
3
NOVEL
Reincarnated as a Sword
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3

written by

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Seven Seas Entertainment

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD VOL. 3

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Illustrations by Llo

This edition originally published in Japan in 2017 by
MICROMAGAZINE PUBLISHING CO., Tokyo.
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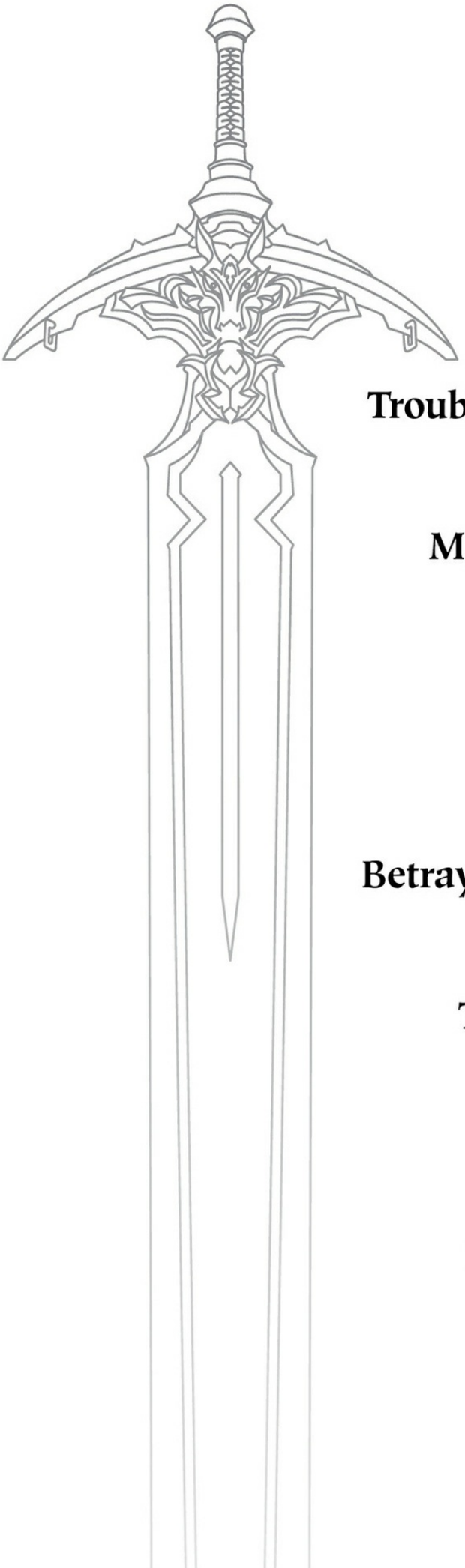
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64275-724-8
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2019
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter 1:
Where Cats Go, Trouble Is Soon to Follow

Who is the God of Evil?

An evil god? A god who fought the other gods? While these answers are not mistaken, they are merely a part of the God of Evil's narrative.

To know the God of Evil, we must start with the gods in general.

This is not public knowledge, but the gods of this world did not come from this world. I have come to this conclusion after consulting those with the Oracle skill and those who have written down and preserved the divine word of the gods.

I was surprised to learn that there were eight million gods where they came from. They came to our world to seek a new residence because theirs had become too cramped. Unlike villagers who rant and rave at being forced to leave their overpopulated village, the gods simply left their world to come to ours. Their number was eighty-nine: exactly the number of gods which grace our world.

What follows is general folklore: Having come to an uninhabited plane of existence, the gods wasted no time shaping a new world. The God of Earth created the land out of his own body, and the other gods filled that body with each of their aspects. The God of Oceans filled the seas, the God of the Sun lit up the great fireball in the sky. The God of the Silver Moon then created the moon and moved there to lessen the burden of the God of Earth. The lesser gods proceeded to live on the Great Moon, the greater gods staking their claims on each of the seven moons orbiting it.

There was one god who was left out during the creation of our world, and that was the God of War. He continued to assist the other gods, saying that he would bestow his blessing upon this world once they were done with their part. When the other gods had exhausted their creative energies, the God of War rose in revolt. Some say he lost his mind, while others say he fell to temptation. Only the gods know for sure. One thing we do know is the God of War,

possessed by the God of Evil, was so strong and the other gods so weak that they were no match for him in the ensuing conflict.

Nevertheless, the united power of the gods managed to subdue the God of Evil. They scattered his remains across the known world and sealed them away. However, they were unable to completely seal away the pieces of his body, and those pieces went on to create Fiends, which remain a problem to this day.

I do not know whether the following is true or pure mythological conjecture, but it is said that one of the gods summoned his godly weapon from his home world and wielded it during the war with the God of Evil. His sword was the first of the Divine Weapons created in our world.

The significance of this story lies not only in the origin of the Divine Weapons but in how the link between worlds could be established. It goes without saying that summoning a divine weapon is not so easily done, for we are not gods ourselves.

