going to let him off for slander.

Fran, what should we do?

Nothing? It's just a bit of noise.

Krad had used his Intimidation skill again, and it failed to affect Fran, again. She answered him, her expression still uninterested.

"I'm stronger than you."

"You? Stronger than me?! Don't make me laugh! There's no way a kid like you is strong enough to make it to D-Rank!"

"But I am."

"Hahaha! All right, let's see what you're made of. Show me this power of yours!"

Krad raised his spear to challenge her to a duel.

Fran got up and prepared herself. I couldn't know for sure until we actually fought, but she seemed ready for an all-out brawl. The sooner we got this over with, the better. This dumbass shouldn't take too long to subdue.

You can fight him, Fran, but don't overdo it.

I know. I'll just rough him up a little.

The rest kept quiet. Furion's crew didn't want to get involved with infighting but I fully expected Amanda to step in and stop the foolishness before it started. Instead, she only smiled and watched. She understood the difference between Krad and Fran's strength levels. Cruise didn't stop us, either. Was he exasperated by the events of the day?

"Oh, are we getting a show?"

I guess not. Cruise's crew looked on with great interest. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen them during the goblin raid. They were probably part of the expedition crew and didn't get to participate. This would be their first time seeing Fran in action, too. Cruise's teammates set up a perimeter and stood guard in Fran's stead.

Fran, you should make an arena before you start fighting.

If anyone interfered during the match, Krad would start complaining again.

All right.

Fran started casting two spells.

"Wind Zone."

"Earth Zone."

Wind Zone created a dome of wind which its caster could use to detect any objects which passed through it. Earth Zone created a dome of earth magic below a given area. Unlike Wind Zone, it couldn't detect anything above ground. Between the two zones we had both land and air covered.

"M-magic…?"

"She used two elements."

“Seriously?”

Krad’s crew spoke nervously among themselves. They were grinning at first but now their faces grew pale. And that was just from watching Fran set up barrier spells.

“Y-you’re a Mage?!”

“What? No.”

“B-but you can use magic…”

“You don’t have to be a mage to use magic.”

“O-oh…”

The barrier spells were enough to scare him. The spells were Level 4, after all. Seeing Fran cast them without a sweat would scare any E-Rank adventurer.

“Let’s go.”

“A-all right. Let’s do this!”

Krad looked determined to win using his spear even if he couldn’t use magic. Back on Earth, spears had an advantage over swords. But that might not hold true in this world of magic and weapon arts.

Still, we weren’t about to lose in a one on one match.

“… Ready when you are.”

“Raaah!”

Krad wasted no time and charged right into Fran. He must have felt a little bit of Fran’s power from the two spells she cast and decided to hit first and think later. Fran stood her ground. It surprised the rest of the camp who were spectating as they had dinner. Furion and Krad’s crew gasped in horror as they expected Krad’s spear would run right through Fran.

They would be sorely disappointed.

“That’s not going to work.”

With a short swing of myself, Fran deflected the spearhead. It sent Krad tumbling since he had put the entire weight of his body into his thrust. As he

tripped, Fran kicked him right in the ribs.

“Gah!”

The kick sent Krad rolling across the ground.

“Dammit!”

“Had enough?”

“Hell no! You got lucky just now, but you’re not going to catch me with the same trick twice!”

Wow! I didn’t expect to hear something so clichéd today! As much as he annoyed me I had to thank him for that.

“In that case.”

“Huh… Gah!”

Fran jumped to Krad’s side in the blink of an eye and smacked him with the flat of my blade.

“I’m not done!”

That blow should’ve been enough to tell him how much stronger Fran was, but Krad got back up. His tenacity was impressive.

“Hm.”

“Raaah!”

Desperate, he unleashed a flurry of thrusts with his spears. However, Fran dodged each and every stab. How long could he keep this up?

“Why?! How?!”

“You’re not going to hit me like that.”

“This is ridiculous!”

He kept up his flurry of stabs for three minutes before he started gasping for breath. He leaned against his spear for support, shocked that none of his blows connected.

“Dammit… Dammit!”

“Time to end this.”

“Wha-? Argh!”

She swung me at Krad’s face, knocking him out cold.

“Boss!”

His friends surrounded him.

That should take care of any future disputes.

“Hm. What a letdown.”

I know how you feel.

Fran never had any sparring partners who could go toe-to-toe with her. At least Krad had chutzpah to spare.

“You’re so strong, Fran!”

“Hm.”

Amanda came up and hugged her. My steel body couldn’t feel her soft flesh. Curses.

There was an odd look about the A-Rank, though. Her lips were curled into a friendly smile, but her eyes weren’t smiling. She looked like a predator who had just spotted its prey.

“Do you want to spar with me?”

“Right now?”

“Of course. I’m a solo A-Rank, remember? I don’t really have any training partners. But you’ll do just fine, Fran!”

So Amanda was a loner, too. Sparring with an A-Rank would be a great learning experience for Fran, but I couldn’t help worrying…

Fran—

I was going to ask but the excited look on Fran’s face told me all I needed to know.

It’s a perfect chance to try out Blade Mastery.

…Right.

There was no stopping Fran once she entered battle mode. Fran gave Amanda a challenging smile which was received with a predatory grin.

“Heehee.”

“Hm.”

There was no need for further words for these battle maniacs. They walked several paces from each other to get into position. The tension in the air was palpable.

“Ready?”

Amanda made the first move. She pulled out her whip with her right hand and lashed it at Fran.

“Mmph.”

That was close! I had expected Amanda to wait for Fran to make the first move. Instead, she immediately targeted Fran’s eyes with her first strike. Fran barely dodged it.

“Good reflexes. How about this?”

The path of a whip was too irregular to parry with a sword. It put Fran on the defensive and she had no choice but to dodge every strike. Amanda’s whip strikes got faster with every successful dodge, however. Seeing Fran keep up with her assault must’ve excited her.

If Amanda landed a hit it would do heavy damage.

“Haaa!”

With a crack of her whip she blew away the ground Fran was just standing on.

What the hell was that?!

The impact left a small crater in the earth. It was as if a warhammer had smashed into it. Amanda was likely holding back so she wouldn’t outright kill her but the damage was great enough to send shivers down my spine.

“Ahahaha! You’re doing great, Fran!”

Amanda had roped Fran into her pace. Her whip kept Fran at bay with no way of moving in. She would unleash one great blow after another at blinding speeds. As soon as Fran had dodged a strike, Amanda was already letting loose another. This was the power of an A-Rank adventurer. I had to admit I underestimated her at first.

Who knew a whip could be so dangerous?

All Amanda had to do was land one blow on Fran and the fight would be over. Worse, there was no way of telling where her attacks would come from. Her methods morphed freely without notice. Sometimes it was a straightforward lash. At other times, the crack of her whip was strong enough to break boulders. She could also lash her whip without a sound.

The real mystery wasn't the workings of Amanda's whips but rather how Fran was still managing to keep up with it. Amanda must've been holding back since this was a sparring match. She wanted to see how long Fran could last.

Are you alright?

You don't need to get involved, Teacher.

I know.

I'll definitely get a hit in!

Good luck.

As far as goals went, I thought that was impossible. Amanda hadn't moved from her original position since the start of the match.

Amanda was a master at the whip despite being a Storm Warrior. She could use a higher form of Wind Magic called Storm Magic, yet she hadn't felt the need to cast a single spell.

The Mage skill allowed me to see any enchantments she might have cast on herself before the fight but she came up clean. It underscored how much of a skilled fighter she was if she could control the situation with just Whip Mastery.

But Fran wasn't to be scoffed at, either. She was getting used to the whip's movements and was now closing in on Amanda. Once she was close enough, she swung her sword.

“Now!”

“You missed!”

“Part of the plan.”

“Hah! Such cheek.”

Fran came close to landing a blow on her. After several more attempts, she had forced Amanda to start using her feet. She leapt back to draw her whip to her side and evade Fran’s attack.

“I’m sorry for holding back on you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Time to get a little serious…!”

“Oof.”

“Well, then. It’s been a long time since anyone dodged that on their first try.”

Amanda’s whip came snaking toward Fran and jumped at her. It looked like it had a mind of its own. The whip had been infused with mana, now. This must be one of Amanda’s Whip Arts. The whip acted on its own without her having to move her wrist.

The exchange continued. The enchanted whip was so powerful that the wind pressure was enough to cut. Soon Fran’s body was covered in lashes. Blood flowed freely from her wounds.

Still, I wasn’t too worried. We had asked around what kind of person Amanda was on the day we met her and figured out she was a genuinely good person. She had been managing an orphanage in Alessa for the better part of thirty years. The orphanage was now home to close to five hundred children, and she got a lot of respect for that.

There used to be a lot of adventurers who would try to run this dungeon twenty years ago. When they died, they left behind orphans who in turn disturbed the public order of Alessa. Amanda started helping those children when she was a measly twenty-year-old D-Rank adventurer.

She built the orphanage with money out of her own pocket. She started

housing kids off the street and cared for and educated them. The orphanage now got a lot of help from the townspeople now but it was tough when it just started. The people we asked had fond smiles as they remembered Amanda and her humble beginnings.

That was how Amanda got her Protector of Children title. Now she had to keep saving and caring for little children if she wanted to keep that title. I had no doubt in my mind that Amanda was a good person and was also a friend to Fran because of this.

They might rough each other up during this fight but they were both consenting. Besides, there was no ill will behind it.

“Ha!”

“Kuh…”

Although I was beginning to sweat a little bit now that it had gotten more intense.

Fran had been forced on the defensive and was losing a lot of blood. Even if they could heal her, full recovery was still going to take a couple days.

I wondered if I should stop Fran, but decided to just keep watch. It looked like Fran had something up her sleeve.

“Now!”

Fran made her move. She timed her steps to Amanda’s whip strike and moved in instead of dodging. It looked desperate but it was a calculated trade on Fran’s part.

“Guh!”

Amanda hardened her whip until it became spear-like. She stabbed Fran in the side and blood came gushing out. Fran grit her teeth. She had used Wind Magic on herself to push herself forward and she continued her advance.

“Very smart!”

“Ha…!”

Fran put her entire weight on her sword and charged. Amanda didn’t have

enough time to draw her whip back to her side. Still, we were up against an A-Rank. She must have something else planned.

“Wind Shield!”

With a high-pitched whistle, Amanda summoned a gust of wind which blew Fran away. Fran was getting close to landing a blow if Amanda was using Wind Magic now. Still, close wasn’t good enough for Fran.

Fran answered the wind spell with a Flare Blast.

“Flare Blast!”

She could cast the spell while fighting thanks to Double Mind, and had been waiting for the perfect chance to fire it. Amanda had just cast a defensive spell. No matter how good she was, she couldn’t have cast another spell in such an instant.

Nice shot!

The direct hit of the Flare Blast caused a huge explosion. The blast blew up dust and smoke and scorched the earth around it. The flame was even hot enough to melt stone.

She wasn’t dead, right? She might be an A-Rank but that explosion might have been a bit too much…

But I had nothing to worry about. Amanda had come out of the explosion unscathed. Which I found preposterous. How did she manage that? I knew she had Magic Resistance but I doubted that was enough to nullify the damage of such a spell.

“That was close.”

“Hm… Shame.”

Fran fell to the ground while looking disappointed. She had lost too much blood and was now at the limits of physical exhaustion.

Too bad… You did well, though.

She got so far with such a monster, and I didn’t even help.

“Fran, I’m so sorry!”

Amanda rushed to Fran's aid and began dousing her with a Life Potion. It was the good stuff, too. The hole that was in her side closed in a matter of seconds. No wonder Amanda could go all out.

"I wanted to let you land a hit on me as a reward, but I can't help Beloved of the Spirits triggering automatically."

So that's what that was. The skill worked by nullifying the damage of a massively destructive attack. It was a handy skill to have, but it had a 24-hour cooldown. Fran might say it didn't count, but she managed to trigger Amanda's safety skill so I'd say that was good enough.

Get some sleep, Fran. You've earned it. As for the night watch… we could find someone else to do it. Probably.

An hour had gone by since Fran's match with Amanda.

Fran awoke to Amanda sitting across from her. She had been very apologetic about going overboard during the spar and asked Fran if there was anything she'd like to know to make it up to her.

I didn't think she had anything to be sorry for. Fran learned a lot from the match, and Amanda had taken Fran's place in guarding camp. She had even spent a powerful Life Potion on Fran to heal her. We'd be owing her instead if she was willing to give us free classes on top of all that.

"Let's start Battle Arts."

"Please do."

We asked her to teach us the mechanics of Skills and Magic. We'd been using them and had been on the receiving end of them, too, but we could learn a lot from an A-Rank.

"Just to be clear, I'm not good with theory so I can't teach you everything."

"Good enough."

We didn't know how any of this stuff worked, after all.

"The Mastery skills like Sword Mastery and Whip Mastery increase your

proficiency with a given weapon.”

These skills gave a numerical value to your technical mastery of a weapon. Got it.

“Battle Arts, like your Sword Arts and my Whip Arts, are skills you need to expend mana to activate.”

“I know that much.”

Amanda continued her lecture. First, you needed Sword Mastery to unlock Sword Arts, and Bow Mastery to unlock Bow Arts. A Battle Arts skill level could not exceed the skill level of its corresponding Mastery skill. So if you only had Sword Mastery 5, your Sword Arts would cap at 5, as well.

“As for how you learn new Battle Arts…”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know the exact details of it.”

“What?”

“I know how to unlock them, but I can’t tell you the underlying logic behind it. There are researchers who might be able to tell you that, however.”

“I don’t care about theory.”

“And that’s why you’re an adventurer. Thing is, you can only learn new arts once you have Mana Manipulation or Spirit Manipulation. How you unlock either of those, I have no idea. I’m a Half Elf, remember? I’ve had them both for as long as I can remember. We’ll move on since you don’t seem to have any trouble with them, anyway.”

“Go for it.”

Mana Manipulation allowed its user to project magic outside of their body while Spirit Manipulation allowed for the use of mana within a user’s body. You only needed one of them to use Battle Arts since they both technically manipulated mana. You could even use one instead of the other once you were used to it, although it wouldn’t be as potent.

“You learn a new Battle Art by letting mana flow through your body or

weapon. At some point, you'll get a flash of inspiration for a new Battle Art. When that happens, just let loose. You can call on it again and again once you have it learned. Don't you remember the first time that happened to you, Fran? You can use Battle Arts, after all."

"…?"

"Well, you probably learned them while you were too little to remember. You're a genius for being able to use Battle Arts at your age."

That was close. It was a good thing Fran was still a child. We now knew where Battle Arts came from. We would be able to add more Sword Arts to our repertoire from now on. We could use Sword Arts but there was a huge difference between using them and being good at them. We were still at the former stage. We would get more Sword Arts as we got better with our Sword Mastery.

"You increase the level of a Battle Art by using it repeatedly. You'll learn new Battle Arts as it levels up."

The hardest part was getting it up to Level 1.

"I'll go into Magic now."

"Okay."

"There are four elements: Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water. Its advanced forms are: Land, Storm, Flame, and Ocean."

We could use the four basic elements, plus the upgraded Fire Magic that was Flame Magic.

"There are also magicks which are called Compound Elements. There are six of them: Thunder, Frost, Wood, Steel, Sand, and Life."

"Compound what?"

I had never heard of these before.

"They could be unlocked by leveling up two of the basic elements together. For example, Wood Magic is made up of Water and Earth."

"Could? So it's not a guarantee?"

“Let me explain.”

The traditional way of learning magic was having an old master teach you. Alternatively, you could use various items and tools to unlock it. The non-traditional methods Amanda described were… extreme, to say the least. I couldn’t believe it myself, at first.

In the case of Water Magic, the prospective would douse himself in water every day, drink water, submerge himself in water, and even imagine himself as water. Once he started dreaming about water, he had a chance of learning Water Magic.

To learn Wind Magic, you had to bathe yourself in wind and run around during a hurricane while naked. Obtaining Earth Magic involved burying oneself with dirt and chewing on rocks. I guess that was one way of becoming one with the earth. Few mages were determined enough to obtain this second element. However, I caught a faint gleam of nostalgia in Amanda’s eyes. I wondered how she got her Wind Magic…

Unlike Sword Arts, however, there was no guarantee of acquisition. There was still the arbitrary wall of talent to think about. Everyone could get better at swinging a sword with practice, but you had to have the gift of magic to use spells.

“Talent?”

“You could call it aptitude for a certain element. If you didn’t have the talent for Fire Magic, you would never be able to use it no matter how hard you tried.”

Meaning all that hard work would be for nothing. Without talent, you wouldn’t be able to use Fire Magic if you set yourself on fire. That sounded awful.

“There is no way of telling whether you’re talented at something. However, everyone has at least one thing they’re naturally talented at. You just have to keep trying until you find the one that works.”

“Hard work still works.”

“Exactly. I tried unlocking Fire Magic once but it didn’t seem like I had the talent for it. I do have an inclination for Wind Magic though, so I got that one in

a week.”

“I see.”

“There are geniuses who come out of the womb ready to shoot fireballs, too. You might be one of them, Fran.”

“What?”

“I guess you don’t remember that, either. Anyway, back to our discussion of Compound Elements. There are two problems which lay at the core of unlocking them. Firstly, you need to have aptitude for not just one, but two elements.”

Having the proclivity to use two elements was a tall enough hurdle by itself.

“Correct. You also need to have the talent for using Compound Elements.”

In that case, Compound Element users were rare. I had only seen Wood Magic on the Guildmaster and Furion, and they were both Wood Elves so they were probably born with it. Amanda went on to tell us that some races were born with magic. The Wood Elves had Wood Magic and Salamanders had Steel Magic, for example.

“That’s why you don’t see people using Compound Elements all the time.”

I wondered what Fran had for talent. She had no problems using the spells that I had, and that included all four elements plus Dark and Healing. Talent might not be a factor when using spells which were under Skill Sharing. Fran was good, but I doubted she had the miraculous talent of being able to use all four elements naturally.

“Next I’ll talk about the other elements.”

“Like Dark and Healing.”

“That’s right. I’ll start with Light and Dark.”

Light and Dark were not part of the four primary elements. You could learn them the same way as the main four, but not many people had the gift for them. The main four were the most common, followed by Compound Elements, and Light and Dark were the rarest. We were lucky to get them off the Daemon when we did.

“There are also the derivative elements of Light and Dark. Cleansing and Illusion fall under Light Magic. Poison and Necromancy are a part of Dark.”

The occurrence of Derivative Elements were consistent enough that researchers thought of them as the lower forms of Light Magic and Dark Magic. Having talent for Derivative Elements made it more likely to have talent for its parent element. Meaning, if someone was good at Poison Magic, they might be able to get Dark Magic.

The Derivative Elements had advanced forms, too. Purification for Cleansing Magic, and Venom for Poison Magic. This magic hole ran deep.

“And then there’s Unique Magic.”

Unique Magic had various forms, such as Healing, Support, Summon, Contract, Dimensional, Moonlight, Spirit, and Blacksmith, to name a few. Healing and Support magic were common enough, but Moonlight was even rarer than Light and Dark.

“Those are the ones I know but I’m sure there’s a lot more variations out there in the world. Some magicks are unique to particular monsters.”

“Rumor has it that there are magicks only dragons and fiends can use. Compared to us humanoids, nearly all monsters can use magic.”

“Why?”

“They need to use magic to survive in the wild. Even if a monster was bigger than a castle, they’d get annihilated in an instant if they didn’t strengthen their bodies with magic. Magic is as necessary to them as breathing is to us. They can use it even without Mana Manipulation. It might have something to do with the crystals they have. They would be stronger with Mana Manipulation, of course.”

“I see.”

“It’s the same with Battle Arts. Spirit and Mana Manipulation might differ in their manifestations but they both have to do with controlling mana. Crystals allow monsters to use Battle Arts even without Spirit Manipulation.”

Vibrofang must work on the same basis.

“That’s why a lot of monsters can use Compound Elements and Light and Dark

magic. They're more talented than us in that way."

It might be distressing to learn that there were gigantic monsters out there but it was good news for us since they were more likely to have the rare elements. I might be able to get a boatload of crystals off them to boot.

There was something that had been on my mind for a while, though.

"Is Dark Magic only used by bad people?"

We got it off a Daemon, and there was nothing good about Poison and Necromancy. I would never let my guard down around a Necromancer if we were meeting for the first time. They just had this evil aura about them.

"Not at all. It might seem that way since they're mostly used by monsters. But an adventurer with Necromancy would be a powerful ally to have in a raid. Think of how useful Necromancy is in a dungeon."

Good. We wouldn't have to worry about using Dark Magic or the spell we got when we bumped it up to Dark Magic Up. I asked her about the Compound Element pairings to wrap things up.

Water + Earth = Wood.

Water + Wind = Frost.

Water + Fire = Life.

Wind + Fire = Thunder.

Wind + Earth = Sand.

Earth + Fire = Steel.

She taught us how each worked, too.

Wood Magic: As its name implied, it allowed its user to manipulate plants. It could make them grow as well as wilt. It also came with a skill that allowed its user to navigate a forest.

Frost Magic: Ability to control cold air. Came with a variety of ice and snow attacks, along with the ability to steal the heat from a target to chill it. It also allowed you to survive freezing terrain.

Life: Could be used for healing but its intricacies went deeper than that. It could manipulate life itself. Used in conjunction with Alchemy to conduct homunculus research.

Thunder: Allowed its user to control lightning and magnetic forces. Had the ability to summon lightning strikes and apply a speed buff to its user.

Sand: Allowed the user to control sand. It could also desiccate, dehydrate, and erode, among other things. Mostly used in food preservation.

Steel: Allowed the user to control metal, ores, lava, etc. Worked under the ground. Mostly used by blacksmiths.

As for the Unique Elements:

Timespace: Control over time and space. Teleportation and time manipulation have been confirmed by researchers.

Moonlight: Control over reflections and the mind. Mostly associated with vampires and werewolves.

Support: Applies various buffs and barriers. There are similar skills in the other elements but the Support Element is the best in this case.

There had been no sightings of a Compound Element formed between Light and Dark and Unique magicks.

“Or maybe I just haven’t heard about it,” Amanda finished.

“I want a Compound Element magic.”

“You used Earth and Wind earlier. You’re good at Fire too, right? You can go for either Lightning, Sand, or Metal.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Should we absorb the Compound Element from a crystal or should we unlock it by ourselves? We already had Flame Magic when our Fire Magic hit 10, so we could unlock a Compound Element by leveling another element.

Our strongest element after Fire would be… Wind.

Leveling skills up through crystal was faster and more effective. The Army Beetles had Wind Magic 3 on each crystal. Wind Magic was easier to level up compared to Sword Mastery since the Goblins only had Sword Mastery 1 on them.

Should I put more points into it?

I had 47 EP left.

What do you think?

I want a Compound Element.

No need for further argument. I used 6 EP to level up Wind Magic to unlock Lightning Magic. We got the titles Storm Elementalist and Wind Mage from it, too.

I can't wait to use it.

Not now. Amanda just taught us about Compound Elements. She'd get suspicious if we suddenly started using one.

Fine…

We'll experiment once we're back in Alessa, okay?

"Hm."

Chapter 3:
A Black Wolf Named Jet

Dawn had broken, and the expedition team had rushed through the dungeon floors to make up for lost time. We had just finished exploring the fourth floor.

“All right, time to gun through level five.”

We hadn’t run into any problems so far. Even Krad wasn’t giving us any lip. His loss the other day had made him taciturn, and if that wasn’t enough, he happened to wake up during Amanda and Fran’s mock battle (served him right).

Their battle had been fierce and downright horrifying at times. Seeing Amanda stab right through Fran still sent shivers up my spine, not that I had one. I had yet to snap out of using bodily metaphors to describe a situation. They felt weird to use in my current state, but alas, old habits die hard. Still, the experience of fighting an A-Rank had been a good one for Fran. As much as it pained her to lose, she bore no grudges towards Amanda. In fact, it made her like the Half Elf all the more.

Amanda herself was very satisfied with the proceedings of the night before. If an ordinary adventurer had been on the receiving of her whip’s onslaught, one lash would’ve brought them to a tragic end. Thanks to Fran’s evasive capabilities, Amanda had to go all out or risk getting cut herself.

Amanda adored Fran for being equal parts cute and strong. She had been doting on her all morning, but then again she had been friendly ever since our first encounter at the guild some days ago. It wouldn’t have been awkward if she had blurted out, “I actually knew your parents,” because she was so kind. That goes to show you how much she liked kids.

Cruise and Furion had looked on in awe at Fran and Amanda’s earth-shattering fight. There were no obvious changes in their behavior, but there was a note of awe in their voices when they talked to Fran now. She had earned their respect. Cruise had sparred with Amanda afterwards, but the match was

nowhere near as intense.

Oddly enough, Cruise took a liking to Fran, as well. I guess he didn't feel like he lost to a D-Rank adventurer. He respected her for being much stronger than him, and was broad-minded enough to admit that fact. He's a good man, Cruise. Not that I'd give Fran over to him.

We went from the first to the fourth floors unhampered. There were no strong enemies, and no traps that we could find. We weren't able to gain any new skills but that was okay. We had never fought in a team before and the extra experience didn't hurt.

"A word of caution before we go deeper. We're going to start running into Trap Spiders, so stay sharp."

"Hm."

"They're a pain if they manage to swarm you. Be on the lookout."

The Trap Spiders could produce strong silk thread. They might be weak, but you could suffer a humiliating defeat if they managed to wrap you up in their webbing.

"There'll be other traps, too. The Teleportation Trap is going to be the most dangerous one here. Thieves, focus on sniffing out traps over killing monsters."

There were also poison gas traps and trapdoors, both of which could kill you if you weren't careful. And to top it off, there were strange traps that unequipped your armor, or confused your sense of direction.

The Thief-class adventurers took point as we descended into the fifth level. In the event of a fight, the Fighter classes would move forward to swap positions with them. The Mage-class party members would hang back and provide covering fire and support.

We needed the materials the spiders left behind, so we were warned not to use fire magic. Trap Spider Silk was strong and necessary in the making of a myriad of equipment. However, singeing them with fire before processing them would lower the quality of the material. Fran was going to have to stick to swinging her sword.

Our expedition was doing all right. We hadn't run into any problems during our battles or with traps. At this rate, we would clear level five without a hitch. We brought a lot of firepower so that was only natural.

We ran into our first obstacle once we descended into the sixth floor.

"Damn it, these spiders aren't going down!"

"My Spirit Magic isn't working on them, either?! How?!"

The Trap Spiders had suddenly gotten stronger. They were bigger and had more health points than the ones we'd been fighting on the previous floors. Did they get stronger the deeper we went into the dungeon?

I used Identify on one of them. After seeing their stats and titles, my suspicions were confirmed.

Fran, these aren't Trap Spiders, they're Trick *Spiders! They've evolved!*

Trick Spiders looked like oversized Trap Spiders, but their capabilities were on a different level. Having evolved, they were now an E-Rank monster. Their stats were a tier above regular Trap Spiders, but what made them especially dangerous were their Confusion and Venom Fangs. Many an adventurer was fooled into attacking them, thinking they were ordinary Trap Spiders.

We weren't supposed to run into Trick Spiders yet, though, and yet here they were in full force. Wasn't this a bad sign?

"Gennel, what's wrong?!"

"I don't know… My antidote's not working…"

There was our first victim. A Trap Spider's poison was so weak that popping a fifth-rate antidote would've been enough to cleanse it. You needed a third-rate antidote for a Trick Spider's venom.

This was how the Trick Spider killed its prey. An adventurer, having been bit by something that looked like a Trap Spider, would consume his cheapest antidote. He'd continue fighting with the venom still in his system until he eventually succumbed to it.

Fran, that guy's in trouble.

“On it.”

Fran knelt beside the man and cast the Healing spell, Antidote.

“Y-you saved me!”

“Thank you. But why didn’t the antidote potion work?”

“That’s a Trick Spider. Its venom is stronger.”

“Trick Spiders?! So they’ve evolved?”

This dungeon wasn’t supposed to spawn any Trick Spiders; Trap Spiders were the strongest things here. However, there had been cases where the monster population in dungeons would evolve on its own. Usually, it was an accident of the dungeon’s spawn system. A dungeon produced monsters out of nothing by using free mana in the atmosphere. Individual variations between specimens were inevitable. Sometimes, a dungeon would spit out a Rare or Unique monster that was head and shoulders above the rest.

There was no clear explanation for it. Some say it was a trial from the Chaos God himself.

This apex predator ate all weaker monsters around it. Eventually, it would have eaten enough of its own kind to evolve. It would move to greener pastures, and gave a chance for the next strongest monster to become an apex predator, and to subsequently evolve.

Most of the time, the apexes’ battles for dominance would end in mutual destruction. However, there have been awful cases where they would coexist, thereby disrupting the dungeon’s ecosystem.

Alternatively, monsters could evolve by ingesting something with high EXP, or other external factors. These latter cases were rare, however, since most conquered dungeons were monitored by guilds and the nations the dungeons were in.

Cruise understood that this was not the time to be fussing about examination matters and promptly asked Amanda for assistance.

“Damn it, we should’ve noticed sooner! Lady Amanda!”

“Got it. Let’s go, Fran.”

“Yeah.”

And so the stomping began. Amanda unleashed her whip to keep the spiders at bay while Fran moved in to slice their heads open. The Trick Spiders, which had been giving the E-Ranks a hard time, began to dissipate. Soon, all that was left of the swarm were a pile of corpses. There were around twenty of them in total.

“Well, that was boring, wasn’t it, Fran? I wish we could fight something stronger.”

“No, I had fun.”

“Aww, really? Then I had fun, too.”

The other adventurers lay around exhausted despite Amanda’s cheerful exchange. Krad and his crew seemed to be at their limits.

“Fall back to the fifth floor! They wouldn’t be able to chase us there!”

Dungeon monsters were only able to move floors if a Dungeon Master ordered them to. Since this was a conquered dungeon, the Trick Spiders wouldn’t be able to go after us if we went back to the fifth floor.

“They’re already breeding, so watch out.”

“Got it!”

“We’ll cover the rear. Fran, you’re with us.”

“Sure.”

“E-Ranks, you’re on point!”

Krad and his crew followed Cruise’s orders without talking back for once. He didn’t have time to bicker.

“R-right. Aargh!”

“Calm down! It’s just a scratch.”

“They’re right behind us!”

“It’s only one of them! Stop panicking!”

“They’re coming in from the front!”

Dragon Roar, Krad's party, started freaking out. They weren't used to being surrounded from all sides. The chaos didn't make things any easier on them, either.

"Wait."

"S-shut up!"

Krad was barely able to maintain his composure during the brawl, but two of his teammates, the ones who had gotten attacked from behind, were now in a frenzy. They charged blindly into the swarm of spiders in front of them.

"Stop, there might be traps there!"

They stepped into a part of the floor that the thieves hadn't scouted yet, and surely enough, fell into a trap. It activated with a low whine.

"And it's a Teleport Trap, too…?"

"Crap!"

"Run for i—"

Fran disappeared. I fell to the ground, no longer in her hands.

What? Fran?

"Fran!"

Fran was gone. The trap Krad's party activated had taken her with them. Their weapons fell to the ground, too. It wasn't just their spears, either. Even their daggers and throwing knives had been left behind. The Cobra Dagger Fran had equipped as a sidearm lay next to me.

"A Strip Weapon trap…?"

"It even stripped their sidearms!"

We were warned that Teleport Traps could drag the people next to you when activated, but they could unequip your weapons, too? That was not part of the mission brief!

Please be okay… She should be fine… Right? Right. Just calm down!

Where was she…? Damn it! I should've leveled up my scouting skills if I knew

this would happen!

“Impossible! What’s a Compound Trap doing in a dungeon like this?!”

“These are traps you see in high-rank dungeons!”

Cruise’s crew were just as shocked as I was. The high-level trap hit them like a bolt out of the blue.

“… I think I know where they came from.”

“Ma’am?”

“Trap Spiders and Trick Spiders have the Create Trap skill. The same goes for their evolved form, the Trickster Spiders, of course.”

Trap creation? These spiders were more dangerous than I thought! And we might have Trickster Spiders on our hands, too?

“B-but how can such a powerful monster be in a dungeon like this?”

“We got overrun by Trick Spiders, didn’t we? A Trickster Spider or two wouldn’t be out of the question.”

“Damn it! Eizell, the map!”

Cruise’s Thief began looking up possible locations where the Teleport Trap might have sent our comrades.

“Got it. They should be in a small room just ahead of here. I hope.”

Amanda grabbed Fran’s Cobra Dagger and me and sprinted; she ran faster than I could Telekinesis myself. Spiders began swarming her and I grew worried for her. Her Beloved of the Spirits skill was still on cooldown. Amanda was strong, but surely even she was no match for this horde of spiders.

“Move it.”

With a flick of her right hand, the spiders around her burst into gore. All it took was one strike, and I couldn’t even see it. How strong was she? If she had gone all out during her sparring match with Fran, she would’ve killed her in an instant.

“Fran!”

Krad followed desperately behind us. He made it to the small room a few seconds after Amanda did.

“Victor! Bart!”

But the room was empty.

“I knew it. They changed the teleport locations…”

“Shit, what do we do?!”

Cruise caught up to us. Understanding the situation, he immediately gave us our orders.

“We’ll split up to look for them. But we’ll end up killing ourselves if we spread ourselves too thin. We’ll make three search parties. Me, Eizell, and Dragon’s Roar. Rig, you’re with Eye of the Forest. Lady Amanda, I trust you can take care of yourself.”

“A-all right.”

“Let’s go!”

The adventurers left to look for their comrades. Amanda stayed, however, and rested me against a wall. She closed her eyes and seemed to be concentrating. She must’ve been using Wind Magic.

Will Telepathy work? No. She was too far away! If only I had teleportation or some skill that would guide me to her, or her to me.

Bring Fran back to me…? That might be possible. She was still under Contract even when she unequipped me. Maybe I could Summon her. I brought up my Summon list, desperately wishing that Fran’s name would be listed there.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t. However, the summon list had names I had never seen before.

Summon List:

Wolf; Grey Wolf; Brown Wolf; Red Wolf; Blue Wolf; Green Wolf; Yellow Wolf; Black Wolf; Ruby Wolf; Emerald Wolf; Thunder Wolf; Onyx Wolf.

What was this wolf party? I didn't remember ever forming a contract with any of them. However, a wolf might be able to track her down using its sense of smell. It might be able to find her, and that was good enough for me.

I looked through each wolf's stats and decided Onyx Wolf would be the best option. It had the strongest stats and had the skill Life Sense. All the wolves over Red had Echolocation and Enhanced Sense of Smell. The Onyx Wolf would have the best chance of finding Fran.

I didn't see any other options, so I decided to summon it.

Summon Onyx Wolf.

I focused to put all the mana I could into summoning it—it might have been useless, but it couldn't hurt. A gigantic magic circle appeared in mid-air, mana pouring out of it like crazy. Currents of mana flickered and danced before finally taking the shape of a wolf with black fur.

It was much bigger than I expected. I thought it would be the size of a large dog… But this thing was close to the size of a Holstein.

"Wh-what's an Onyx Wolf doing here?" Amanda gasped in surprise.

Crap, I completely forgot about her!

The wolf was overflowing with mana and barked intimidatingly. No matter how you looked at it, the great wolf looked like a threat that needed to be put down.

"Grrr…"

Please stop. Why do you keep barking? Why do you keep releasing your mana everywhere?

Down, boy! Stop barking!

"Grrr!"

It wasn't listening to me. Was I not getting through to it? I looked at it closer and it seemed to be in pain. What was going on?

Name: Onyx Wolf

Race: Direwolf

Status: Mana Frenzy

Level: 1

HP: 319; Magic: 213; Strength: 126; Agility: 221

Mana Frenzy… So that's why it couldn't stop its mana overflow! But what should I do?

Would you like to Name the Onyx Wolf?

Not now! Any name would do, right? Uhh—

Jet! That's your new name!

I named it Jet for its jet-black fur. It also had red streaks around its mane, which reminded me of jets of flame. Which, in turn, would turn you into jet-black charcoal if you got too close. It was a good name, considering I came up with it in two seconds.

Onyx Wolf has been named Jet. It will now evolve.

Evolve? Did I do that by naming it? What about Mana Frenzy? Could someone please tell me what is going on?

The Onyx Wolf began to change shape right before my eyes, as the system voice had said.



Jet has evolved into a Darkness Wolf

"Awoooo!"

It seemed lively now. Was its Mana Frenzy gone?

Name: Jet (Darkness Wolf)

Race: Direwolf

Level: 1

HP: 451; Magic: 670; Strength: 216; Agility: 310

Skills: Shadow Resistance 8; Shadow Magic 1; Heightened Senses 10; Stealth 7; Fang Arts 5; Fang Mastery 5; Shadow Lurk 10; Shadow Walk 5; Air Hike 8; Fear 4; Vigilance 6; Conceal Presence 6; Regeneration 5; Deadly Venom Magic 1; Flash Step 5; Hush 6; Necromancy 5; Life Sense 7; Mental Resistance 6; Poison Magic 10; Echolocation 7; Roar 8; Nightshade 10; Dark Magic 10; Nightvision; Toxic Fang; Health Regen; Mana Regen; Nullify Poison; Shapeshift; Mana Manipulation Unique Skill: Predator

Titles: Sword Clan; Great Wolf Clan

A high rank Direwolf with the ability to use Shadow Magic. Though its stats are lower than other monsters in its Threat Level, its magic and skillset are top class. Though its existence have been confirmed, live specimens are difficult to find because of its stealth-oriented skills. Threat Level C.

Crystal location: Heart

I thought the Onyx Wolf was big but the Darkness Wolf dwarfed it in comparison. The Onyx Wolf was as big as a cow, but the Darkness Wolf stood at a staggering three meters. Its golden eyes glared threateningly at anything foolish enough to challenge it. Its paws looked strong enough to knock a bear out with a swipe. Having evolved from the Onyx Wolf, its fur had an odd glimmer; it seemed to glitter like the midnight sky depending on where you

were standing. Its mane had undergone an odd transformation as well. Previously red, it was now an elegant white, giving it the appearance of a husky. As someone who liked dogs, it made Jet look friendly and approachable.

According to its description, it was a C-Rank threat with a myriad of stealth-oriented skills; it reminded me of an assassin. Its magic capabilities were impressive, too. It might not be as physically strong as the Tyrant Sabertooth I fought ages ago, but it more than made up for that difference in magic.