But what of other beings? Perhaps, people?

Impossible? Why so? The gods themselves came from other worlds, after all. There is a nonzero chance that non-divine aliens live in our midst.

—The writings of Willow Magnus, High Elf historian.
Excerpt from “On the Mythology of Our World.”

A day had gone by since we left Jean’s laboratory. Thanks to Jet’s efforts, the port city of Dars was now within sight.

Our side trip to the floating island had left us behind schedule. We should have reached Dars a few days ago. We would take a boat from Dars and head south to the port town of Bulbola. From there, we would carry on to our final destination, the Dungeon City of Ulmutt.

I can see it!

“Oooh.”

The city of Dars was beginning to come into view beyond the distant hill. A sparkling blue sea with a refreshing breeze surrounded the port town, itself home to rustic wooden houses. Why, it looked like a scene right out of my

manga.

The town was slightly smaller than Alessa, the first major settlement Fran and I came across.

“Woof, woof, woof!”

What is it, Jet?

Jet began barking excitedly. At first, I thought he had detected some enemies in the vicinity, but his barks lacked the necessary hostility.

“He likes seeing the ocean.”

Oh yeah. You’ve never seen the ocean before, have you, Jet?

“Aroo!”

Jet looked at the sea, his eyes glittering like the surf itself, unable to hold back his excitement at seeing his first body of water.

Let’s head to the beach later.

“Woof!” Jet replied with vigorous wagging of his gigantic tail. The size and speed at which he wagged his tail turned it into something of an electric fan.

Fran closed her eyes and looked satisfied. “I can’t wait.”

You too?

“I’ve never been on a beach before.”

Fran had been transported on slave ships, so she’d never had the chance to play on a beach. That was no good! No good at all! I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said half the fun of the ocean is playing on the beach! I’d make her a pro at beach games before we got on a boat to Bulbola.

Shall we make it a picnic? We can have lunch and everything.

“Curry?”

Not curry, no.

While the lumpy curry served in beach houses had a certain charm to them, they wouldn’t do us much good at a picnic.

Times like these call for sandwiches.

“Like curry sandwiches?”

That…would be an interesting challenge.

I’ll make some curry sandwiches, too. I figured I could either make a sandwich out of dry curry or one out of curry-seasoned meat.

“Hm!” Fran nodded in enthusiasm, and Jet looked up at me, following his master’s cue.

“Arf?”

All right, fine, I’ll make some for you, too, Jet. You okay with bone-in?

“Awoo!”

I wonder if they were more excited about the picnic or the food. Fran and Jet did prefer cuisine to scenery, after all.

First, we would need to secure lodging. We’d have to stay in the city for at least one night, maybe more, while we looked for a ship traveling to Ulmutt.

Make yourself smaller, Jet. We’re walking from here on out. The town might break out into a panic if we walked in with a giant direwolf. They might even mobilize the town guard. We wouldn’t want that.

“Woof!”

Fran hopped off of Jet, now dog-sized, and walked alongside him down the hill. We soon found a path which led straight to the town. We met a lot of travelers along the way, though all of them steered clear when they saw us. Some of them went so far as to go off the main road to avoid us.

Try as we might to blunt Jet’s intimidation factor, he was still a wolf to most people. We knew he was a big puppy underneath all that ferocity, but his jet-black fur and menacing jaws understandably struck fear into people’s hearts. Fear enough to make them get off the main road.

Only two things prevented pedestrians from outright fleeing: Jet’s collar, with his Familiar Identification Tag attached, and the fact that he was walking alongside Fran. Still, he looked menacing enough. I apologized mentally to everyone who was shocked by the encounter.

We reached the city gates after unconsciously pressuring everyone we passed to get out of our way.

“What? An adventurer? And a D-Rank, at that? Excuse me?”

The guard on duty was astonished when Fran showed him her guild card. He was surprised enough to learn that the little beastgirl in front of him was an adventurer. That she was also a mid-rank adventurer proved too much to process.

After inspecting her guild card multiple times, the soldier regained his composure and resumed the registration process. We paid 300G for our entry fee and produced Jet’s Familiar Registration documents.

“Carry on.”

We were free to enter. That went smoother than I thought. I expected him to bother us with a lot more questions, but as it was in Alessa, entering the city was simple enough as long as you had proper documentation and identification.

All right, let’s look for a place to stay.

“What about the beach?”

After we get a room. But wow, this city is packed!

Although Dars was smaller than Alessa, its population was several times larger. Did that come with being a port town?

The streets were bustling with merchants and seamen.

I hope we can get a nice place to stay. Wouldn’t want to sleep on the streets in a city like this.

“Well, duh.”

Who taught you to talk like that?

“Hm?”

…Never mind. We need to check in at the local guild, so let’s hurry up and find some lodging.

We saw a lot of hotels and inns along the main street, just like in Alessa. The cheaper inns didn’t feel safe to me, so I kept my eyes peeled for something

pricier.