“And it evolved?! Into a Darkness Wolf…? I’ve never seen one before. Wait, is its magic connected to Fran’s sword?”

Amanda easily saw through my plot. Well, at least she didn’t see Jet as that much of a threat now. We needed to look for Fran!

Jet, can you hear me? Raise your right paw if you can.

“Woof.”

Jet raised its right front paw.

Now your left hind leg.

“Woof.”

Good, I’m getting through to it. It also felt like I was able to feel what Jet was feeling as well. Was it thanks to Telepathy?

Can you find Fran for me? She’s my User.

“Woof.”

Jet proceeded to sniff me to pick up Fran’s scent. It then started growling as it used its skill.

Well?

“Awooo!”

It howled, grabbed me with its mouth, and started running. Had it already spotted her? That was fast!

Am I too heavy for you?

“Urf!”

Jet's bark sounded muffled since it was holding me in its mouth. Its large muzzle was more than enough to accommodate me. It ran through the cave at the speed of darkness.

Faster, Jet!

"Bow wow!"

We might reach Fran sooner than I thought, but were we being too careless in our rush to get to her?

"Wait, there might be traps!"

Amanda cried out from behind us. Things would turn out worse if we set off any more Teleport Traps.

Jet, keep your eyes open for any traps!

"Woof?"

You don't need to?

Jet trotted along, paying no attention to my warnings. Its Air Hike allowed it to move in mid-air, thereby bypassing any traps that might have been in the way. Its eyes glowed as it used its Dark Magic to detect any traps along the way, hopping to and fro to avoid them all.

Jet stopped after three hundred meters.

What is it, Jet?

"Aroo?"

No, where's Fran?

Jet left me on the floor and sat. It panted.

Now is not the time for panting.

"Ruff, ruff!"

It put its front paws on a cave wall and scratched against it. Soon, it started digging.

Is she on the other side of this wall?

"Bark!"

“Is Fran behind that thing?” Amanda approached the wall with a look of surprise. I was more surprised to see that she had actually kept up with the Direwolf. Although given her higher Agility value, I guess that was to be expected. “I got it. Tornado Lance!”

Amanda blew a hole through the wall with her Wind Magic.

A hidden passageway!

“This is why I hate this dungeon. No wonder I couldn’t find her with my wind spells earlier.”

I wondered if the other two were in there with her. I looked for her presence, but I could sense nothing but spiders waiting for us further down. Was she really in there? Uncertainty began to creep over me.

Jet, go!

“Woof!”

Jet used Air Hike to glide through the air.

There!

There she was! I could see Fran now! She was further down the passageway, fortunately, still moving. But there was one problem— *The spiders!*

Fran was surrounded by a swarm of smaller spiders. As weak as each individual spiderling was, an entire army of them posed a threat.

Faster, Jet!

“Woof!”

Over here, Fran!

She couldn’t hear me. I was still too far to use Telepathy. But why wasn’t she getting out of the way? Fran would be able to hop over them with how fast she was. It was then that I noticed the two figures lying unconscious behind her. They were members of Krad’s party that had set off the Teleport Trap to begin with. She was covering for them.

Fire Javelin!

These damn spiders were more troublesome than they looked. I shot off

some spells, but the nests they had set up blocked them off. My Fire Javelin couldn't travel far enough to kill the spiders that were surrounding Fran.

She doesn't have any skills right now!

She was no longer under the effect of Skill Sharing once she unequipped me. Trying to fight in that state was suicidal. The spiders leapt at Fran all at once to overwhelm her. They seemed impossible to dodge but Fran was somehow putting up a fight. She punched and kicked the little bastards like she was dancing. The spiderlings' assault was unrelenting, however. They crawled up to the walls around her to prey on the two unconscious adventurers. Try as she might to punch the spiderlings out of existence, she couldn't possibly have taken care of all of them. The spiderlings on the wall jumped onto the unconscious adventurers.

Fran, don't be reckless! I screamed. Fran had protected the adventurers with her own body. Countless tiny fangs sank into her back. Blood flowed. Lots of it. The sight of the red stuff pouring out of her back made me to fly into a rage. Literally.

Raaaaargh!

"Awooo!"

I was seeing red now. So what if Amanda found out? I was angry at myself for being worried about such petty things. Get your priorities straight!

It had been a few minutes since we found Fran and I had spent all that time charging Telekinesis. I did it out of habit; it was a subconscious decision. I was like a swordsman who had his hand on the hilt of his sword the moment he sensed danger. Now, I had enough charge to launch myself with the Telekinetic Catapult.

But would I reach her? The spiders' silk was quite strong. As much momentum as I could get with the Telekinetic Catapult, would I be able to pierce through the swarm of spiders and their nests? I knew enough about the strength of their carapaces and webbing by now, and I understood that I wouldn't be able to land at Fran's feet by mere force of the Telekinetic Catapult.

So what now?

I'll just have to break through my limits!

I had always charged my Telekinetic Catapult to what I thought was my near absolute limit, but was that my true limit? Try as I might for a max charge, I was still subconsciously holding back for a margin of safety. I didn't want to break myself from the recoil, but it looked like I was going to have to play dangerously today.

Break… through!

Mana ran up and down my blade. I didn't know how much mana my blade could take. No, it wasn't enough. I needed more power! What could I do…? I suddenly remembered the Elemental Blade skill I had learned earlier. The skill would imbue my blade with an element. I turned it on.

"Ooooh!"

Now I could charge my mana all the way!

Flames engulfed me and I glowed, red hot. It was so hot that I could feel the finer parts of my blade melting away. I caught the spiders' attention and they turned towards me. They spat out their webbing but it was no use. Their thread evaporated long before it could reach me.

Out of my way, you goddamn spiders!

I exploded and accelerated with charges of Telekinesis. I pierced through the spiders' tough nests like they were sheets of paper. Even the tough carapaces of the arachnids were no match for me. They turned to charcoal the instant I ran through them.

A normal Telekinetic Catapult would only go half the distance before the webbing started slowing me down. But now I was like a cannonball. I charged through the horde of spiders, disintegrating the ones who were in my immediate path, and cracking open the ones on the sides with the force of my sonic boom.

Graaah!

The sheer number of the spiderlings eventually slowed me down. Would I still be able to make it? Did I underestimate the strength of the spiders' nests?

Come on! I'm almost there!

I was able to charge through the last of the arachnid horde, and into the small room Fran was in. It was almost as if my blade responded to my wishes. I had lost most of my momentum by then, I could only float towards Fran but at least the pesky spider nests were no longer in my way.

Get away from Fran, you eight-legged demons! Fire Arrow!

I incinerated the last of the creepy-crawlies with bolts of flame. I bombarded Fran with Healing Magic as soon as I got to her.

Heal!

I started with the cheaper spells to maintain my already deteriorating speed.

Fran!

She wasn't responding. Her status said she was Poisoned and Stunned. To top it all off, she was low on health. I panicked, and bombarded her with Antidote and Greater Heal to top her up.

I cast Antidote on Krad's friends just in case. They might have dragged Fran into this mess, but she had put her life on the line to protect them. I wasn't going to let her pain go to waste.

What happened to the other spiders?

"Aroo?"

Jet! When did you get here? Wait, did you just use Shadow Walk?!

Shadow Walk was the movement skill the Daemon had used. I had completely forgotten about it in my frenzy. How much in a panic was I? I would've been able to reach Fran sooner if I had ridden with Jet…

Jet stuck its muzzle in the pile of spider corpses and stuffed its cheeks. The wolf seemed to be chewing on something. A single spider leg was sticking out of its mouth, in fact. Just thinking about the cost of its food gave me a headache. I wouldn't be able to harvest any materials out of the monster it ate, either.

Fran, Fran.

I shook Fran with Telepathy to try to wake her up.

“Huh…?”

Are you awake?

“Teacher?”

Yeah. You’re okay now.

“What about the spiders?”

All dead.

“Oh.”

I looked at her stats again. Her Sword Mastery was at Level 3. She still had Sword Arts and Spirit Manipulation, too. She didn’t have these skills when I first met her. She managed to learn new skills even when she had been equipping me.

Her titles had stayed with her during the loss of her skills. She was still a Fire Mage. Also, despite fighting barehanded, Sword Mastery still increased her fighting capabilities. That must have helped her to fend off the spiderlings.

Having gained two skills in a little over a month, I still thought her growth was unusually fast. Was it because she had been using me? Knowing the feel of high-level skills probably helped her body to accommodate.

But all those skill levels would’ve been useless if it wasn’t for Fran’s determination. She had kept fighting off the spiderlings despite being surrounded, bitten, and poisoned. If she had lost her fighting spirit for a second, they all would’ve died by now. If there was one thing I knew had grown in her, it was her willpower.

You did great.

I learned something else today. If I understood the flow of mana in an object, I could control it, roughly speaking. I could load myself with mana to the point of overcharge, although it was a double-edged sword.

I’m glad you’re alright, Fran.

“Thanks.”

Fran hugged my cracked and chipped blade.

Careful, Fran. You'll cut yourself.

"I'll be fine."

She hugged me tighter. She leaned her forehead against my hilt and let out a sigh of relief. She was just as worried as I was.

Alright, fine.

"Hm."

It was the touching reunion with my beloved student. It would be nice if there were no one else here but us.

"D-did that sword just… move? I'm pretty sure I heard it talk, too. And it used magic…"

I had completely forgotten about Amanda! I was trying to tiptoe around her before… But I had lost my head in the heat of things.

In a state of panic, I had neglected to set my Telepathy frequency to private. I had broadcast my frantic shouting to all the souls in earshot, and that included Amanda.

I had cast spells, used Telekinesis, and had flown over to Fran.

"Um…"

"No, wait. You don't have to explain it to me. It's okay."

"Huh?"

"I just happened to hear it, that's all. Everyone's bound to have a secret or two."

She might as well have said that she knew about Fran's talking, flying sword. There wasn't much point in dancing around the issue, was there?

Teacher, can I talk to her?

Do you want to tell Amanda?

Yeah…

That was awfully nice of Fran, considering Amanda was the person who had half-killed her during a friendly match… but, if Fran wanted to tell Amanda

about me I wasn't going to question her. Amanda seemed like a good person, anyway.

"Amanda."

"What's up?"

"There's something I want to tell you."

Three minutes later, Amanda's eyes were shining with excitement.

"An Intelligent Weapon?! So you have a mind of your own? I thought those only existed in fairy tales! I can't believe I'm talking to one right now!"

Intelligent Weapons were indeed rare; even Amanda had never come across one in all her travels. What really pleased her though, was the fact that Fran would entrust this great secret to her. This wasn't information you would share with just about anyone, after all.

"Thank you for telling me, Fran. And… Teacher, was it?"

That's right.

"Wow… You can really talk!"

Amanda admired me, her eyes all a-sparkle. She was like a little girl who was meeting Santa Claus in person after being told he was a myth all her life.

Nice to meet you.

"The pleasure's all mine! Don't you worry, your secret's safe with me. I'll keep it with me to my grave! Come talk to me if you need help with anything, okay? I'll always be on your side, Fran."

"Sure."

"I'm the Protector of Children, after all. Come to me anytime you want."

"Thanks."

"Ooooh! You're so cute I'll do anything for you, Fran!"

I was glad we came to her for help. I was initially apprehensive of Amanda and used Essence of Lies on her just to be safe, but she was telling the truth, the

whole truth, and nothing but the truth. She was willing to do anything if Fran came to her for help.

Isn't that nice of her, Fran?

"Yeah."

"I wish you could've seen your teacher when those spiders got you, Fran. The sword started screaming your name at the top of its lungs, and I thought I was going crazy!"

"Did I scare you, Teacher?"

A-a little bit.

"Your wolf had rushed ahead too, so I couldn't help you with my spells. I was freaking out, too!"

"Aroo…"

I couldn't believe I did all that! I panicked, and freaked, and piled one mistake on top of the other. There were easier ways to solve the encounter we just had. I could've asked Amanda for help from the start or hitched a ride during Jet's Shadow Walk! If we'd had Amanda's magic and her whip, we would've been able to get to Fran sooner.

Fran had a lot to learn, but so did I…

"What's with the dog?"

Dog…

Jet whined. I understood where Fran was coming from, but I'd feel sorry for Jet if she started treating it like a dog.

Fran, meet Jet. It's a Darkness Wolf I summoned to look for you.

"Jet suddenly coming out of nowhere scared me half to death!"

"Jet?"

Fran stared at Jet and it stared back innocently at her.

"Aww…"

She pet it on its head, which produced a joyful whine from the canine.

“Good wolf.”

“Arf.”

Is it really a Direwolf? It acts more like a dog than anything else.

“Woof, woof.”

“Hm.”

Jet squinted its eyes as Fran proceeded to fluff its neck, snout, and muzzle. It began licking her face in gratitude, covering her head with slobber. This thing had just been munching on spiders, hadn’t it? Go wash your face later, Fran.

We would need to regroup with the rest of the adventurers. There was no need to rush, of course, but this dungeon was particularly dangerous for Krad’s and Furion’s parties.

We should get going.

“You’re right. Wake up, you two.”

“Bwuh…?”

Amanda kicked the two unconscious adventurers awake.

“Where am I?”

“You idiots freaked out and ran straight into a Teleport Trap.”

“Right… What happened to the girl?!”

“I-Is she okay?”

The two were knocked out of the fight before it even began. They were poisoned and bleeding, and were barely conscious. They still managed to see that Fran had covered for them despite their Stunned state.

“Thanks.”

“We owe you big time.”

What’s this? I wasn’t expecting Krad’s crew to bow their heads to Fran to thank her. Well, if they had turned out to be ungrateful scumbags who refused to acknowledge their petite savior, I would’ve given them a few free lessons in showing respect!

Judging by how Amanda was glaring at the two, she seemed to share my sentiments.

“Bark.”

“Wha—Oh my god, what is that?!”

“B-b-big wolf! Direwolf!”

That was the appropriate reaction to seeing a Darkness Wolf. Their legs turned to jelly and—Oh no. Were they going to faint again? Were we going to have to drag their unconscious asses out of here?

“M-ma’am, please! Save us!”

“Arf?”

“Oh god, it’s going to eat me!”

“Jet, no. Stop licking him.”

“Aroo…”

Amanda explained how Jet was Fran’s summon and the two finally calmed down.

“How did you get such a high-rank monster to be your summon?!”

“I’ve never seen someone use a summon in combat before!”

Their eyes glowed with respect towards Fran. They were converts, for sure. I wouldn’t be surprised if they started calling her “Ma’am.”

“As I was saying…”

“Where are the others?”

“Out looking for you.”

How should we look for them? Running around blindly in this dark cave wasn’t going to help.

“Jet, can you sniff them out, doggie?”

“Woof!”

Jet barked in assent. I had summoned it as part of a mad gambit but it was

proving to be more than worth the mana cost. Jet knelt down, then cast a glance at Fran.

“You want me to ride you?”

“Bark!”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“What a smart dog he is.”

Jet still towered over her, despite kneeling down, but Fran managed to climb onto its back.

“Fluffy.”

“Arf!”

Fran grabbed its collar and cuddled against its neck. I held Fran in place with Telekinesis just to make sure she wouldn’t fall off during the great wolf’s dash.

But what about Krad’s friends? They weren’t fast enough to keep up, and it would be dangerous to leave them here by themselves. Maybe Amanda could cast some buffs on them.

“Jet, do you mind?”

“Aroo!”

Jet turned to Fran and answered with a bark. She nodded.

“You like dogs?”

“Little Lady? I-I don’t mind them I guess, but why do you ask…?”

“You’re good.”

“Good for wha—aaaah!”

Jet grabbed the adventurer from behind by the straps of his leather armor. It looked like a cat that was carrying its kittens by the back of the neck.

You could just let him ride you, you know?

Arf!

Ah. I guess Jet didn’t want anyone other than Fran to ride it. It recognized her

as its master.

“I guess you’re with me.”

“Ma’am? What do you mean by that?”

“Try not to struggle too much.”

“Whoa!”

Amanda picked up the other adventurer and carried him under her arm. It was an odd sight to behold. The man was clearly bigger than her, but her A-Rank Strength was more than enough to carry him.

“Move out.”

“Bark!”

Jet started running on Fran’s signal. As it happened, I was back in my sheath, slung over Fran’s back. I was feeling cold from all the cracks in my blade but I was going to have to suck it up and deal with it until we left the dungeon. I had put enough of myself together to fight, but total repairs were going to have to wait.

“Wow, Jet. You’re running on thin air.”

It does have Air Hike 8, after all.

Our Air Hike 1 was only enough for a double jump. Compared to that, it felt like Jet was running on an invisible track. Fran seemed to be enjoying all this.

“Spiders ahead.”

Five Trick Spiders came to greet us.

“Go for it, Jet.”

“Awooo!”

Jet accelerated instead of slowing down. The adventurer in its mouth cried out in terror but Jet ignored him.

“Grrrr!”

Jet roared and jet-black lances shot out from around it to pierce the spiders all at once. Spiders at its sides were sliced open as it dashed forward. It had

clawed at them, its fierce paws too fast for the naked eye to see.

Flare Blast!

“Fire Arrow.”

“Wind Cutter!”

We carved a path through the nest-ridden passageway with consecutive blasts of magic. We carried out our spider extermination mission as we rushed through the caves.

“They’re not putting up much of a fight.”

“Aiee…”

“Huff, huff…”

This was all a cakewalk to Amanda, but the two adventurers looked scared out of their minds.

We finally came to an anteroom covered with spider nests. A huge swarm of spiders covered the room as more and more crawled out of their hidey-holes. I felt some human presence further down, though. It must be Cruise and the rest of the adventurers. How did they end up all the way back there? There must have been another passageway.

We mowed down the spider swarm in front of us and made it to the anteroom. It was a huge space, its high ceilings decorated with spider nests. What would have been a welcome break from the claustrophobic cave atmosphere just looked creepy instead.

Countless spiders swarmed throughout the cave interior. They were on the floor, the walls, and the ceilings—a grotesque carpet and wallpaper of critters.

Cruise and the rest of the adventurers were in the thick of it. They were in trouble, by the looks of it. They didn’t have enough firepower to kill the critters fast enough and some of them had already fallen to abnormal status effects.

“Dammit! There’s no end to them!”

“If we could just get to the exit…!”

They had retreated too far back and were now boxed in.

One of the spiders was bigger than the rest of the horde. Its body was covered in venomous purple fur. Just the sight of it was enough to give me goosebumps. This must have been the Trickster Spider I had been hearing about. Its stats were a class above the rest of the arachnids.

This was the Big Spider Daddy who hurt Fran!

Time for a little payback!

“Yeah!”

As we charged into the heart of the swarm, I heard a desperate cry.

“Aaargh! I-I need help!”

“Boss!”

“Krad!”

What’s this? Krad was wrapped up in webbing and was being dragged into one of the spider nests. He wasn’t Poisoned, but he was Paralyzed. It didn’t look good for him.

We need to help him. Jet, you help the other adventurers.

“Woof.”

“Hm. Fire Arrow!”

The bolt of flame pierced through the horde of Trick Spiders and burned away the webbing that was wrapped around Krad.

“Ow! Ow! Hot!”

The flames got to Krad a little bit, but he’d be alright. The tips of his hair was slightly singed but at least he wasn’t spider food.

“Awooo!”

Jet unleashed a barrage of shadow spears that pierced through the arachnids’ carapaces. I didn’t know the spiders could feel fear, but they felt Jet’s power and scattered.

The humans, on the other hand, were more articulate in voicing their opinions.

“Whoa!”

“What the hell is that?!”

“Yikes! So much magical energy…”

“An Onyx Wolf…?”

“No, you idiot! It’s worse than that!”

“What the hell is it doing here?!”

“Everyone stay calm!”

They were already having enough trouble with the E-Rank monsters. The sight of a Direwolf almost sent the party into hysterics.

“Wait, look! It’s Lady Amanda!”

“And… the little lady! She’s riding that thing!”

“What?”

They calmed down after noticing Fran on top of Jet. We wouldn’t have to worry about being on the receiving end of friendly fire, now.

Alright, let’s start with the Big Daddy of ’em all. The Trickster Spi—

“Die!”

With a crack of her whip, Amanda tore the Trickster Spider into pieces. Crystals burst out of its abdomen.

“I’ll show you what happens when you hurt Fran!”

Well, that was fast. Despite the Trickster Spider’s C-Rank Threat classification, its stats were closer to a D-Rank monster. If not for its Create Trap, it was closer to a D-Rank in strength.

All well and good, but to see it get torn to shreds in an instant…

Um, Amanda?

“Huh?”

I sent Amanda a telepathic message.

“Crap!”

She turned to me and smacked her forehead. I had explained to her earlier that I got stronger by absorbing crystals. No, I didn't ask her if I could have the Trickster Spider's crystal. But she didn't look like she was opposed to it, either, so I took her silence as a yes.

I guess this one was on me for not actually asking her for the crystal…

"A-all right, let's kill the rest of these bugs!"

Don't just change the subject!

"Come on, Fran!"

Oh well… Arachnid extermination was going to have to come first.

"Okay."

"Grrr."

Let's kill 'em all!

We rained down a barrage of spells on the arachnid swarm. Amanda used her Wind Magic to slice open the spider nests on the ceiling, Jet's Shadow Magic pierced the spiders on the walls, and our Fire Magic burned the spiders on the ground. Furion had joined in to entangle the bugs with ivy.

We were dominating, especially Amanda with her Wind Magic. She had managed to annihilate all the spiders on the ceiling with a few shots of her spells. In all the chaos she had also managed to avoid friendly fire. Her control was impeccable. This was Amanda when she got serious. We had a long ways to go with our Flame Magic. We would need to put additional time into training our magic along with our sword.

"That was amazing, Amanda."

"Aww, thanks Fran!"

She didn't look very fierce when she was blushing from Fran's compliment, though.

The floor was littered with burnt spider remains. Most looked too damaged to be of any use, but we might still be able to salvage some materials out of them. There might be some crystals among the corpse pile, too.

Jet, see if you can't sniff out some crystals.

"Woof."

We could get some Trick Spider crystals at least. Jet's sense of smell allowed it to sniff whatever remained with little trouble. What's more, it had stowed the crystal away in the shadows, another application of Shadow Walk. Very useful.

"Excuse me… What's with the Direwolf?"

Cruise cautiously approached us. He had somehow made it out of the scuffle safely, but some of the others weren't as lucky. The spider's toxin was beginning to get to them.

Fran.

"Right. Antidote. Cure Paralyze."

"You saved me!"

"Thank you!"

"I-I thought I was a goner!"

We sat down, Furion's crew fully healed. One of them was in tears with gratitude. Good thing there were no casualties.

"So, this wolf. Is it an Onyx Wolf?"

"No. It's a Darkness Wolf."

"What?"

"I've never seen one before!"

The party was in an uproar over seeing such a rare beast. Even Amanda had never seen one before.

"Is it your summon, Fran?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of Summon Magic could a D-Rank have…"

"This is weird…"

Furion observed Jet with wide eyes. He couldn't beat his natural curiosity as a

researcher. Cruise shook his head after being reminded of Fran's capabilities.

Jet really stood out, didn't it? I could imagine getting looks from the people in town once we returned to Alessa. And where was it going to stay? We might have to look for lodging that was okay with pets.

I had tried to unsummon it earlier, but it didn't work. It looked like once you summoned something in this world, it was here for good. Fortunately, it didn't consume any extra mana by existing.

Jet, you can use Shadow Walk to enter Fran's shadow, right?

Woof.

Jet responded by melting into Fran's shadow. It took no time at all, and I could barely detect its presence with my Mage skill. An inexperienced adventurer wouldn't be able to tell that he was there.

Do you mind staying in her shadow when we walk around town?

Jet whined.

You don't like that?

Arf.

You really stand out in town, though. You might get attacked.

Jet let out another dejected whine and its ears flopped down sadly.

Urgh… You know I can't force you to shadow lurk when you look at me like that.

Teacher, let him stay out.

Look, I would love to, but—

Please?

Aroo?

This wasn't fair! Two sets of watery eyes were looking at me! It was an odd sight to everyone else in the room since Fran and the Direwolf were looking towards Fran's back.

"Woof!"

What? Did you think of something?

Jet dug its paws to the ground and started focusing his mana.

“Awooo.”

What’s this? Jet was shrinking! In a few seconds it had shrunk down to the size of a normal large dog.

You’re using Shapeshift? I thought that skill was for transforming into other monsters.

“Bark, bark.”

“Oh my god, it’s so cute! It’s so small now! I want one, too!”

Jet was smaller compared to its original size, but it was still plenty big. It was barely within the reasonable limits, but you could pass it off as an ordinary dog if you insisted. Or so I hoped.

Oh, fine. You can walk around town in that form.

“Woof!”

Thanks, Teacher. Now I can fluff Jet all day.

So that was why Fran had insisted… I wanna fluff it too, dammit!

We had summoned the big black wolf, so now we were going to have to take care of it. I wondered if we would need to take it out on walks. What about a leash? Summoning Jet made me feel like keeping a dog.

“I’m in your care, Fluff—Jet.”

“Aroo?”

Fran seemed to be quite particular about Jet’s texture.

After our bout of spider extermination, we returned to our original mission of examining the Core Room.

“There’s the Magistone.”

“And of such purity… It’s brilliant.”

“It’s a mountain of treasure!”

Krad’s eyes lit up. He went ahead to the glowing rock, past Furion who was still in the middle of admiring the Magistone.

“Pfft.”

Fran couldn’t stifle her giggle at the sight.

“Don’t laugh! Whose fault do you think this is?”

“The one who saved your life.”

“Urgh.”

“Collateral damage.”

“F-fine, I get it already!”

The Fire Arrow used to burn off Krad’s bondage earlier had singed and left patches in his hair. He ended up having to shave his entire head. He had used a dagger for his emergency haircut, and the uneven shave resulting from it was absolutely comical. I could have restored his hair with Greater Heal, but I kept quiet.

“Heh.”

“Dammit.”

Amanda and Fran couldn’t help but laugh every time they caught sight of it. I had never seen Fran smile so much before. It was rude, but I’d allow it. Krad’s hairdo was quite funny, after all.

“Lady Amanda, please. We need to recover the Magistone now.”

“I know, I know.”

“Everyone, please use this item bag.”

“Hm.”

Everyone took turns in harvesting the Magistone and putting it into their item bags which had been imbued with the Item Box capability. We were getting a lot of it. The purity of the core room even produced Magistone Ingots. Considering how valuable they were, it was surprising we were getting so much

of it.

“I don’t think I need to remind you, but this is a restricted area. Cross it without permission, and it won’t be just the Guild – the government might look into the matter, as well.”

“We’ll be alright since we have permits, but if anyone tries to walk in here without one, the barrier at the entrance would be able to tell immediately.”

“You need to be careful too, Fran. The Guildmaster won’t shut up about this one,” Amanda warned us sternly. There must be serious punishment for violating this rule.

“Why all the need for secrecy?”

“Don’t you think we’re getting too many Magistones?”

“Are we?”

“Yes. Each Dungeon Core has its own idiosyncrasies, and it takes a different amount of mana to produce different items. This dungeon can produce high purity Magistones without using much mana.”

That was why entry to this place was usually restricted. Filching a few Magistones would be enough to make a fortune. It would entice the heart of most adventurers.

“Let’s see… Core Settings…”

Cruise left us on Magistone collection while he examined the dungeon’s settings. He couldn’t find Trap Spider on the dungeon’s spawn list, however.

“So, are you going to eliminate the remaining Trick Spiders, Cruise?”

“We’re going to have to write a report first.”

Not many of the Trick Spiders were left, but we couldn’t let them have free reign over the dungeon, either. They might start reproducing again, or worse, one of them might grow strong enough to evolve into a Trickster Spider. That would increase the dungeon’s difficulty level, thereby making Magistone collection more dangerous.

On the bright side, Trick Spider materials were far better than the Trap Spider

variety. It would make periodic farming more productive. Trick Spiders also had more mana, which the Dungeon Core would be able to absorb through the air. It would contribute to the core's Magistone production for sure.

"How about we file a report and let the Guildmaster worry about it?"

"I suppose you're right."

Cruise nodded to Amanda. Messing with Core Settings was above a C-Rank's pay grade. This was a matter of Guild management and government taxation. Amanda had made the suggestion in passing, but the matter might concern her considering she was the only A-Rank in Alessa.

In any case, this had nothing to do with us.

Our trip back to Alessa was uneventful. Fran and Amanda had another sparring match, and Jet jumped in during the middle of it.

"Grrr!"

"Haa!"

Jet's shadow spears and Fran's flame bolts launched towards Amanda. She dispersed the spells with a single crack of her whip before countering them.

She was more serious today since the Direwolf had joined the party. Her attacks were more vicious, her speed a whole tier faster. Fran and Jet winced from a single lash of Amanda's whip. They powered through it while casting healing spells, however.

Fran and Jet were slowly but surely becoming a solid team.

"Awooo!"

"Very interesting!"

Jet had entered Fran's shadow to dodge Amanda's whip strikes and had popped out of Amanda's shadow. It had faked a Shadow Walk from a Shadow Lurk. This reminded me of our fight with the Daemon; it really was an annoying move. But Amanda immediately responded by blowing Jet away with a wind spell. I didn't expect anything less from her.

Shadow Walk allowed you to close the distance between you and your target in an instant. It consumed a lot of mana, but fortunately Jet was a Darkness Wolf who had mana to spare. It was able to use it over and over again in a short period of time.

It was also getting better at using the mana and was figuring out multiple ways to harass its target. At times, it would stay in Fran's shadow and lay covering fire with shadow and poison spells. Other times it would fake Amanda out by seeming as if it was going to ambush her from her shadow when in fact it would just come out of Fran's shadow.

Just because Jet had strong magical capabilities didn't mean it was a slouch in the physical department, either. It was strong there, too. It had Fang Arts and Toxic Fang, and its Strength was quite high. It was enough to mow down a Goblin horde with little trouble.

Fran was beginning to grasp Jet's combat capabilities, and was slowly learning to issue commands to it throughout the fight. The two were becoming a force to be reckoned with as the fight went on. The bond between them was growing stronger, and they pulled off some tactics that were able to throw Amanda off, if only slightly. Still, their combined abilities weren't enough to beat her.

We asked Amanda to teach us about Naming as a reward for our sparring match. No doubt, Naming was the reason behind Jet's evolution. However, Fran and I had given each other names when we first met. Why didn't anything happen to us then?

Amanda explained the mechanics and I understood why.

Naming was an action usually carried out by a superior towards a subordinate, or a summoner towards the summoned. The act not only served to give a name to the creature, but it also strengthened the bond between the two parties. It was like a contract in that way.

Being named unlocked one's true potential and granted additional points in one's stats. It might also produce unique effects depending on the one being named.

In Jet's case, being named allowed it to channel the mana overload into a body that was able to handle it. What if I had delayed? It would've gone

berserk, attacked Amanda, and been subsequently destroyed by the A-Rank. Sorry about that, Jet. It was an emergency.

Fran and I weren't superior to each other, so we didn't get stronger when we gave each other names. It was a simple naming ceremony in our case.

What I really wanted to know was why I had an entire menagerie of wolves on my Summon List. What was that about? I was sure we would be able to figure it out somehow but we needed more information. Should we go to the Reference Room again? Fran wouldn't like it very much, though.

She would be all right so long as she had food. She'd be able to put up with most things if I told her she could eat all the curry she wanted afterwards. She was making a mad dash for the Big Eater spot… I knew I could cut back her portion sizes but when she stared at me with those puppy-dog eyes, I couldn't resist. I had double to deal with now with Jet joining us. I was beginning to understand why some parents got overprotective with their kids.

As we sat around the campfire, Fran asked Amanda one last question.

"Evolved Black Cats?"

Evolution. Fran's goal. No Black Cat in history had ever achieved it.

Our encounters with other Beastmen reinforced this fact. All of them mocked her on account of her race. Were Black Cats simply unable to evolve? Amanda was a well-traveled adventurer. Maybe she knew something we didn't.

Amanda was silent, and sadly, shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I don't know. Beastman Evolution isn't my area of expertise so I can't offer you any advice on it, either. What I do know is I've never met an evolved Black Cat."

"Oh…"

Amanda had never seen one, either.

"The Black Cats I met all said the same thing, too…"

"What happened to them?"

"They've gone somewhere we cannot follow."

Amanda let out a lonely sigh. As a veteran, she must have had to say countless goodbyes throughout her travels.

“You want to evolve too, Fran?”

“I’m a Black Cat. Of course I do,” Fran replied.

Amanda moved next to her, and held her close. “I wish you well, sweetie.”

“Mm.”

“You’re strong, and you work hard. You’ll be all right.”

“Thanks.”

Despite all her encouragement, Amanda looked sad and pained. “Just remember… You’re still young, okay? You have a right to rely on us adults. You’ll always have Teacher with you, so ask him to spoil you from time to time, all right? I’m here, too.”

“But…”

“No buts. I’ve seen how much of a hard worker you are and it worries me. Don’t overdo it, okay? You’ll end up breaking yourself if you do.”

Amanda’s words had the weight of experience. She either went through this herself or knew someone who did.

“Okay.”

“Sorry for preaching at you.”

“No, it’s all right. Thanks.”

Amanda’s advice hadn’t offended her at all. Rather, her genuine concern penetrated Fran’s heart.

Alessa was finally in sight the next day.

There was a crowd in front of the gates, most of them men in armor.

Did something happen while we were gone?

A multitude was headed our way. The one leading the crowd looked familiar to me, but I couldn’t place where I had seen him before.

“It’s the Knight Brigade,” Cruise said. Now I remembered. They were wearing the same armor August was. The one leading the platoon wore something similar to August, so he must be one of the higher-ups.

“Little League Knights.”

“Heh. That’s one way of putting it.”

“Fran! Lady Amanda! Please do not mention such things in front of them. They are very proud of their positions!” Cruise cried out in genuine panic when he heard the girls’ exchange. The Adventurers and the Knight Brigade didn’t really get along with each other. It would all be over for them if they had gotten in a fight with Fran and Amanda.

“Oh, fine.”

“Hm.”

I didn’t have any impressions on the Knight Brigade in general, but I wasn’t going to go out of my way to make enemies out of them. At least, so long as they didn’t start it first.

Just stay down, Jet.

“Woof.”

It had shapeshifted into its smaller, yet still impressive, size. It’d be annoying to have to deal with the Knight Brigade’s questions.

“Besides, that’s the Knight Captain, Urs. He’s okay.”

The Knight Captain was leading his squad today. The Guildmaster had also mentioned that he was a good man.

“What’s this? Is that Lady Amanda I see?”

“Hey there. Been a while.”

“Likewise, Madam. It does us good seeing Alessa’s finest back home!”

He was a cheerful old fellow. He was shorter than Don, but his features were just as hard. In a word, he was a Macho Dandy. I wondered if he was stronger than Don, too. Don was an offense-oriented Warrior, whereas Urs was a defense-oriented Paladin. A huge shield was latched onto his back.

“Is something up?”

“Indeed, we sensed a disturbance in the town borders. There is a C-Rank monster headed our way.”

The big cities had set up magical borders around its perimeter. The barrier couldn’t ward off monsters but it was able to send an early notification to the town’s citizens. The Knight Brigade had been mobilized to deal with this threat.

“You’re going out to kill it?”

“Yes. We’ve quarantined the town, and we are about to comb the area to look for the fiend. We’ve requested assistance from the Guild as well.”

Wow. He looked like he was about to graciously ask Amanda for help, too. Urs was an upright, respectable knight.

“You’ve got a lot of young knights with you.”

“Yes. We’ve been cleaning house at the Knight Brigade. We eliminated our corrupt members, so all we have left are our spry young men.”

He must be talking about August and his lot. The Knight Brigade was respectable again with its bad apples thrown out.

A C-Rank monster, though? Could it be—

The expedition crew’s eyes all turned to the Direwolf sitting comfortably next to the Beastgirl: Jet.

“It’s Jet.”

“Woof.”

“Goodness! Is that… a Direwolf? Small, but immensely strong!”

The Knight Captain took a step back after seeing Jet.

“… One of yours, Madam?”

“Oh! No, it’s Fran’s pet.”

“I see. This little girl… Aaah, so you’re the ‘Little Spellsword’ I’ve been hearing about.”

The Little Spellsword. Someone else had called Fran by the same nickname.

She was becoming famous, but I wish they'd given her a cooler nickname.

"Well, it's all right that you're keeping a familiar… But could you at least put a collar on it?"

"I know, I know," Amanda interjected quickly. "I was going to suggest that Fran wrap a scarf around its neck before we reached town. Could you issue a Familiar Registration Document for it?"

"Of course," Urs replied. "I've got to ask a few questions, but I'll take care of the paperwork."

"Thanks for being a sweetheart, Urs."

Urs directed his attention to Fran. "First, its species. What is it? It looks too strong to be an ordinary Onyx Wolf…"

"It's a Darkness Wolf."

"Wh-what! My word… I've never seen one before." Urs' eyes bulged with surprise as he filled out Jet's particulars on parchment paper. "And its name?"

"Jet."

"'Jet' it is. You are its master, yes? What is your name?"

"Fran."

"Now, what is Jet's gender?"

"Hm? Hold on."

Now that Urs mentioned it, I hadn't given it much thought, either. As I was about to check, Fran had gone around to Jet's back and flipped up its tail.

Jet winced.

Fran, manners! You can't intrude on Jet's privacy like that! Well, she was still young, after all…

"Male."

"Aroo…"

Jet put his tail between his legs and hung his head in shame. The incident had been a shock to him.

“O-oh. Alright.” Even the Knight Captain was taken aback.

A red scarf was wrapped around Jet’s neck and he was now allowed to enter Alessa without a problem. He also received a badge that indicated he was a registered familiar. He was going to have to equip this at all times.

A similar uproar greeted us when we reached the guildhouse. The lower-level adventurers were used to being on guard against powerful monsters, so they stood in awe of the Direwolf. If Amanda hadn’t vouched for him, the uproar would’ve devolved into a panic.

“You come home bringing a C-Rank familiar… Really? You are an endless source of conversation, Fran.”

We had been summoned to the Guildmaster’s office, where he started the conversation with a snide remark. I couldn’t fault him for it.