However, that didn't work out.

"They wouldn't let us stay, either…"

What is going on?

We had been turned away at all of the five inns we went to. At first, I thought it had something to do with Fran being too small or them not allowing pets like Jet, but the innkeepers didn't seem to be lying. The receptionists had all apologized profusely for turning us away. There really were no vacancies.

Did this come with being a port town? Were the inns always packed because of all the people who were constantly coming and going?

But how could *all* the lodges be filled *all* of the time?

Can't be helped. Let's go to the guild for now. We'll ask them if they have any suggestions on where to stay.

"Okay."

We reached the local guildhouse after asking someone on the street for directions. It was much smaller than the one in Alessa.

"Hello."

"Welcome!"

A voice full of vitality and vigor greeted us when we opened the door to the guildhouse. A well-built man was waiting at the reception table. He wore a tank top and a headband around his forehead, making him look like a veritable fishmonger. Was this also part of the port town experience? I should stop with the comparisons.

The difference between Alessa's pretty lady receptionist and…this guy, was quite a shock, though. *Oh, adventurers of Dars, how I pity you.*

"What brings you to the guild, little lady?"

"I want to sell materials."

"Sorry, but we only buy mats off of authorized adventurers."

“No problem. I am one.”

Fran presented her guild card over the counter. The man casually picked it up, expecting Fran to be a newly minted rookie adventurer.

His indifference didn’t last for long.

“Wh-what? Y-you’re a D-Rank?” He inspected her identification, astonished. “Is this fake? No…it’s real no matter how you dice it. H-hang on.”

The guild receptionist shared the reaction of the soldier at the gates. He scrunched his face and held a crystal against Fran’s guild card.

The crystal looked to be of the same kind as the one used to register her guild card, albeit much smaller. It probably had the ability to read information stored in a guild card. Fran’s name and information appeared on its surface, confirming that her card was, in fact, authentic.

“It…it’s real?! You really are a D-Rank, little lady!”

The macho man stood up, astounded. The other adventures gathered around after hearing his exclamation. The guildhouse came equipped with a tavern, so there were quite a few who had been lounging in their seats.

A crowd of twenty encircled us in no time.

“What the hell are you on about, Modge? Is this some kind of joke?”

“That’s gotta be fake.”

Disbelief was their immediate reaction. The receptionist, Modge, insisted however, having seen the proof with his own eyes.

The rowdy adventurers were making this conversation go nowhere.

“Can I sell you my stuff now?”

“O-oh, of course. Sorry about that.”

“Good. Trading counter’s over there?”

“Y-yes.”

Fran ignored the rowdy complaints of her fellow adventurers and made her way to the trading counter.

She piled materials one on top of another on the leather-adorned table. She started with the low-rank materials she got off the monsters we fought on our way to Dars and worked up to the few materials she had left from the undead dungeon.

We had sold the materials that could be used for specialized crafting off to Jean. All that we had left on us were materials which were used for making weapons and armor.

The guild hall grew noisier with every item Fran put on her pile. That was until she took out a D-Rank Threat material. Clearly, that had crossed some line, and everyone fell silent.

The only sound left in the guild hall was that of Fran stacking up items.

Judging by the looks of the guildsmen, it didn't seem like we were going to get caught up in the cliché of having low-life adventurers gang up on us. Good. Should we make a public display of all our transactions from now on? No, that would only attract the attention of money-grubbing idiots.

"That's all of it."

The guy behind the counter didn't answer.

Fran stared at him questioningly.

He still boggled at her pile.

"Hey."

"…Oh! 'Scuse me! I'm just a little shocked is all!"

Fran might be a D-Rank adventurer, but she couldn't avoid being treated like a child because of her looks.

"All right… It's going to take about an hour to get through all of this. Do you wanna wait?"

What do you think?

Ask him about lodging so we can head out and find a place to stay.

Got it.

So we asked the receptionist, Modge, if he knew of any place that would take

us in for the night. The information he had to share was unfortunate.

“That’s going to be tough at this time of year,” Modge said, furling his eyebrows.

“Why?”

“It’s almost time for the Festival of the Moons, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“We celebrate it normally in this city like anywhere else, but they throw an extravagant festival over in Bulbola. Folks who wanna take a ship over there end up crowding our little town around this time of year. Can’t find a vacant room for the life of you.”

“I see.”

That didn’t sound good. Were we going to have to sleep on the streets while we were here? And what was this about the Festival of the Moons? Fran seemed to know what it was, so it must be a customary festival of this world.

Hey, what’s this Festival of the Moons thing?

It’s a festival.

Yeah, I kind of figured. It had “Festival” in the name, after all.

It’s a day where you can see all the moons.

Doesn’t that happen all the time?

No. I mean you get to see all of them being full moons at once.

After much prompting, I was finally able to put together Fran’s explanation of the Festival of the Moons.