Jet had returned to his original size and gnawed on some of the adventurers’ heads like chew toys. He was holding back, of course. He was nibbling rather than biting, but they still ended up bloody and half-dead by the end.

“And a Unique Darkness Wolf, at that. It’s already a rare species to begin with.”

Unique? What was that supposed to mean? Was Jet no ordinary Darkness Wolf?

“Jet’s a Unique?”

“Oh, you didn’t notice? Darkness Wolves usually have black fur with white streaks on them, but Jet here has streaks of red mixed in on his neck. You can’t quite see them since the scarf is covering them. Darkness Wolves don’t usually come with Unique Skills, either, especially at Level 1.”

Damn, seriously? I didn’t know that. I couldn’t know that since I’d never seen any other Darkness Wolves. I thought Jet was your garden-variety Direwolf.

“In any case, I congratulate you for accomplishing your mission. Amanda has vouched for your capabilities, and everyone in the guild saw you come in with your familiar. No one in their right mind would be suspicious of you now.”

“Hm.”

“Pick up your guild card from reception. I’ve given you a stamp which will allow you to enter the Ulmutt dungeon.”

Nice, now we could get a move on.

Let’s go to the receptionist ASAP!

“Okay. I’ll be going now.”

“One more thing. How about you look at your Classes when you get downstairs? You might have unlocked a few more. We usually charge 500G to change Classes, but I’ll let you do it for free as a parting gift.”

Parting gift? That’s pennies! Although I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thanks.”

“When will you leave for Ulmutt?”

“Soon.”

“I see. We’re going to miss you.”

“… Didn’t think you would.”

“Hahaha. Come now, you’ve been full of surprises ever since you came here, for better or for worse. Although, I am also relieved that we’re going to get some peace and quiet again.”

“Hm. Thank you for taking care of me.”

Fran bowed deeply, and the Guildmaster’s eyes bulged. This was the last thing he had seen coming.

Give her some credit, GM. Fran could be polite when she wanted to.

She shut the door. From beyond it, I could hear the Guildmaster mutter to himself.

“Heh. Always full of surprises.”

Thanks, GM. Sorry for all the trouble.

“Ready? Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

“Cheers!”

Night had fallen on the day we returned from the dungeon investigation.

Fran was in a bar, sharing a table with Nell and Amanda. They were throwing a farewell party for her since she told them she was leaving Alessa.

“Aww, I’m going to be so lonely without you, Fran!”

“Me too. Do you have to go?”

“Yeah. I wanna see the dungeon.”

“Which is more important: me or the dungeon?!”

“Of course the dungeon is! She just met you, Amanda! Then again, we’ve known each other for almost a month, haven’t we?”

“So what if you’ve known her for a month! I actually ate and slept together with Fran!”

The conversation moved from how Krad’s party, Dragon Roar, had failed their exam, to how Don had been turned down by a woman. The drinks kept coming, and the two women got more intoxicated with every round. They went into such a frenzy petting Jet that he retreated into Fran’s shadow and wouldn’t come out.

“Maybe I should come with you, Fran.”

“What about the orphanage?”

“Ooh, you knew about that? The orphanage will be fine. They have caretakers who’ll look after them. Think of it this way, if I went out on quests, I could use the rewards to raise money for the orphanage. So let’s raid some dungeons together, Fran!”

“I don’t mind.”

Amanda knew the truth about us so I didn’t mind, either. The only problem was Amanda’s overwhelming strength. It might prevent Fran from growing stronger.

“What? Really? Nice!”

“Nope, not happening.”

Nell stopped her, however. It was only natural that she didn’t want to see the only A-Rank in town to leave. But there was more to the story.

“Come on, Nell, why not?”

“Did you forget about your contract?”

“Oh. That. Ugh, I can’t believe I’m bound by that stupid contract!”

“Your fault for going along with Klimt’s sweet words.”

“Urgghhhh…”

“Contract?”

“Yes! I can only leave Alessa if it’s on Guild-related duty!”

“Why?”

“Well, you see—”

“Amanda. There are people here!”

“Oh yeah. Silence!”

Amanda created a soundproof barrier made of wind. It was a useful spell when you needed to discuss private matters, but the alcohol was clearly getting to her. She had planned to cast the dome around us but inadvertently included the table next to us, too. Confused diners looked confused as the bustle of the pub fell into hushed silence.

“So that dungeon we went to? It’s pretty important. It can produce a large amount of Magistone while being safer to gather compared to a conventional mine.”

That was true. I could see why the military would want to get their hands on it.

“But dungeons are under guild supervision, right? Meaning that the government can’t get their hands on them, despite really wanting to.”

“Uh-huh.”

Doubtless the government would want to undermine the guild’s supervision

over the dungeon, but the kingdom was bound to the guild under an agreement.

“Alessa is located close to the border of the Raydoss Kingdom up north.”

“It is?”

“Yes. We don’t get along with Raydoss very well, and they tend to be quite violent. Worse come to worst, they might move in to annex Alessa.”

Nell drew a simple map with the sauce on her plate as she explained to us the relations between our neighbors and us. The kingdom north of Granzell looked quite large.

“We can’t keep this matter about a great Magistone mine a secret forever, you know. It’s bound to come to light at some point.”

“Granzell is using that as an excuse to put more dungeons under their supervision. Amanda scared them off once, though.”

“We don’t want to give the government our dungeon. It’s the only thing Alessa has going for it. The Guild would be devastated by its loss!”

“Which means we won’t get paid!”

“We convinced the government that Alessa would be able to defend itself in case of an invasion. Our A-Rank is proof of that.”

That was why Amanda wasn’t allowed to leave Alessa.

“Even the government doesn’t trust its own Knight Brigade. Urs is only stationed here because he’s an Alessan, born and raised. It used to be worse before he came along!”

I guess August became Knight Lieutenant not only through bribery, but also for the purpose of harassing locals.

“And that is why I can’t leave this city!”

“I see.”

“There was so many things I wanted to teach you, too!” Amanda yelled while hugging Fran.

“For the last time, Amanda, you can’t leave!”

“Then let me treat you tonight!”

“Yes! I’ve been waiting for you to say that!”

“Not you, Nell.”

“Cheapskate!”

“Call me a cheapskate, I don’t care! Fran, you won’t forget me, will you?”

“I won’t.”

We wouldn’t soon forget all the beatings she handed us.

“What! Fran, you’re leaving town?!”

“Wh-what?!”

The adventurer at the next table overheard our conversation. Silence had worn off at some point. The man was a Dwarf. He looked very dwarfish with his giant pitcher full of ale. His mug was as big as his head. Who was he? He looked familiar somehow…

Now I remember. This was the dwarf who had come as backup after our first encounter with the goblin army. I think his name was Elevent.

“Seriously?!”

“Damn it, I was gonna ask you to join my party!”

“Get in line, buddy!”

“Frannie, nooooo!”

“You shoulda told us sooner!”

There sure were a lot of adventurers in this pub. It was only natural, considering the place was located next to the Guild. The rest of the adventurers soon piled in at our table.

“It’s such a shame, Fran. We were only getting to know each other.”

“I haven’t paid you back yet, dammit!”

Furion and Krad had been drinking here as well. It looked like they had become friends at some point.

“Where are you going?”

“Ulmutt.”

The adventurers roared at Fran’s response. Ulmutt was a place they all aspired to go.

“Ooh, that dungeon!”

“Man, I wish I could go.”

“Wahaha! Then you better get your rank up!”

“Let’s all raise our glass to send young Fran off!”

The adventurers took to that suggestion with melodious uproar.

“Yeah!”

“Cheers!”

“More beer!”

“Gahahaha!”

“Chug! Chug! Chug!”

To me, it looked like they were using Fran as an excuse to drink.

“You wanna have some, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“This isn’t juice! It’s better than juice!”

“Amanda! She’s not supposed to drink that!”

“Seriously though, it’s just wheat juice!”

“I’ll take it.”

Nell took away the pitcher of “wheat juice” just as Fran was reaching for it. Good job, Nell!

“No!”

She’s right. You’re still too young for beer.

“Come on, let the girl live a little!”

“Come on.”

Call me a killjoy, but this was one thing I wouldn’t let Fran have! She should know about the dangers of alcohol by seeing the damage it was doing to Amanda!

“No means no. I’m confiscating this.”

“Oooh! Nell’s chuggin’!”

“Nice!”

Nell downed the glass of beer in one gulp as the rowdy group of adventurers cheered her on.

“Having fun, Fran?”

“Yeah.”

At least Fran was enjoying herself. The drinking continued until everyone dropped, and it was almost the next day by the time we got back to our room. Jet had fallen asleep in Fran’s shadow.

Are you all right?

“Yeah.”

She didn’t drink anything but she was at the bar. With that amount of alcohol going around I wouldn’t be surprised if she got drunk off the vapors.

Poison Resistance didn’t seem to help with alcohol, either. We asked Nell about this fact and she chalked it up to the wisdom of God. It seemed that God himself acknowledged drink as a method of escaping the sorrows of one’s life.

“I’m okay.”

Are you sure?

“Yeah.”

Are you hungry?

If she was full then she could have breakfast once she woke up.

“Yes. Curry?”

No, not curry. Wait… Okay, now we’re good.

The inn's clock ticked as it changed to the following day. It was a simple machine powered by magic, nothing fancy. There were bigger clocks placed out on the streets and ones you could hang on walls. However, I had yet to see a watch in this world. I guess they couldn't make the mechanisms small enough.

This world had a calendar, too. There were thirty days in each month with a thirty-first day every three months. They had a special holiday called the Moon Feast on that thirty-first day. It signalled the changing of the seasons. Two thirty day months and one thirty-one day month consisted a season, which made a full seasonal rotation take three hundred and sixty-four days. Today was the 13th of March—if they called it that.

Hold on—

I took a bowl full of mysterious white, creamy stuff out of the Pocket Dimension.

In reality, it was a batter made of strong flour and sugar. I had secretly prepared it when we were cooking en masse. We used flour and strong flour in our other recipes too, so Fran didn't notice when I hid this batter away next to the bread dough rolls.

We're indoors, but we'll be fine so long as we're careful.

I telekinetically operated the frying pan and lit a fire under it with a fire spell. I poured some oil into it and poured the batter out on top of it. The batter started frying with a satisfying sizzle as it expanded and puffed up. I flipped it over to fry the other side then put two of them onto a plate. I laid on some whipped cream and poured some honey over it, and then I topped it off with some fruit.

Here you go.

"What's this? It smells sweet."

It's called a pancake. I wanted to bake you a party cake, but that was impossible with our time, ingredients, and skill constraints. This was the least I can do. It's fresh off the pan so it should be delicious.

"Why? What's the occasion?"

It has been exactly one month since the day we met. I wanted to do something special to celebrate.

The batter was easy enough to make, but the whipped cream was a different matter. They didn't sell the stuff in liquid form, so I had to split some milk on my own.

"This cake is for me?"

Fran's eyes widened as she looked at the fluffy pancakes that were presented to her on a plate floating in mid-air.

They're pancakes, technically, but yes.

She hadn't seen this coming. The surprise was a success!

While they're hot, Fran.

"Okay. Let's eat…"

Fran's fork went through the two layers of pancake, which had been decorated with whipped cream and fruit. She cut a piece of it and slowly carried it into her mouth.

What do you think?

"It's good. Really good."

Fran munched away. I was glad that she liked it. She carried on eating her pancakes in silent reverie.

Come on, you're getting it all over yourself.

"Mm."

I wiped the edges of her mouth with a towel. She felt like being pampered today, it seemed.

There you go, all clean.

"Thanks."

She carried on munching.

Aah, you're making a mess again!

"It's the cake's fault for being so good."

All right, all right.

Fran continued to silently stuff her cheeks with pancake. She looked like a squirrel with her cheeks puffed out. She finished her meal and let out a satisfied sigh. A content smile decorated her lips.

Thank god for pancakes.

“That was good. Thank you.”

You are very welcome.

Fran clapped her hands together and bowed her head.

“Teacher?”

Yeah?

“Thanks.”

Anytime.

These pancakes were the most difficult flapjacks I had ever made in my conscious existence. I had to make sure Fran wasn’t looking, and the whipped cream…

But her smile was more than worth the trouble of it all.

I was the one who should be thanking her. *Thank you for using me. Thank you for going on this adventure with me. Thank you for finding me.*

I had so much fun in the past month.

And I was sure there was more to come.

Side Story:
Klimt

There was a knock on my door.

"Yes?"

"You called for me, Uncle?"

"Aah, Furion. Come in, come in."

My nephew, Furion, had come to my office. It was the first time in a long while that someone had actually bothered to knock on my door. Recently, it felt like everyone had just been barging in, as if forgetting the fact that I happened to be the master of this guild. Compared to those brutes, Furion had perfect etiquette. Some people could learn a thing or two from him.

"Have a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

"You did well out there. Despite things happening which made it far from a normal supply run…"

"I almost lost my life, sir. Multiple times."

I had read his report earlier. Trick Spiders multiplying to the point that a Trickster Spider would be spawned from them. The occurrence was cause for worry, but I had a hunch who was behind all this.

"Uncle, those spiders…"

"Yes. A parting gift from one August Allsand, I presume."

An adventurer who used to be one of Allsand's lackeys had come clean. They wanted to take control of Alessa's dungeon from the Guild, so they went and fed the monsters in the dungeon with chemicals loaded with mana to beef them up.

Failing to harvest Magistones from the dungeon, the Knight Brigade would then have a case against the Guild, and could easily take over. Once the Knight

Brigade was under Allsand's control, they could then make bank on the black market.

Still, I couldn't believe that they were able to convince one of our members to sell us out. We had only allowed a select few adventurers whom we knew were strong and trustworthy enough to enter that dungeon… I would have to review our whitelist.

But even they didn't expect the appearance of a Trickster Spider. They had prepared for the eventuality of some strong Trick Spiders coming into existence, but the appearance of a Unique was not part of their plan. The Unique must've evolved by eating up the Trap Spiders around it. Very unfortunate.

"I can just about see the Kingdom of Raydoss' fingerprints on this incident."

"The country to the north."

The Kingdom of Raydoss was a large military nation to the north of Granzell. Monster-strengthening chemicals were quite rare in themselves; even the higher nobles wouldn't be able to get their hands on them with mere money and connections. But if they had asked old Raydoss for assistance…

"But Uncle, I just can't believe that Raydoss would go so far as to make enemies with an adventuring guild."

"They don't have adventuring guilds over in Raydoss. I'm sure they detest the very concept of one."

Although Adventurer Guilds were spread all over the world, they were not bound to any particular government or nation. If Raydoss and Granzell were ever to go to war, the guild was under no obligation to side with either of them. If the government attempted to force adventurers to go to war for them, said adventurers would sooner leave the country they are in; an adventurer's duty was to protect the people from the ever-looming threat of dungeons and monsters, after all. This was the unspoken agreement between all adventuring guilds and their host nations.

But once upon a time, Raydoss betrayed that contract, and forced its adventurers to go into war against Granzell. All who objected were punished and labeled as traitors. The guilds moved out of Raydoss, then, its members

becoming stateless. A little over ten years after the incident, Raydoss became overrun with monsters. Its soldiers and knights were barely enough to contain them and they were no longer able to wage war with their neighboring countries. In the end, they suffered a loss at the hands of Granzell.

“Do they have no need of adventurers? Perhaps they think a guild is far too restricting?”

“Not exactly. They’ve simply gotten used to dealing with everything without adventurers.”

To Raydoss, adventuring guilds simply got in the way of their daily business.

“The possibility of our nobles conspiring with their royals… Troubling.”

I wouldn’t have sent out our weaker members to the dungeon if I had known there was a conspiracy lying in wait. I should compensate them for that.

“You’ll find a bonus waiting for you. For all the close shaves with death you’ve had today.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“All right, let’s hear your report.”

“Yes, sir.”

I had given Furion a special side mission: The observation of D-Rank Adventurer, Fran.

“So what do you think of her?”

Furion was an adventurer and a full-time employee of the Guild. He wasn’t so much a spy as he was a plainclothes observer.

“A moment, sir. Tahlua, come.”

Aah, it’s been a while, Klimt.

“You look brilliant as ever.”

Furion extended his arm and summoned an owl, which perched on it. This was his Guardian Spirit, Tahlua.

We elves were a race beloved by the spirits. There were some among us

whom the spirits take an immediate liking to as soon as they left the womb (I believe the statistic was one in every ten).

An elf's guardian spirit would usually be affiliated with a Wood, Water, or Earth element. Furion's spirit was special in that regard. Tahlua possessed the Mind Element, a rare affinity even among the spirits. I had formed a contract with a Mind Elemental, myself, but it was nowhere near as strong as Tahlua. I had once told Fran that the spirits could sense the presence of evil in a man. That was only half true. The ability was limited only to Mind Elementals.

Tahlua was far more powerful in that capacity compared to the elementals I had under my aid. It was able to detect a man's motives, see the true meaning behind his words, and so on. That was why I gave him this special assignment.

I couldn't feel the heart of evil in the girl called Fran. In fact, I had never seen less malice towards others as in her.

"How does she feel about the adventurer who went with her, this Krad?"

Mild curiosity, at best.

"Curiosity?"

The creature called Krad would rouse anger and frustration from those around him every time he spoke. But it wasn't so for that girl. She looked upon his tantrums with deepening interest.

We had high hopes for Krad and his party, Dragon Roar. They were already scratching at D-Rank at such a young age. They were far and away the fastest growing party we had at the guild.

Well, aside from Fran, that is.

Their personalities were a problem, however. They caused trouble not only with fellow adventurers, but with clients as well. If not for this fault, I would've been happy to promote them to D-Rank.

Dragon's Roar must've seen Fran's capabilities firsthand on this mission. I had hoped that going on a raid with people who were clearly were their superiors would make them realize their conceit, but my plan might have worked better than I'd hoped…

Realizing their lack of strength, they had refused their promotion before they could be told they had failed; afterwards, they had looked down, then nodded solemnly. On the road back to Alessa, Furion asked them if they agreed with the result; they did.

Their inflated egos had completely burst into pieces over the course of a single day.

“Thank you, Tahlua.”

Indeed.

“Unsummon.”

“So, what did you think of Fran, Furion?”

“She’s… an amazing girl.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Yes. But it’s not just her physical strength. How can I say this… She always seems to consider every move she makes before she makes them. It’s almost as if she was having a discussion with herself. Not to say she’s the conspiratorial type, but she does take her actions into consideration. So analytical at such a young age. I can learn a thing or two from her.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’re very welcome, sir. If you don’t mind me asking, why do you take such a great interest in that girl?”

“Does it seem that way to you?”

“Yes. There have been rumors going on about how you prefer them on the younger of the age spectrum.”

“Quiet, you.”

And here I thought you were the picture of politeness, Furion. How you’ve disappointed me. To make it clear, I was not a lolicon.

The reason why I took such great interest in Fran was because there wasn’t much information regarding her to begin with. As a Guildmaster, I had to keep my eyes on this girl whom constant trouble seemed to follow. Yet there was

surprisingly little talk circulating about her beyond the recent praise. As the head of the guild she registered to, this was part of my responsibilities.

“All I know about her is that she has a magic sword and Identify.”

“The magic sword was obvious enough, but Identify?”

“Yes. I’m quite certain of this.”

I had deduced it when I was giving her down payment in crystals. Out of twenty, she had managed to select the only two C-Rank crystals mixed in on the table. The rest were rare sea-dwelling monsters. It was far too convenient to be considered coincidence.

Having Identify would allow her to have Identify Protection, as well. This skill was surprisingly useful in combat. Having it was enough to raise a red flag, but on a warrior of her strength, her opponent might as well give up the fight while he still had the chance.

“By the looks of it, she also has the Advanced Weapon Skills. Blade Mastery, judging by the looks of her fighting style. She also has Fire and Flame Magic, Wind, Shadow, Thunder, and Healing Magic. Her Magic stat was also above 100 for sure.”

Before heading home, Fran had changed her class to the advanced form of the Spellsword: Blademage. It had better stat growth compared to Spellsword, and it also came with the Class Skill, Focus Mana. To be a Blademage, one needed to have the advanced skill of Sword, Axe, or Spear Mastery. Moreover, they needed to be able to use more than two advanced elements, and have over 100 Magic.

Alternatively, she could have chosen to be a Shadow Mage, Storm Mage, Thunder Mage, or Healing Mage. All classes you couldn’t pick unless you had advanced magic skills.

She couldn’t choose them when she first came to the guild. She had grown so much in such a short period of time. Such strength and she was barely in her teens. “Prodigy” would be an understatement. “Divine providence” would be more like it. Honestly, she scared me a bit.

There were two more reasons why I took such an interest in her.

She was a nobody who came out of nowhere who was growing at an impossibly fast rate. Of course I needed to monitor her.

“I expected her shrewdness from the way she picked her crystals, but for her to let her guard down…”

I didn’t think she would take up my offer to change classes at the guild. She could easily have gone to the local temple, where no one would be able to look at her personal information. Was she all right with us knowing her stats and skills, or did she simply not know the mechanics of changing her Class? My guess was the latter.

“Amanda seemed to like her a lot, as well.”

I hadn’t expected Amanda to go along on the mission, to be honest. She probably only did it because Fran was there, but I didn’t expect her to be so taken with the girl… Although there was the possibility that Amanda had caught on to my plans.

“Is Amanda a good judge of character?”

“When it comes to children, yes. If she were faced with a long-lived race who looked like a child, then she would talk to them as an adult. I suppose it’s one of the functions of her title.”

Which meant that Fran was really a twelve-year-old. I had suspected her claim to be a Beastman and thought of her as one of the long-lived races.

“Uncle, I don’t understand. What is she exactly?”

“I don’t know, either. Perhaps she is nothing at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have been suspecting her of hiding something. But what if she isn’t hiding anything at all?”

She must have her reasons for being an adventurer at such a young age, just like everyone else. But it didn’t seem like she was part of any conspiracy that we needed to be wary of. That was my conclusion.

She was a little twelve-year-old girl who liked to fight and get in trouble, who owned a Unique Darkness Wolf, who was probably brought up in an exceptional

way, who belonged to the least of the Beastmen tribes.

Nothing more, nothing less. Her looks were all we had to go by, but did it tell her whole story? No, stop that. I'd only become more suspicious of her.

"I've relied on Identify and the spirits for so long that I've lost my eye for judging people."

Nell, who befriended her on the day she came to us, knew more about her than I did.

Chapter 4:
Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover

A few days had gone by since our dungeon raid.

Fran and I were on the outskirts of the city to see what Elemental Sword could do. For a skill I used out of desperation to save Fran, it seemed far more versatile than we initially thought, and we were in the middle of exploring its functions.

Let’s start with Flame Element.

“Okay.”

This was the one I had used in the spider’s nest. It covered my blade in flames; it was able to not only leave burn wounds on the outside, but also burn an enemy from the inside.

Is it too hot?

“I’m all right.”

“Awoo.”

Fran looked cool despite swinging around a red-hot blade. She wasn’t merely putting up with it, either. Jet looked like he was sweating, though. I guess the heat didn’t affect its main User.

Now, what would happen if I used the Mage skill to overload it with mana? I charged a small amount of mana into Elemental Blade.

How about now?

“Hot.”

Jet whined in agreement while taking a step back. Fran grimaced from the superheated blade. Beads of sweat were forming on her forehead.

She wouldn’t be able to properly wield me in this state. I guess I could only use this form with the Catapult. Too bad.

Let’s try the other basic elements.

Water and Earth were so-so. Both increased attack power, but it was more in terms of impact damage. They were more suited for bludgeoning weapons.

Wind proved excellent, however. It vastly increased the sharpness of my blade. It wasn't as flashy or destructive as fire, but it was a straightforward attack buff.

What about Dark? How would that even work?

"I'll give it a shot."

Darkness enveloped my blade. It looked so cool! I could feel my sharpness increase, but I couldn't tell if it had any other particular effects…

Jet, do you know anything about this?

"Woof."

Jet was more versed in Dark Magic than we were, so we hoped he might be able to give us a clue, but it seemed that he didn't know, either.

Jet sniffed me, then let out a whimper. *What are you doing, buddy?*

Jet!

In my panic, I looked at his status to make sure he was okay. His Mana Pool count had gone down. It wasn't much but it was enough to be significant after multiple hits.

"Aroo…"

You okay?

"Arf…"

We wouldn't have been able to figure out Dark Blade's effect without Jet's blind sacrifice.

Moving on.

"Let's try Thunder."

Here we go.

Electricity crackled down my blade. Fran slashed a nearby tree to see what it would do.

With a spark, currents of electricity ran through the tree trunk and cooked its insides. A thin wisp of smoke rose up from the gash. This was definitely going to prove useful.

A light dose of electricity would act like a taser. A strong dose would be able to fry the enemy from the inside out. Electricity was difficult to counter, too. This would come in handy against any organic monsters.

“Thunder Blade’s the coolest.”

You like it, Fran?

“Yeah. It’s all sparky and cool.”

“Woof!”

Fran pointed my galvanized blade towards the sky. The static electricity I gave off caused Jet’s fur to stand on end. He looked like a canine hedgehog, and they both looked like they were having fun with this element.

I moved on to the Special Elements: Healing and Support. Neither of them seemed to activate Elemental Blade, however. The skill seemed limited only to the basic elements, Light and Dark, and the Compound elements.

Okay. Let’s try out your new Class Skill.

“Right. Focus Mana.”

Focus Mana was the new skill Fran acquired when she got promoted to Blademage. It wasn’t included in our Skill Sharing list. She was on her own with this one.

Focus Mana: Increases the strength of Magic and Weapon Arts at the cost of increasing mana costs.

It was similar to Mage skill, Overload, judging by the description.

Be careful, now.

“I will.”

Fran fired off an ordinary Fire Arrow to start, letting loose a volley of five flaming bolts. This was the spell she was the most used to, so it would make a great basis for comparison.

And now, the Focus Mana version.

“Fire Arrow.”

Foom!

Whoa! That was great.

The bolts were much larger and more numerous. She fired them at a nearby tree, and they burned through its thick trunk, leaving a sizable hole. Each bolt was far stronger than the usual Fire Arrow, too.

Can you be more precise with it?

“I’ll try.”

We experimented and figured out we were going to get a lot of mileage from Focus Mana. Fran could manipulate her mana input so as to fire off a single bolt of greatly increased strength, or fire off twenty bolts without a drop in attack power.

However, it did consume three times her regular Mana Pool, which wasn’t going to be a problem since Fran could pull from my Mana Pool. To my great relief, Focus Mana didn’t seem to take a great toll on Fran. It wasn’t like when I overloaded myself with mana using the Mage skill. My attack power was raised to the point where I was beginning to damage myself.

Fran’s Focus Mana wasn’t as strong as a Mage’s, but it did allow far greater precision with her mana output. I expected nothing less from the Class Skill of an Advanced Class.

Which reminds me, there’s something I want to talk to you about.

“What about?”

I’ve been thinking about our last dungeon run.

Our raid made me understand that we needed more than raw attack power to finish a dungeon. We needed exploration skills, detection skills, and a whole

cavalcade of versatile spells. There were some skills I wanted to level up now.

"Same here."

We've been increasing the combat-related skills like the magic skills and Sword Mastery, but what do you think of leveling a different skill?

"Go on."

Unlike fighting in an open field, there wasn't much space to maneuver in a dungeon. We would need a myriad of different skills to survive. With that in mind, I decided to spend my Evolution Points into these skills:

Speedcast 1; Sense Danger 1; Sense Presence 2; Blink 1; Abnormal Status Resistance 3; Mana Barrier 1; Sense Trap 1

I chose Sense Danger, Sense Presence, and Sense Trap to avoid any unnecessary encounters with monsters and traps. Speedcast would allow us to cast our spells faster. Blink, Abnormal Status Resistance, and Mana Barrier were great for survivability and getting out of a sticky situation.

I had 41 Evolution Points left. I could either max out one of my new skills, or evenly spread the points across three of them. I was leaning towards one of the detection skills. Since we would be doing more dungeon runs from here on out, Sense Trap made the most sense.

What do you think, Fran?

"Hmm."

After a discussion with Fran, we decided to put Sense Presence, Sense Trap, Speedcast, and Blink all up to Level 5. We bumped Abnormal Status Resistance to Level 6.

We weren't going into a dungeon right away, so I thought of leaving some points over in case of emergency, but we ended up spending it all. We tended to be stingy with our Evolution Points expenditure; we would save EP just in case a shiny new skill came along. This time, we decided to spend all of our EP on necessities.

Now we would be able to traverse dungeons more safely. Although, it did

knock our EP count all the way down to 5.

Now we won't have to worry so much when we go on raids.

"Yeah."

"Woof."

But don't get careless.

"Of course."

"Arf!"

They were so reliable. All we needed to do know was go to Garrus' shop to pick up Fran's armor, and we would be all set to go for Ulmutt.

A few days had gone by since our night out at the bar, and we were now at Garrus' smithy.

"Is the armor ready?"

"Yep, it's good to g—God, that thing's huge!"

It had been a month since we arrived in Alessa. Today was our appointment.

The sight of Jet surprised old Garrus. The Direwolf was in his smaller form, but he was still gigantic compared to the dwarf.

"Ruff!"

"Your familiar?"

"Yeah. His name's Jet."

Fluffy dog aside, how's the armor?

"Gahahaha! It's perfect! My finest work, if I may say so myself!"

Now you're exaggerating.

We had given Garrus C-and D-Rank materials to work with. Nothing to scoff at, but a Magesmith of Garrus' calibre should be used to handling higher rank materials.

"Hey now, this ain't a job where you can just make the toughest thing you can

think of and call it good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know… You gotta put your soul into it. And I put my heart and soul into each piece of gear that I make. But every once in a while, there’s a piece that comes across my anvil that’s just pleasing to work on.”

His words were difficult to grasp but I saw his point. They were the thoughts of an expert craftsman.

“The little lady’s gear is one such a piece. I’ve put my heart, soul, and originality into crafting hers into existence.”

Sounds like we can expect a lot from it.

If Garrus was bragging this much then we were sure to get spectacular armor. I couldn’t wait to see it.

“Damn right. Hell, even God approves of this armor set!”

“God?”

What was that supposed to mean? We looked confused as Garrus retreated to the back of his shop to retrieve Fran’s gear.

“See for yourself.”

He came back lugging a huge chest. He took out each piece of equipment and set it on the table with confidence. I didn’t need to Identify them to know that they were loaded with magic.

“Here’s your new gear, little lady!”

Name: Black Cat Armor

Defense: 100; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Deep Sleep; Deodorant; Cleanse; Mental Abnormal Status Resistance Up (Medium)

Name: Black Cat Gloves

Defense: 70; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Physical Resistance Up (Medium); Strength Up (Medium)

Name: Black Cat Boots

Defense: 65; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Jump; Agility Up (Medium)

Name: Black Cat Earring

Defense: 15; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Poison Resistance; Sonic Resistance; Elemental Resistance

Name: Black Cat Cloak

Defense: 85; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Cold Resistance; Heat Resistance; Self-Repair

Name: Black Cat Belt

Defense: 15; Durability: 600/600

Skills: Magic Resistance Up (low); Abnormal Status Resistance Up (low); Item Bag (small)

W-wow. They were far and away stronger than the armor Fran currently had on her, and that had cost us 150,000G. The defense values were leagues above, and the skills were splendid. All that while being lighter than her current equipment? How did that work? And what did Garrus mean by the armor being "God approved"?

"I present to you my greatest work, the Black Cat Armor Set!"

"Good name."

Sounds cute coming from you, old man.

"Woof."

Fran had liked the ring of the Black Cat set, but for old Garrus to name it that himself was a little surprising.

Pfft.

“Shut it! I didn’t choose the name myself, all right?”

“Then who did?”

“Like I said, God did.”

“?”

“Aroo?”

What do you mean?

Did a name come down from the heavens?

“You don’t know? This is what we call Named Items.”

Named Items were special items which the gods had seen fit to name. When a blacksmith forged a piece of equipment with all his heart and soul, a god might see fit to rain down their blessings on it.

You could also find Legendary Named Items within labyrinths. They were items which had the gods’ divine protection attached to them. Their strength was easily inferred.

“Having your work be approved by the gods is the greatest honor a blacksmith can achieve. I appreciate you giving me that chance. Everyone involved in this production was so happy they were moved to tears.”

That was our line. They all must have put their heart and soul into crafting this set if the gods approved of it.

We should be thanking you for crafting such strong gear.

“Gahaha. The gods reinforced the sturdy composite material with divine blessings. This here set can give equipment made with B-Rank materials a run for their money.”

Wow.

“And they’re powerful blessings, too.”

Wait, I thought the Resistance skills were the blessings.

“Just put it on and see for yourself.”

“Alright.”

We borrowed the back room so Fran could put on her Black Cat Armor.

Did she need help putting on the armor, you ask? Well, she did have trouble putting on her pajamas, so of course I helped. I was her appointed guardian, after all, and it's not like I had any capacity for lust ever since I became a sword. It couldn't be helped. Bear with me.

I used Telekinesis to assist Fran with her armor pieces.

Fifteen minutes later, Fran had fully donned her Black Cat Set. The base color of the armor was black with green and white accents. It looked good on her. The main piece of the set, the Black Cat Armor, had a cute boyish look to it. It came with a skirt which had a hole for her tail to pop out of. Her top looked like a cross between a large collared shirt and a bustier. Jewels decorated the clasp of her chest, adding to the feminine look of the armor. Her midriff was left exposed, but it still looked adorable on her.

She wore fingerless gloves and boots that went up to her calves. Her belt looked like a gunbelt and looked like it had room to conceal a dagger; it came with a Small Item Bag, too, which meant she could store up to five emergency potions in it. Her silver earring looked like an animal ID tag by itself, but on Fran, it looked stylish.

Her cloak, which covered her entire body, looked more like a raincoat than a full blown mantle. It was light and supple, and didn't get in the way of her movement.



“I didn’t use much metal in making that. Lemme tell ya, reinforcing cloth and leather ain’t no small feat. I took the Tyrant Sabertooth leather, Doppel Snake skin, and the Blast Tortoise shell, and cured them in a special solution. Then I further reinforced it by applying the Gluttony Slimelord’s fluids all over it. This is a masterwork of composite material.”

Just the way you explained it sounds amazing.

“We had a string of failures along the way but it was well worth it. We managed to make a fine weave of composite materials, much stronger than any old metal. Lighter, too!”

Lightness was an important aspect of the armor as Fran relied on her agility in combat. This really was the best armor she could get.

I Identified it again and noticed something new.

Black Cat Blessing?

“You spotted it, huh? That’s the divine blessing I was talking about earlier! It increases all its user’s stats by 10. Also grants protection from Instant Death. However, only Black Cat Beastmen can wear it.”

You got a set bonus just by wearing it, too? That was amazing. A flat +10 to all stats might as well be an overpowered title. The armor was no match compared to heavy plate mail, but once you added the stat bonuses and lightness of it, the Black Cat Set was far and away stronger.

“So cool.”

It’s strong and *it looks cute!*

“Right? Toldja it’s my masterwork. Gahaha!”

Are you sure we can have this for free?

How much would this cost if we were to pay for it? We wouldn’t have enough money for it, that’s for sure.

“Yep, that was our deal. I took whatever materials I had left over, so I’m not making a loss or anything. Besides, I’m thankful that you let me do this work for you. I couldn’t accept your money if you shoved it in my face. Just, one thing,

though.”

“What is it?”

“There’s something you gotta be careful about with this armor. This is a fine piece of armor and because of it, repairs are gonna cost you more than a pretty penny. You’ll need Mana Spheres, the good kind, too. The repair fees are also gonna be quite high…”

The better the armor, the more expensive it was to repair.

How much?

“100,000G for the first round. It’s only gonna get more expensive from then on.”

Oof… That’s rough.

“It is, but remember the cloak has Self Repair on it. That extends to all the other pieces of armor as long as she’s wearing it. It’ll take a few days for everything to get into tip-top shape again but so long as you’re not pressed for time…”

That helped. We might never need to bring the set in for repairs as long as we’re careful. That was a relief.

All that’s left now is Jet’s gear.

“The dog’s?”

Yeah. I mean he has to equip his Familiar Identification Tag, anyway. Don’t suppose you can outfit him with actual equipment?

There was another problem. I explained to Garrus how Jet had the ability to manipulate his size. He was far bigger in combat, and his equipment needed to accommodate that. No amount of money would be enough to replace his gear if he broke his collar every time he shifted to his original size.

“There’s a lot of armor pieces that come with the Size Adjustment skill. I’ll just fix one of those for your pupper there.”

“Really?”

“Arf?”

“You betcha. Give me two days.”

Thanks.

“Awooo!”

Jet leapt happily. He tackled Garrus and started licking his face.

“Hey now!”

Welp, there goes Garrus.

So how much do we owe you?

“R-right… Give me 50,000G and I can have a whole assortment ready.”

“Please and thank you.”

“Yep—Will you quit it?!”

“Arf!”

Garrus snapped at the Direwolf. He didn’t mean it, of course, and Jet figured that out, too. He got off the dwarf and backed off, waiting for another opportunity to pounce at him.

Jet turned back into his original size so Garrus could get accurate measurements of his size. He licked Garrus in the face so hard that it flung the old blacksmith to the wall of his shop. The same thing happened when Garrus was trying to measure his hind legs with the Direwolf wagging his tail at the dwarf.

It was a good thing Garrus made it out in one piece. Any ordinary blacksmith would’ve needed several life potions by now. I admired the old man for his extraordinary Defense.

I made a note to myself to teach Jet to take it easy while he was “playing”. He might actually put someone in a hospital at some point.

“So where are y’all headed next?” Garrus asked while wiping his face with a rag.

“Ulmutt.”

“I see. It’s about time I got a move on, myself. Ulmutt’s a good destination as

any for my next stop.”

Ooh, do you want to come with us, then?

We would love to have the old Magesmith in our party. He was strong, and knew of our special circumstances.

“Which route are you taking?”

We’ll head west for Dars, then take a boat down south to Bulbola. Then we’ll foot it all the way to Ulmutt. It’s a bit pricier compared to a land route, but it’s faster. I also want to show Fran how much fun it is to be on a cruise.

“Do you want to come with us?” Fran asked, a faint glimmer of expectation in her voice. Amanda couldn’t accompany us on our journey. Having Garrus around would make things livelier.

“I’d love to, little lady… but I can’t.”

Why not?

Garrus sighed, scrunched his face. “We dwarves are mountain people, you see…”

“Uh-huh.”

“We don’t get along with water. Put simply… I can’t swim!”

I see. It was a very dwarven excuse. With how heavily built Garrus was he’d probably sink right to the bottom of the ocean.

“Oh. That’s too bad…”

“Sorry.”

I guess we’ll see you in Ulmutt.

“You betcha!”

“Okay.”

Fran shook Garrus’ hand, promising each other they’d meet again.

It was the day after we got the rest of our gear from Garrus. We had finished preparing and were ready to depart for Ulmutt.

“I’ll miss you!”

“Good luck out there!”

“Meet you in Ulmutt!”

“Come back any time!”

“See ya!”

Amanda, Donadrond, Garrus, Randell, and Delt sent us off at the gates of Alessa. Amanda was blowing her nose into a handkerchief and looked like she was crying. Everyone else had encouraging smiles on their faces.

What a great town.

I didn’t know what the other towns of this world were like.

But I was glad Alessa was my first.

“Yeah.”

Let’s keep heading west. Next stop, the port town of Dars!

“Woof, woof!”

Dars was a port town located to the west of Alessa. We would take a ship there and head south to the city of Bulbola, Alessa’s Gateway to the Ocean. From there, we would travel eastward on land and it was a straight shot to the Dungeon City of Ulmutt. At least, that’s what the books said. I had no idea what any of those cities would look like.

Our immediate goal was to get on a nice boat. A ferry would be ideal, even if it would end up costing more than a cargo ship. If we didn’t have enough money to get on one, we would simply have to earn more once we got to Dars.

I wasn’t too worried, though. We weren’t lacking in potions and we still had a cool 1,000,000G in our purse.

It’s all you, Jet.

“Woof!”

Jet knelt down, and Fran hopped on top of him.

Hang on tight.

“Yeah.”

Fran held on to the reins attached to his collar. Garrus had sewn in short straps into Jet’s collar for Fran to use. Jet could now run at full speed without having to worry about Fran falling off. Good job, Garrus.

Jet’s forelegs were now fashioned with black metal anklets. They came with Strength Up (low), Agility Up (low), and had the ability to adjust to its user’s size. Jet could shrink and expand without having to worry about the anklets breaking. Garrus had made these, as well. It only took him two days, too. It underscored how much of a master he was at his craft.

“Let’s go, Jet.”

Fran pumped her fist and pointed it onwards, filling Jet with energy.

“Awooooo!”

Jet let out an elated howl and dashed westward. He was so fast that the surrounding scenery was reduced to a greenish blur.

Before long, Alessa was nowhere in sight.

Keep going, Jet!

“Arf, arf!”

Jet accelerated at my command. His tail wagged happily, a sure sign of his excitement.

There was a girl in our party whose spirits were gradually getting dampened, however. That girl was, of course, Fran.

“My eyes hurt.”

She couldn’t open her eyes. Jet was going too fast, I guess. I used Air Current Manipulation to divert the headwind from her eyes.

How about now?

“Yeah. That’s better.”

Good. Fran squinted her eyes and enjoyed the fresh wind on her face.

“What’s that? I’ve never seen that before. That mountain peak’s white.”

By the looks of it, Fran was now enjoying her ride.

Things looked different when you were on top of a Direwolf running at top speed. Said Direwolf wasn't slowing down, either. Even when there were obstacles in the way, Jet nimbly navigated through them, allowing us to speed past mountains and rivers in a straight line.

Oh, are those monsters over there?

"Where?"

In those trees.

"Let's go."

*"*Aroo."

We ambushed the monsters and took care of them in no time. There weren't any strong monsters here so a single attack from Jet was enough to do them in. I absorbed their crystals, stored away their meat, and let Jet have his fill of the innards and bones. No wastage here.

Jet couldn't run at top speed forever, though. As powerful a Direwolf as he was, he still got tired and hungry after a while. He'd been constantly using Air Hike to hop around the terrain so his mana was depleted, too.

No problem. We'll go on foot for now.

"Good job."

What about you, Jet?

"Arf!"

Jet barked before sinking into Fran's shadow.

Jet possessed the skills Shadow Lurk and Shadow Walk. Shadow Lurk allowed him to, well, lurk in the shadows, but Shadow Walk allowed him to move from shadow to shadow. The latter cost much more mana compared to the former. It cost a bit of mana to use Shadow Lurk but it didn't use any more mana once he was in someone's shadow. All this meant that he was able to recover his mana while shadow lurking.

He didn't have to expend any effort to move with Fran's shadow, either. It

was a useful skill to have.

Let's take it slow.

"Sure."

We were in no hurry to get to our destination, after all.

We continued on foot as Fran performed some parkour to get around some obstacles once in a while. Eventually, Fran's stomach let out a cute rumble.

"I'm hungry."

I guess it's about time for lunch.

Fran's stomach was the most accurate timepiece we had.

Let's set up camp here. Do you want me to make a table?

I could easily fashion some basic chairs and tables using Earth Magic.

Fran shook her head, however, and pointed straight ahead.

"I wanna eat there."

She was pointing at a large boulder, on top of which we would be able to look at some nice scenery.

"Mm! It's so good."

Fran stuffed her cheeks with curry as she sat on top of the three-meter-high rock. She gazed at the surrounding scenery as she dangled her feet playfully.

She never had the chance to enjoy the sights around her when she was a slave. The scenery was a new and enjoyable novelty to her.

I would show her even more sights from here on out.

After her meal, Fran laid on the rock and relaxed. She set me beside her, and we watched the sky together. Clouds rolled slowly past us overhead, and we took pleasure in this quiet moment together. After a good thirty minutes, we were on the road again, riding Jet since he was already at full mana.

Our surroundings began to change after two days of travel.

The forests thinned out and eventually disappeared, replaced with wide open grasslands. Unlike the Direwolf Plains, however, there were more rocks and boulders in addition to the savannah-like brush. It actually looked quite barren.

The change in scenery underlined how far we were from Alessa. Jet sure could travel fast.

I considered summoning another Direwolf to switch places with Jet when he got tired but… I couldn't. That is, I couldn't summon any more Direwolves. When I looked at my summon list, they were all greyed out. I guessed that I was out of vessels.

I didn't look into it too much at the Guild's Reference Room but you needed something called a 'vessel' to form contracts with summoned monsters. A monster's 'capacity' determined its strength. A 'vessel' was just that: a vessel. 'Capacity' could be thought of as water that would fill a vessel. Stronger monsters needed bigger vessels to accommodate their capacity. When a vessel was full, you wouldn't be able to form contracts with additional monsters.

Jet was a Unique C-Rank Threat. It made sense that summoning him was enough to fill up my vessel to the max.

I guess we'll just have to rely on you for now, Jet.

"Woof!"

I didn't need Telepathy to understand Jet's bark. He was saying that we could count on him. I was so blessed to have such a motivated pet!

I would have to fluff him up later (with Telekinesis, of course).

I looked up at the sky and saw something which made me gasp with surprise.

Whoa! Wh-what the hell is that?!

"Hm?"

That thing over there!

It was difficult to point without fingers. I had to telekinetically tilt Fran's head towards the sky so she could see what I saw.

"Which one?"

The thing next to that cloud!

"That's a Sky Isle."

Sky Isle? That's straight out of a fantasy novel!

It was an island suspended in the open sky. A Studio Ghibli fan would freak out at the mere sight of it. Then again, so would any fan of fantasy fiction.

So why was Fran so calm about this island in the sky?

Just looking at the floating isle filled me with great excitement! How did anybody get there? Did inhabitants use a stone imbued with flying powers? Maybe a bit of Wind Magic would do the trick. Perhaps some other fantastical method was necessary. I wanted to see what was on there!

Saaaay… are those commonplace here?

Fran wasn't the least bit surprised, so I thought they were as common as regular islands in this world.

"Hm. You see them from time to time."

Really!

I had no idea! In the two months of inhabiting this world I didn't even think there was such a wonderful place!

Wait a second, if these floating islands were commonplace here, there might be an easy way to get there.

I wanna go there!

"Not happening."

Huh, why not?

"Too high up."

We needed some special magical gear to even get to that altitude, the price of which was appropriately sky-high. Fran didn't know the details, but going there was too expensive for regular tourism. It reminded me of space tourism in my previous life.

But I still wanted to go!

Is there no other way?

“I heard stories of mages flying there on their own.”

I see.

Well, what if we used Jet’s Air Hike? It would take all his effort, but maybe…

How about it, Jet?

Jet whined sadly and flopped his ears. I guess that wouldn’t work. The island was way up in the sky and he wouldn’t have enough mana.

What if we just used Float to get there? No. I just remembered that Float had an altitude limit; you stopped ascending after a certain point. Even if I were to break through it with Telekinesis, I still wouldn’t be able to maintain my altitude. At best, it would soften my eventual crash to the earth.

Do you think I can reach it with Telekinesis?

It would be possible if I were the only one flying up there.

“No fair, Teacher.”

What?

“I wanna go, too.”

You do?

“Of course.”

“Bark!”

“No leaving us behind.”

And then I understood: Fran was used to seeing the floating isles from the ground, but she wanted to see what it was like up there. All of us would have to go.

Wait a second. I got it!

All right, let’s try something out.

I flew out of my sheath and hovered in front of Fran, the flat side of my blade facing the ground.

Hop on!

“You want me to what?”

It’s called surfing—not that you’d know, I guess. Anyway, try standing on me.

“Okay…”

Fran carefully stepped on to my blade and distributed her weight.

“You all right?”

Yep. It’d make things easier for me if you activated Float, too, and use Air Current Manipulation so the wind wouldn’t knock you off balance.

“Got it.”

Jet, you lurk in Fran’s shadow.

“Woof!”

I used Float and Telekinesis and levitated upwards. Fran rode me like some kind of metal surfboard.

“Ooh, we’re flying.”

It worked! I called it the Telekinetic Air Ride!

I moved horizontally to start. I had telekinetically reinforced Fran’s feet to my blade so she was doing alright. I slowly accelerated, moving up, down, left, and right.

No problems so far.

Fran was getting used to balancing herself on top of me. There was no danger of her falling off me now if she leaned in any direction.

Buckle in.

“Yeah!”

“Let’s go!”

I ascended through the sky, drawing an imaginary spiral staircase as my path. No amount of Telekinesis could help Fran if I went fully vertical; it would knock her straight off.

“Wow. Teacher, this is great.”

Fran looked to be enjoying herself as she surfed through the air currents. I looked down to see that we were gaining more and more distance from the earth. I can’t help but cry out.

Woohoo!

It worked! We were closing in on the floating island. What was once a black dot from the ground grew to the size of a fist as we flew closer. It looked like we were going to break through the high clouds soon, but the Sky Island was located even farther up.

The foundation of the island was plain old rock. Although seeing the bottom peek out of the clouds like that was enough to intimidate the wariest traveler. I couldn’t wait to see what was up there!

Wait, what? Where did the wind go?

A strange feeling overtook me as we got close to the island. It felt like we had pierced through a thin membrane of magic. The raging winds had come to a halt; proof that I wasn’t just imagining things.

I looked around, anxious to see if I could find the cause of this phenomenon.

“Teacher.”

What is it?

“There.”

Hm? Whoa! What is that?!

Fran pointed towards the anomaly.

A Skeleton Knight was flying through the air.

I couldn’t believe my eyes either, at first. But the sight of the armor-clad skeleton, riding through the sky on his skeleton horse, wouldn’t go away.

“It looks like it’s leaving the island.”

Was the Skeleton Knight the island’s guardian?

It charged downwards towards us from the floating isle.

He's coming for us, isn't he?

The skeleton let out a rattling cackle as if in response.

Seriously?!

He drew his sword and started slashing.

Urgh!

I managed to dodge his attack, but the bone knight wasn't stopping. He turned around on his skeletal steed and continued his assault.

I could only dodge while in surfblade mode!

Fran, fire off some spells at him!

"Fire Arrow!"

"Kaaah!" the Skeleton Knight shrieked.

What the hell?! He deflected Fire Arrow with a bat of his hand! I had suspected this was no ordinary skeleton, but he was far stronger than I thought. He had an excellent sword arm as well. It'd be dangerous for us to keep fighting here!

Come out, Jet!

"Bark!"

Fran, get on him!

Fran hopped off my blade and onto Jet's back. Now we could fight back! Still, Jet couldn't use Air Hike forever. We would have to settle this while Jet had mana to spare.

We took to offense, and slashed away at the Skeleton Knight, but his guard proved too tough to penetrate. True to his name, he was an expert horseback fighter.

"Teacher, I have an idea. Distract him for me."

All right. Flare Blast!

"Grrr!"

"Kah!"

Fran slashed at the skeleton knight as he was distracted by Jet and my spells.

“Kah?”

Fran had fought awkwardly while riding Jet so she jumped off him and took the fight to the bone rider. Every time they clashed swords she would use Air Hike to regain her footing and try again. She fought like she was on solid ground. Even the Skeleton Knight found Fran’s barrage difficult to keep up with. She finally landed a hit on him.

Yes!

Unfortunately, her long awaited direct hit connected with the Skeleton Knight’s yellow plate mail. Her deep slash which would’ve left a deep gash in a fight with a human opponent was only rewarded with a hole in the skeleton’s armor.

“Kukakaka!”

Dammit! Keep going!

“Yeah!”

They clashed swords again. The skeleton steed proved to be more dangerous than I thought. One wrong move could lead to a devastating counterattack. The undead felt no pain, either. No matter how many times we cut them open, they wouldn’t care about it the way ordinary organics would.

To make matters worse, the bone rider and his steed wasn’t our only problem.

“Aroo…”

Shit! Fran, get on me!

I cried out frantically, noticing that something was wrong with Jet.

“Hm?”

Come on!

Jet’s mana was nearly depleted. Letting Fran ride him while fighting in the air by constantly using Air Hike had proven too much for him. The drain on his mana was far greater than we thought.

Jet had shrunk to the point that Fran was able to hold him. She caught him, and sat him on top of me.

Jet, you can go back to Fran's shadow now.

Jet retreated to Fran's shadow with an exhausted whine. I hoped he would be alright.

"Kukakaka!"

God, you're persistent!

I looked for a path to get past the bone knight and his steed but it was impossible. Even if I could, it wouldn't take long for them to catch up. As we carried out our deadly game of aerial tag, I eventually ran out of mana, too.

It was difficult for me to fly with Fran on top of me. The load was different compared to overcharging myself with mana and exploding into Telekinetic Catapult, but it was a load all the same.

We had only been flying for a total of fifteen minutes, and that included training time. Even if we forced ourselves to fight the Skeleton Knight our time in the air was nonexistent.

If we got out of this in one piece, we'd at least get a new mode of transportation out of it. We could go pretty fast, and we could bypass dangerous obstacles. It was a perfect getaway car.

Sorry about this, Fran!

The Skeleton Knight pursued us as we began our descent and slashed at us with his sword.

"Kuh!"

We were able to deflect his sword in time but as a result it blew Fran away. She sped to the ground in a nosedive.

The Skeleton Knight ceased his pursuit once we had gained enough distance from the floating island. He really was a guardian appointed to annihilate all who entered the island's vicinity.

He watched us quietly as we fell to the earth.

It was a good thing he didn't gave chase, but the floating island was currently off-limits to us.

"Too bad."

Dammit! We'll get there someday, I'll show you! That's right, I'm talking to you, bonehead! I screamed at the undead knight as we fell through the sky.

"We'll win someday."

Soon, the floating island and its guardian were nowhere in sight.

We weren't out of the woods, though. We lost the Skeleton Knight, but now the ground was growing closer and closer. Jet and I were both out of mana, and Fran was our only ticket out of this mess.

Fran, I'm counting on you!

"Got it."

We should be all right if she used Float to slow us down and Air Hike just before she hit the ground to soften our landing.

If only it were that easy.

Why is there a house in the middle of nowhere?!

There was a cottage erected in the middle of this wilderness. It looked as ordinary as the houses in Alessa.

I still had a bad feeling about it. Why would that be?

"We're gonna crash."

Now was not the time to think about that!

F-F-Fran, can you move around it somehow?

Our current trajectory would make us land us squarely through the middle of the house's rooftop. Fran shook her head during our descent.

"There's too much momentum. I can't stop."

We fell from too high an altitude for Float to be of any use to us.

Seriously?!

“Haa!”

Fran perfectly timed Air Hike just inches away from the rooftop. She couldn’t nullify the momentum though, and we crashed through it, anyway.

You all right, Fran?

“Yeah… I’m good.”

Heal.

“Thanks.”

Thank god she was okay. We really made a mess this time, though!

I looked up at the hole our crash had left behind. I looked around the interior of the house and finally realized the reason behind my earlier feeling of unease.

There are no windows in this place.

That’s right. There wasn’t a single source of external light in this house; the hole in the rooftop was now our only light source. It didn’t look like a good place for someone to live in…

The interior was strange as well. There was no flooring in this house; the floor instead being exposed earth. The ground was tended to, as well. Grass grew at regular intervals to the height of a man’s hips. This place was some sort of grow house, not abandoned property.

Was this grass really able to grow in complete darkness, though? Remembering how some plants could be cultivated with similar methods back on Earth, I supposed it wasn’t completely out of the question… The leaves of the plants were green with red splotches; the mere look of it spelled poisonous. Very suspicious, indeed. I wonder if they were used in some kind of drug.

Fran, do you feel funny or anything?

“I’m fine.”

She fell right in the thick of the grass, after all. Her face had blotches of purple sap, and it was easy to imagine the stuff getting into her system through the scratches all over her body.

I identified the plant to discover that it was called Necroweed. It wasn’t

poisonous, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

We made quite a mess of the indoor garden, though, and we weren't sure what to make of it. We had stumbled upon an indoor plantation after crashing through the roof of this shack. I didn't know if anyone lived here at the moment but—

No, I feel it… Someone's here.

"Hm? Where?"

There was a faint presence coming from a corner of the room. We turned to it, and saw a man standing there in tattered gray robes.

We instinctively took to our battle positions the moment we saw his silhouette.

Fran!

"Hm!"

Fran readied me in her heads, while Jet leapt out of her shadow to follow suit.

"Awooo!" Jet crouched, ready to pounce. We were ready to settle this in one strike. No quarter.

Aim for the torso. That's where a Skeleton's crystal is!

"I'll finish this in one strike."

Our opponent was no human. A bleached white skull peeked out of the hood. It was a Skeleton. What a monster was doing in someone's house, I had no idea, but it was better to end him before he could get the jump on us.

What was with all the undead today?!

Don't let your guard down! Remember what happened with the Skeleton Knight!

"Hm!"

Fran made a great leap forward and swung me. Jet followed suit, a trail of darkness following him as he pounced.

The Skeleton tried to move out of the way but it was too late. *Struggle all you*

want, undead scum, it's no use!

But none of us could predict what the creature would do next.

The skeleton didn't draw his sword, or start casting spells, or even make any attempt to dodge. Instead, it curled up into a ball and covered its head.

"Hyaaa! P-please, spare me!"

Wait, what?

Wait! Fran, Jet, stop!

I sent out an emergency message right into my companions' minds and they halted their attack. We all gazed curiously at the shivering skeleton.

"T-take anything you want! Just don't kill me!" he wailed in a quavering voice.

"?"

Fran looked perplexed.

"Oh! Great Lord of the Underworld, save me!"

"Um."

"Aieee! P-please don't eat me! I'm all bones! I don't have any money, either!"

I felt genuinely bad now.

Amanda had told us that Necromancy was not evil in and of itself. Even adventurers made no particular effort to avoid Undead Necromancers. Naturally-occurring undead attacked people and therefore were to be exterminated. But the ones who were familiars made for useful pets and support. Even Jet was welcome in Alessa despite being a monster.

So was this Skeleton a familiar?

"I-I'm a good Skeleton, I promise."

You looked like an evil undead to me, buddy. His statement didn't trigger Essence of Falsehood, however. I didn't know if the skill worked on the undead but I was going to defer to its judgment.

"Good Skeleton?"

He might be someone's familiar.

“Yes. I am a good Skeleton. Who might you be?”

“I’m Fran.”

“I am Bernard.”

His magical strength was much higher than the Skeletons I had run into in the Plains. Despite his lack of vocal cords, he was able to speak through the Vibration Manipulation skill. All this led me to believe that he was a Unique.

“What on earth happened to you?” Bernard asked.

We explained to him what had happened to us while remaining ambiguous about our finer circumstances. Especially the fact that I was a talking sword.

We told him how Fran had ridden Jet to go to the floating island but was blocked off by a Skeleton Knight. The recent encounter had left her jumpy about skeletons, which was why she had been ready to break Bernard into pieces. We laid the blame squarely on the Skeleton Knight’s bony feet.

“I see. My goodness, that must have been awful.”

Bernard didn’t seem upset, in any case. We’d had conversations with other adventurers about close calls before, and he dismissed our misfortune with a brief, yet polite statement. He really didn’t think the way humans did.

“What is this place?”

“This is my master’s laboratory.”

Master. So he really was under the charge of a necromancer. He must have been one hell of a necromancer if he managed to summon a skeleton with this much Magic and Intelligence, one that could talk to boot.

“This place is a laboratory?”

“Yes.”

Fran asked the question I was about to ask. Aside from the lack of windows, and the interior which looked like a little farm, the house itself looked perfectly normal from the outside. It didn’t look like the laboratory of a powerful necromancer.

“Dingy.”

“My master does not care that you think it is so.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. He is correct!”

“!”

“Grr…!”

A voice had come from outside before the door swung open with a bang. The presence barged in without forewarning, which was odd considering we had capped our detection skills. Even Jet didn’t see it coming.

When did he get here?!

We hadn’t sensed any presence outside the house, either.

Hmm.

Woof.

They hadn’t felt the presence, either.

Fran drew me, and she and Jet proceeded to take their battle stances. I charged myself up with mana just in case.

“Who are you?”

“Where are your manners, girl? Shouldn’t you introduce yourself first?”

“I’m Fran… Who are you?”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Bernard hastened to make introductions. “That is my master.”

So this was the necromancer we’ve been hearing about!

We would’ve cut him down where he stood if we ran into him out on the road. The hem of his black robe was ragged from years of being dragged on the ground. Skull ornaments hung from his neck. His skin was a pale, sickly white. His hood covered most of his face, but I could make out slivers of silver hair and a smile which looked like a crescent moon.

I thought he was a guy, but there was no way of telling for sure.

One thing was for sure though: he looked suspicious. Like a textbook evil necromancer. If an incident happened in the area, you’d knock on his house

first. The necromancer seemed completely oblivious to our suspicion, and he boomed out his introduction.

“Mwahahaha! I am the great Jean du Vix! Master of the Undead!”



I didn't want anything to do with him if possible. We needed to get out of here as fast as we could and get back on track. The necromancer was as suspicious as he was obnoxious.

Name: Jean du Vix

Age: 49

Race: Magi

Class: Nether Mage

Level: 45

HP: 180; Magic: 616; Strength: 91; Agility: 119

Skills: Shadow Resistance 6; Speedcast 4; Identify 8; Summon Minion 8; Staff Mastery 4; Ghost Manipulation 8; Necromancy 10; Dagger Mastery 2; Apothecary 7; Poison Resistance 3; Venomology 7; Fire Magic 3; Nether Magic 5; Herbology 4; Dark Magic 5; Total Presence Concealment; Frenzy Ghost; Friend of the Dead; Mana Manipulation; Magic Up (medium)

Unique Skill: Soul Sight

Titles: Natural Assassin; Undead Creator; Butcher; Necromancer; Ghost King

Equipment: Dragonbone Staff; Tattered Robes of the Ghost King; Devil Shoes; Death Bracelet; Bracelet of Sacrifice

What caught my eye was his Total Presence Concealment. That must be why our detection skills hadn't worked on him.

He was strong, though. His physical stats might be low but he was a master at magic. He could give Klimt, our Guild Master, a run for his money with a few extra levels. His Total Presence Concealment synergized perfectly with his Necromancy. He could send his minions after you and you'd never know where he was. I didn't want to get on his bad side if at all possible.

And a Magi… It was my first time seeing one. Was he really a non-hostile?

“Magi?”

Fran noticed what the necromancer was before I could tell her.

The robed figure tilted his head and smirked. “Aaah… You know what I am?”

She didn’t need to Identify him to know that. You could make out the faint shape of a horn poking against his hood, not to mention the claws and the fangs.

“It’s obvious by looking at you. The horn, the claws, the fangs. And your skin is white.”

“Hah! You are well learned, little girl. Yes, I am a Magi!”

“I haven’t seen one of you in a long time.”

“You don’t find many of our kind on this continent. One would have to travel further east.”

Fran didn’t seem hostile to the man. Jean himself didn’t sound alarmed when Fran guessed what he was. There must have been no particular enmity between Magi and mankind.

It was a good thing we didn’t start attacking him earlier.

“Now, what do you want? To what do I owe the honor of this peculiar visit?” Jean said while casting a glance at the hole in the roof.

“Sorry about that. Some stuff happened.”

“Indeed? Very well. Anyway, let us hear your story. Come.”

“Please, right this way.” Bernard bowed as he gestured for us to follow Jean.

Jean descended the staircase that was tucked in the corner of the room. I couldn’t say I wasn’t suspicious of his invitation… What should I do?

As I was contemplating my options, Fran had already followed him downstairs. No helping it then, I would have to be on guard instead.

Stay on your toes, Jet.

Woof!

The room at the bottom of the stairs was disappointingly normal.

“Ha ha ha! Welcome to my abyssal laboratory of darkness and death!”

God, couldn’t he shut up? So this was his laboratory. It looked normal at first glance, but perhaps there was a switch he could throw that would unveil the most advanced in magical technology…!

No, probably not.

The basement was spacious, but that was about it. There was some leftover bread and salad set on the table, and an open book resting atop a chest.

It looked like an ordinary, lived-in living room.

“Laboratory?” Fran wondered aloud about the same thing.

“Indeed! My experiments are known to be dangerous so my real lab is further downstairs; wouldn’t want to wake the neighbors, you know. Would you like to see? I warn you, there is a reason why they say that ‘curiosity killed the dragon’… Heheheh.”

I could tell that he was telling the truth because I had been getting a weird mana signature from downstairs. I was conflicted about wanting to see it, though. Inconspicuous as the house seemed, it was still a necromancer’s laboratory. I didn’t think it was a good idea for Fran to see something like a slaughterhouse at her tender age.

And god, was he loud!

“Tea?”

Bernard set teacups on the table. He had begun wearing an apron at some point. For an undead, he sure seemed human.

“Thanks…?”

The tea looked poisonous. There was reddish-purple goo at the bottom of the teacup. Was Fran supposed to drink this?

Our host, Jean, took the cup into his hand and downed it all in one gulp.

“Aaah. Such a fragrant aroma and complex flavor. Truly a wonderful cup.”

Really?

Sense Danger hadn’t alerted me to anything so I guess it was safe to drink.

Besides, Fran had Abnormal Status Resistance in case anything bad happened.

“Quite the manners you have there.”

Fran drank her tea, and set the empty cup on the table. She could make anything look delicious. I’d give her some good food to fix her palate later.

“Bernard, would you mind explaining what happened?”

“You see—”

Bernard told Jean about the day’s proceedings.

“I see. So we lost some of our Necroweed.”

“Yes, sir. About a third of it.”

They were talking about the plants we had crashed into earlier.

“Argh, this is awful news,” Jean said while casting glances in our direction. It didn’t look good for us. It was true that we had broken into his house and destroyed some of his plants in the process.

“Do you know how much Necroweed you wasted by your crash landing? They are a very valuable type of Spirit Grass.”

They were valuable enough for the necromancer to cultivate in his own home. There was no way they grew on the side of the road.

“Are those plants important?”

“Indeed. Necroweed is a type of Spirit Grass you don’t normally find in the wild. They can be made into Necro Potions which can do a great deal of damage to undead with a mere sprinkle. If you manipulated the variables during its concoction, you can use it as a catalyst for Necromancy. Necromancers would die to get their hands on this potion. Also, the Necroweed I grow is first class.”

I remembered seeing a Necro Potion in Randell’s store. It was a third class Necro Potion and that already cost 300,000G. I doubted we could pay Jean if he asked us to compensate him for damages.

A-ask him if he could still use the damaged plants in his potion. We’ll help any way we can!

“What if you used the damaged herbs to make your potions right now?”

“Impossible. Once touched by the living, Necroweed becomes tainted with life. One could still make ordinary potions out of it but they wouldn’t suit my purposes.”

Essence of Falsehood detected no deceit in Jean’s answer. Necroweed was a valuable plant which must not be touched by the living. There was nothing we could give him in exchange but I doubted he would be satisfied with a simple apology.

“Now, judging by Bernard’s explanation, you falling through my roof was something of an Act of God, so I shall not press charges.”

“You won’t?”

I couldn’t tell from looking at him, but this necromancer was generous!

“Indeed… However!” Jean suddenly raised his voice and grinned. His manner was impossible to predict.

“Uh.”

It scared even Fran!

“I cannot say the same about the ruined Necroweed. You must understand.”

“Hm…”

“Act of God that it might be, you still damaged my valuable Spirit Grass. Justice demands an act of recompense. I’m not talking about bowing your head and apologizing, either.”

Aah, I figured. What was he going to ask us for? Money? Or maybe he wanted to use us for drug and magic experimentation. Either way, we might be in for a fight.

Fran sat up in her chair and stared at Jean.

The tension in the living room was palpable.

“Little girl. Would you mind going on a quest for me? You shall be rewarded, of course. 200,000G. What do you think?”

That was a lot of money in completion fees. We weren’t going to jump on it immediately, though. The reward was an indication of how difficult the task

would be.

Ask him about the details, Fran.

“Hm. Depends on what you’re asking.”

“I won’t force you. You’d be doing more harm than good if you did it reluctantly.”

“Nothing illegal.”

“Of course. I am an adventurer myself, you know.”

Whoa, seriously? He sure didn’t look like one. He looked like a creature who would be waiting for you inside a dungeon than a man who raided dungeons.

“Really?”

“Indeed. B-Rank, at that!”

He took out a silver guild card out of his robe and showed it to us. It said B-Rank Adventurer on it. He was our great senior!

“Before we move on…”

“Hm?”

Jean smiled in a way I could only describe as sinister. Was he finally going to show his true colors to us? I was getting worried, despite Danger Sense not triggering.

“Would you mind introducing yourself?”

What was he talking about?

As I puzzled over Jean’s redundant question, he pointed his finger toward Fran.

“I’m talking about you, Sword.”

Rather, he pointed his finger at me.

Did he want to get his hands on an enchanted sword?

“You’ve been so quiet, I do wish you’d start talking to me.”

“!”

“Heheheh. I’ve known all along about the fact that a soul inhabits that blade of yours! How you’ve been communicating with Telepathy! Now, reveal yourself! Bahahaha!!!”

He saw through my Telepathy? How?!

Fran, don’t say a word.

Hm.

“…”

“…”

“You’re giving me the silent treatment now? You will not fool me with such petty methods. For I possess the great skill of SOUL SIGHT! I can see souls wherever they are! Even your Identity Protection is no use against it, a mere vanity of vanities!” He cackled, obviously smug at catching me off-guard.

What?! So his method of identification could pierce through Identity Protection?! The same thing had happened with Garrus. These Mystic Eye people were a pain!

Dammit! What now? Do I keep my mouth shut? No, stay calm!

As I became metaphorically drenched in cold sweat, Jean merely rested his chin on his hand and nodded carelessly.

“My, but what a rare sight this is! You are an Intelligent Weapon, are you not?”

He knew. There was no point in keeping quiet now.

“I can see that you are quite strong and capable. With your powers combined, you might just be able to carry out my request!”

Request?

“Aah, so you’ve finally decided to talk to me. It’s not every day I get to converse with a sword! Brilliant, brilliant!”

I was beginning to get tired of Jean’s boisterous speech.

“Now, allow me to explain the thing I want you to do for me.”

Hmm? He didn't seem interested in having me for himself. In fact, it looked like was only curious to see whether I could talk.

You know I'm an Intelligent Weapon. Is there anything else you'd like to add to that?

"What do you mean?"

You don't want me for yourself?

"If I did, would you give yourself to me?"

No.

"And that settles that argument. I'm not the least interested in you, anyway."

"You really don't want him?" Fran asked.

"Not in particular, no."

I used Essence of Falsehood but again couldn't find any untruth in Jean's words. He wasn't the slightest bit interested in me. I was disappointed, but relieved at the same time.

"Are you satisfied? May I move on to the details of my quest?" he chortled.

All right, let's see what impossible errand you have in store for us.

Disturbing words like Live Experimentation and Assassination danced across my mind.

"You are to help me explore!"

That was… absolutely pedestrian.

"Explore what?"

"Yes. It pleases me that you seem eager to assist. Our destination is not far from here. With my help, we can get there in a little under thirty minutes."

This dungeon must've been pretty close to Jean's house. I hadn't seen any on the way here, though, and I didn't remember any mention of dungeons in this area during my research in Alessa. What Jean said next confounded all my expectations.

"We are going to the dungeon called Undead Lair."

What?

If a dungeon was nearby, there was no way we wouldn't have heard about it back in Alessa. What was he talking about?

Fran voiced my thoughts. "We didn't hear anything about it in Alessa."

"Of course not." Jean's answer was nonchalant. "I am the only one who knows anything about it."

Considering how big dungeons were, I was confused as to how anyone could miss it.

So you've kept information about this dungeon to yourself?

"That's right. We are under no obligation to inform any party about any dungeon we might find on our travels. We are urged to inform the authorities since doing so would help prevent future calamities, but keeping quiet about it is not a crime in itself. Not in this country, anyway."

"Didn't know that."

"You get a handsome reward for informing them that a dungeon has appeared. In any case, the dungeon I speak of does not fall under the jurisdiction of this country, or any other country for that matter. Therefore, I am under even less obligation to make a report."

"Not in any country?"

What do you mean?

A place which isn't under the dominion of any kingdom? Was it located in some kind of DMZ? Either way, it sounded like trouble.

"Haha! I see you are rattling your puny brains about this."

I'd like to hear where this dungeon is located, if you don't mind.

"Now, now. Where would the fun be if I just told you?"

I was all right with a straight answer, actually.

"Let me tell you the story of how I came across the dungeon! Stay a while and listen!"

“Hm.”

It’d help if you kept it short and simple.

“You ask for the impossible!”

And so Jean began his animated tale.

“Ten years ago… I heard tell of an undead outbreak in this area. Their numbers were growing so rapidly they outnumbered the local monsters.”

Really? This place isn’t even a Haunt.

“Indeed! It was an odd phenomenon, to be sure. Reports of undead raiding nearby villages came flooding to the guild. The Guild had sent out countless investigation parties in response to this threat.”

“I see.”

“I was a young Necromancer, then. I came to this land to deepen my knowledge of the undead magicks. I’ve carried on my research for ten years, and though my heart broke and was sorrowed countless times, I rebuked it that I might increase in knowledge!”

“Wow.”

Jean carried on his story like an actor in a stage play. *Fran, you really don’t have to clap for the Magi.*

“And then I made my discovery. A massive accumulation of mana! In multiple spots!”

Accumulation of mana?

“Indeed. The phenomenon was caused by naturally occurring mana gathering in one location. This stagnation of mana causes monsters to spawn.”

I see.

“Now, the mana accumulation I had discovered had a distinctly Undead element to it. The element of these masses of mana were influenced by the surrounding environment. For example, in places like a volcano where fire is plentiful, these mana hoards would spawn fire monsters, and the oceans would spawn water monsters.”

So you get wind monsters in a place with strong winds?

"Yes. The only element I can't quite figure is the Fiend element. One hypothesis states that Fiend-type monsters appear where in areas which contain the seals of the God of Evil. There seems to be truth in this hypothesis, seeing as there are no Fiends around these parts. There must be a reason behind their concentrated spawning."

Wait, seriously? There were a lot of Fiends in Alessa, and the Direwolf Garden had been teeming with orcs and goblins, as well. Was the God of Evil sealed off in those places? That was a scary thought.

If this hypothesis were true, wouldn't we have found the seals by now? All you needed to do was look to the center of Fiend populated areas.

"Some of them actually look for the seals that way. You've heard of the Evil and the Dark Uniques?"

Yeah. I ran into an Evil Goblin once.

"The Evil Uniques seem to have the blessing of the God of Evil himself. When they're around, you can be sure that there is a seal of the God of Evil nearby. One of the adventurers actually found one of the sealing grounds that way."

What happened then?

"Not much, thankfully. The adventurer informed the guild, and they locked down the area."

Even if someone had found one of the sealing grounds, not much could be done about it. Legend has it that the gods, upon defeating the God of Evil, divided him into parts before sealing him away. It was impossible for man to undo the seals of the gods. At least, that was what I learned.

But when I pondered this aloud to Jean, he shook his head. The process wasn't as straightforward as I thought.

"No. There have been times where the seals were broken. Although the forces maintaining the seals are strong enough to keep the Evil God in bondage, they are prone to outside interference."

What? But the gods created those seals, didn't they? Wouldn't they have

some protection on them so the seals couldn't be tampered with?

"There are barriers to prevent Fiends from tampering with them but there doesn't seem to be any special protection against humans."

Why not?

"Think about it. The gods have promised not to interfere with the works of Man. Wouldn't that be reason enough?"

Did that mean the gods were unable to violate a single iota of their laws? Wouldn't that leave the seals vulnerable to abuse? The people of this world had more faith in their gods than I initially thought, so perhaps the gods here were more involved than I was used to. At least they were involved enough that Jean believed they wouldn't break their promises.

Still, man is a creature who is easily led astray, whose heart is easily tempted by evil. No wonder some of them managed to break the seals.

"It goes to shows you how much the gods value mankind."

They were gods, after all. They weren't concerned with every little detail like we were, and who knew the thoughts within those infinite minds?

But wouldn't that mean that the forces of the Evil God are leaking into this world if Fiends exist?

"Perhaps, but I don't know for sure. It is outside my area of expertise. I cannot know for no Fiends spawn around these parts."

Not even one?

"Nay. I've never seen one myself. This place is mostly home to the undead."

That's what we were talking about earlier.

So you were saying about finding massive accumulations of Ghost mana?

"That is the conclusion I have come to after residing in this place for many years. I've been wanting to resolve this anomaly for a long time."

So the undead were spawned out of that accumulated Ghost mana?