The Festival of the Moons happened once every three months. A large silver moon surrounded by six smaller moons orbited this planet, but you could only see all seven heavenly discs at their fullest on the days of these festivals.

The seven simultaneous full moons occurred on the last days of March, June, September, and December—only four times a year. Today was March 25, just six days away from the Festival of the Moons.

I couldn't tell how grand the Festival of the Moons in Bulbola was going to be based on Modge's explanation, but I could tell it was big. Big enough to get all the people in the country to want to visit.

"You're not the only ones without lodging. If you don't mind hunkering down in a corner of the bar, I can lend you a blanket."

Yeah, I would like to avoid that if at all possible.

We left the guild regardless, since calculating the price of the materials was going to take time, anyway. Modge gave us some leads for inns that might have vacancies but…to no avail.

Some of the inns were completely chartered by some rich nobles. God, why did they have to bring so much trouble wherever they went? We tried three more inns and were turned away from all of them.

Oh well. Let's go get our money at the guild before trying again.

"Okay."

We might have to take Modge's advice and rent out a corner of a bar.

"You're back. Any luck?"

"None."

"I see. That's too bad. Ah, before I forget, here's payment for your materials."

"Thanks."

120,000G in total. Not bad. If we could find a place to stay, today would be perfect.

"I'm so sorry. We're fully booked today."

This was our ninth miss of the day.

We can't find an inn at all. What should we do?

We found ourselves at the market, located in the city center, as we continued our search for lodging. Specialty foodstuffs unique to port towns lined the stalls on the streets.

How about we take a walk around the market for a change of pace? I wanted

to get my hands on seafood if they had any.

“Okay, sure.”

We looked around the market, and the selection of seafood did not disappoint. The port town of Dars lived up to its name. They had so many different kinds of fish.

Among the selection of products sold at the marketplace was some kind of crimson salt. It was ten times more expensive than regular white salt.

We learned a lot from speaking to the fast-talking young lady (estimated age: fifty years old) who ran one of the stalls, although we did have to prevent her from going off on a tangent about the problems she had with her daughter-in-law and husband. She told us about Dars’ specialty, which could only be harvested from a nearby dungeon in the sea.

The mere mention of a dungeon excited Fran, but she lost all interest after being told the details. This dungeon was only one floor deep. You could clear it in thirty minutes, and there wasn’t anything of interest in it other than Blue Salt. To top it all off, the monsters were few and weak, as it was a G-Rank dungeon. No wonder Fran was disappointed. I wouldn’t want to bother traversing such a dungeon myself.

The notion of underwater battles did pique my interest, though. You needed Underwater Breathing to get to the dungeon, but once you were in, you could proceed as normal. There was air inside, making it no different from an ordinary cave. We could sell the blue salt at the marketplace, too.

Still, we’d pass on it for now.

We walked around the marketplace, shopping for various items on our way. I identified everything Fran took an interest in to tell her the details.

What’s that one?

That is a fish-type monster called the Piragna. Its meat tastes pretty good by the looks of it.

What about that one?

Is that a crab claw? It’s huge!

“Arf.”

You want that one, Jet?

But man, the seafood in Dars was cheap. They went for half the price of what they were in Alessa. We got a big haul for ourselves in the marketplace.

Still, we couldn’t find a single inn that would take us in.

“Sorry. We’re full for the night.”

That makes ten. What gives?

“Jet.”

“Woof.”

Fran was getting tired. She started playing with Jet’s ears and tail.

“Teacher, I wanna go to the beach.”

Yep, she was done!

But we haven’t settled our lodging yet.

“We’ll stay the night at the guild. For now, beach.”

“Aroo.”

You too, Jet?! You know I can’t resist when the two of you stare at me like that!

“Beach…”

“Awoo…”

Ooooh, fine.

We paused our search for lodging to go to the beach. I couldn’t help but long for the beach myself after Fran and Jet’s appeals. The string of disappointments had left me in a low mood, and I was feeling nostalgic for the ocean.

Let’s go to the beach!

“Yeah!”

“Woof!”

The seashore was quiet when we got there. It was still too cold for maritime

merriment, and so the beach was empty save for us. It was like we had the place to ourselves.

Fran grew more elated the closer we got to the ocean. Her eyes sparkled, and her excitement peaked in the form of a shout.

“It’s the sea!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

Fran took off her shoes and cloak and made a beeline for the waters. Jet followed suit, tailing his master. As they ran, they left a picturesque trail of footprints in the sand.

Still, though Jet had his fur pelt and Fran had magic which could help her deal with cold water…

Look, I know you’re excited, but if you just jump into the ocean like that you’ll —

“Yech.”

“Arf!”

Oh, if they would just listen for once. Fran received a face full of seawater courtesy of a crashing wave. Her face immediately twisted as she started spitting it out.

And then—

Crash!

“Urrp.”

“Ruff!”

A big wave engulfed them and left them sprawled on the shore. They were now totally wet and covered with sand.

Heh, they look like a couple of floaters who got washed up on the beach.

I felt the great power of nature, which was able to take down Fran, who had superhuman stats, and her Darkness Wolf, Jet.

The sea’s made entirely of saltwater, so don’t get any in your mouth!

“I didn’t know.”

“Arf…”

Fran was in low spirits by the time she pulled herself up from the sands. To think she was so looking forward to this just moments ago.

“It’s kinda gross, too…”

“Aroo…”

Fran and Jet screwed up their faces and looked at their feet.

What’s up?

“My feet are getting sucked in.”

“Awoo…”

Oh yeah, that was what it was like to stand in the middle of the waves. It felt like you were being dragged back into the ocean along with the sand. Fran didn’t seem to like it very much.

Had enough?

“Yeah…”

“Arf…”

The two went back to shore, drenched and dripping with seawater. Their spirits were so low it looked like they’d just been to a funeral.

I used magic to produce some freshwater to rinse them off. They’d get sticky when they dried out, otherwise. Especially Jet, who might end up feeling gritty from all the sand for a few days. Once I had washed most of the sand away, I just needed to dry them off, and we would be done.

Getting clean wasn’t enough to cheer Fran up, however. She sat on the sandy shores, her knees huddled up to her chest, staring out at the ocean. Jet was lying beside her with a similarly distant expression. They had such high expectations about the ocean, so the experience must have left them devastated.

Come on, it’s okay. Let’s have some dinner. That’ll cheer you up.

My initial plan was to get a room at an inn so I could cook up some packed lunches to take to the beach. Given our current situation, I had no choice but to serve a meal that was already in our inventory.

"Curry…?"

I haven't had the chance to make you a proper packed lunch yet, so sure.

"Thanks."

You can have this, Jet.

"Woof."

I took out a huge meatball for our direwolf. Hopefully, they would both feel a bit better with food in their bellies…

There was a gentle, salty breeze and not a cloud in the blue sky. I doubted Fran had ever had dinner at a beach like this before. I had to show her that playing in the water wasn't the only fun thing you could do here.

Let's start with this.

"A fishing rod?"

I crafted a makeshift fishing rod out of some bamboo, some string, and a hook. Fran had done her fair share of fishing on this trip, usually in rivers and ponds, but fishing in open waters was a different deal.

We can fish over there. There were some rocks where the sands met dry land, which would make a solid fishing spot. I couldn't let this opportunity pass.

Having finished her meal, Fran quietly began to fish. I created a clone of myself to join her.

Now that I thought about it, this was my first time fishing since I came into this world. Usually, I'd let my Skills do the work for me. Heh. I was itching to put my abilities to the test.

"I'll catch something big."

Good luck!

"Woof, woof!"

One hour later.

“Wow.”

“Woof, woof, woof!”

There you go! Reel it in!

I was beginning to get nervous, since nothing had been biting all night. Fran was about to come to the awful conclusion of the sea being a boring place. *Fish who was foolish enough to take Fran’s bait, I thank you!*

“Nailed it.”

“Awooo!”

That’s pretty big.

The grotesque looking fish must have been about eighty centimeters long. A respectable size for any fisherman. As for me? It didn’t matter what I caught as long as Fran landed a big one. Hahaha!

Let’s cook it up and eat it here. Can’t get any fresher than this! Nothing beat cooking freshly caught fish.

“Yeah!”

“Woof, woof!”

We went back to the beach, where I started preparing a makeshift kitchen. I fashioned a stove out of Earth Magic and lit it with Fire Magic. It would seem that I had the ability to turn any locale into a kitchen, even an empty beach.

You can go play with the sand while I get your food ready.

“Play with the sand? You can do that?”

The concept seemed foreign to her. Well, it *was* her first time at the beach.

Sure you can.

“…Do you just rub sand in each other’s faces?”

Oh, like a sandball fight? Well… Wait, no! That is far too messy of a game to play with sand! You make sandcastles, or dig holes in the sand. That kind of stuff.

Sand had rocks and shells mixed into them, which would hurt if they hit you in the face. If an adventurer of Fran's level flung it at someone, they might actually get injured.

That was Fran the wild girl for you. All her games had a streak of violence running through them.

"I see… Okay, I'll work it out. Come on, Jet."

"Woof."

Fran seemed to understand what I meant by playing with sand. Jet nodded and followed alongside her.

Don't go too far, now!

"Okay!"

Now, what should I make? Sashimi would be the default option. Alternatively, I could make soup or go with simple grilled fish.

I cast Identify on the ugly fish and found that it was edible. It was also an ordinary fish and not a monster. I filleted it and found that its flesh was an exquisite white. It was quite fatty, giving it a satisfying bounce.

Let's start with sashimi.

The grotesque fish's succulent flesh looked delectable, not that my blade body had an appetite. Still, I could imagine what it tasted like, given my past life.

I rubbed the fish with the blue salt we bought earlier to prepare it for the grill.

Yep, tastes like normal salt.