But how were you supposed to resolve the mana accumulation if the Undead element didn't occur naturally? Was this place an old battlefield, once upon a

time? Perhaps it was an execution ground?

“Correct. But this is where the tale becomes strange.”

How do you mean?

“These fields have never been anything out of the ordinary. I looked through the records and found nothing that would indicate any instances of mass slaughter above ground. There are no records of massive tombs below ground, either.”

Jean had obviously done his homework.

“I’ve studied the mineral structure of the earth and every plant life I could find, none of which amplify or add to the strength of the undead element. Why then, is there an accumulation of undead mana?”

“Hmm?”

Huh?

I didn’t know how Jean expected us to answer something even he didn’t know.

“Any guesses?”

He stood up, and started pacing around the room. His gestures grew grander than before as he became more excited.

“Someone’s adding it on purpose,” Fran said.

“Yes! That is what I initially thought, as well. I suspected the northern kingdom of Raydoss of being up to one of their diabolical schemes.”

Judging by your tone of voice, your speculation turned out false.

“It is impossible to manufacture a mana accumulation or inject mana into a locale. Many researchers have dedicated their lives to it; all have failed.”

“I see.”

“And so I looked at the similarities between mana accumulations. That is when I made my discovery!”

Jean swung around, and pointed his finger at us in a grandiose gesture. He

was like a detective who had finally solved the mystery of the day.

"Your discovery?"

"Yes. Do you know of the floating island above this field? Ah, but of course you do. That's how you ended up in my lab in the first place."

We saw the island firsthand – part of it, anyway.

"Objects would fall from the floating island from time to time. Sometimes it would be plants, other times, boulders."

So you're saying these falling objects are the cause of the undead outbreak?

"I can't believe you just… ugh…" Jean cringed. "Yes. The accumulations of mana are located in the same place as the fallen objects." He slumped his shoulders and sulked back into his chair. He really must have wanted to make the announcement by himself. He was grumbling under his breath now, and I couldn't decide which of his two moods was more annoying. "I investigated the suspicious suspended island and found a dungeon on top of it," he finished, spirits completely dashed. At least it made him quiet, though, even if it didn't completely shut him up.

So why are the fallen objects imbued with undead mana?

"Because the dungeon is an undead dungeon. That is the reason why everything on that floating island is imbued with the undead element. They retain their element even when they've fallen to the earth."

Which means the Skeleton Knight that attacked us was…

"Likely to be one of the dungeon's monsters, yes."

I didn't expect to run into a dungeon this early in our trip.

"Do all floating islands have dungeons on them?" Fran asked. I was interested as well. If all floating islands housed dungeons in this world, wouldn't that make them dangerous? We could have stampedes since no one would be able to conquer them.

"No. I posit that the dungeon on our floating island was created out of a Dungeon Core that spawned in the air next to it, or one that spawned on the island itself. That is the only floating island I know of to have a dungeon on it."

I had thought that Dungeon Cores could only appear on land, but they could show up anywhere, it seemed. There was a lot about the Cores that I didn't understand. "Would a Core break upon hitting the ground if it spawned that high up in the air? I know it would have a magical barrier protecting it, but would it be able to absorb the impact from a drop from such a high altitude?" I asked Jean.

"No. A mysterious force operates the Dungeon Cores, and therefore they would only spawn in places that were viable for a dungeon. They can't be moved from their original spawn location, barring special circumstances. If one were to appear in the sky, it would remain afloat. If one appeared in the ocean, it would not drift along with the tide."

"Special circumstances?"

"One such circumstance is our floating dungeon. Also, the records say that long ago there was once a giant golem whose insides housed a dungeon. This golem could move around, of course. Why these extraordinary cases exist, one can only guess."

The Chaos God worked in mysterious ways. This world housed many mysteries.

"How do we get to the floating island?" Fran wanted to know.

"With my level of magic, we have several options."

Is the floating island under no one's jurisdiction?

That's what Jean had mentioned earlier. I thought we were still on Granzell soil.

"The island's route circles around the edges of Raydoss and just about straddles Bellios. The kingdoms are still fighting over who gets to own it. That is why no one has sent troops to claim the island and the dungeon remains hidden."

If one of the kingdoms had tried to claim the floater, that might be interpreted as an act of invasion which could lead to all-out war.

"It is quite troublesome, however. As dangerous as the dungeon is, it also lays

golden eggs. The dungeon itself doesn't pose much of a threat to the continent. If the kingdoms figured this out, they would do everything in their power to get their hands on it. They might even send in the army."

And it's okay for us to go there?

"As long as no one finds out."

Don't get caught, huh? Jean's plan was beginning to sound fishy.

"Now, I shall restate my request. We shall go to the island together to investigate the dungeon."

How much are we investigating? Do you want to clear the dungeon or is there something else you have in mind?

"Indeed, clearing the dungeon would be our goal. We can then destroy the dungeon once we clear it. Perhaps that would ease tensions between the kingdoms."

Destroying the dungeon would nullify all possibility of war breaking out.

Was Jean, the Necromancer… actually good…?

"The difficult part comes with capturing and returning with a certain monster. The beast's name is Ghost Eater. It is an undead monster which eats other undead. Threat Level B. Even if we can't finish the raid this time, returning home with the Ghost Eater will make it easier for me to conquer the dungeon another time."

B-Rank Monster, huh?

"I was going to make my attempt with several batches of Necro Potions but working together with you will prove far more effective."

It was dangerous for sure, but might be worth the risk. We'd get to go to the floating island, too.

Fran?

I wanna hit the dungeon.

Of course she did. I did, too. No one had ever stepped in this dungeon to boot.

We can get payback, too.

Yeah, we have a score to settle with that numbskull.

Arf, arf!

I guess you're in too, Jet.

We might be able to get revenge on the Skeleton Knight if we went with Jean. After discussing the matter with Fran, we decided to accept Jean's offer.

"Wonderful! I'll be in your care! Mwahahaha! My word, I can hardly wait!"

Likewise. We really appreciate you taking us there.

"Leave that to me. Now, let us reintroduce ourselves! I am Jean du Vix! Master of things which lurk in the dark! Lord over the abyss and all that is dead!"

I guessed that meant he was a scholar in Necromancy. As much as I hated to admit it, I was getting used to Jean's language.

"I'm Fran. A Black Cat. My favorite foods are curry and pancakes. This is Jet."

"Woof!"

"It's my first time seeing a Darkness Wolf. He would make a fine minion if he were undead."

"Aroo…"

Jean looked dead serious. Jet tucked his tail between his legs and cowered in fear.

"No."

"Hahaha!"

That's not funny, please stop.

"Worry not. I won't waste a single drop of blood."

Dude, seriously! Anyway, I'm the Intelligent Weapon, Teacher. Fran named me that.

"I see. So Teacher is your name?"

Was it impossible to ask this guy to read the room? If he insulted Fran's naming sense she would—

"What an eccentric name! Hah! I like it!"

I'm glad he's a weirdo.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hm."

The Blademage and the Necromancer shook hands.

Before we set off, we decided to change the terms of our agreement.

"You don't have to give us that much in reward money."

"Oh?"

In exchange, we want the crystal.

"Crystals? So you want that instead of gold?"

Yeah. Would that be too much to ask?

"Not at all, but what are you going to use them for?"

Well, uh…

Of course he would ask. I wasn't sure if I was comfortable with telling him all the details, though.

"Hmm… I see, I see." Jean closed in on me as I hesitated. He was looking intently at me.

What? Why are you looking at me like that?

"A crystal counter…"

"!"

"Does absorbing crystals make you get stronger?"

He nailed it in one guess!

"How do you know that?"

"Heheheh. There is nothing hidden from my Soul Sight! Teacher here has a Crystal counter on his status screen and he wants crystals as payment… It

doesn’t take a genius Necromancer to put two and two together!”

Damn it, he had such amazing deductive reasoning despite being so obnoxious! He saw right through me! I didn’t think Identify could even see that much information. I underestimated his Soul Sight!

“Heheheh… Looks like I hit the bullseye. I see your status is now: Frustrated.”

Y-you can see that, too?!

“Bwahahaha! I jest! But it seems I was right again!”

Dammit! I completely fell for it!

“Arf…”

Jet, stop looking at me as if you felt sorry for me! I know what you’re thinking, you overly-expressive wolf! Take this!

“Ruff!”

How do you like getting your fur ruffled in the wrong direction? I bet it feels uncomfortable!

I stopped with the awful realization that Jean was rubbing off on me. Was Fran going to follow his example, too? Jean might teach her his evil-sounding laughs.

“But a magic sword which consumes crystals… Interesting. Do you gain the skills of the crystal on top of the mana?”

!

How did he keep getting it right? His guess was so sudden I couldn’t gasp in surprise. I wanted to ask him how he knew more than anything else.

How did you—?

“Am I right? Mwahaha! I am a genius!”

I didn’t think you’d see right through me.

“Shocked? It was all a matter of deduction. First, I looked at your skills and found them to be far too similar to each other. Teacher has a skill called Skill Sharing, which must mean that the skills you have transfer over to Fran, as

well.”

I see.

“Those skills must therefore belong to Teacher. Still, your skill selection proves too diverse even for the most legendary of blades. Which leads me to believe that you have another way of learning skills.”

He saw right through everything. We couldn’t let our guard down around him.

“Also, your skill composition is absolutely baffling. I deduced that you didn’t gain them through leveling up the prerequisite skills.”

Prerequisite skills?

“What?”

Under normal circumstances, Shadow Magic could only be unlocked if you had the highest level of Dark Magic. Despite that, our Shadow Magic was already at Level 2. Another such oddity was Instant Regen without Regeneration. You only needed to look at our skill composition to notice something was wrong.

“I suspected you used some strange skill like Skill Taker to fatten your skill portfolio, but it seemed wrong to me. The cooldowns didn’t work out.”

Such perfect reasoning! Were we that easy to figure out with a little bit of knowledge and deductive reasoning? I’d have to be careful about Mystic Eye users in the future.

Well, no use hiding it now. We told Jean everything and asked for his help in gathering crystals. We would do most of the heavy exploration in exchange.

Jean’s response was a booming, “Agreed! Hahaha! All right then! So all I need to do is gather up the crystals which have the skills you don’t already have, yes? Then I just feed them to Teacher?”

“Yeah.”

“Worry not, for you are in good hands!”

He was as loud as he was suspicious but his necromancy was the real deal. He would prove useful in an undead dungeon.

“Also, I know of a monster who would have a skill that would be perfect for you.”

“Perfect?”

“Awoo?”

“Indeed. It is an undead monster, so there is a high likelihood of us running into one once we get to the floating island.”

Uh-huh. What’s it called?

“It is called a Mimic. An E-Rank undead monster.”

“Never heard of it.”

Fran shook her head along with Jet. I had never heard of it, either.

“As its name implies, it changes its shape and lies in wait for prey to walk past it. And then, it strikes. It isn’t particularly strong but you do have to watch out for its ambushes.”

So what skills does this Mimic have?

“It has the Mimic skill, of course. It also has an interesting skill called Identify Jammer.”

As its name implied, Identify Jammer disturbed Identify. It was weaker than Identity Protection, but when maxed out it prevented one from a lower-level Identify.

But we already have Identity Protection.

“Is Identify Jammer a good skill?”

“No, this is just the setup!”

Then why are you wasting our time…

“Because I felt like it!”

“…”

This was what we were dealing with.

“Now, now, if you’d just let me finish, you’ll see where I’m going with this. There is a D-Rank monster called a Counterfeit which is sometimes confused

with the Mimic, as they look very similar. I recommend that you slay the Counterfeit!”

“Why?”

“Counterfeits possess a Unique Skill called Fake Identity. This skill does not block Identify. However, it allows you to create false information about your stats and skills!”

So you could trick someone into thinking you’re weak by purposely putting up small numbers?

“Yes, that is what makes this skill so deadly. In a way, it is far more powerful than Identity Protection.”

Identity Protection protected your information by preventing your opponent from casting Identify on you. Seeing as you had something to hide, your opponent would invariably become wary of you.

But what about Fake Identity? Showing your opponent false information would make them think that you had no reason to hide your stats. They would let their guard down and be easier to fight, provided they believed the false information. It was more useful in an info war.

“You could even pair it with Identity Protection. Even if anyone managed to get through your Identity Protection, they would still have to deal with your complete fabrication of stats and skills! A terrifying combination, indeed.”

“I see.”

“Identity Protection is also a Unique Skill. That means it can go up against most Mystic Eye skills such as my Soul Sight!”

“I want it.”

Yeah, we’re definitely gonna need it.

I was just in the middle of mulling over how we were supposed to ward off Mystic Eye users.

“Mwahahaha! Leave it to me. On my last expedition, I found an area where Counterfeits love to spawn!”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

As expected of a Lord of the Dead! So dependable!

“Bark, bark, bark!”

“Hahaha! Don’t be so straight with me, now! You’re making me blush!”

Don’t let us down, Jean!

The necromancer was also very susceptible to praise. His pale white cheeks actually seemed to flush. He was always used to boasting so he wasn’t used to the idea of people complimenting him.

So wise and powerful and smart!

“Smart.”

“Woof.”

“Mwahahaha!”

With our encouragement, Jean puffed out his chest and let out a shrill guffaw.

Chapter 5:
Battle on the Floating Island

It was the morning after we agreed to take on Jean's request. We had spent the night at the necromancer's laboratory, and it reminded me of the first time I reincarnated into this world. Those early days of the pedestal had been filled with dread at the rustling noises of the beasts in the dark. Jean's laboratory was more… intense.

Unpredictable ghastly howling. The odd explosion coming from the basement. Otherworldly presences passing through the hallway outside our door. I was amazed Fran could sleep through all of that.

For breakfast, we had a purple egg sunny side up with some blackish green soup on the side. We also had glowing mystery meat and a glass of blue milk. Jet was served the blue milk in a bowl which he lapped up, despite it tinting the fur around his muzzle. Fran stuck out her tongue to find that it was also tinted purple.

What scared me the most was how the taste wasn't actually that bad.

We didn't get any status effects after eating it, but was it really safe? My apprehension made me check Fran's and Jet's statuses five times that morning.

After breakfast, Bernard led us down two sets of stairs to Jean's improvised laboratory. After seeing how well equipped his lab was, I uttered a quiet apology for calling it "improvised."

"Aah, I see my cutting edge laboratory has astounded you!"

It's amazing.

"Cool."

"Woof."

A giant pentagram was laid out in the center of the floor. A variety of tools such as sickles and rods hung on the walls. Flasks and mortars were arranged in an organized clutter. Poisonous herbs and ores peeked out of their respective

baskets. A dubious-looking liquid was boiling away in a large pot.

Atelier was the better word to describe the look of Jean's laboratory. It had the air of a workshop.

There was so much I wanted to play with! Like turning one of the flasks upside down, or that rainbow colored powder over there. What did that do? I felt like a nerd in science class.

Fran sniffed the air, and turned to look at one of the doors in the lab.

"What's over there?"

"Has it piqued your interest?"

"It smells like blood."

"Hahaha! The olfactory senses of a Beastman! My morgue lies behind that door. It is where I preserve all of my excellent corpses! That room over there is where I store my dangerous chemicals, and that room is where I carry out my dangerous experiments! I've reinforced it, of course. I tell you, I almost died the other day!"

A morgue? That shouldn't have come as a surprise, considering Jean was a necromancer, but it still caught me off guard. Wait, did he say he almost died? Would we really be okay here?

"Now, on to our preparations. You have a Pocket Dimension so you can carry a massive amount of items, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'll need you to bring some materials I've prepared."

"Sure thing."

I guess we were on item-carrying duty. We would carry as much as Jean wanted if it was necessary to clear the dungeon.

Fran agreed, and Jean took out a myriad items from his storage space.

"We'll need this, and this, and this one, too. We'll need that one for sure. Wait, let's bring these two along, as well. I'm not the one unloading them, anyway. Bernard, come. Right. And this one—"

Jean instructed Bernard to lay out the items he wanted on the floor. Before long, a small mountain of items had piled up.

Isn't this a bit much?

There were bottles which looked like potions to devices that didn't seem to have any specific use. There was a skull lamp and a zombie-shaped pendant, too. Were these really necessary?

Jet sniffed the item mound in curiosity.

Jet, no! You don't know where that stuff's been!

"Arf…"

Jean's inventory might curse you if you so much looked at it the wrong way.

All right. We'll split the load halfway between me and Fran.

"Okay."

We spent an hour loading the mysterious items away, asking questions about what they were for and how to use them the entire time.

"Now we're ready!"

Shall we get going?

"Finally."

"Indeed. Come with me."

Jean climbed up the stairs and exited his research lab. The only problem now was getting to the floating island.

So how are we getting up there?

"Teleportation?"

"Hmph! I am a necromancer. I do not use such boorish methods!"

Is he saying there are some spells in necromancy that would allow him to fly?

"Bwahaha! Watch and be amazed! Bernard, come!"

"Yes, sir."

"Has everything been prepared?"

“To your specifications, sir. Right this way.”

Bernard led us to the back of the lab. There was a pentagram, ten meters in diameter, engraved on the ground. On it, crystals had been meticulously organized.

“Yes! Very good!”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, behold! The essence of my magic!”

He made a cross with his forearms and pointed it heavenward before beginning to cast his spell. The act would’ve been embarrassing to behold if a junior high kid did it, but Jean pulled it off perfectly.

“So cool.”

“Woof!”

I couldn’t argue with that if I wanted to. Jean maintained his pose throughout his chanting. Mana in the air started to glow and pulse, making him look like a true spellcaster.

“__”

“__”

The spell sure took a while, though. It had almost been three minutes since he began, and that was with Speedcasting. The amount of mana reacting all around us highlighted the greatness of this spell.

Another three minutes went by.

“Overspec Undead Summoning!” Jean shouted, and with it the grand pentagram glowed with an eerie black light. A glowing back veil, ten meters high, shot out of the magic circle, temporarily blinding me, Fran, and Jet. It was as if a wellspring of shining darkness had burst out of the earth.

“Mwahahaha! Come forth, my servant! Thy name is Andy!”

“Graaaargh!”

What the hell is that?!

“Wow!”

“Grrr!”

Something crawled out of the light. It was too bright to see, but the shape slowly rose out of the circle. Once the light had subsided, what we saw made us gasp with surprise.

Fran’s eyes went wide with wonder. Jet entered a state of alert. I was trying to recover from the initial shock.

The fruit of Jean’s summoning ritual was a giant skeleton monster spanning ten meters in length. It looked like a bigger, stronger version of the Lesser Wyvern I once fought. This skeleton must be a true Wyvern.

“Heheheh… Hahaha! Bwahahaha! Behold! And cower! In FEAR!!! Hack! Cough!”

Jean started to cough in the middle of his gloating. He looked exhausted, too, and perspiration had formed on his pale face. His desire to gloat was understandable, though. Jean had succeeded in summoning a strong Skeleton Wyvern. To top it off, the undead dragon looked absolutely killer.

Name: Andy (Overspec Skeleton Wyvern)

Race: Undead Beast

Status: Vengeful Spirit; Contract; Weakness Mitigation

Level: 30

HP: 1034; Magic: 433; Strength: 539; Agility: 431

Skills: Intimidate 6; Stealth 3; Identify Jammer 3; Fear 6; Regeneration 10; Mana Barrier 5; Poison Immunity; Toxic Fang

Its stats were much stronger than a Lesser Wyvern’s.

Overspec?

The spell Jean had cast was called Overspec Undead Summoning. I wondered

what effects it had.

“Indeed. That is the status the spell imbues.”

This particular spell was unlocked upon hitting Nether Magic 5. It was a high-ranking spell, to be sure! Its effects were justly impressive.

Summoning an undead minion with this spell would give it a whopping increase in HP, Magic, Strength, and Agility. It also gave the minion the Weakness Mitigation status—which worked by softening blows to the creature’s weak spot—and increased its level of Regeneration. On the flip side, however, the summoned undead would expire after twenty-four hours. It was still well worth it, though.

“Would you like to try it as well, Jet?”

And how do you plan on doing that, exactly?

“Very simple. First, I’ll have you die—”

“Nope!”

Jet whined in fear. *Would you please stop scaring my Direwolf? You can’t just talk about killing someone’s pet in that kind of businesslike manner! These necromancers, I swear!*

“Are you sure? It won’t hurt, I promise. I won’t force you, all the same.”

Ugh… Can we just get going, please?

We hadn’t even seen the dungeon and I was already exhausted.

“In a moment. Bernard!”

“Your preparations have been made, sir.”

Bernard brought out three Skeleton Beasts, each half Andy’s size. They were called Winged Tiger Skeletons.

What are those for?

Were we going to ride them? I was pretty sure Andy was more than enough to accommodate Fran and Jean.

“No, these skeletons will act as a diversion.”

“Diversion?”

“Yes. I’m sure the dungeon has monsters protecting it from intruders, like the Skeleton Knight you encountered the other day. We could charge through the trash mobs and scatter them, but it would be a bone-breaking endeavor if we did that by ourselves. These Skeleton Beasts will go ahead of us and provide a distraction. Bwahahaha! Yes, yes, you may marvel at my infinite wisdom.”

I see. Having distractions handy was a good tactic. Jean might be dumb enough to fall for insincere compliments but his wits were indeed sharp.

Jean sent off the Winged Tiger Skeletons ahead of us and began mounting Andy, the Skeleton Wyvern.

“You must ride Andy, as well.”

“Hm.”

“There are plenty of mounting spots, just make sure you hold on tight.”

The creature was made entirely of bone, after all. Fran positioned herself between Andy’s wings and held on to a spinal column. Jet returned to her shadow. Jean took the head.

“Are we all ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we shall depart. Fly, Andy!”

“Grooooar!”

The wyvern spread its wings upon Jean’s command. It should’ve been impossible for it to fly with its skeletal wings, but gravity seemed to hold no sway over the giant creature’s body. Some kind of magic must be allowing it to fly.

“Bwahaha! Onwards to the Undead Lair!”

“Hm.”

Andy, Jean’s Skeleton Wyvern, was as strong as I expected. He exceeded the altitudes we had struggled to reach the other day with ease. The effects of the cold air and strong winds were reduced thanks to Mana Barrier, which made for

a comfortable ride.

“We’re so high up!”

Fran looked down at the distant earth with sparkling eyes.

“Indeed! Witness the earth and all the trash who inhabit it!”

“Yeah, trash.”

Fran! Do not call people trash! Call them ants, at the very least.

Then again, ants weren’t that better off, either.

“There it is!”

We broke through the clouds and saw the floating island ahead of us. There was no question that we were much closer compared to where we got yesterday.

The gigantic rock formation gently floated through the sky. The sight of it was enough to instill awe and wonder.

Whoa! It’s magnificent!

“Yeah!”

It looked just like Laputa! I almost cried!

Andy beat his wings, flying towards the floating island. I was still awestruck when I began picking up on the mana signature I felt yesterday.

The slapping winds suddenly came to a halt.

What was that?

“You felt it too, young Teacher? We’ve broken into dungeon territory, now!”

But we’re not at the dungeon yet.

“A dungeon is whatever locale ends up being affected by a Dungeon Core, regardless of whether it’s in the skies or wherever else.”

I see.

That explained the massive horde of monsters.

Monsters incoming!

“Those Bone Birds will harass us until we set foot on the island! The Skeleton Beasts have decreased their numbers but there are still plenty of them for us to fight!”

“What’s our plan?”

“Plan? Mwahahaha! The only plan worthwhile for these trash mobs is to attack them head on!”

“I see.”

Not ‘I see’! There’re still too many of them for us to be careless!

Entire flocks of Bone Birds came to stop our advance on the floating island. There must have been a hundred of them at least.

Fighting them in the sky is difficult enough, but we’d have to break our backs to face that many at once!

“You mean it’ll be a ‘bone-breaking endeavor’? Ahahaha!”

No! Now is not the time for lame puns!

“Hahaha! ’Tis a necro joke is all!”

I am going to hit this idiot!

“But seriously, those Bone Birds are much faster than Andy. Running away would be impossible.”

Don’t you have any items or spells to keep them away? Maybe an anti-undead barrier?

“Why would I waste them on trash mobs such as these?! And an anti-undead barrier would affect Andy, so that is out of the question.”

Which meant charging through the flock was our only option. Dammit, I guess we would have to get violent!

“Andy! Play to your heart’s content!”

“Groaaaar!”

“Teacher.”

We have no choice! We’ll have to fight our way through!

“Awoooo!”

And so we began to charge through the Bone Bird flock that was blocking our way. They were individually weak at G-Threat. But they gathered around like clouds. No matter how many of them we cut down they just kept coming.

Still, we managed to fend them off with Andy’s Breath Attack, Jean’s spells, Fran’s blade work, and Jet’s Air Hike. One Bone Bird after another dropped out of the sky. It was a good thing there was nothing in the fields below. We didn’t have to worry about collateral damage.

“Reverse Undead!”

“Fire Arrow!”

“Grrr! Awoooo!”

“Groaaargh!”

And me? I had left Fran to fly around killing Bone Birds. Jean knew everything anyway. Might as well go all out.

Fran was using the Enchanted Phantom Augite Blade she filched off Gyuran. It was imbued with the Illusion Element, a subset of Light Element, which made it highly effective against undead.

I… didn’t like the idea of her using a blade other than myself. I hated it! It was the worst! I felt like a girl whose crush had begun talking to some hussy. My heart was broken into pieces.

Fran, I can’t believe you’re using another blade that’s not me! Are you sick of me? Is that it?

Now wasn’t the time to voice my complaints so I held it in… and took it out on those skeleton birds, instead.

C’mere bird brains, I’ll grind you into bone meal!

I took a sick kind of pleasure in this state to begin with.

I haven’t had a buffet in a long time! Time to fill my belly with crystals!

The swarm made it easier to get up close and personal. I cut each and every one of them as they came.

It's a crystal festival!

"Hiss!"

"Caaaw!"

Not gonna work!

The Bone Birds tried to Intimidate me but it was to no avail. Their level of intimidation was far too low.

Gwahahahaha! Just stay still so I can eat your crystals!

It felt like I had become a crystal Viking.

After thirty minutes, we had broken through the great flock of Bone Birds and were now within arm's reach of the floating island. It looked much more intimidating now that we were up close.

"Big."

We're finally here.

"No, not yet."

What do you mean?

"You'll know soon enough… Here it comes!"

Jean warned, pointing his finger at the mass of flying objects headed our way.

"They're like Andy?"

"Hah! There is a similarity… but no! Andy is a skeleton of a great Wind Wyvern, while those flying bone masses were Lesser Wyverns! There is a huge difference in power!"

I identified them and found that their stats were weaker compared to the Lesser Wyvern I once fought. However, they were tougher to kill since they had the Regeneration skill. Not to mention there were about thirty of them in formation.

That wasn't our only problem, either.

There was a big *kaboom* followed by something whizzing past us. It would've

been the end of us had it landed a direct hit. I had to concentrate.

Whoa! Was that a cannonball?!

“Artillery from the floating island. They use live cannonballs so you can, with great care, capture and deflect them. You must focus your efforts on mounting our counterattack, young Teacher!”

Cannonballs. I didn’t know whether this world had gunpowder, but I was sure that you could replicate its effects with magic.

What about the wyverns?

“Leave that to me!”

“What about me?”

“Fran and Jet, you take care of the Bone Birds! We haven’t eliminated them all quite yet!”

“On it.”

“Woof!”

We had entered the second half of our landing campaign.

I defended us against the incoming cannon fire. At times I cut them in half, others I would deflect using magic. There were a lot of them with each volley; they must have lots of cannons lined up.

A volley of five came rapidly at us.

Flare Blast!

That was close. The spell had managed to deflect them to the side but if I had delayed even slightly, we would’ve taken a hit or two. My tactic worked this time, but we’d be in a dangerous position if the shelling continued.

Jean! How did you get through this last time?!

“I had the assistance of the Skeleton Griffon, Milco! Cannon fire was useless against Milco’s Wind Armor! We charged through the ranks and landed!”

So he bruteforced it! He hadn’t summoned the Skeleton Griffon, so I guess it was gone forever. Jean must have done an Overspec summoning.

“Gyooo!!”

Damn it, these Lesser Wyvern Skeletons were annoying! But I couldn’t do anything to them since my “hands” were full defending us against cannonballs!

They were fast, so fast that Jean had trouble landing a hit. Thankfully, a hit was all it needed to take them down.

Oh boy, this looks bad.

A wyvern had gone after Fran. It opened its skeletal mouth to bite her but Andy smashed it with his chin before it could get the chance. Good job, Andy! Half of the Lesser Wyvern flock was still flying around, however. We weren’t out of the woods yet.

“Thanks, Andy.”

Even with Andy’s strength, he wouldn’t be able to handle that many wyverns. He was beginning to get roughed up in spite of his Regeneration.

Jean, what the hell are we gonna do?!

“Silence! Be patient and let me focus!”

I turned to see Jean charging a softball-sized sphere with mana. The sphere was a special magical item made of undead crystal. It allowed its user to summon undead minions. Jean had called it a Summon Sphere. It was among the items he had us shove into our Pocket Dimension the other day.

Was this his ace in the hole?

“All right, it’s ready. Teacher, Jet, fall back!”

Got it.

“Woof!”

“Fran, you stay right there! Trust me on this one!”

“Hm!”

The way Jean put it made me worry even more. I was amazed Fran could nod in agreement!

“Mwahaha! Good answer!”

So, what now?

“Now is time for *this*! Andy, do it!”

“Groaaargh!”

“Whoa.”

He’s changing?

At Jean’s command, Andy’s bones began to shift. His skeletal rearrangement was accompanied by a dull grinding noise. The wyvern’s ribs and sternum rose to cover Fran and Jean. More layers of bone were added to provide protection for the people inside it.

His wings folded to cover his body, too; although it had no bearing on his flight since he flew with magic. Andy now looked like a skeleton ball with a wyvern’s skull peeking on top of it.

“Instant Summon!”

As we were still reeling from Andy’s transformation, Jean summoned something new. Instant Summon allowed its user to summon a part of a minion’s body for a short period of time. It was much weaker compared to a full summon, but the catalyst would suffer no damage even if the part of the minion were to die.

“A slime?”

Wh-what?! Damn it!

“It’s on our side! Just stay still!”

Jean had summoned a blood-red slime. I would’ve killed it if Jean hadn’t stopped me. The slime began crawling towards and covered our bodies.

Jean?

“It’ll be fine!”

Jean told us to stay still. Was this thing going to melt us? The undead slime called Undead Ooze assisted Andy in protecting us.

All this happened while Andy was still getting bombarded by cannon fire. He was still holding on somehow, though for how much longer I didn’t know. What

on earth was Jean's plan?

"Andy, you've done well!"

"Roar!"

"Now, do it!"

Upon Jean's command, Andy turned around. His head was pointed away from the floating island.

"BLAAARGH!"

Andy loosed his charged-up attack. The bright beam of light painted a line across the empty sky. It took down close to thirty of the Bone Birds who had the misfortune of fluttering in the way. It was without a doubt the greatest display of force we had seen today.

Now a cannonball propelled by his breath attack, Andy charged towards the floating island, crashing through the bone wyverns which stood in his way.

"Mwahaha! Perfect, Andy! All according to plan!"

We're going too fast!

"Unnh…"

G-forces pressed on Fran and Jean from how fast we were accelerating. Fran held on to Andy's bones in a desperate attempt to stay in place.

Would Andy be all right after using such a breath attack? Andy's mana began depleting, and fast. Undead sustained themselves with mana and would expire once their mana stores were emptied. Things didn't look good for him.

Andy never ceased firing his beam, and because of it we were fast approaching the floating island.

Crash!

We felt a light impact which turned out to be the island's wall. It was no match for Andy in his current state.

Jean turned to Fran before taking cover.

"Fran, be careful so you don't bite your tongue off!"

“Mm!”

Kaboom!

“Hrrghh!”

“Ow.”

“Ruff!”

Whoa!

Andy the Cannonball had successfully crash-landed into the floating island and formed a giant crater.

Fran let go of the bone she had held on to during the crash and began dusting bone bits and pieces off herself. She would’ve suffered massive injuries if the Undead Ooze hadn’t absorbed most of the shock.

The crater creating impact proved too much for the Undead Ooze to handle. There was not much left of it now; its Physical Resistance skill was unable to completely nullify the shock of the impact.

Andy was in shambles and could not return to his original shape. His shell and crystal were both shattered. There were bits of bone around him, though I couldn’t tell if they belonged to our Undead Wyvern or not.

The only thing we could recognize was half of his skull.

After Fran and the others had crawled out of Andy’s remains, they went to his side to give him words of appreciation and thanks. That was the least we could do. His bones were already beginning to turn to dust.

“Andy, I shall never forget your loyalty.”

“Thank you.”

“Woof!”

That was a hell of a show.

“Groar…”

“I shall send you off myself. Rest in peace, friend. Ascension.”

Andy let out a final rumble.

Jean’s spell had a warmth which you would never guess came from a necromancer. The warm light shone out of the necromancer’s hand to envelop his undead comrade. Andy’s remains began shining and rose. His body began breaking down into shards of light which were then taken into the great sky.

It was a beautiful sight.



“Goodbye.”

Fran watched and waved her hand until the last of the light had gone.

It had been two hours since we landed on the island thanks to Andy’s sacrifice.

“I see it. There’s the entrance to the dungeon proper!”

We had passed a forest filled with prowling skeletons and zombies and were now in sight of some kind of ancient ruins.

Our trip through the forest had been uneventful. The monsters inhabiting it were weak, and although they could conceal their presence, they were nothing special. They weren’t much of a threat, even in large numbers. About the only noteworthy thing that happened was my getting excited during crystal absorption. Trash mobs as they were, I still got a significant boost to my crystal counter from their sheer number.

Jean had pointed to a small ruined building. Vines had crept all over it and the rock surface was covered with moss. No one had been here in months, if not years. It reminded me of the ruins surrounding my pedestal. My home had looked like a shrine, whereas this had a more temple-like feel to it.

At the center of the temple ruins was a stairwell leading down.

“Here we are! The last time I was here, just looking for this place had left me exhausted, but it is not the case today! Haha! We can explore to our hearts’ content!”

Anything we need to look out for? There must be dangerous traps around here. You said you had some secret plan the other night?

“I shall lead the way. You take care of the fighting.”

“All right.”

“Woof, woof!”

“Now, could you take out the first of the Summon Spheres?”

“Sure. This one?”

Fran took out a summon sphere which had the number “one” written on it out of her Pocket Dimension.

“Indeed. Hold on.”

Jean began chanting his summoning spell.

“Summon High Undead!”

The spell allowed him to summon a stronger minion at the cost of more mana.

He summoned a humanoid undead this time. It looked like a straightforward zombie, or perhaps an armored mummy. From a distance it looked like a brown-skinned, emaciated human being. It was even wearing fancy red clothes.

“Your name is Selkan!”

“Vargh.”

Name: Selkan (Custom Revenant)

Race: Undead

Status: Contract, Undead

Level: 14

HP: 69; Magic: 165; Strength: 33; Agility: 56

Skills: Regeneration 10; Instant Regen 4; Disarm Trap 5; Sense Trap 4; Dexterous; Enhanced Regeneration

“Heheh! I have prepared this Custom Undead for this day! His special abilities will serve us well!”

The Revenant was customized specifically to take point in a party. He had great regenerative ability in exchange for his weak combat capabilities. He would go ahead of us to spot traps and disarm them when possible. If not, he would go ahead and trigger the trap and act as our meat shield. He was as useful as he was pitiful.

“Bwahaha. Onwards, Selkan!”

“Vargh!”

Jean pointed Selkan to the entrance. The revenant proved his worth immediately. He could disarm most traps and the ones he was forced to trigger had little effect on him.

“Vargh!”

Spikes came out of the ceiling and stabbed Selkan. He wasn’t able to disarm this trap so he had to take its punishment. It didn’t take long for his Regeneration to trigger and soon he was back at full health. Jean covered for the mana cost of Regeneration so he was in no risk of running out. Selkan didn’t get lost either, since Jean had passed on knowledge of his previous run. He was doing good work.

We smoothly carried out our exploration, barely stopping at all. Fran and I took down whatever zombies that happened to come from behind. They went down before they got close.

So far so good.

“Yes, so far…”

There was a hint of worry in Jean’s voice.

What’s wrong?

“I was forced to turn back here last time because I ran out of supplies. I don’t know what awaits us in this hall.”

“Is there something in the hall?”

“It is something of a monster closet. Middle-tier monsters tend to spawn there.”

There was another staircase leading down at the far end of the hall.

We slowed down our pace. We had to take into account the chances of running into new trap and gimmicks, not to mention stronger monsters.

We started by entering the so-called monster hall.

Let’s start the battle with some magic.

“Hm.”

“Bark!”

And so, our annihilation began.

Tri Explosion!

“Fire Javelin.”

“Hell Storm!”

“Awooo!”

Our initial volley of spells took down a good thirty undead in the room. About fifty of them were left now.

But that wasn’t to be the end of it. One undead monster after another crawled out of the magic circle. Mid-tier armored monsters like the Zombie Soldier, Skeleton Warrior, and Armored Ghoul were thrown into the mix. Their armor increased their already ghoulish strength.

Let’s go!

“Hm!”

“Grrr!”

They were still no match for us. Fran found it much easier to fight monster hordes in a trapless room. Flame Magic was also particularly effective against the undead.

We took down all the undead after a good twenty minutes of fighting.

“Bwahaha! Splendid!”

That was easy.

“Super easy.”

“Munch, munch.”

Jet was chowing down as usual. Would his stomach be alright after eating zombies? If yogurt is slightly off milk then maybe…? The zombies did look a bit like jerky. No, it couldn’t be. Well, as long as Jet was enjoying his meal, then I was all right with it.

“Let’s take a short break here.”

I took a certain magical tool and passed it to Jean, per his request. It looked like an ordinary rock, but he said it was imbued with Cleansing Magic. When combined with Jean’s Necromancy, the Cleansing Rock set up a barrier that would send any undead that got near us to the afterlife.

We sat in the protection of the barrier for about an hour. It was now lunchtime, so I took out a serving of curry upon Fran’s special request.

“Mm. Supreme.”

I’m surprised you haven’t gotten sick of that thing.

She would compliment me on its taste despite having curry every other day. Her tail stood at attention which told me she wasn’t lying.

I offered Jean some curry, as well, and he enjoyed the stuff so much, he had three servings in total. Seeing the dark master of the undead mixing a plate of curry was a surreal sight to behold.

“Hmph.”

Fran, stop glaring at the magi! We still have lots to go around! You could afford to share a plate or two of your curry. My little girl tended to get aggressive when it came to food.

Jet was munching on the femur of a Lizard Skeleton he received from Jean. The density of bone made for a delectable chew for the Direwolf.

I asked Jean about necromancy since we had some downtime. I had learned from our experience with Amanda that asking an expert was more effective than researching the subject by myself.

“I applaud you for having curiosity and being forthcoming! Ask me anything you want!”

Jean was more than happy to tell me about his craft since he was a researcher. In fact, he needed no prompting and just spoke off the cuff about things I didn’t even ask. We learned a lot about necromancy as a result.

What surprised me most was the concept of a soul. I initially thought necromancy as a craft where one manipulated souls into inhabiting dead bodies

and then controlled them. That was not the case.

In this world, only the gods had the authority to affect souls. Upon death, a soul would make its way to the Netherworld, home of the God of the Dead. This was why people of this world tolerated necromancy. Not to sound crass, but a corpse without a soul is little more than an empty shell: close to worthless now that a soul was no longer inhabiting it. Not everyone felt the same way, of course.

In any case, necromancy did not disturb the restful sleep of the dead, it did not manipulate souls of the dead into doing one's bidding, and it certainly was not an evil, sacrilegious practice.

The Necromancy spell, Create Undead, could only control a corpse by imbuing it with a pseudo-soul created with mana. In that, it was closer to a golem than an undead proper. Necromancy awakened the memory of old spells and skills that a body still had in it. The body's memory of its past life was what allowed it to move.

Massive accumulations of mana could have a similar pseudo-soul effect on a corpse lying next to some crystals. This was how undead came about in the wild, and they were just as soulless as the domesticated type.

There were special cases, however, like the Vengeful Spirit skill that Andy had.

When a creature is on the brink of death, it is overcome with the overwhelming desire to survive. This act of will is akin to a candle burning its brightest before it goes out. It is so strong that it binds a part of the creature's soul with its crystal, creating a Vengeful Spirit when turned into an undead.

This was the reason why using Vengeful Spirits was highly recommended for Necromancers; they could be purified and ascend. It meant saving the lost souls who wandered the world holding painful grudges. Purifying a Vengeful Spirit meant one less threat to humanity. There were even necromancers who made the purification of spirits their mission, travelling from country to country.

"I never did care for people much. That is why I have them fight for me in exchange for purifying them. It's a bit of a give-and-take, you see. Heh, I can't believe any of them would thank me after I was done with them. Such foolishness! Hahaha!"

You say that, but you cast Ascension on Andy today.

Ascension was spell which cleared a soul's conscience and allowed its soul fragment to ascend. It was the signature spell of Nether Magic, and I first read about in the Guild's Reference Room.

The spell consumed a lot of mana to affect an individual soul. The spell was also known to reduce the caster's lifespan if the soul bore a lot of resentment. In practice, Jean had not been in top fighting shape ever since we landed. He didn't have to cast Ascension on Andy—the Bone Wyvern would've simply dissipated with time—and yet he did.

"H-hmph! A proper send-off was the least I could do for a loyal subject such as Andy. Do you have a problem with that?!"

"Nope. Good job."

No objections here.

"Woof!"

"Y-you really think so?"

We shared a heartfelt moment together. Jean looked like he felt embarrassed for instigating it, though. He was blushing all the way to his ears. He changed the subject by talking about our next step in a loud voice.

"Aha-ahahaha! Now we can advance to the second floor!"

I decided to cut Jean a break and let the moment go.

Do you really have no information about the second floor?

"Not in the slightest!"

That wasn't something to be proud of.

"But fear not! For I have a plan!"

"What kind?"

"This kind!"

Jean took out a familiar-looking Summon Sphere in response to Fran's question. He must have a special monster ready like Selkan. I couldn't wait to

see what came out of it.

What's in it?

"You'll see… Heheheh… Now, make way!"

We backed off, and Jean started casting his summoning spell again.

"Summon High Undead!"

Jean's undead summoning had become a familiar sight to us by now.

Something rushed out of the crystal. It was either mist or steam, I couldn't tell. In any case, the summoning ritual produced a formless gas creature.

"A cloud?"

"Meet part two of my ultimate plan for dungeon domination! This is Fly, the Custom Gust!"

Name: Fly (Custom Gust)

Race: Undead

Status: Contract; Undead

Level: 7

HP: 22; Magic: 401; Strength: 8; Agility: 36

Skills: Dispersion 7; Cartography 6; Communication 3; Shadow Clone 7; Mana Absorption 6; Trap Sense 3; Physical Immunity

This guy was specifically tailored for exploration. He was a mist monster called a Gust.

Fran reached out to touch the fluffy Fly, but her hand passed right through him. Jet followed his master's conduct and tried to bite into the cloud, but he might as well have been chewing smoke.

"Oooh."

"Woof!"

They seemed to have fun with the necromancer's minion, playing with the puff of white smoke. The heartwarming sight was almost enough to make you forget you were in a dungeon.

"Fly will chart the map with his Cartography and send it to us with Communication. We would be able to get a full map of the dungeon without lifting a finger! Mwahaha! My genius makes even my own hair stand on end!"

Exploration would be a cinch with Fly around. His mist form could get through every nook and cranny, and could immediately send the information he gathered to his master. His Shadow Clones also allowed him to cover a lot of ground at once. He was also hard to kill thanks to his survivability skills.

"Now go, Fly!"

Fly began splitting himself into twenty clones, all of them weak, but fighting wasn't exactly their purpose, anyway. The clones began to quietly move out, and to the untrained eye, they looked like mist being blown about by the wind.

"And now we wait for the map information."

And what's our formation?

"Same as always. Selkan takes point. You take care of any long distance threats."

"Got it."

Fran hadn't had her fill of battle yet. The trash mobs had been too easy for her. She puffed out her chest and pumped her fist in a show of enthusiasm.

"I couldn't go beyond this floor last time. And I had Fly scout ahead, too."

So you have the basic layout of the floor in your head?

I thought he said he didn't know anything about this floor.

"I don't. Fly wasn't able to move past this area last time. I've made improvements to him so we shouldn't have any problems now."

"So you don't know what's ahead of us?"

"Well, I do know one thing. The Counterfeit you're looking for spawns in the next area. That was what stopped Fly from advancing last time."

Really? Nice! Now I'm motivated!

"Yeah."

"Aroo!"

That was the entire reason why we came!

"All right, take this. Eat it before the battle starts."

"What are these?"

"Mwahaha. These are my specialty Soul Potions! Drink it, and you will reduce the incoming damage of Undead types, and it increases your resistance to attacks such as Mind Control."

That's an amazing potion! It must be expensive, huh?

"'Tis nothing. You could find one in the marketplace if you looked hard enough. They go for 100,000G a potion."

That's expensive!

Should you really be handing expensive stuff like that out?

"It's all pennies to me. Besides, the ingredients barely cost 20,000G!"

There's a B-Rank adventurer for you, calling 100,000G pennies. But I guess the image of fast money was the entire reason behind dreamers becoming adventurers.

"I'll take it then."

"Use all the items I give you as you see fit. It would be to my disadvantage should we get separated."

I was so happy we had a generous client for once. Still, I was a cheapskate by nature, and tended to end up hoarding most of my usable items. I was the kind of guy who would save the best healing items like Elixirs and Yggdrasil Leaves all the way up to the end of the game and end up not using any of them. Not that I would stick to that policy if Fran was in danger.

"Onwards!"

And so we made our way down to the second floor.

The entrance to the second floor was a long corridor. Countless half-visible shadows jumped around us as we walked down the long, narrow hallway.

This corridor was in fact our destination.

Among these spirits were Mimics, and we might run into its stronger cousin, the Counterfeit, in the mix.

Come on out, Counterfeit!

Thirty minutes had passed since we charged through the hallway.

Raaagh!

“Ooo…”

Dammit! That one was no good, either. What about you?!

“Ooorg…”

Still nothing!

“Wooo…”

“Ooo…”

This is getting frustrating! Which one of you is a Counterfeit?!

We continued to fight in the hallway. Spirit-type monsters like Wraiths, Ghosts, and Specters boxed us in from all four directions. Sometimes they would even come out of the ground and the walls.

I used Elemental Blade: Fire, just so I could deal damage to the spirits. This tactic would’ve been impossible if I didn’t have any mana.

We had increased the level of Mana Absorption earlier. The bodies of these Spirit monsters were composed entirely of mana, making them weak to Mana Absorption. We bumped the skill up to Level 3 for dual purposes of attack and mana recovery.

I was left with 1 EP now. The skill would come in handy during long fights so I considered it a worthwhile investment.

Add that to Elemental Blade and I was taking down these spirits with one

slice. I was maintaining my 1500 MP no problem. Now we just had to kill a Counterfeit and take its Fake Identity skill.

Jean! Have you found any Counterfeits on your side?

“Not yet, no.”

“Are they even here?”

“I do not know!”

We’re only fighting out of faith, here!

“Woof, woof!”

Fran and the others had their hands full as well. Every Mimic could be a Counterfeit in disguise. I was on Mimic/Counterfeit-slaying duty so the others wouldn’t have to worry about breaking the Counterfeit’s crystal.

The Spirit Potion had been effective in shutting out the Mental Status Effects the Spirit types tended to inflict on their prey. They were little more than an annoyance now since their physical attack power was laughable.

Another thirty minutes went by. I was cutting down my umpteenth Mimic of the day when I felt a strange sensation.

What was that…?

The crystal counter went up by too much for it to be an ordinary Mimic. It felt like a stronger, higher-ranked Mimic.

I frantically reached for my skills.

Unique Skill Fake Identity!

The skill I had been working so hard to attain had now been added to my list.

I got it! I got Fake Identity! Finally.

“Excellent! Then our work here is done.”

Damn right it is!

“Finally.”

“Arf.”

Frustration had been building up for a while. Fran, Jet, and Jean took all their pent up frustration and unleashed it in the form of magic. The barrage of ranged magic annihilated everything in the hallway, and the stragglers were easily picked off with lower level magic.

The battle, which had been going on for over an hour, was over in an instant. We would’ve been able to clear the hallway in about five minutes if we hadn’t been looking for the Counterfeit.

“Hm?”

“Woof?”

I’m sorry. Please don’t look at me like that. I really wanted Fake Identity. We’ll just chalk it up to necessary struggle and be done with it.

“Congratulations, young Teacher.”

Thanks. I’ve already set it but how does it look? I’ve hidden my skills and reduced stats, but can you still see through it with Soul Sight?

I asked Jean to examine me with Fake Identity on. If it could fool Jean’s identification skill then it was good enough to fool the rest of them.

“Well?”

“Hmm… Yes, perfect. Your stats are about half of what they were before.”

“And the skills?”

“I can’t see the skills at all. You should put more thought into its usage, though. It would be much too suspicious for you not to have a single skill. You must craft your identity so that it won’t seem blatantly obvious.”

Yeah, I know.

What fake information should I put up? I could have some fun with this. Now, I could fool enemies into thinking, “Your power level is only at five? How weak,” and then going, “Actually it’s at fifty-three thousand,” after showing off our real strength.

Heheheh. We’re in for some fun times.

“Teacher, you’re being creepy.”

Back to clearing the dungeon.

We began to advance again with Fly taking the lead. Fly’s abilities were much more powerful than I thought. We were making our way through the uncharted second floor as quickly as we did the first. Moreover, we knew the exact location of every treasure box.

We had no holdups after the Spirit Hallway, and soon reached the second floor boss room.

Felling the boss only took us a few minutes. A barrage of Flame Magic made quick work of the giant Ogre Zombie. I got a decent amount of crystals out of it, too, making it quite the tasty meal. I had my points stored and was ready to invest.

The long-awaited system voice chimed in my head the moment I absorbed the Ogre Zombie’s crystal.

You have reached a new evolution level. You have gained 50 EP.

Yes!

Mwahaha! Now I could get even stronger! What should I level up this time? Then again, maybe I should wait until after we were out of the dungeon.

Name: Teacher

User: Fran

Race: Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 524, MP: 3000/3000; Durability: 2800/2800

Mana Conductivity: A+

Evolution: [Rank 10; Crystals: 4511/5500; Skill Capacity: 89; EP: 51]

Skills: Identify 7; Identity Protection; Change Shape; High Speed Self Repair;

Telekinesis; Telekinesis Up (low); Telepathy; Attack Up (low); User Status Up (medium); User Recovery Rate Up (low); MP Up (low); Skill Capacity Up (medium); Bestiary; Skill Sharing; Mage

My Mana Conductivity had finally increased! I was getting closer to my ultimate goal. I got a new skill out of it, too.

Change Shape: Consume mana to change one's shape.

Did that mean I could turn into another weapon? I would have to test it on the enemies we ran into after this.

Still, this raid was surprisingly easy.

Compared to the struggle to land on the island, the interior of the dungeon had been too lax… was I overthinking it?

We fought more zombies and skeletons on the third floor. There were more dangerous traps, but they were of no threat to us, thanks to Selkan.

We were going at a good pace with little to no time wasted.

Now we just had to look for Jean's Ghost Eater. It'd be best if we could clear the dungeon, of course.

So what does this Ghost Eater look like?

"Mwahahaha! I haven't a clue!" Jean exclaimed, puffing out his chest boastfully.

What? But I thought you wanted to capture it.

How could he not know when capturing the Ghost Eater was his entire reason for coming here?

"They say it initially looks like a normal zombie you'd find anywhere. But it is not limited to looking like that since it started eating ghosts. The Ghost Eater was a giant being the last time I saw it before making my retreat. I have no clue what it looks like now."

Where did you see it last?

“In the forest above the dungeon. The Dungeon Master must have summoned it to chase me away.”

“You couldn’t beat him?”

“Indeed. I am not a powerful necromancer. I have thought of several anti-Ghost Eater measures, however. Not that it displayed its full strength. My minions were consumed by the Ghost Eater before I could bring my plan to fruition. A pitiful thing.”

It sounds strong.

We were dealing with a creature strong enough that Jean, a B-Rank master of necromancy, couldn’t defeat it even with preparations.

“Well, it’s all right if we can’t capture it. We don’t even know where that thing is. I had initially wanted it for the purposes of clearing this dungeon. I don’t need it anymore now that you’re here.”

So we don’t have to look for it?

“Indeed.”

It was easier for us that way. Looking for the spawn location of a single monster in this big dungeon was undoubtedly difficult.

“We’ll cross paths with it if the gods would have it.”

So we carried on deeper into the dungeon without stopping for detours.

Two days had gone by since we entered the dungeon. We had cleared the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth floors. We faced weak enemies all the way up to the sixth floor which made for perfect hunting grounds. I even had enough leeway to test out Change Shape.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t use it to its full potential as of yet. I could change myself into a spear, a shield, and other such instruments of war, but it was of no use to us at the moment.

First off, it consumed a huge amount of mana to get started. Further,

maintaining the change drained even more mana. I only had Sword Skills leveled up, and I couldn't change my size either to make a bigger weapon. There had to be a creative way of using this skill, but I couldn't think of anything at the moment. I'd need to experiment with this, too.

Monsters began to spawn more frequently by the time we got to the seventh floor, and most of the hateful fiends came equipped with special abilities. Our fights started taking longer as stronger monsters were mixed in with the mob. D-Rank threats such as the Hellhound Zombie, Naga Skeleton, and Skeleton Dark Paladin started spawning on the ninth floor.

We wouldn't have gotten this far if not for Jean's preparations. The monsters were relentless in their assault, and letting our guard down was a sure-fire way of getting pummeled. Jean, who would purify and control his enemies, was as versatile as a Joker card in this Undead Dungeon. We didn't get lost and were able to explore smoothly thanks to Selkan and Fly.

Jean's cornucopia of items proved their worth many times over.

I never expected that the skull-shaped lamp was used to set up an anti-undead barrier. We were able to rest at night without worry, although the constant groans of the zombies outside the field was a bit disturbing. I was amazed at how Fran, and Jean for that matter, were able to sleep without a care in the world despite this.

Jean probably slept better between the two. Some zombies had approached the edges of our safety field while we were eating and Fran scrunched her face at the sight of them, adjusting her position so they wouldn't end up in her line of sight. Jean, on the other hand, was completely unaffected and chowed down his food without pausing.

They were zombies, you know? Shambling corpses? They were rotten and strange fluids leaked out of their bodies. Jean was used to them since he was a necromancer by trade, but he still made me squeamish when he took a bite of his meat and said, "Those zombies look quite fresh."

We carried on our trek of the ninth floor until we reached the boss room.

As it was with all the floors before this, the boss room was sealed off behind a great heavy door. We'd seen it many times by now. The layout of this dungeon

was complex like a maze, but it consistently ended each floor with a boss room.

So that's the ninth floor boss room.

The Ogre Zombie we fought on the second floor had been weak, but stronger monsters had protected every floor after that. The eighth floor had been guarded by an Elder Zombie Great Lancer, a magical spear wielding undead who had Advanced Spear Mastery and Advanced Spear Arts. His spear was able to deflect magic, and Fran's health dipped below fifty percent for the first time since we got to this dungeon. We got Advanced Spear Mastery and Advanced Spear Arts for our troubles, at least. I might be able to debut my spear form sooner than later. Unfortunately, we got a little overzealous and destroyed the enchanted spear in the process. It would've fetched a fair price since it was a decently strong piece of enchanted gear.

"Are we ready?"

"Yeah."

"Selkan, open the door!"

"Varg!"

Selkan slowly opened the heavy door. We started casting our spells in the meantime. By the time the door was fully opened, we let loose our barrage of magic into the room.

Flare Blast!

"Hexagon Tornado!"

"Hell Blaze!"

"Grr!"

The opening spell volley had become our standard approach. Our spells immediately went after the skeleton clad in golden armor who was standing in the middle of the room.

"Kakaka!"

The skeleton stood its ground, however, with no sign of taking damage.

The eighth floor boss had defended himself using his spear which had anti-

magic powers, but the same could not be said for this skeleton. It didn't even go into a defensive stance. Magic didn't seem to affect it much, thanks to its high level of Magic Resistance. It stood intimidatingly after taking our spell barrage which destroyed its sixth floor cousin in one round.

Name: Legendary Skeleton Dark Knight

Race: Undead

Status: Guardian; Undead

Level: 24

HP: 1568/1693; Magic: 988; Strength: 637; Agility: 436

Skills: Sense Jammer 6; Sword Arts 10; Advanced Sword Arts 1; Sword Mastery 10; Advanced Sword Mastery 1; Regeneration 8; Automated Mana Strike 6; Abnormal Status Resistance 9; Control Undead 4; Necromancy 8; Mental Abnormal Status Resistance 9; Elemental Blade 6; Poison Magic 6; Magic Resistance 9; Dark Magic 4; Spirit Manipulation

Extra Skill: Unleash Potential

Title: Dungeon Guardian

Equipment: Enchanted Sword Death Gaze; Orihalcon Full Plate; Nether Mantle

The skeleton began moving slowly. The mere sight of him was intimidating, not to mention his massive amount of mana. This was a B-Rank Threat to be sure.

The skeleton was the same tier as the daemon we had faced. The daemon was the stronger between the two where stats were involved, but the skeleton definitely had more defense by way of skill selection.

Regeneration 8, Abnormal Status Resistance 9, Mental Abnormal Status Resistance 9, Magical Resistance 9, are you kidding me? It also donned an orihalcon armor, known for its high resistance to magic. Spells would be useless

against it. It was without a doubt a deadly enemy.

However, Jet, Fran, and I weren't scared. In fact, we had been waiting for this moment.

Hello again, bonehead!

"Time to pay for what you did to us in the skies."

"Woof!"

This had been the Skeleton Knight which blocked our path on our initial trip to the floating island.

Heheheh. Finally, time for some payback!

Jean, this one's ours. Back off.

"This is a difficult foe for me to face. I shall focus on healing you."

The Skeleton Knight drew his sword as if understanding our desire to fight. It was as motivated as we were.

"Kukaka!"

"Hm."

I guess his horse is a summon.

The Skeleton Knight swung its sword and immediately a magic circle appeared at his side. A Skeleton Horse galloped out of it, shrouded with purple mana. That horse had given us a lot of grief, too. We'd beat this dead horse yet.

"Brr!"

The undead horse stood on its hind legs and neighed. It was ready for a fight.

However, the Skeleton Knight showed no signs of climbing on his horse. It was obvious when I thought about it. We might be in a large hall but it still wasn't big enough for a horse to run around in. He would immediately smash into a wall if he tried to run at full throttle. He had summoned the horse purely to bolster his offense.

"Grrr…"

Jet growled as he watched the horse. The horse had also locked on to Jet in

return. They looked like they were talking to each other as fellow summons.

All right, you can take the horse, Jet.

“Don’t lose.”

“Woof!”

Fran and I turned our full attention back to the Skeleton Knight.

“Teacher.”

Yep.

Fran sheathed her phantom augite dagger. I had been flying around to my heart’s content up until now but we wouldn’t be able to beat the Skeleton Knight if we didn’t get serious.

Fran gripped me, assumed her position. Having her wield me just felt right.

“I knew it. Wielding you feels just right, Teacher.”

Hahaha!

I burst into laughter upon Fran’s sentiment. Fran and I were the perfect combination.

“?”

It’s nothing. Together we’re unstoppable.

“Of course.”

All right, we haven’t had a tough fight in a while. Let’s put our backs into it!

Yeah!

And with that, Fran leapt towards the Skeleton Knight.

She swung her sword, fully intent on ending the fight with the first strike. We already had our skirmish in the sky, after all.

But the Skeleton Knight proved to be a formidable swordsman. He parried Fran’s frenzied slashes while countering them with equally powerful strikes.

The two of them fell silent, the sound of clanging swords filling the large hall instead. Their duel was straightforward but anyone watching it would fall into

captivated awe at the two non-human combatants.

However, Fran was the weaker of the two; her stats were much lower and they were evenly matched in the number of battle arts they had. With a little help from my support skills and magic, they were just about evenly matched.

There was also another reason why she was in a stalemate.

Our enemy had Sense Jammer 6, making us unable to spot its crystal location even when we had Mana Sense. I had wanted to launch a surprise attack using Telekinetic Catapult at first but that was not in the cards for us. I could use a chain of Catapults and hope to get lucky, but…

“Urgh! Ha!”

“Kaka!”

The Skeleton Knight’s title, Dungeon Guardian, was the real problem. Its health and mana would heal as long as he fought within the dungeon.

I didn’t want to blindly use a skill which greatly consumed my mana against an enemy with such great regenerative capabilities. Moreover, he might develop a counter to the Telekinetic Catapult if I used it too early. We were forced to whittle it down…

Another annoying move was Automated Mana Strike 6. As its name implied, it automatically attacks its surrounding opponents with bursts of mana. Seeing that it was automated, the Skeleton Knight’s movement had nothing to do with it. It was difficult to predict, and it often activated when we were off balance or trying to catch our breath. The damage was significant, too. It made Fran reel with the recoil, and she had already had several close calls that day.

We had leveled up Mana Barrier as a countermeasure, so damage wasn’t as much of an issue as before. Mana Barrier reduced the damage of other attacks, too, so it was much more worthwhile than I initially thought.

Still, all my saved up EP was steadily dropping.

How are you doing, Jet?

I looked over to Jet’s battleground, where he was getting pushed back. He and the undead horse were about evenly matched in terms of physical size, but

the horse had had more combat experience. Jet tried to ambush the horse from behind only to receive a kick to the face which threw him across the room.

The horse had better regeneration since it was undead; it was able to recover quickly from most of its wounds. The horse was also highly resistant towards Dark Magic. Jet found it difficult to land a single hit.

Jet and the horse were going to take more time.

But we were really stuck in the same situation!

“Haaa!”

“Kakaka!”

Clang!

The fight must have been going for ten minutes.

Crink!

I heard the high-pitched echo of glass bells, completely unlike the clanging between steel and steel. The sound was apparently Fran’s Black Cat Protection activating. The Skeleton Knight’s sword, Death Gaze, had activated its latent power of Instant Death. The sound signified the protection of the Black Cat Armor.

Thanks, Garrus! We’ll see you in Ulmutt! The Black Cat set you made had saved Fran’s life.

But Fran was still at a disadvantage even with the Anti Death embedded in her armor. Our opponent was undead and didn’t know what exhaustion was. If this turned into a battle of attrition, we would lose body and soul.

Still, we hadn’t dragged on the fight this long for nothing.

Fran, it’s probably the head.

“Hm!”

I observed the Skeleton Knight’s movements even as I let Fran swing me around to try and figure out where its crystal was located.

There were some attacks he didn’t bother to deflect since he didn’t feel pain and could just recover from the damage. It was much more effective to launch a

counterattack from that position. However, he would always block all attempts we made at attacking his head.

Which meant his head was the one part of his body he had to protect at all costs. Bad things happened if his head got busted open.

Your immortality will be the death of you!

“Haa!”

“Kakakaka!”

Our opponent was still a tough nut to crack. He wasn’t going to let us attack his weak point that easily.

The duelists became more intense in their defense and offense. Fran went on the aggressive, prepared to take a hit for an even trade. The bone knight focused on landing a counterattack as he started to solely focus on protecting his head.

“Hmph!”

“Ka!”

“There!”

“Kakkaka!”

The skeleton was now completely focused on Fran!

Jet!

“Growl!”

“Ka?”

Jet immediately responded and leapt at the Skeleton Knight from behind.

I had told Jet to hinder the horse’s movements since killing it proved difficult. He would wait for my signal and then hop over to our duel for an assist. He kept a close eye on both the Skeleton Knight and his steed for a chance to jump in.

Jet clamped on the Skeleton Knight’s right leg and locked him down.

“Now!”

Rraaargh!

Fran jumped towards the horse who was stunned by Jet's disappearance. The Skeleton Knight was unable to help his steed as Jet had a strong lock on his leg.

"Brr…?"

I already know where your crystal is, buddy.

Fran pierced me into the undead horse's neck.

"Brrrr!!!" The Skeleton Horse's death cry was pitiful.

"Kaka!"

The Skeleton Knight tried in vain to reach for his dying steed. By the time he got to his horse, there was nothing left of it.

Now Jet could help us in beating this guy. It should make our fight easier.

Our chance to kill the skeleton knight had already presented itself. Who knew he would be in shock upon the death of his beloved horse? The Skeleton Knight stopped in his tracks, exposing his back to Fran.

"Teacher!"

I know! Take this!

It was finally time to use my secret trump card!

The Super Short Distance Telekinetic Catapult.

Yaaaargh!

No one could block a fully charged catapult launched from behind at this distance! Jet even had his legs locked down!

Even if you could somehow react to it at the last second it would be too late to dodge—or so I thought.

"Kakaka!!!"

Boom!

"Aroo!"

"Kuuh."

"Guaah!"

I was seconds away from victory, inches away from penetrating the Skeleton Knight's skull when it happened. Bright light shone from the knight's body and blew me away.

Damn it, what happened?!

The sudden impact flung me all the way to the wall. I immediately looked around me to survey what had just happened.

Where is he… There!

"Kakakakaka!"

"Ah!"

Fran!

The Skeleton Knight, who was supposed to be locked in position, disappeared from sight. At least, he moved so fast that he gave the impression of disappearing.

He reappeared in front of Fran, who was sprawled out on the floor, a second later. Fran immediately reached out for her Phantom Augite Dagger but he knocked it out of her hand with one blow.

I flew towards Fran as fast as I could, the knight still carrying out his assault on her during my flight. Fran dodged by rolling on the ground but it was a matter of time until she got skewered by the knight's sword.

Raaah!

Clang!

I clashed against the knight's sword in the nick of time.

Such force! If I hadn't used the full power of Telekinesis I would've been blown away again. Our clash would buy enough time for Fran to get back on her feet.

Fran jumped up, grabbed me, took a few steps back. I was back in her hands now, but that didn't mean the skeleton had stopped his onslaught.

"Kaka, kakaka!"

"Kuh! Aagh!"

“Ka!”

“Wah!”

Middle Heal!

Damn it, Fran was getting pushed back! She was receiving more damage than I could heal through, her health fiercely dwindling. Her mana was decreasing too as the attacks pushed Mana Barrier to its absolute limit.

The Skeleton Knight’s strikes were incomparably faster than when we started, and each blow was much stronger because of it.

His Automated Mana Strikes got stronger to the point that Mana Barrier couldn’t brush them off.

What happened to have made him power up this much?!

Identify!

Name: Legendary Skeleton Dark Knight

Race: Undead

Status: Guardian; Unleash Potential

Level: 24

HP: 1229/1693; Strength: 637→1137; Agility: 436→1036

Uh, what? His stats got a huge boost all of a sudden. His Strength was over 1000! What were these hacks?!

Unleash Potential was written on his status. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the result of his Extra Skill!

Unleash Potential: Unleashes the potential of its user. Increased stat depends on the latent power of each individual user. Unleashing potential takes a toll on the user’s body and depletes health on top of requiring additional cost. Additional cost differs from user to user.

The Skeleton Knight's health was depleting at quite a rapid rate, to be sure, but Fran might expire long before he did!

"Kakaka!"

"Ugh!"

Damn it, he was ridiculously strong! I felt like I was going to be knocked out of Fran's hands just from blocking his attacks, which would have been the case had I not reinforced myself with Telekinesis.

"Grr!"

"Kaka!"

"Gyan!"

His senses must have been sharpened, too. He cut down Jet, who was trying to ambush him from the shadows.

Jet! Get out of here!

"Arrf…"

Jet lurked in the shadows with the remainder of his strength. The enchanted sword let out a shrill clang as it came down on rocky ground. He might have been powerful but he still couldn't get to Jet in the shadows.

"Reverse Undead!"

Jean's voice boomed in the silence. The high rank Nether Magic spell could destroy any undead short of a high level one, but—

The Skeleton Knight's magic resistance must have gone up, too. He didn't make any attempt to dodge the spell.

"Kuh! My spell didn't work!"

"Haaa!"

"Kakakaka!"

The bone knight paid no heed to Jean's attempt at his unlife. Fran was his sole target. He knew who the real threat was.

But was that his only reason? The Skeleton Knight looked furious to me. Was he angry about us killing his beloved horse? Could an undead feel emotions? Thinking back to Jean's skeleton butler, Bernard, it must have been so. The high-rank undeads seemed to retain a bit of their hearts.

I also understood why he decided to use the potentially fatal Unleash Potential. He was prepared to die to avenge his beloved horse.

"Haaa!"

"Kakaka!"

The unleashed power of the Skeleton Knight was overwhelming. Each of his blows hit as hard as a Sword Art, all of them too fast for the eyes to follow. Jet was down, and Jean's magic wasn't effective. The Skeleton Knight's onslaught continued like a storm, his mind set on killing Fran before his life ran out.

His attacks weren't flailing slashes, either, which was the most terrifying point. We could find no gaps in his offense.

Fran continued to dodge would-be fatal blows by a hair's breadth. Her eyes hadn't given up. She was still looking for a way to turn this around.

I hadn't given up, either.

We'll use Skill Taker!

"Hm!"

I had initially planned to save it for the Dungeon Boss, but we couldn't afford such a luxury at a time like this. Fran would use her Skill Taker so I could save mine. I had another card up my sleeve, anyway.

The main issue was we didn't know whether he would lose his buff if we took away Unleash Potential. If his status advantage didn't go away, there would be no point in stealing the skill. But taking away another skill wouldn't cover our stat difference, either. Our only viable option was to steal Unleash Potential.

Go for it!

*"*Haaa!"

"Ka?"

Fran used Skill Taker. My goal was to bring his stats down to their previous values. If it worked…

The skill you targeted is an Extra Skill. Extra Skills cannot be targeted. Capture has failed.

The announcer's voice echoes through my head. You never told me that!

"Kakkaka!"

"Kuh! Where's the skill?"

It didn't work!

"One more time… I can't cast it!"

The failure still counted to her usage of Skill Taker. She was unable to use it now, too.

Maybe I should use mine… But even if I did take some of his other skills, it still wouldn't cover the difference in power.

Time to use the ace in my sleeve.

Fran, we're going to do that!

"Okay! Let's go."

I poured all my remaining EP into Advanced Sword Arts and boosted it all the way to Level 5.

We had thought of this plan on our way here. This would be our ace in the hole against a particularly strong opponent. By leveling it up to 5, we would catch him off guard.

"Haaa!"

"Ka, ka?"

Fran's movements changed. They were more precise now, her understanding of the blade having deepened.

I felt the Skeleton Knight's confusion at Fran's sudden jump in skill. They were

evenly matched just moments before.

Based on our experience, a three-level difference in skill was impossible to ignore. A four-level difference allowed Fran to be skilled enough with the sword to overcome the stat difference.

The knight's movement slowed down, and whether it was from surprise, confusion, or a malfunction caused by this new element, I didn't care.

That wasn't all. My body felt oddly light, and it felt like Fran was moving much faster.

Was it because we leveled up Advanced Sword Mastery? Was Fran's body stronger now that it was optimized to her skill with the sword?

Was it because Fran was also feeling this new rush of energy?

Never mind the details.

We could win now.

This was our last and best chance!

"Take this!"

Fran used the Advanced Sword Art, Impact Slash. It was a side slash so powerful that we were stunned after using it. We had put all our energy into this attack: Fran with her Focus Mana and my Overboost by way of the Mage skill. The sheer power of this attack would be enough to exceed even the unleashed Skeleton Knight.

Giiiin!

But the bone knight dodged our most powerful attack.

What a monster! He might be weaker in terms of strength but he was definitely still faster. We would be forced to take his counterattack now that we were wide open.

At least, normally we would.

We're not done yet!

"Hm!"

Sorry about this, Fran.

“It’s okay!”

Because Impact Slash caused you to twist your hips by ninety degrees, it was a move that left you wide open to attack during the recovery.

I used my charged up Telekinesis to stop Impact Slash midway. This would cancel the recovery time immediately after the skill. However, all the force that would’ve been dissipated into a would-be target was now concentrated on Fran’s arm.

As a result—

Rrrip!

The sound of breaking bones and tearing muscles echoed loudly.

God, it was a horrifying sound! Made worse that I was the one who brought this upon her!

But I still had to add salt to an already terrifying wound.

Fraaaan!

“Aaaaargh!”

Fran unleashed a Sword Art with all her might while holding back the intense pain. She used the Heavy Slash, the first Art she ever learned. I used Mage to charge the skill up with mana to increase its speed. The dreadful sound of breaking bones came from Fran’s overexerted arm but we couldn’t hold back now.

We had to finish this.

The Skeleton Knight had yet to regain his stance from our initial Impact Slash.

“Aaaah!”

“Kakkaaaaa!”

This bastard! He was still reeling but he was able to move his skull back by a few inches. I wasn’t going to be able to reach him!

Was there no way to close this distance? Then I had it!

“Uooooh! Change Shape!”

I activated the skill I had just learned, Change Shape, with all my heart, hoping that it would be enough to reach the Skeleton Knight.

My blade thinned and then lengthened; I was now more of an estoc than a longsword. It took 200 MP to transform myself. That was too expensive – although I was grateful at the moment!

“Kaaaa!”

The skeleton was helpless now. I sliced his skull clean in two, and with it I felt the response of a crystal.

“Ka, ka…”

The bone knight stopped. His hollow sockets continued to glare at Fran.

“Kakakakaka!”

His body crumbled into pieces as he let out something that sounded like a disturbing laugh. A human skeleton lay in his place, making it look like our battle was little more than a hallucination. The bones still felt haunted, and I expected nothing less from a B-Rank monster.

“Urgh…”

Fran held her arm and crumpled up. Her whole body was locking up from the crushing pain.

I’ll heal you now, Fran! Greater Heal!

“Are you alright?”

“Woof!”

It was a difficult fight, but well worth it. I got three hundred crystals, Sense Jammer, Automated Magic Strike, Control Undead, and Magic Resistance. All useful and versatile skills.

And then there was the Extra Skill, Unleash Potential. Seeing how it brought the Skeleton Knight back from the brink of death, I would reserve this skill for that purpose.

Still, the effects of the skill changed from user to user. Did that mean Fran and

I would have different manifestations of it as well?

I wanted to experiment with it but it carried the cost of depleting your life for its duration, not to mention the additional cost. With a twenty-four-hour cooldown it didn't look like I would be able to test this any time soon.

Does it still hurt?

"I'm… fine."

Are you sure?

"Yeah. I'm good."

"Arf?"

Jet started licking Fran's previously battered arm. He was worried, too.

"Thanks."

"Arf!"

Fran fluffed up Jet's head. Seeing the peaceful scene finally allowed me to accept that the battle was over.

Jean collected the skeleton's bones.

Can you still use those?

"These are very valuable as a necromancy catalyst. Retrieving these leaves us very much in the green. Mwahaha, I thank you!"

I could use all the potions I wanted now.

"And what of the sword and armor?"

What do you mean?

"I have no need for the sword so you may have it. In exchange, I don't suppose you'd mind if I took the armor and mantle. Orihalcon is a highly prized material among mages, and I might be able to find a use for this Nether item."

I don't mind, but are you sure?

Jean was our client so all drops were rightfully his. I was very grateful for the offer.

“Still, your movements were amazing towards the end. Did it have something to do with that blue light?”

Uh, blue light?

“Indeed. You and Fran were wrapped in a faint blue light, as if your mana was coming together.”

I didn’t notice at all. I can’t think of why that would be.

I doubt it happened because I leveled up Advanced Sword Mastery.

“Is it? To me it looked like you were being linked with magic. I thought for sure mana had something to do with it.”

Linked with magic?

Was it because of Skill Sharing and her User status? I don’t think that’s quite right.

“You and Fran are under Contract, are you not? That is what I speak of. A Contract is one of the stronger connections. I would not be surprised if entering a contract with an enchanted sword such as you would bring about mysterious magical powers.”

The Contract that bound us to each other so long ago had that kind of power?

I still didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t even know how to activate that blue light to begin with. Jean didn’t look like he had a clue, either.

I charged some mana while thinking of the Contract but nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Maybe we would figure it out in one of our fights in the dungeon.

Chapter 6:
Ghost King

Thirty minutes had gone by since our battle with the Skeleton Knight and we still hadn't left the room.