My clone had taste buds, as it turned out. Its sense of taste was on the weaker side, though, so I had to be careful that I didn't over-season.

To the fish soup, I added something that looked like clams, which I got from the market earlier, along with some claw of crab. It went without saying that I used miso as the base. I had managed to reproduce miso paste thanks to the Cooking Skill I had. My version ended up sweeter than the one back home, but it still made for great soup, miso or otherwise.

And we're done!

It was thirty minutes later. Now that I was done with my cooking, I needed to call Fran back to camp—

Wait, what?!

Did I fail a spot check? Had I been so engrossed in cooking that I'd failed to notice the giant, five-meter tall gothic sandcastle being erected not so far from me?

Fran was the culprit, of course.

She had excavated and molded it using a combination of earth and wind magic. I knew I had told her to make sandcastles, but this was ridiculous. This was closer to professional sand art than a playful day at the beach.

I was so glad no one was at the beach tonight. Her sand palace was really detailed, too. Fran might have a talent for the arts. It would be my duty as her guardian to cultivate this talent.

The sand Fran used in her sand fortress must have come from Jet, who was next to her, looking as if he were fervently digging a hole to the other side of the world. Actually, "crater" might be a better word to describe the hole he was digging.

Jet paid me no mind as I got closer, completely entranced in the act of sand excavation. He was having the time of his life. He panted happily, digging ever deeper, his face and body entirely covered in sand. I had given him a wash earlier, but he was going to need another bath after this.

What were we going to do about this hole, though?

I wonder if anyone would notice if we just left it alone…

We returned to town, having had our fill of the beach. We still needed a room for the night.

Fran's sand palace? We left it there. Fran looked like she was about to cry when I started to destroy it. We managed to fill Jet's hole back up with some magic, though.

The sun was already setting; we had spent more time at the beach than I expected. We gave up on the inns lining the main road and decided to look in

the alleyways for a chance at lodging.

We were wandering the back alleys when Fran noticed something.

Teacher.

I know.

Or rather, someone.

We heard the sound of footsteps behind us. It sounded like they were tailing us as we entered one of the alleyways.

The footsteps belonged to two men, who stood a reasonable distance from us. They didn't bother concealing their presence, revealing their ineptitude. I looked back and saw that they didn't even hide in the shadows. Identifying them confirmed their low stats. They were slightly stronger than an average goblin, at best.

Should I kill them?

I can see why you want to…but hold on. They might not be hostiles.

There was the possibility that they were part of a local gang and we'd just happened to wander into their territory. I wanted to make sure before we did anything decisive.

Let's go somewhere quiet.

Hm.

We would still retaliate if they tried to do anything funny.

Jet, stay in the shadows. But get ready.

"Ruff."

Fran took a turn into a convenient dead end. The two Blue Cat beastmen revealed themselves, right on cue. They had no idea they were being lured right into a trap.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"We'll take you back to your parents."

Their invitation was casual and kind; they were used to this. They used sweet

words to lull their victims into a false sense of security.

“I’m all right.”

“Come on, no need to be shy.”

I Identified the two men again.

Definitely weak.

Their skills and stats were no match for Fran. Despite being a Fighter and a Merchant, they had Pickpocket, Capture, Assassinate, and Torture in their skill lists. With skills like that, there was no way the two beastmen led respectable lives.

“It’s easy to get turned around in this part of town.”

“Back off.”

“Now, now…”

Danger Sense triggered. So much for the possibility of them being mean-faced good Samaritans.

“Come any closer, and I’ll cut you.”

“What?”

“It won’t be pretty. This is your last chance to walk away.”

It was right after Fran’s warning that the two men dropped all their pretensions and burst into laughter.

“Gyahahaha! Oooh, I’m so scared!”

“Shut the hell up and get over here!”

“Hey, take it easy. You don’t wanna damage the merchandise.”

“I know what I’m doing!”

All of the Blue Cat beastmen we’ve met so far had been unanimously of the scumbag variety. So far, so typical.

Fran unsheathed me without a word.

“What? You wanna go?”

“Stop acting tough, kid!”

The two men mocked her. They might as well enjoy it while they could. Their mocking jeers would soon turn into pleading for their lives. I was ready to let loose into these scumbags who were planning to sell Fran into slavery.

“I warned you.”

I started casting my spells on Fran’s mark. The two spells manifested at the same time thanks to Double Mind.

Stone Wall.

Silence.

I blocked their escape route with a wall of earth magic. The two men wouldn’t be able to run away now. I also soundproofed our surrounding area with wind magic. No one would be able to hear anything.

Not even their cries for help.

The two men were startled at the sudden casting of magic. “H-huh?”

“Wh-what’s going on?”

Neither of them dropped into combat formation. They were pitiful weaklings, after all, who were only used to tormenting targets that were weaker than them.

Don’t kill them.

Why not?

Fran was already furious at the prospect of slavery, so she looked disappointed that I was asking her to spare them.