We had decided to take a break since the previous battle took a lot out of us. Fran and the rest were sitting down as they drank potions to recover their mana. I was recovering as best I could; my durability had been depleted by half. My MP was also below 500. Going deeper into the dungeon would be difficult.

Jean had summoned a Skeleton with Blacksmith abilities to repair Fran's armor. He even had Mana Spheres ready. The necromancer was thorough for sure.

Fly had, of course, gone on to scout ahead.

I looked over my new skills. Unfortunately, none of them increased my combat ability by leaps and bounds. They were all at Level 1, after all. At most, I could probably work something out with Unleash Potential.

Our encounters in the dungeon were paying off, though. Fran had gone up by three levels and Jet by five. That was enough to bump their fighting prowess by a significant amount. The fierce battle with the Skeleton Knight had also given Fran some hands-on combat experience. Her fighting ability had definitely gone up.

"So good."

"Munch, munch."

"Indeed, this is also delicious!"

I had cooked up some special fried chicken for the starving trio. I guess fried monster would be the appropriate term, since I used monster meat. I hadn't come across many fried foods in this world. There were pan-fried foods, but I hadn't seen any with a crispy batter. It might not even exist, actually. Jean had been surprised when I first presented the dish. The mountain of deep-fried,

crispy goodness was gone in a near instant.

We gave the leftover bones to Jet. He gobbled them down, satisfied.

“It seems Fly has found the door… Mwahahaha! Straight to the dungeon core!”

“What about the boss?”

“Hold on… Hm!”

After his shrill laughter, Jean suddenly winced.

What’s wrong?

“I lost contact with Fly.”

“Did it get killed?”

“It appears so… No fear, I know the exact path to get there. I shall take point.”

The monsters on the way to the deepest section of the dungeon weren’t that different from the ninth floor. If anything, they were easier now. We could go all out since we knew the end was coming, and we didn’t have to feel shy about using up all our items, either.

We reached the boss room in less than a shake.

“Behold! The door to the boss room!”

A stone door, more lavish and intricate than all the previous doors, stood in front of us. After three days of exploring the dungeon, we had finally reached our destination.

“Is there a boss and a Dungeon Master behind this?”

“Fly couldn’t get a reading off it, but yes, they’re definitely there.”

The boss was definitely going to be a problem but it didn’t end there. The Dungeon Master would be quite strong, seeing that it was a product of this dungeon. We were dealing with something that used B-Rank monsters.

“We must prepare.”

What do you propose?

“Mwahaha! I shall use my final trump card! I don’t want to use it since it costs

too much, but we must be ready for the worst."

Jean was right. We had to prepare as best we could, too. But how should we go about it?

"Should we level up some skills?"

That's what I had in mind, but…

I had 25 EP left on hand. I had to think about this so they wouldn't go to waste.

I don't know which of these would be useful. I'll have to see how the battle goes to decide.

It wouldn't be funny if we panicked and leveled up a skill that would prove useless in the boss fight. We didn't know what we were dealing with. Being careful with our points was the best we could do.

"Teacher, Fran, there are some things I want you to take out of storage for me."

What is it?

"You can start with the pendant."

Pendant? There were a *lot* of those. We took out all the pendant-like items for the time being. Jean picked one out of the pile and gave it to Fran.

"This is the one. Carry it with you."

Woof, it looked gross! The pendant had a realistic carving of a zombie on it. I did remember putting that away into Fran's storage space.

"It is a Sacrificial Effigy."

This thing?

Wasn't it for cursing your enemies or summoning zombies?

"Ha ha ha! I'm sure you have your doubts. I thought of the same thing, in fact. I only bought this because I thought it was related to necromancy."

I mean, look at it.

"Still, it is quite the potent charm."

According to Jean, the pendant was able to take a single hit that was delivered to its user. Furthermore, it only activated if the damage dealt was on the heavy side. That really was nice to have.

Thanks.

“Indeed. We’ll also need this and this and this and—”

“What?”

“You need all the charms you can get. Take it with you.”

He gave us about ten more charms, not that I felt magic from any of them. We got peace of mind from them, at least.

“I need to prepare as well.”

The next item on Jean’s list was a long, rectangular chest. It was one of the biggest items in our inventory.

Paper seals covered the chest, making it look like a sarcophagus. Jean started casting the incantation while forming symbols with his hands to undo the seal.

With this strong of a seal, I couldn’t help but wonder what amazing tool must have been in the box. We looked on with interest as Jean pulled out an ominous-looking staff adorned with a skull. Yikes. Now that right there was a necromancer’s staff. Even its handle looked like it was made from a spinal cord. It fit Jean’s look perfectly.

It didn’t look like imitation bone, either. There was a sinister quality about the staff that made your skin crawl. Wielding it seemed enough to cast a curse on you.

Name: Unknown

Cannot be identified.

Hm? I couldn’t Identify it?

“Bwahahaha! This is my special staff! You cannot use any ordinary Identify on it!”

“Why not?”

“This staff is called the Blessing of the Nether Lord. A Named Item I found in a certain dungeon.”

Jean told me how the stats for the staff were so high that a regular Identify wasn’t able to penetrate it.

So about that staff’s powers—

“Kukakaka!”

I was just about to ask Jean about his staff when a loud human-sounding cackle cut me off.

!

“?”

What? Where was that voice coming from? I thought the staff was calling out to me, but Jean looked equally surprised.

“Kukakaka—”

There was something about the voice that disturbed the mind. Hearing it was enough to make me feel depressed.

The situation escalated even as I was searching for the source of the voice.

Vooom.

A gigantic pentagram had appeared on the place we were only seconds ago.

Crap, Danger Sense was sounding the alarm!

Fran, Jet!

I tried to draw their attention to the impending danger but didn’t make it in time. The pentagram on the floor shot a sudden burst of light which filled the entire corridor. Fran tried her best to get away from it but the mystery voice cackled again as if to mock her attempt at escape.

“How long do you plan on making me wait? Allow me to invite you personally to my quarters! Kukakaka!”

The light faded and we found ourselves in a large hall. It was several times

larger than the boss rooms we had been in up to now. I had no time to look around however, as my eyes were fixed on the thing that was before us.

I couldn't avert my gaze from the creature if I had wanted to.

"Kukakaka! Welcome, intruders!"

What was this thing? Its mana was overwhelming. Its presence was overbearing, and it was absolutely repulsive. I found no words to describe it. "Horror" and "repugnance" were the best I could come up with as a menacing fear took hold of me. If not for my sword body, I would've either puked or lost control of my bowels.

Ah…

I wanted to get out of here as fast as I could.

Fran squeezed my hilt, as if for hanging on for dear life. Was she shaking? Fran, who stood her own against a daemon? Blood was draining away from her face as she went pale.

Fran… It's alright.

I was brought back to my senses the moment I felt Fran shiver. What was I thinking? I didn't have time to be afraid, I had to protect Fran. That was my duty.

We might have to run away now. We still had time to use our Teleport Feathers.

Fran, we're leaving.

Okay.

Jean, we gotta go.

"Hm? Wait—"

I made sure Fran was holding on to Jean's arm and immediately used a Teleport Feather. We couldn't face such a powerful enemy in our current beat-up state. Survival was of the utmost.

However—

The Teleport Feather didn't respond. Not even a blip or a click. It should have

mana inside it!

What the hell?!

“Kukakaka! This room prevents anyone who enters from teleporting out of it! There is no escape. Give up, and let us have a battle to the death! Kukakaka! Kukakakaka—”

It was a Lich.

King of the Evil Spirits. The worst and strongest of the undead.

The most reviled of creatures cackled as he told us the ruthless truth.

Name: Lich

Race: Undead

Status: Vengeful Spirit

Level: 23

HP: 863; Magic: 2467; Strength: 134; Agility: 366

Skills: Speedcast 7; Panic 4; Fear 4; Regeneration 6; Control Undead 10; Necromancy 10; Nether Magic 4; Mana Manipulation

Title: Dungeon Master

Equipment: Tattered Robes

The Lich was the most notorious of the undead. I wanted to scratch my “head” in confusion as I checked its stats. Was it really supposed to be that strong? I had heard that there were huge differences in power between individual undead, but still.

Between its intimidating presence and overwhelming terror, its threat level could easily pass as A-Rank, or B-Rank at minimum.

“Overload Undead Summoning.”

The Lich summoned his undead minions as we were still flustered by our inability to teleport out.

“These shall be your playmates for now. Try not to die. Kukakaka!”

“Oooorgh.”

“Uaaaa.”

“Grroowl!”

He summoned ten undead all at once, each of them a strong C-Rank threat. The entire mob of them made for a solid B-Rank threat. They were as strong as the Skeleton Knight we were barely able to beat.

Fran!

“Yeah. I’ll have to get serious right out of the gate.”

We started putting all our efforts into blasting them away with magic. There were no other options open to us. We would thin them out with our opening flurry then go for the Lich if there was an opening. That was the best we could do.

But Jean held us back, and stepped forward himself.

“Leave this to me.”

…Are you sure?

“Indeed, for I have the power of this staff.”

Jean had his usual cocky grin. It had a slightly sad look to it, though, as if he was prepared for the worst. We were fighting against a Lich, after all, but that didn’t seem to be the only reason.



“Fuhahaha! It is time for me to play my trump card!”

“Oooorgh.”

“Uoo.”

Jean stood alone in front of the undead squad. He raised the staff in his hand, and shouted, “Blessing of the Nether Lord! Come forth!”

The skull on Jean’s staff began to glow eerily. The light shone like a rainbow, making it oddly beautiful.

The skull on the staff’s tip opened its mouth.

OooooOooOoOO—

Wha!

“Uh?”

“Arf…”

It was speaking… or maybe singing? Could be either.

What echoed out of the skull was a song-like groaning. The resentful cry was mysterious, haunting, and had the quality of a hymn.

And yet, the strange song was easy to listen to.

OoOo—

“May the spirits bound by hate and resentment be allowed to rest in peace. Nether Lord, bestow thy blessings unto the lost.”

A pale blue light shone out of the staff as Jean carried out his incantation.

“Ugaaah.”

“Aooo.”

“No! Run away, my minions!”

Blue light filled the room. The undead squadron tried to escape upon the Lich’s orders but there was nowhere to run.

The light faded, and so did the undead.

Huh?

“Wow!”

Not a single hint of their existence remained. They were wiped out without a trace.

“You destroyed my slaves in an instant?! Kukakaka! What on earth is that staff?!”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“Fuha… Haha. This is a divine item… capable of sending any and all undead to the afterlife. So how did you… a Lich… rema—Gaah!”

Jean!

Jean started coughing up blood, and fell to one knee. His face was now an earthy brown. He looked like one of his undead zombies!

“Lean on me.”

“Thank… you.”

“Kukakaka. You seem to have a tool which allows you to send off many undead at once! But I tell you that is not enough to fight me! Hohoho. Look at you, you are at the brink of death’s door, yourself!”

So that was it! Casting Ascension on Andy took a lot of mana out of Jean, and now he had to purify even more, stronger undead. Was this how the spell took years off your life expectancy?

I’ll heal you—

“No use. I have no wounds, after all.”

“Then take this.”

“Thanks.”

Fran took out a Stamina Potion, designed to recover the subject from exhaustion, and administered it to Jean. It wasn’t enough for a full recovery, but it seemed to help. Jean’s ragged breathing was now stable again.

“So, what is your plan? Your trump card has failed against me.”

How did the Lich get away unscathed from a spell that could purify any and all undead? Was it not an undead itself? The Lich had said he was, and his stats reflected his Undead status.

“It does appear to be a powerful item, but it is no match for the likes of me!”

That could be it. We were up against a Lich, the Ghost King. There was a possibility of even the most powerful item not working against him.

But we’d come too far to lose hope now!

Fran took me in her hand and dashed towards the Lich.

“Then we’ll just have to cut you.”

Damn straight!

We’ll cut him down before he got another chance to summon his undead!

“Haaa!”

“Kukakaka! It’s no use!”

What? My blade went right through him? He wasn’t supposed to have that kind of skill!

“Raah!”

Fire Arrow!

None of our attacks landed despite Fran swinging at him with Elemental Blade and my shots of magic. I thought we were up against an illusion, but he was able to use magic… The Lich attacked us just as my blade went through him, too!

“Ooof!”

Middle Heal!

The simple backhand took Fran’s health down by half.

He wasn’t an illusion after all!

His attack power was oddly strong, too. His strength was only at 134, definitely on the weak end of the spectrum. I didn’t see hints of him using magic and skills, either. So how did he knock down Fran’s health by half? The numbers

didn’t add up.

He must have some kind of trick.

“Yeah, he’s strong.”

There was something to the Lich other than his stats. Could it be that he was falsifying his status information? We would be able to see it with my level of Identify if that were the case, however.

This is annoying.

What do we do?

If we can just figure out the mechanism behind his evasion, we might be able to use Skill Taker to get rid of it…

But with Identify not working, I didn’t know which skill to take.

Jean?

I cannot see it, either. Soul Sight does not work against undead.

Jean was our last hope in solving the mystery of the Lich, but he was equally stumped.

You’re oddly calm, now. Do you have a plan cooked up?

It might not be much of a plan, but could you stall him in the meantime?

Will it help?

I don’t know. But I need you to trust me.

Jean seemed to have something in mind. I wasn’t sure it would work, but I would happily grasp at straws at times like these. Let’s give it a shot.

All right. This fight was bound to go into extra time anyway.

Thank you.

An hour passed.

We had been going up against wave upon wave of undead armies.

“What’s wrong?! You’re getting slower! Am I tiring you out?”

“Not… yet!”

“Woof!”

“Yes, yes. I can’t wait to see the moment your hope turns into despair. What a delight that will be! You shall make fine slaves in your unlife! Kukakaka!”

None of our attacks landed on the Lich. We had attempted bombarding him with spells and setting up purification barriers around it but none of it worked. All this while we had to fend off the undead hordes the Lich had summoned.

We had only survived thus far because our enemy was toying with us. Fran could do nothing but wait to cast her next healing spell.

It seemed that the Lich’s aim was to break Fran, Jean, and Jet’s spirits in an attempt to dominate them. These three would make for strong undead, after all. A necromancer of Jean’s caliber could be as strong as a Lich when he turned undead.

As much as it pained me to admit it, the Lich’s toying did buy us enough time for Jean’s plan.

“What’s wrong? You’ve stopped moving. Has my summoning magic proven too much for you?”

“Arf!”

Jet launched his shadow spears at the Lich but they were to no avail.

“That’s right. Much better that you don’t stop attacking me. What plan do you have in mind next?”

“I will cut you down.”

“Kukakaka! I would like to see you try!”

More than half my mana was already gone. Fran, Jean, and Jet weren’t faring much better, either.

Jean, are you not done yet?

A little more… Wait, here it comes!

I exchanged some words with Jean until the moment finally came upon us.

Kaboooom!

The ground shook. The explosion felt like it might rattle your insides and it was a five on the Richter scale.

What was that? Did a bomb just go off in the dungeon? The ground was shaking and dust was coming off from the ceiling. I thought it was the Lich's doing, but he seemed just as puzzled.

The Lich lost his arrogance, and screamed at us angrily.

"What…! What did you bastards do?!"

He screamed in pain.

"It looks like… that worked." Jean struggled to get on his feet, still not having fully recovered from using the Nether Lord's Blessing.

"Were you the one who caused that, Jean?"

"My minion… to be exact."

When did that happen?

Jean had sent off his undead minions on an act of sabotage. This was what he had been waiting for.

"The mana from the Malice Furnace…! My death wish…! Disappearing…! Disappearing! Nuaaaaah!"

The Lich screamed in agony. The facility we destroyed must have been vital to his operation.

What about him? What did you do to him?

"He should be weaker now. One of his sources of power is the fact that he can draw mana from the dungeon itself. I've destroyed that particular source."

You could've told us earlier!

"… I apologize. But the Lich would have gotten in the way if he knew of my plot. I needed someone to be a distraction."

"Meaning?"

"If you want to fool your enemy, first fool your friends. The Lich might also

have the ability to read minds and shuffle through memories."

The Lich turned to us and screamed, "You bastards! You won't get away with this! I won't let you become my slaves so easily! I'll let my minions have their way with you and crush all your limbs! I'll make you regret ever having been born! Don't expect to ever have death's peaceful embrace!" It was strange how I could tell he was angry despite his skull lacking any capacity to form expressions.

If he's weaker we might be able to stand a chance!

"Yeah!"

We finally saw a dim ray of hope. Fran took me in her hand and glared the Lich down intently.

"What is this? Do you think you have a chance at defeating me?! Very well, I shall show you the true terror of the Nether! You seem to have Identify, so have at me!"

The Lich deactivated his Identify disrupting skill. His stats changed significantly.

Name: Lich

Race: Undead

Status: Greater Vengeful Spirit

Level: 71

HP: 4863; Magic: 7467; Strength: 934; Agility: 666

Skills: Speedcast 10; Wind Magic 7; Identify Jammer 5; Panic 8; Fear 7; Regeneration 10; Spacetime Magic 7; Curse 6; Instant Regen 4; Control Undead 10; Necromancy 10; Mental Abnormal Status Resistance 9; Life Sense 6; Life Drain 7; Ocean Magic 3; Martial Arts 7; Land Magic 3; Earth Magic 10; Mind Reading 4; Poison Magic 8; Fire Magic 6; Mana Sense 7; Mana Drain 7; Water Magic 10; Nether Magic 8; Dark Magic 5; Instacast; Abnormal Status Immunity; Enhanced Undead; Seal Immunity; Mana Manipulation

Unique Skill: Malice Drain; Malice Conversion; Fake Identity

Extra Skill: Essence of Filth

Titles: Unrepentant; Dungeon Master; Avenger

Equipment: Robe of Resentment

… Shit. Fran, stay on your guard!

"Hm!"

I underestimated him! I didn't think he would be this strong! He could kill us in an instant if he wanted to. But with his skill set revealed I finally figured out what he was using to dodge our attacks! To be fair, Jean was the one who told me.

Teacher, I figured it out. It's the Timespace Magic. Specifically, a spell called Dimension Shift.

Dimension Shift allowed its user to phase shift to another dimension in order to dodge an attack. Repeated use should be impossible since its mana cost was huge, but the Lich's Instacast and huge mana pool made it a non-issue.

"Overload Undead Summoning!"

The Lich summoned his minions. These were nothing like the undead he had summoned up until now. The ones we had been facing were strong, but these undead wore enchanted gear. He had summoned ten Legendary Skeletons. Fighting one of them was enough to bring us to the brink of death. They didn't have Unleash Potential, but the Advanced Sword Mastery and Advanced Spear Mastery still made them a threat, not to mention their high defense values.

"Kill them all!"

The skeletons came at us upon the Lich's order. Though their numbers were little, they were much more skilled and coordinated compared to the hordes that came before them.

"High Undead Summoning."

A mere instant later, the Lich summoned a swarm of undead locusts. They

quickly surrounded Fran, who already had her hands full fending off the skeletons.

The screeching insect swarm was enough to cause a man to go insane.

Damn it! Get off of her!

They kept on coming despite our best efforts to blow them away with Wind Magic. They were beginning to inhibit Fran's movements.

"Kuh!"

She couldn't concentrate, each one of them sinking their tiny fangs into her skin.

"Hell Blast!"

"Venom Bullet!"

"Gravity Pressure!"

The Lich was now instacasting his arsenal of spells one after another!

"Urgh!"

We couldn't dodge it! I focused all my mana into maintaining our Mana Barrier but it wasn't enough.

I saw the Lich preparing another barrage of spells.

Fran, you have to dodge it!

"Hm."

"Kakakaka."

I instructed Fran to dodge the hexes but the horde of undead made it impossible. Fran's health was now down to half! I wouldn't be able to heal her through this!

"High Undead Summoning!"

Jean summoned his minion to assist her.

"Stefan, come forth!"

The mana signature was strong, perhaps even stronger than the Legendary

Skeletons! I couldn't Identify it because it had Identity Protection but it was strong enough to be a B-Rank threat. The skeletons took notice and slowed down.

Stefan looked completely unassuming. He looked like a human boy. If not for his hollow eye sockets, you could never tell that he was an undead under Jean's charge.

"That specimen…! This is very curious. What trickery did you use?"

"Heh. I'm not just a necromancer for show."

"Kukakaka! To think that you had subjugated my Ghost Eater!"

The being Jean had summoned was the elusive Ghost Eater. Wait, so he had it already? We were as surprised as the Lich was. The undead had previously belonged to the Lich, so how did Jean take control of it?

To control an undead all you needed was Necromancy and Control Undead. But the Ghost Eater, aside from being really strong, was previously under the charge of the Lich. No matter how skilled Jean was, it didn't seem like something he could easily take control of…

"I am still a nobody of a necromancer. I had to use every trick in the book to secure this one."

Jean told us the gist of it. Even the Lich stopped attacking out of curiosity.

Stefan was originally the name of a Wraith that Jean had prepared for his anti-Ghost Eater strategy. He had possessed Undead Resistance, Drain Resistance, and Erosive Fusion. His battle plan was deceptively simple.

First he was eaten by the Ghost Eater on purpose. The consumed undead would usually be absorbed into the Ghost Eater, but Stefan's Undead Resistance and Drain Resistance prevented that from happening. He then used Erosive Fusion to take control of the Ghost Eater from the inside.

Stefan had been consumed by the Ghost Eater on Jean's last excursion, but Jean thought his plan had failed, seeing that Stefan had not been able to take control of the Ghost Eater. Stefan was not defeated, however, and instead took control of the Ghost Eater little by little over the course of many years.

By the time we landed, Jean had made contact with his old minion.

“Kukaka! Interesting! Very well, you can become my servant once I kill you! I shall use your imagination to bring about my death wish!”

“I refuse.”

“I am not giving you the option to refuse!”

As Jean kept the Lich busy with their quarrel, we were coordinating with the Ghost Eater to eliminate half of the skeleton troops.

The Ghost Eater’s fighting ability was impressive. It might be unbeatable in anti-Undead combat. It could instantly deplete the mana of any undead it touched and use that to strengthen itself. Its foes didn’t have a chance to retaliate. The Lich had stopped paying attention to anything other than Jean, further reducing his minion’s menacing aura.

I used what little time Jean had bought for us to inspect the Lich’s abilities and think of a way to beat him. One tactic came to mind which would severely weaken the Lich with one move. I didn’t know whether it would beat him outright, but it would definitely hurt the undead wizard.

Jean, I can seal off the Lich’s Spacetime Magic. But if it’s too dangerous for you to use the Nether Lord’s Blessing, then—

It won’t be a problem.

Then start casting. I’ll adjust to your timing.

Very well.

Jean raised his staff over his head once again as I watched the Lich’s movements like a hawk.

“Nether Lord’s Blessing, come forth.”

“Hah. Again with your staff? Are you going to purify my skeletons away? No matter. You would make a fine corpse should that blessing kill you!”

“May the spirits bound by hate and resentment—”

The Lich looked smug. He knew he could use Dimension Shift to dodge the attack. Nether Lord’s Blessing also took a long time to cast. It was easy for the

Lich to guess when the spell would activate. He didn't think for a second that he was going to get purified by it.

Well, things were different this time.

Skill Taker!

I targeted the Lich with Skill Taker. Spacetime Magic wasn't an Extra Skill so I should be able to take it—

Skill Taker successful. You have gained Spacetime Magic 7.

It worked! I took his Spacetime Magic 7!

"—be allowed to rest in peace. Nether Lord, bestow thy blessings unto the lost."

"It's no use…!"

Joke's on you, idiot!

"What?! Why?!"

The Lich began panicking, unable to use his Spacetime spells. The divine light of the Nether Lord's Blessing wrapped the undead immediately.

"Gyaaa!"

The Lich screamed in agony. It was working!

"Impossible! I cannot be defeated like this!"

We could hear the Lich's death throes from beyond the blinding light. His mana was rapidly depleting so how was he not dead yet?

"Guaaah! Purification! My malice! Fading away! Nooooo-aaaaaaah!"

The strongest of the undead proved a worthy challenge to purify. He was filled with so much resentment that absolving him was going to take some time.

But what if it couldn't purify him completely?

Now I was getting worried. The light faded, and there sat the Lich, squirming,

but still alive. Black wisps of miasma rose out of his weakened state. He was far from being annihilated, though.

How can he still stand after that?!

But the Lich was acting odd.

“AAAAAAAAA—”

A huge amount of mana was still pouring into him. It looked like he was about to burst from the rushing waterfall of mana.

Was this because of his role as a Dungeon Master?

“He’s acting weird.”

“All of the malice in the air is being absorbed into him.”

“What do you mean?”

The one who responded to Fran was not Jean. Our necromancer was still lying on the ground, breathing heavily. He was in a critical condition despite Fran’s attempt at healing him with a Stamina Potion.

The Ghost Eater, Stefan, was talking in his stead. His speech was so clear that he really sounded human.

“It is a result of a skill that he has. Essence of Filth allows him to gather the malice of the undead around him and convert that into energy. There is also the free-flowing malice left over from when I destroyed the Malice Furnace. I have resistance to it so it doesn’t affect me much, fortunately.”

The Malice Furnace was the dungeon facility that Stefan had destroyed earlier. It was a piece of equipment which took an undead’s malice and converted it into mana. This dungeon was able to churn out huge amounts of mana thanks to all the undead that were in it. He had destroyed the machine to pieces, but the malice that was in the furnace was not gone, but simply dispersed throughout the dungeon.

The Lich continued to suck up all that malice, thanks to his Essence of Filth. The abundance of malice acted as a counter to the Nether Lord’s Blessing, every ounce of purified malice was soon replenished.

The Lich had a Unique Skill called Malice Drain which allowed him to convert malice into strength. The more malice he took in, the stronger he got.

“Gugagagagagaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—”

But it didn’t look like he was healing himself. Instead, he was screaming in intense agony.

He doesn’t look right to me.

“It must be because of all the malice pouring into him at once. He’s absorbed so much malice that he’s left without a will of his own. I doubt he even remembers the fact that he’s a Lich.”

Isn’t that bad? Was he going to go berserk?

We need to use Nether Lord’s Blessing again!

“We can’t. My master won’t last another cast.”

Can’t you use it?

“A Named Item can only be used by the one it chose. That would be my master…”

So the item was bound to Jean?! I tried shooting some spells at the creature but to no avail.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaa—”

The Lich’s screams turned into animalistic roars which echoed in the hall.

The situation was getting worse. His black aura was spreading, enveloping the entire room at a rapid pace. I didn’t have to use Danger Sense to know that stuff was bad news.

“There is so much concentrated malice to the point that it is now corporeal. The living would lose their life instantly should they come into contact with it.”

You didn’t have to tell me twice! *Teleport Feather—No! Newly obtained Spacetime Magic 7…* That didn’t work, either! If I had the Lich’s Seal Immunity, I would probably be able to use it to get out of the room.

Nothing was working.

“Gogagagaaaaaaaaaaaaa—”

The Lich excreted all of his pent-up malice at once as if something finally broke inside him. The excess malice looked like a tidal wave rushing toward us.

Stefan picked Jean up off the floor, still unconscious.

“I can take care of my master! But you guys…”

We’ll figure it out!

“I’m so so—”

Only a few steps in front of us, Jean and Stefan were swept up by the torrent of malice.

Fran, put all your energy into Mana Barrier, and set up some Purification Magic barriers!

“Okay!”

Jet, stay in the shadows!

“Woof!”

Change Shape!

I took the form of a giant shield. It was thin, but covering Fran’s entire body took priority right now. I also put all my energy into Mana Barrier. Our two layers of protection were going to have to do for this storm of malice. I had Overboosted the barrier with Mage, of course.

Urrghhhh.

Our barrier was creaking. Dammit, it’s going to break through at this point! Even my durability was starting to deplete! The rush of malice was beginning to chip away at my shield form.

“Teacher…”

Fran!

The malice was overpowering! Fran’s barrier was taking a tremendous amount of pressure and it was beginning to take a toll on her.

It was only a matter of time until our barriers broke down and we were

drowned in the malice.

Wasn't there anything I could do? Was there a skill I could use to overcome the situation? I still had some EP left over. Should I put it into Physical Barrier? Maybe Purification Magic?

No, there was one skill I hadn't used yet!

I'm going to have to bet our lives on this!

Oooooh! Unleash Potential!

I used the Extra Skill I got from the Skeleton Knight, Unleash Potential. At that very moment, my body started shining and I could feel tremendous amounts of mana inside me.

I felt myself getting dramatically stronger.

This should—

Wait, no! My durability was going down a lot faster now, too! I would be destroyed in under three minutes, and I didn't know how much malice left there was to hold back.

What should I do? Keep focusing on defense? Put my EP into Mana Barrier and Purification Magic and resist it that way?

Approaching critical condition. Requesting input.

Huh? Who's there?

I am specimen **. My name has been deleted by the craftsman. I do not have a name.***

That's not what I'm asking. This voice… Is that you, P.A.?

Yes. This "P.A." that Specimen Teacher speaks of is part of my abilities. My

previously frozen authority has been unlocked due to the emergency situation caused by Unleash Potential.

There's a lot I want to ask you, but now's not the time! We have to get out of here, quick!

Specimen Teacher will be destroyed in one hundred and thirty-nine seconds. Odds of eliminating hostile elements until then is thirteen percent. Odds of Specimen Fran expiring is ninety-one percent.

Seriously?! Then I have to put more points into Mana Barrier or Purification Magic to protect Fran! But which one? Dammit, what do I do?! P.A., help me!

Proposal: Neither.

They're both no good?

Yes. Odds of Specimen Fran expiring with both skills is over eighty percent.

Do you have a better way?

Yes. Would you like to commence guidance?

Yes! Please, you need to save Fran!

Affirmative. Please transfer usage authority.

A-all right! There, it's transferred! Please, help her!

Transfer of authority confirmed. Commencing guidance protocol.

My slapdash knowledge was no match for the P.A.'s; she knew a lot more than I did. Letting her handle the situation felt like the natural thing to do.

Activating Spacetime Magic, Quick Zone.

The spell slowed down your perception of time. Everything around us moved in slow motion, giving us more time to think. Good job, P.A. I never would've thought of using a spell I had just acquired.

Commencing protection of Fran as top priority. Using 5 EP. Change Shape is now Transform Shape.

Hey! You're just gonna use my EP? Well, I guess it doesn't matter now! My EP went down from 25 to 20.

Under the P.A.'s authority, my body immediately transformed. Part of me maintained my greatshield form while the rest of me began wrapping around Fran. Unlike Change Shape, Transform Shape allowed me to manipulate my volume.

I had encased Fran in armor, and not just superficially, either. I had slipped into the gaps that were left uncovered by her Black Cat Set. The additional armor boosted her defense and allowed me further reinforce her with Mana Barrier to ensure there were no nooks or crannies for the miasma to slip through. I had high hopes for this form.

Maintaining armor form may cause a drop in my calculation capabilities.

Using 5 EP. Split Thinking is now Double Mind. Calculation capabilities are back to normal.

Just do what you need to!

Insufficient EP.

How?! I have so much EP left!

Using 6 EP. Identify 7 is now Identify 10. You do not meet the requirements to unlock Heavensight. Temporarily cancelling acquisition of new skill.

You could get a new skill by leveling Identify to 10, although it looked like I didn't meet the requirements. Why would she level up Identify at a time like this?

Attempting access to Sanctuary. Success. Accessing Library.

Sanctuary? What? Was that where the gods lived? And a library…? I didn't get it. I didn't want to disturb her so I'd just ask later.

Received information on Heavensight in exchange for losing access privileges. Constructing Heavensight-Failed. Use EP to learn Heavensight-Insufficient EP.

She was experimenting. I'm counting on you, P.A. You can do anything you want, just get us out of here!

Scanning skills in possession. Attempting skill restructure in order to procure resources and EP.

Skill restructure?

Complete. Efficiency has increased through skill restructure. Curved Sword Mastery 1, Advanced Sword Mastery 5, Sword Mastery 10, Twinblade Mastery 2, Greatsword Mastery 1, Short Sword Mastery 1, and Dagger Mastery 1 has been consolidated into Sword King Earth 7. Punch Mastery 3,

Kick Mastery 1, and Martial Arts 3 have been consolidated into Martial King Mastery Earth 1. Groundfeel 1, Danger Sense 1, Vigilance 4, Presence Sense 5, Harvesting 2, and Hunting 1 have been consolidated into Omnidirectional Radar 3. Earthquake Sense 1, Heat Detection 1, Electromagnetic Sense 1, Mana Sense 3, Trap Sense 5...

Okay, okay, I get it!

Message abridged. Deleting useless skills to gain 10 EP.

Alright, good job. I'll just see whatever's left once we're out of the woods!

Using 10 EP. Obtained Heavensight. Activating Heavensight. Pinpointed location of Legendary Skeleton. Activating Transform Shape.

After all that build up, it turned out that the skill was able to predict the path of the malice wave. Under the control of the P.A., something shot out of my body. A steel thread? She had used part of my body to produce some steel thread, and it shot out towards the remaining skeletons.

The steel thread held strong even within the storm of malice. It wasn't going

to snap since we reinforced it with Mana Barrier. It found their crystals, and pierced through them easily. Unleash Potential was doing its job, and the skill restructure probably helped too.

The thread was an extension of my blade. It cut and absorbed five crystals with one slice.

That was great, P.A.!

Crystals count is at 5521. You have ranked up. You have gained 55 EP. Total EP is at 64 EP. Using 18 EP. Raising Doppelganger from level 1 to 10. 64 EP remaining. Unlocked new skill "Rapid Processing".

She leveled up Doppelganger to Level 10. Did she do it solely to unlock Rapid Processing?

Using 10 EP to make Doppelganger a Superior Skill. Success. Doppelganger 10 is now Complex Doppelganger SP.

She turned into a Superior Skill before I got a chance to look at it! Well, she did what she had to do. Still, I can't help but be curious what the skill did.

Activating Complex Doppelganger SP.

Five of my human forms came out of it. The P.A. was quite skilled in using it, since my clones were adorned with clothes of this world. I thought they were going to serve as meat shields but they had turned around and covered our backs.

Dual Mind and Rapid Processing has unlocked Rapid Calculation. Using 8 EP to level up Flame Magic 1 to Flame Magic 5.

The P.A. leveled up Flame Magic now. It wasn't at Level 10, but I guess we were going to need a Level 5 spell.

Activating Flame Magic, Inferno Burst. Charging mana to increase destructive power.

My five copies and I began casting, then fired the spells. The golden flames entangled each other, focused on a single point. The spell had a small area of effect in exchange for being a focused blast of energy, but the power of the shot was much stronger than P.A.'s initial calculations. The intensity of the flame curse was so strong that it dissipated the miasma if only for a second.

I could actually see the out of control Lich! However, the endlessly flowing miasma would soon fill the clear air and block our sight of him once more.

We have to take him down! He's right there! Come on!

No. Attacking the Lich now would release all the malice stored inside him. Probability of a malice explosion is eighty nine percent.

Oh. Really? I've changed my mind.

Using EP to advance Skill Taker 10. Skill Taker SP acquired. Cooldown for Skill Taker has reset. Activating Skill Taker SP-Success. Acquired Seal Immunity.

What an underhanded skill. I guess Skill Taker SP could take Extra skills now.

Activating Spacetime Magic: Dimension Jump.

I see! We could bypass the room's teleportation seal now that we had Seal Immunity!

The P.A.'s spell casting echoed in my head.

Oh no, the malice was coming right for us again!

Just as I was about to attempt to fend the crawling malice off with Telekinesis, we were gone from the hall.

Byuoooo.

Are we… off the island?

Buffeting winds greeted us out of our teleport. We were in the middle of a freefall from a place higher than the clouds. We had successfully made our escape.

How was Fran doing? I checked Fran's status as she was still wrapped up with my blade.

Good. She was unconscious, and her health had dropped by half but she was otherwise alright. There was nothing alarming about her complexion and there were no notable wounds on her. I cast Heal and some Purification spells on her just in case.

She hadn't regained consciousness but her life was no longer in danger.

Jet?

"Woof."

Jet was doing alright, too, since he had hidden in Fran's shadow. This new Heavensight, though… It allowed me to see Jet and Identify him even as he remained in the shadows.

He, too, had lost a lot of health, but was otherwise in fine shape. I gave him a Heal.

Time until Specimen Teacher's destruction is thirty-five seconds.

Thanks, P.A.! You saved us!

Halting the effects of Unleash Potential. Scope of Placeholder P.A.'s functionalities will be limited once again.

P.A.'s voice grew distant the second she cut off Unleash Potential. She sounded like a radio whose dial I had turned in the opposite direction.

Wait, so does that mean you'll be going back to the way you were before?

Yes. Placeholder P.A.'s functionalities will be limited to Translation and Notification.

But there's so much I want to ask you! Would this happen again if I used Unleash Potential?

No. Parts of my system have been corrupted due to breaking through of limits. Odds of Placeholder P.A. reasserting authority during a future Unleash Potential are two percent.

What? So I won't be able to meet you like this anymore?

Yes. Odds of recovering corrupted systems are zero percent. Time until shutdown: fifteen seconds.

W-wait, wait! I have so many questions!

I thank you, Specimen Teacher. The gods did not suffer me to exist, and the craftsman deleted my name. Though I was only to live as a vessel, I was glad I could serve you, my master, if only during my last moments. May the God of Wisdom guide you.

P.A.! P.A.?

P.A.? Hello?

She can't hear you anymore, you know? She's gone.

I see… There were so many things I wanted to ask her.

She was a remnant of an existence long gone. Unleash Power just happened to bring that personality forth again. Even that remnant is gone now, taken as the price for going over your limits.

I really can't see her anymore? Even if I used Unleash Power?

There's no way.

I guess I can't ask P.A. for advice anymore.

That's about it. Also, check your crystal stores.

Yeah… wait, who are you?

The conversation had naturally carried on but… who? And how? Was it through Telepathy?

I think I've heard your voice before.

That's right. On the day I was reincarnated, I heard the mysterious voice of a man call out to me in my head.

Hey, who are you?

Well, I was planning to reveal my identity to you later down the road, but… we're scheduled to meet in less than a month, you know. At least our minds will.

Aww, come on. There's no need to put on airs now. You could just tell me now and it'll be just as good.

You're taking this very much in stride…

Because you don't seem like a stranger to me.

That was it. I had felt a sense of familiarity akin to friend or family with this man. It was the whole reason why I carried on talking to him in the first place.

Alright, then. I'll tell you. My name is—

"Teacher!"

Huh? Oh, it was Stefan. He was cradling Jean in his arms as we continued our freefall. The rate of his fall was quite slow; he must have had Float. Still, I was glad they were both alright.

But the timing…

Hey, are you still there?

"__"

Aaand he was gone. Without leaving so much as a name.

Who was that? Was there someone else living inside me? Did I have multiple personalities? Was it another spirit? It wouldn't be strange if there was another soul in my sword body. I didn't even know who made me and for what.

And the P.A., who was she? She didn't feel as much of a soul as she did a machine, very much out of a sci-fi novel or flick. I imagined her to be an android or a support AI. She had said something interesting, too. The craftsman deleted her name, and the gods did not suffer her to live.

Aaah, it bothered me so much! I don't get it! So I had to stop thinking about it!

Not that I would understand even if I hadn't stopped thinking about it. Shelving these questions was my best way forward if I wanted to stay mentally healthy.

The man hadn't seemed hostile. He said we would meet again so I'll ask him when I saw him. I needed to stop thinking about it now.

"Are you alright?"

Stefan drew close to us, and I saw that Jean was all right. It was surreal seeing

an adult in a child's arms.

Somehow.

"And Fran?"

She's just unconscious—

Boooom!

Whoa!

I looked up in panic. The sound had been loud enough to split eardrums. I looked up toward the floating island and saw that it was now split in two. Black light poured from the island's foundation. Malice had flooded the entire dungeon, and it was no longer isolated to the floor where the Lich was.

We would've ascended too if we had failed to escape the dungeon. There was nowhere to run even after we had beaten the Lich. I had the P.A. to thank for saving our lives.

Grrrrgggg—

Huge crags fell from the remains of the ruined dungeon. The exploded foundation had produced boulders which were now falling through the sky. The sight reminded me of the final scene from Laputa.

"The rampage of malice must have destroyed the dungeon core in the process. The dungeon will disappear in a little while."

"Disappear? So those giant boulders won't do any damage?"

"No, only the things created by the dungeon will disappear. The island was already there before the dungeon came about."

That sounded bad. If rocks of those magnitude hit the ground… it would bring disaster to any nearby villages.

Jet.

"Woof!"

Jet came out of Fran's shadow and gently set her on his back. His natural fur pelt must feel comfortable. He was practically a bed, given his size. With Jet's Air Hike ability, Fran was in good hands.

I plunged down through the clouds and surveyed the landscape. Good, there were no cities or villages in sight. I overlooked the foot of a mountain. The kingdom of Raydoss should be just over it.

Still, the falling crags could still do some severe damage if it fell in the forest or the mountains. Worse, I had noticed a river flowing below me that looked like it branched out to several different streams. If the flow of the river was blocked off by one of the crags…

What should I do?

There were two gigantic boulders right now. One of them looked like it was going to fall right in the middle of the forest in the mountain, and the other was on a collision course to the river on the mountain's surface.

I have to save the river somehow.

Not that I could move such a massive rock with Telekinesis. Destroying it wouldn't reduce its volume, either. It might even increase the area affected by the falling rocks.

No, wait a second. If I did that and this… Okay, this just might work.

I figured something out. If my plan went well, I might be able to divert this crisis completely.

Let's go! Inferno Burst!

I charged towards the rock foundation and fired my spell. My brand new Inferno Burst drilled several holes into the rock which I then widened further with Earth Magic. I used Wind Magic to pressurize the rock mass from the inside and—

The giant crag split in four.

Take this!

I pelted them with more spells to split them up into twenty smaller pieces. Granted, the smallest above the boulders was still twenty meters in diameter.

That should do it.

I then deployed the Pocket Dimension, storing up all the broken rocks I could

get my hands on.

Store. Store. Store.

Heheh, there was still plenty of room in my Pocket Dimension! It seemed that learning Spacetime Magic had actually increased its size. I still had an auditorium worth of space left after storing the boulders away.

I just needed to figure out some way to sort out all the rubble in my inventory. That could wait.

We were taking the sea route, after all. I'd just dump it in the ocean then.

The river should be safe now.

The other rock mass had crashed into some plains in the distance, sounding off a loud roar in the process. It kicked up a huge amount of dust and sand as it crushed part of the forest.

"Woof, woof, woof!"

"Teacher, are you alright?"

Jet and Stefan had landed. I should get back on land as well. I had earned a well-deserved break.

I could ask you the same thing. Did you get hit by any of the falling rubble?

"I'm alright… huh?"

Uh, Stefan? You're kind of glowing. Are you sure you're okay?

A faint blue light had enveloped Stefan.

"It looks like my time is up."

Huh? Why?

"I am a dungeon monster, after all. When the dungeon disappears, so will I."

Destroying a dungeon core or defeating a dungeon master eliminated all the monsters within a dungeon. Fair enough, but was Stefan a dungeon monster?

I thought you were under Jean's charge.

"Yes and no. This body was created by the dungeon master, you see."

Stefan's fingertips were beginning to go transparent. It soon spread all over his body as a light shone on him as if beckoning him into the sky. The event was a replay of what had happened when Jean cast Ascension on Andy. He was disappearing.

So why was he smiling as he was fading away?

Shouldn't he be afraid if he had human thoughts?

"Take this." He held a small bundle out.

Is this a diary?

"Yes. You'll understand once you read it."

Whose is it?

"Read to find out. Aaah, I can finally rest in peace…"

Stefan, wait!

"Teacher, please take care of my other master… Thank you for setting us free."

Stefan gently caressed the unconscious necromancer.

"Good night."

He disappeared then, peacefully without a sound.

All that he left behind was a satisfied smile.

Stefan smiled until the end.

"Arf…"

To vengeful spirits, ascension was their salvation. Things couldn't have worked out better for the Wraith turned Ghost Eater. He ascended after laying his life down for his master. To grieve him now would be to miss the point.

Well, no use standing around here. Let's go wake Jean and Fran up.

"Bark."

Jet began licking Jean's face, and for some moments I worried that the Direwolf might drown the necromancer with his slobber. *Don't overdo it, now.*

There was one thing I wanted to check in the meantime—my crystal count which the mystery man had mentioned earlier.

Um… Excuse me?!

Evolution: [Rank 11; Crystals: 2061/6600; Skill Capacity: 100; Free EP: 18]

Where'd all my crystals go?! What?! Seriously?

My rank and abilities had not gone down but my crystal count was drastically reduced. Why? Was it the cost of using Unleash Power? It did mention something about exacting a different price depending on who's using it. I guess crystals were my additional cost.

Not that I was going to complain, since it did save my life. It saved my life so no complaints here, nope! But God… my next rank up felt like an eternity away…

"Pfft! What is all this sticky stuff?!"

Jet had successfully woken up Jean, albeit in the worst way possible.

I should go wake Fran up before Jet assaulted her with his slobber.

We made our way back to Jean's research lab after narrowly escaping the dungeon with our lives. Casting Nether Lord's Blessing twice was taking its toll on Jean. He lay down on the floor immediately after some small talk. A good night's sleep was supposed to fix him up but a night had gone by and he was still down for the count. He had trouble just getting out of bed.

I was in the middle of teaching Bernard how to make curry when Jean called me to his sleeping quarters.

How are you feeling?

"Fuhahaha. Better, really. There's something I want to ask you."

Jean wanted to know what happened the other day after he passed out, the subject naturally progressed to Stefan's final moments.

“So Stefan is gone now.”

Yeah.

Jean looked relieved and nodded.

“I see… He still looked after his foolish master who left him in that place for so long… I am eternally grateful.”

He looked quite happy to go, you know?

“Then I am happy as well. Indeed, that is the best thing that can happen to an undead.”

Jean and I continued our conversation as he lay in his bed.

We talked about how we were going to split the items and reward money. As a result, I got 500,000G for selling off Death Gaze, which was more than I expected.

We had gotten several more items from treasure boxes but had no use for most of them. We decided to sell them off since they were useless to us. Death Gaze was very strong as well.

Name: Death Gaze

Attack: 880; MP: 600; Durability: 400

Mana Conductivity: B+

Skill: Death (3% chance of inflicting Death on an enemy)

Its raw attack power outclassed me.

I-I wasn’t upset at all! I still outclassed it in every other facet!

“Teacher.”

What?

“Have you read the diary Stefan gave you?”

I had not.

Stefan had entrusted me with his diary, but I thought it'd be better if Jean read it first.

"I see. May I?"

We both know you should. I can read it once you're done with it.

"Thank you."

No rush. I was planning on resting here for a few days, anyway.

"Very well."

Take it easy.

I floated the diary over to Jean. He carefully held it and slowly flipped through its pages. I doubted he could finish it all in one day.

How should I spend the next few days?

I guess I could experiment with my newly-acquired skills. I asked Bernard if there was any place I could use and he pointed me to the empty field behind the lab.

First, to look over the changes made to my stats. As for the crystal… I'd have to pretend that didn't exist.

Name: Teacher

User: Fran

Race: Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 527; MP: 3550/3550; Durability: 3350/3350

Mana Conductivity: A+

Evolution: [Rank 11; Crystals: 2061/6600; Skill Capacity: 100; EP: 18]

Skills: Identify 10; Identity Protection; Transform Shape; High Speed Self Repair; Telekinesis; Telekinesis Up (low); Telepathy; Attack Up (low); User Status Up (medium); User Recovery Rate Up (low); Heavensight; Seal Immunity; MP Up (low); Skill Capacity Up (medium); Bestiary; Skill Sharing; Mage

Unique Skill: Essence of Falsehood 5

Superior Skill: Skill Taker SP; Complex Doppelganger SP

Fran had also vastly leveled up. The skills listed below reflected her raw state without me equipped.

Name: Fran

Age: 12

Race: Beastman. Black Cat Tribe.

Class: Blademage

Status: Contract (Swordmaster)

Level: 33/45

HP: 406; Magic: 327; Strength: 215; Agility: 209

Skill: Stealth 3; Royal Etiquette 4; Presence Sense 3; Sword Arts 4; Sword Mastery 6; Flash Step 4; Cooking 1; Insect Killer; Spirit Manipulation; Goblin Killer; Cool Mind; Demon Killer; Expert Carver; Determination; Sense of Direction; Night Vision.

[NEW] Undead Killer

Class Skill: Focus Mana

Special Skill: Black Cat Blessing

Title: Veteran; Insect Killer; Disassembly Expert; Healing Mage; Skill Collector; Goblin Killer; Assassin; Dungeon Raider; Boss Killer; Fire Mage; Demon Killer; Master Chef

[NEW] Undead Killer; Skill Maniac

Equipment: Black Cat Set (Black Cat Armor; Black Cat Gloves; Black Cat Boots; Black Cat Earring; Black Cat Cloak; Black Cat Belt); Bracelet of Strength +1; Bracelet of Sacrifice

She had gained eight levels in total, reflected in her drastic stat increase. Fran herself had not gained a single new skill, but her Sword Mastery went up quite a bit. She was growing up fast. All the EXP from fighting strong enemies was proving their worth.

Her Contract status caught my eye again. It had “(Swordmaster)” on it now. The sword probably referred to me, but I wondered what had changed. Did we happen to trigger a clause in the unwritten contract? If we did, Fran and I had no knowledge of it.

We didn’t know how we even entered into a contract with each other. It was a real mystery. Jean said that we were glowing a blue light during the Lich fight, but we couldn’t figure out a way to reproduce it.

And try to reproduce it we did. Fran and I tried releasing the same amount of mana at the same time, we tried focusing our minds together, nothing seemed to work.

“Activate Contract!”

No, not even shouting out the purported skill name. We didn’t glow blue even for an instant.

Well, no matter. I would just have to monitor it for any changes from here on out.

There was something about Fran’s level, too. Thanks to Heavensight, I was able to glean more information from Fran’s status screen. It read 33/45 so I guess 45 was her cap. Maybe she would evolve when she hit Level 45 which wasn’t that far off. This was great news. Our next goal would be to aim for Level 45.

Then came Jet. He had been at Level 1 when he went in, and had gained ten extra levels in the process. His raw stats had already surpassed Fran’s. Compared to Jet, Fran was slower to level up since she only gained eight extra levels, but then, Jet was at a lower level compared to her.

Name: Jet (Darkness Wolf)

Race: Direwolf

Level: 11/50

HP: 600; Magic: 731; Strength: 301; Agility: 369

Skills: Shadow Resistance 8; Shadow Magic 2; Heightened Senses 10; Stealth 7; Fang Arts 5; Fang Mastery 6; Shadow Lurk 10; Shadow Walk 5; Air Hike 8; Fear 4; Vigilance 6; Conceal Presence 6; Regeneration 5; Deadly Venom Magic 1; Flash Step 5; Hush 6; Necromancy 5; Life Sense 7; Mental Resistance 6; Poison Magic 10; Echolocation 7; Roar 8; Nightshade 10; Dark Magic 10; Nightvision; Toxic Fang; Health Regen; Mana Regen; Nullify Poison; Shapeshift; Mana Manipulation

Unique Skill: Predator

Titles: Sword Clan; Great Wolf Clan

I could see what Sword Clan and Great Wolf Clan were now that my Identify was at a higher level.

Sword Clan: A title bestowed unto those summoned by a special sword as a minion. Effects: Direct link with the Sword and its User.

Great Wolf Clan: A title bestowed unto those upon whom the Great Wolf's power rests. Effects: Intimidates lesser wolves. Direct link with the Great Wolf.

Sword Clan was easy enough to understand, but what was the deal with Great Wolf Clan? I guess I did have a wolf crest on my guard, and I did originally hail from the Demon Wolf's Garden. Maybe me and this Fenrir were connected somehow.

Not that I knew how…

I would really like to go back to the Garden at some point. We would need to get stronger since B-Rank monsters had made it their home.

Now to look at our skills.

Rapid Processing and Dual Mind seemed the most useful. As its name implied, Rapid Processing allowed me to speed up my thinking. It would come in handy in the heat of battle. Dual Mind amplified the effects of Rapid Processing. As the advanced form of Split Thinking it allowed me to think four, even five, thoughts at the same time. Which means I should be able to cast up to five spells at once, as if Split Thinking wasn't powerful enough already. Pulled off right, I should be able to inflict some serious damage.

Fran couldn't get the hang of using it, however. Split Thinking was already giving her a hard time and its advanced form was even worse. Using it immediately gave her a migraine.

"My head hurts."

I guess it's hard for flesh and blood to use.

I then tried Transform Shape. P.A. had shown me lots of applications for this skill, so I was frustrated when I just couldn't get it to work. I tried transforming into a steel string, and then plate armor, but all I could come up with were inferior copies of what the P.A. had used. I needed more practice to get the shape I wanted. As it stood, I only had the Greatsword, Dagger, and Estoc forms down.

Time to move on to Spacetime Magic. It really was as strong as we thought from our experimentation. We had already seen Dimension Shift, Quick Zone, and Dimension Jump, but there were also offense-oriented spells such as Dimension Sword, and the defense-oriented Slow Shield. There were a myriad of spells all with their own little quirks. The effects of the spells were best understood by casting and observing them. Without the requisite knowledge of Spacetime Magic, you wouldn't be able to tell what half of these spells did by looking at their names.

All that was left now were the skills that the P.A. had deleted. Honestly, I wouldn't be able to know what was missing and what was left, either. I thought it best to look at the consolidated skills to start off.

The two Battle Mastery skills created from the compounding were Sword King Mastery Earth 7 and Martial King Mastery Earth 1.

Sword King Earth 7 was made of Curved Sword Mastery 1, Advanced Sword

Mastery 5, Sword Mastery 10, Twinblade Mastery 2, Greatsword Mastery 1, Short Sword Mastery 1, and Dagger Mastery 1. Martial King Mastery Earth 1 was made of Punch Mastery 3, Kick Mastery 1, and Martial Arts 3.

Compounding Sword Arts and Martial Arts created Sword King Arts Earth 6, Martial Master Arts Earth 1. I learned from Jean that there were many such Sword King Mastery and Sword King Arts skills. They were the cream of the crop of mastery skills, but my version was nowhere near as powerful as the one the P.A. exhibited.

After some more digging, I discovered that Sword King Arts Earth 7 was roughly equal in ability to Advanced Sword Mastery 5. I was worried about the skill level going down but was relieved to find it intact.

I looked into some other Compound Skills.

Somatic Manipulation: used to boost the capabilities of the user's body. Aside from being a straight status buff, it also allows the user to increase her flexibility and regenerative capacity. Created by combining Brute Strength and Regeneration.

Omnidirectional Radar 3: created from combining various Detection skills. It works in all directions as well as being much more accurate.

Being Sense 3: created from combining various Sense skills. Allows the user to detect even invisible objects such as heat and infrared beams.

Covert Stealth 3: created from combining Stealth and Conceal Presence. Eliminates your mana and heat signatures aside from your presence.

This was going to come in handy.

Lordship 3: created from combining Pressure 1, Intimidate 2, Command 1, Raise Morale 1, Ambition 1, Panic 1, Roar 1, and Cooperation 5 to unlock it. A complex form of intimidating the enemy while giving a boost to allies.

Abnormal Status Resistance 6, Mental Abnormal Status Resistance 4, Magic Resistance 4. These were clear-cut. The three skills were an amalgam of skills such as Poison Resistance, Fear Resistance, and Flame Resistance. The other Resistance skills were Shadow Immunity, Control Immunity, and Physical Resistance 1. These were the ones which couldn't be amalgamated with the previous three skills.

Water Manipulation 4: a skill which allowed you to manipulate surrounding bodies of water. Had the ability to shoot water bullets and water current manipulation. Included Swimming and Underwater Breathing.

Wind Manipulation 2: The wind version of Water Manipulation. Has the ability to fire air bullets and compressed air. It allows for ultrasonic attacks and the manipulation of soundwaves. Also includes Air Hike and Weather Forecast.

Poison Manipulation 2: a combination of Breathe Poison, Drain Poison, and Generate Poison.

Water, Wind, and Poison Manipulation were all incredibly versatile but difficult to control. They also came with a high mana cost. You were better off using straight magic to cure a deadly poison than Poison Manipulation. It was going to be difficult to use the component skills of the Manipulate tree. To take Air Hike as an example, it cost more mana per cast and the number of steps we could jump had been reduced by half. We were going to have to get used to this, fast.

Kill Master: created from Orc Killer and Goblin Killer. Increases damage output to all monsters.

However, the damage points doled out overall were lower compared to its more specific cousins.

Strengthen Body: created from skills such as Night Vision and Enhanced Digestion, it significantly increases the user's stats.

I was incredulous at how Fran's stats had plummeted after taking this off.

That was about the gist of the Compound Skills. The skills were stronger, but became much more difficult to control. I didn't know what was going to happen if I got a copy of one of my old skills. If I got Sword Mastery, would it create a new Sword Mastery or be absorbed into Sword King Mastery Earth?

As for the missing skills… I honestly couldn't tell. The skills the P.A. had deleted were skills I found useless in the first place. The Battle skills were the easiest to notice. Bow Mastery, Spear Mastery, and my then newly acquired Advanced Spear Mastery and Advanced Spear Arts were all gone.

I was a sword, after all, so I had no intention of ever using them. We couldn't know at the time if we were ever going to use it at all, as much as it pained my collector's soul to say it! Still, I understood the necessity of deleting those skills on that day to convert them into EP. It was an unavoidable sacrifice, and I took comfort in saying that to myself.

There were also absolutely useless skills like Eggshell Mimicry, which allowed eggs you laid to mimic the color of their surroundings, and Enhanced Scales, which increased the toughness of one's scales. Joining the cast of useless skills were Choir and Painting which had been promptly deleted. They were all quite worthless so I didn't feel bad about losing them. We got to escape with our lives at least.

I might have even forgotten that some of the deleted skills were even in my repertoire, not that I could confirm it.

Now, all that were left were the Superior Skills.

Skill Taker SP: Choose any skill from a target and steal it. Has a one hundred percent chance of success. Cooldown determined by a skill's rarity multiplied by skill level in days. Extra Skills count as rarity 20. Effective range is ten meters.

It could steal Extra Skills now! The world was now my oyster! On the flip side, the cooldown time had been increased by several magnitudes. Stealing a maxed out Extra Skill would have me wait two hundred days before I could use Skill Taker SP again. I would have to be more careful with its usage. It looks like I could use it against the same target over and over again, too, not that I could imagine the chance to do so would arise.

Finally, we came to Complex Doppelganger SP.

Complex Doppelganger SP: Use mana to create multiple copies of oneself. The shorter the duration time, the stronger the copies will be. The more copies you create, the weaker each copy will be. Cooldown is determined by duration time multiplied by twenty four hours multiplied by number of copies.

So I sacrificed firepower in exchange for quantity of clones. Creating one clone of myself with a timer of five minutes gave it 200 in each stat and 3 to all skills. If it were an adventurer, it would be a D-Rank. Creating more would reduce the stats even more…? I suppose the clones the P.A created were much stronger thanks to Unleash Power.

And that's about it. We would need time to practice all of our new skills. Their strength would be determined by our finesse.

I went back to the house and found Bernard looking for me.

Jean wanted to see me.

We went to his bedroom and found him sitting up on his bed, Stefan's diary lying on his lap.

"You're here, young Teacher."

Have you finished reading it?

"Yes. Now it's your turn."

Jean was strangely quiet as he handed me the diary.

Hm. This is pretty long.

The massive tome was filled until the last page. There must have been several years' worth of entries in it. I used Telekinesis to flip through it.

Powerful—if messy—handwriting filled its pages.

"Read it if you have the chance. No, you should read it."

It was going to take some time to go through all its pages, but Jean's serious expression made me curious as to its contents.

Four hours went by.

I finished reading the diary cover to cover without stopping. While not strictly a page turner, it did contain the emotions of its writer. Those emotions helped me power through those pages.

By the end, I was dumbstruck. If what was written in this diary were true—

"Have you finished it?"

Yeah.

"You must tell Fran, as well. Please."

Of course.

I needed to read this diary. Everyone did.

***

It's been three years since I inhabited this body.

I've decided to write a diary, starting today. I don't have any particular reason to, I just felt like it was the right thing to do. Daily entries would be impossible, but I think I can do weekly reports.

Someone might find these pages, and to that someone, I would like to tell them a little bit about myself.

Let's start with where I am. Not that I know where I am. But I know what kind of place this used to be.

I am on a drifting floating island which used to host a research facility for the kingdom of Raydoss. I was a prisoner of this facility. I didn't know what the aim of their research was. All I knew was that it would be used for war.

I was the subject of experiments linked to necromancy. I don't know all the details, but there were countless times that I wanted to die. The researchers did not see as human beings; they saw us as mere guinea pigs to experiment on. It was as if the researchers themselves had lost their humanity.

One day—by force of tragedy or miracle, I could never tell—I stopped being human.

I was about to be killed that day. The previous experiments had robbed me of my arms and legs, and so they were ready to dispose of me. I was to be one of their guinea pigs in a large-scale experiment.

They wanted to know what would happen to a living necromancer—that was me (although I could only use Level 1 spells)—if they injected him with malice to turn him into an undead. Pointless, isn't it?

They bound me in chains and laid me on the floor in the center of a giant pentagram. An impossible amount of malice emanated from it. I would be unable to reject this concentrated malice because of the barriers and rituals they had set up. Malice rushed through my body, having found a living thing to fester in.

I thought to myself, *Finally, I'm going to die,* as the rush of malice exceeded

my bodily limitations. Light from the magic circle shone into my eyes as it prepared to turn me into an undead.

That was when it happened.

I could never tell whether it was the mercy or a joke of the gods.

A Dungeon Core suddenly came into being in the very room I was in.

You must be wondering what rubbish I'm writing about. To be honest, I don't quite know, either.

The Dungeon Core. The thing which spawned wherever the gods pleased, ignoring every rule of nature if it came to it.

Why did it show up there and then? Was it coincidence? An ironic trick played by the God of Chaos? Was there a god up there who felt sorry for us and decided to grant us mercy?

I don't know.

What I do know is the Dungeon Core chose me as its master, and I became a Dungeon Master. It increased my strength and I was able to take in all the malice that was rushing through me. The ritual which would make an undead of me as I remained alive had worked, and I became an undead.

I was originally going to be a Zombie Mage, one of the weaker undead. Even that low rank monster was stronger than I had ever been while alive.

But the torrent of malice, combined with my becoming a Dungeon Master, created an anomaly.

I had become a Lich. A Lich. I thought I was an ordinary Skeleton but then I noticed I had over twenty skills at my disposal.

I woke up as a Lich three days after the Core came into existence. I have no memory of what happened in those three days. When I came to, there wasn't a single living human being on the floating island. They had all become undead. And I was a Lich. I was dumbstruck by this fact. Some would say that I had evolved. A Lich made for a most powerful necromancer.

I didn't think so.

My heart dried out when I ceased to be human. In order to quench this thirst I sought out the researchers, who were now shambling undead themselves, and destroyed them. But that did not satisfy me. Hatred kept pouring out of me.

It hurt. I couldn't help hating humanity. I wanted to destroy everything. I wanted slaughter everyone.

Vengeance had become my sole purpose.

I didn't want to, though. Becoming a Lich had miraculously saved me from that horrible experiment. I only wanted to live like this in peace.

But the malice inside of me wouldn't have it. Kill, destroy, take vengeance upon the world. It moved me, and I was helpless to resist.

I don't know who will end up reading this diary. You might be an ally or an enemy. You might be good or bad. All I want is for you to know the story of this island. Furthermore, I want you to expose the kingdom of Raydoss for all the evil that it's committed.

That is my only request.

April 7, 3619

I've decided to write my diary starting today—this diary I started on a whim. Nothing in particular happened today so I'm just going to give a rundown of what happened.

I expanded the dungeon again, and made some more undead. Corpses of the researchers and my former friends were still lying around. I would spawn some lower undead, generate some mana, and secure some GP.

I didn't know GP stood for Goddess Points. I think it's because they're presented to the Goddess of Chaos.

September 29, 3619

I finally have more than 10,000 GP stored up. Now I could create facilities which could create mid-tier undead. As much as I would like to be detailed about the dungeon, there are some things I cannot write. Every time I try to write something about the Dungeon Core, my pen stops moving.

There seems to be a mysterious force behind it. It's powerful enough to control a Lich like me so I wonder if the gods are behind it.

November 4, 3619

I spent some GP to create stronger minions. There are a lot of facilities left behind which all contained some form of undead summoning item. I found a catalyst called the Hero's Bones among them. As its name suggested, they were the remains of a great hero. Not that I could know before summoning them.

It turns out they really were strong. I had succeeded in summoning a Legendary Skeleton Dark Knight. This one even had the Extra Skill, Unleash Potential.

I scrapped with it to see how strong it was and was not disappointed. I had created a good minion for myself.

December 31, 3619

Today's the last day of the year. This was my fourth New Year's Eve as a Lich. I made some celebratory bread and soup. I couldn't eat them, of course, but it did get me in the mood.

How was an undead supposed to celebrate, anyway…?

I'm getting close to hitting my GP mark. If I set up the Undead Creation Workshop, I'll be able to produce more undead. I can't wait.

February 27, 3620

I've succeeded in setting up the Undead Creation Workshop. Seeing the mechanisms of the dungeon never gets old. Just a few clicks in Dungeon Settings and the Workshop came into being in an instant.

The list of undead I could create in the dungeon had grown much bigger, and so did my summoning repertoire.

I wasn't sure which one to pick. The undead created by the dungeon had

crystals in them, which restored mana to the dungeon, but they weren't very strong.

The undead I summoned were made of pseudosouls instead of crystal. They were much stronger when I made them, but they weren't able to contribute to the flow of mana in the dungeon as effectively. They were also quite warlike since they had malice running through them. I could improve on all the undead the dungeon spawned, but going through hundreds of them at a time was a pain.

Hmm, maybe I'll try a middle road.

September 18, 3620

I've been getting used to the orbit of the floating island. I could force it to alter its course by using Orbit Manipulation, but that takes way too much mana…

I didn't mind crossing into other kingdoms as long as I stayed close to Raydoss. Taking vengeance upon them is my sole mission.

April 14, 3621

The dungeon's facilities have expanded, and with it, so has GP production. The larger facilities were particularly impressive.

There was a shield generator which produced a barrier encasing the dungeon, and a furnace where I can turn malice into mana. Each cost 300,000 GP so I doubt if I'll get them both soon.

July 11, 3621

I've fully expanded the dungeon. There are ten floors in total now. The dungeon's area was a diameter of fifty meters in all directions.

Once I increase our anti-air capabilities, no one will be able to land here. I've made plans to create some undead and set up traps.

May 20, 3622

I tried making a unique specimen today. I spent 10,000 GP to create an undead called a Ghost Eater.

It looks like a regular old zombie right now, but I can't wait to see how it will grow.

I usually let him wander the halls of the labyrinth alone.

October 10, 3622

There is much for me to write today.

I finally have an intruder after all my years of being a Dungeon Master. I thought it was one of the Raydossian lackeys, but I was mistaken.

He was alone so he was probably an adventurer. A necromancer, and quite strong, at that. He was riding a Griffon Skeleton, a creature I have trouble summoning.

I made some bird and spider undead in retaliation, at least. Unfortunately, the Griffon Skeleton was strong enough to bruteforce through them and landed.

I had made sure that the forest was well-equipped. The Necromancer fell for my illusion traps which made him lose his way.

He was already running low on supplies by the time he ran into more undead ahead of him.

I sent my higher ranked undead after him as he tried to retreat. The Ghost Eater had gotten much stronger now so he should have been able to win… but the necromancer got away in the end.

Too bad. I wanted to talk to him if I had captured him. I guess I wouldn't mind making him my minion, either.

I haven't laughed so hard in so long, though; it might be the first time since I was born.

"I am the great Jean du Vix! Fuhahaha! An undead lair! A dungeon which

befits my very nature!”

I’m not making fun of him or anything. I kind of respect that. He had skull accessories and wore tattered robes. And his exclamations… Now *that* was a real necromancer.

What was I compared to him? I was so polite despite being a Lich, it was kind of lame.

So, I’ve decided to turn a new leaf and change the way I talk starting today.

“I am the Lich! King of the Evil Spirits! Kukakaka!”

Would that work? Uh, I mean, would that be befitting of me?

Yes, I suppose so! Kukakaka!

This is going to take some getting used to.

October 28, 3623

I have gathered up 300,000 GP. With this, I can build the Malice Furnace. Hunting those monsters which happened to venture into the dungeon’s flight path has paid off.

I thought I would use the various tools and leave the remains for later. However, crystals were the best source of GP, so I let the dungeon absorb them.

A whelp such as a Lesser Wyvern yielded 20 GP. In the end, I let the dungeon have its fill of everything.

This furnace will absorb the malice around it and convert it into mana. Once linked to it, I will have an infinite supply of malice and mana.

April 12, 3624

I grow stronger each day thanks to the Malice Furnace. The day is approaching where I shall have power enough to take vengeance upon the world.

There is a slight problem, however. The power of malice inside me is growing faster than I expected. Seeing as I can convert malice into energy, I should be colossally strong, but…

Hatred and resentment are growing within me as well.

November 3, 3624

I have been experiencing blackouts of memory. Is the Malice Furnace at fault?

August 7, 3625

I noticed something interesting today. The Ghost Eater has taken on the form of a little boy.

I am quite sure it was a giant, ten meters in height, before…

I suppose it is a result of it shedding unnecessary weight. He is smaller now, yes, but his mana signature is stronger than ever.

What's more interesting is that the form he took is of myself, from before I had become a lich. Is it because my magical energy flows throughout the place? Or was it because I made him myself? How curious.

February 24, 3626

I have no memory of what happened in the middle of the week. I saw myself in the footage of the dungeon's surveillance system, but was that really me?

I saw a Lich. The cruel, ruthless tyrant. The King of the Evil Spirits. It was only a matter of time until I was absorbed into that being.

But perhaps that is for the best.

Kindness was a liability in the quest for revenge. That Lich in the footage would be able to take vengeance upon the kingdom Raydoss far better, far crueler than I could.

October 6, 3626

The gaps in my memory are getting worse. I hold no recollection of half of what happened today.

My plan is going smoothly, however. I had leveled up, and my minions were armed and ready. With this much power, I can grind Raydoss to dust.

An all-out war with the entire country is impossible. However, I could bring the floating island to the capital and assassinate the royal family. I would then turn the victims of the first battle into my undead legion.

In half a year, I shall set my plan into motion.

The world shall know of the depths of our malice.

March 21, 3627

My consciousness returns to me after half a year. My other self has completely taken over. Not that I mind, since the dungeon is in excellent condition.

But I do wonder if this is divine punishment.

I was visited by another intruder on this day of clarity. Moreover, it was that necromancer, Jean, and he brought help this time.

His helper was an adorable little girl who looked about the same age as I was before I became a Lich. However, she was a fierce swordsman.

I couldn't take my eyes off the screen.

If only I had a friend like that… I had been a slave ever since I was born, I never had friends. Perhaps that was why the girl shone so brightly to me.

I don't want her to die… Is this an impossible wish?

They sped their way through my dungeon. Quite efficiently, I might add. They must be well-prepared. Are they going to conquer it?

The thought tickles my fancy.

Frustration at being denied vengeance on one hand, and the hope for the

release of the malice that has been burning my heart for so long on another.

Did I want to disappear or no?

I do not know.

But the necromancer and the girl must be part of our fate. How it turns out? Well…

It is unfortunate that I cannot face them in the final battle. I wonder what would happen the next time I woke up. Perhaps I shall awake no longer after this. I can’t wait.

Perhaps, the one reading these pages are the great Jean du Vix and the Beastgirl. If so, I have one thing to say:

Thank the gods you’re alive.

Epilogue

Morning came, and we were about to set off from Jean's laboratory.

"We're off."

"Indeed. Be careful out there."

Are you sure you don't mind filing the reports?

"Of course not. It's all part of the job."

Jean had recovered for the most part. He was well enough to walk, though he had to lean on Bernard's shoulder.

I left the reporting and documentation to Jean. It involved informing the guild and the government, along with bringing the diary to the appropriate authorities. He also had to inform them that the fallen island had completely disappeared.

Just listening to all the potential bureaucracy made me cringe. Fortunately, Jean had volunteered himself for the job. He did have time on his hands, unlike us who were out on an adventure.

Besides, they would have a hard time believing that an adventurer of Fran's rank was able to clear that dungeon by herself. I'd go so far as to say they would never believe it. Add an encounter with a Lich and evidence of a Raydossian conspiracy to that and anyone would think she was making stuff up.

We didn't want to waste any more time and so asked Jean to take care of it for us. It was a pain in the ass so we tossed it over to Jean! Something like that. Not to say I completely ditched my responsibilities; I still had the rubble of a floating island to take care of. Jean assured us that leaving the rubble in a place like a volcano, where another element was stronger, would get rid of the undead element. The bottom of the ocean sounded like a good alternative especially since we were going by the sea route.

"'Til we meet again," Jean said, oddly formal.

“Yeah. See you around.”

“Woof!”

Take care of yourselves!

“You too!” Bernard called after us.

The warm morning sun shone brightly upon us as a pale Magi and a skeleton waved us goodbye… It was the strangest sight.

Only a few days ago we would have exterminated all undead we saw with extreme prejudice, yet now we were friendly with them. Although, to be fair, seeing one in the middle of the night would still make me jump.

“Bye-bye.”

Fran jumped onto Jet. With Jean’s gift of potions we were ready to depart. Fran lightly tapped Jet’s neck and the Direwolf let out a howl before speeding away.

“Come back any time! We’ll be happy to have you!”

The necromancer’s laboratory shrank as we gained distance. There was something exciting about going on a journey. It made all our encounters and goodbyes that much sweeter. I felt the same when we left Alessa.

They were good people.

“Yeah. I hope we see them again.” Fran nodded vigorously, her expression tinged with loneliness.

We’ll just have to come visit when we get the chance.

“Awooo!”

Jet let out a happy howl, his trots gaining the quality of a skip. Jet must have grown to like Jean as well. The necromancer probably fed him behind my back. I was actually sad to part ways with that obnoxious spellcaster. It felt like we didn’t spend enough time together. We had all come to like the loud necromancer, as regrettable as that might sound.

Jean had an attractive quality about him. His first dungeon raid even gained him the admiration of the Lich. Even as the Lich’s personality was taken over by

the dark side, the style of speech he adopted after Jean's visit didn't change. That's how much Jean influenced him.

I started thinking, still strapped on Fran's back.

Was the Lich really himself during our final confrontation? He was a Lich in form, of course, but I wondered if the person who wrote the diary stayed asleep back then.

The cruel side of the Lich was brought about by an overdose of malice manufactured by the Malice Furnace. Well, what happened when the furnace was destroyed? I'm sure the furious Lich facing us then was the evil one. But what about after that?

If the Lich had been serious he could've killed us all in an instant. Wasn't he then holding back? It was too late to speculate about it but I couldn't help but wonder.

"Teacher?"

Fran looked at me curiously as I stayed silent. *Oh, she's so cute when she looks confused.* Even the Lich acknowledged Fran's cuteness at first sight.

What if he regained his consciousness at the very end? What if we killed him when…

I wonder who the Lich was at the very end…

"?"

It's nothing. I hope the Lich and Stefan are in a better place.

"Me too."

His dying wishes came true. Fran didn't die in the end.

It made me think: What would my dying wishes be? Would I make those wishes as a person or as a sword?

I suppose it went without saying. I was Fran's sword, and I would have to make my wishes as a sword. Of Fran's happiness, I could leave that to other people. I would wish that I could continue to be Fran's strength. I wanted to fight alongside her as her sword.

Granted, I couldn’t know what I would wish for until that time comes. But right now, I hope that’s what I end up wishing for.



Afterword

Hello, this is Yuu Tanaka.

To first-timers and long time web readers alike, thank you for buying this book.

I somehow managed to churn out two volumes in one year.

There are a lot of revisions and system changes in this volume so readers of the web edition should be able to enjoy the subtle differences, I think.

I would like to end this volume with expressions of gratitude.

Thank you to Micro Magazine's editor I-san, who's been with me these two volumes. I'm forever grateful to your great ideas and insights.

Thank you Llo, for the wonderful illustrations. The cover and illustrations of Volume 2 are amazing.

To my friends and family back home who have stayed with me through thick and thin, thank you.

Thank you to my ever supportive colleagues and everyone involved in the publication process.

And you, the reader. Thank you.

I have nothing but gratitude for all of you.



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