I have some questions for our slaver friends.

Fine.

The next moment, Fran dashed forward.

“Hmph.”

“Gah!”

“Hah.”

“Bwuh…?”

Aaaand that’s the end of that encounter.

The beastmen fell to the ground, unconscious.

“What now?”

We’ll start by tying them up.

I made some string using Create Mana Thread and bound them with it. The individual mana threads weren’t strong by themselves, but they were as sturdy as rope once you spun enough of them together. I bound their ankles and then put their arms in front and tied their wrists.

I was interested in the beastmen’s background. We figured they were Blue Cats when they mentioned their plans of selling Fran. They were slavers who sold unwitting victims into slavery against their will, just like the bastards who had Fran when I found her.

Dars was a port town, too. It wasn’t too much of a stretch to think that slavers from all over Granzell gathered here for easy pickings; they had immediate access to boats, after all. Fran had mentioned being put on a slave vessel, too.

The Blue Cat slavers were Fran’s archenemies. They were on my hit list, too, of course. We might end up confronting them at any moment, so I wanted to get my hands on any information that was available. Now was a good time to stock up.

And there you have it.

“I see.”

I was about to suggest making a clone of myself so I could question the two men while Fran kept watch…but Fran had other plans. She began kicking the two men awake.

“Wake up.”

“Urgh… Wh-what’s going on?”

“What the hell…?”

The men came to their senses after a good deal of kicking. They still didn’t

know what had happened to them. Who could blame them? Fran took them down in less than a second.

“What the—hey! What’s the meaning of this!”

“You little bitch! What did you do to us?!”

I had to hand it to these two. They had the balls to start yelling at Fran despite their circumstances. Maybe their ignorance enabled them to do just that.

Fran ignored their shouts and called on Jet.

“Come out, Jet.”

“Ruff.”

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

You’d be hard-pressed to keep your nerves when a three-meter-tall giant wolf popped out right in front of you. Their anger was now replaced with fear as they desperately tried to get away. However, they could barely get on their feet with their limbs tied up.

“I have some questions for you.”

One of the men didn’t take kindly to being ordered around, and recovered his nerve, if only for a second.

“You bitch! You’re not the boss of me!”

He must really be a lowly grunt if he couldn’t tell his life was in danger.

“Don’t expect to leave the city in one piece after doing this to u—hurk!”

Whoa. Fran had kicked the protesting merchant right in the face. Blood was pouring out of his nose like a broken faucet. I had never seen anyone bleed that way before.

“Shut up. I’m doing the asking here.”

The men relented, seeing how merciless Fran was. She was stewing in quiet fury, which was fair enough, since she’d had more dealings with the Blue Cat slavers than I had. Saying that she loathed them wouldn’t be an exaggeration.

She looked down upon the beastmen with cold eyes and asked again.

“Are you slavers?”

“H-heh, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“W-we’re honest to goodness merchants.”

Yeah, right. I didn’t need Essence of Falsehood to see through their barefaced lie.

They’re slavers, Fran. No doubt about it.

“Where do you keep your captured slaves in this city?”

“I said, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He’s lying again.

They really didn’t know when to give up.

“Hm. Are you in cahoots with other slavers in town?”

“I’m telling you, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Still lying.

The slavers were managing to lie despite Fran’s intimidation. Impressive. That being said, their persistence guaranteed that they weren’t getting out of here in one piece.

Fran frowned. She wasn’t entertained. “If you just tell me what I want to know, nothing bad will happen to you. Probably.”

“If only we knew what you wanted to know.”

“He’s right. We’ll let you walk away and treat this as a huge misunderstanding if you let us go now.”

“…Jet.”

“Grrrr!”

“Aiee!”

Now that Jet’s gigantic jaws were right in front of the criminals’ faces, Fran continued dispassionately.

“My wolf happens to love people. He especially loves eating their guts while they’re still alive.”

“Bark!” Jet played along, growling low in his throat and licking the Fighter’s face. It was almost as if he were saying, “Your guts look delicious.” The man must have taken it that way, because his face went pale, and he started quivering.

“If you don’t want to be eaten alive, start talking.”

“I don’t know what you’re—gyaa!”

Fran stabbed the Fighter in his thigh. She slowly twisted me for maximum pain.

“Gyaaaa!”

“Hey, are you okay?! You little bi—aaargh!”

“Do you have a learning disability?”

“Aieee…”

She kicked the Merchant’s face in again. His nose was now bent at an odd angle.

“Greater Heal.”

“What?”

“An advanced healing spell…?”

She pulled me out of the Fighter’s leg and healed it; the gaping wound closed in an instant.

The man started looking hopeful. This little girl didn’t want to kill them. There was no way she could bring herself to do it. Given the circumstances, I couldn’t blame them for wanting to believe in this convenient delusion.

What Fran said next turned their hope into despair.

“Nice, isn’t it? You won’t be able to die so easily now.”

“What?”

“Not even if I do this. Fire Arrow.”

“Guaaaaah!” the Fighter bellowed in pain after receiving Fran’s fire spell at point blank range.

“Greater Heal.”

Her next spell recovered the Fighter’s hands, which had turned to ash. She had ended up burning the rope which tied his hands together, but I was sure these two weren’t going anywhere.

“You can’t die unless I let you.”

“No.”

“Eek.”

A squeak of anguish escaped their lips. They couldn’t run from this girl. And as long as she had mana to cast her healing spells, they couldn’t die, either. An eternity of torment awaited them.

The realization must have dawned on them in a dreadful instant.

“L-Let’s make a deal! We have money! Just name your price!”

“Don’t need any.”

“Then what do you—”

“Are you really that dumb? Just tell me what I want to know.”

“Hee hon’t—oogfh!”

That was the third kick to the Merchant’s face. His front teeth were all crushed now.

“Answer my questions.”

They finally understood their situation and began answering Fran’s questions.

Apparently, this town housed a hidden slaving operation. The slavers would send their ill-gotten victims to Dars to be shipped out to other countries. They were previously based in Bulbola, but a sting operation five years ago had driven them out of the city.

“The authorities would catch on to us quick if we sold them in Granzell…a-and those Raydossians pay good money for slaves.”

“H-hut nhaw—”

The Merchant wasn’t as articulate with his face busted in, but we could make out the gist of what he was trying to say.

Although Raydoss was the final destination of the slaves, getting them there directly from Granzell was difficult, since the two countries were at war with each other. They had to make a stop at Seedrun, where they would then be shipped off to Raydoss.

“Seedrun… Never heard of it.”

“I-It’s a small island nation. There’s a power vacuum because the king just stepped down, throwing the country into chaos. Makes it easy for people like us to move around.”

I see. That’s what typically happens to countries that are going through a change in rulers.

In order to avoid Granzell’s patrol ships, they had to go into open waters in the past. That had its own set of problems, since they usually ran into giant sea monsters which could destroy smaller boats. The slavers couldn’t use larger vessels, either, since that would stand out to the authorities.

My guess was that Fran was captured in a different country and was sent to Bulbola by boat. When the raid on the base in Bulbola happened, the slavers moved to Granzell. They were on their way to Dars when she ran into me.

They might have been planning to sell her in Alessa, but I doubted it. In the past ten years, most of them were sent to Dars to be shipped off to Raydoss. Slaves fetched a handsome price over there. It was a high possibility that Fran’s caravan was taking the same route.

The men told us the location of the hidden base, the number of accomplices, and the number of slaves that were kept there. They had around ten orphans kidnapped from the city.

“W-we told you everything. You’ll let us go now, right?”

“We’ll change our ways!”

Which was a nice thought, but…

Wind Cutter.

I cut off their heads with a blade of wind.

If we let them go now, they would warn their slaver friends of Fran's arrival. I'd rather not have a syndicate of slavers targeting us everywhere we went. They were scumbags who sold children for profit. The world was a better place without them.

I stored the corpses into Pocket Dimension; my inventory was becoming more of a mess with each passing day.

"Thanks, Teacher."

It was nothing. Don't mention it.

"What now?"

Well, what do you want to do, Fran?

"Clean the streets, of course."

Yeah. Of course she would want to do that.

I wanted to have Fran wait somewhere while Jet and I took care of the problem…but I had already used my clone for cooking at the beach today. I'd kept it up for quite a long time, so I could only use it again the day after tomorrow.

Besides, Fran would never let the opportunity to kill some filthy slavers slide like that.

You'll have to wait until nighttime, though.

"Okay."

I really hope we can find a place to stay by then.

Fortunately, we found a room at a cheap inn soon after, where we waited for nightfall to make our raid.

It was the late hours of the night. The residents of town were asleep, and the drunkards were shuffling their way home.

Let's go.

“Hm.”

We were near the base of operations the slavers had told us about. We combined Jet’s Dark Magic with our stealth skills so there was little risk of anyone spotting us, but I had Fran wear a mask in the event our cover was blown. We were set and ready.

The hideaway was a building facing the harbor district, its first floor a warehouse and its second floor an apartment. The building itself looked inconspicuous.

I felt a number of presences from inside the house, however. Inspecting the house more closely, I found two guards manning the entrance. One was a Sadistic Torturer and the other a Sadistic Assassin. That was more information than I needed.

They’ll notice us if we take too long.

“Then we’ll have to go fast.”

“Woof.”

Yeah, we’ll take care of the guards first.

“Hm!”

Fran made her move. I muted her footsteps with Silence so she could sprint at full speed. She cut the two guards down to dispose of them. The last thing they saw was Fran’s shadow. I immediately stored their corpses away. We couldn’t do anything about the blood on the ground, but it was dark, so no one would notice.

Now we had to think of the best way to investigate the building.

Let’s start with the top floor.

“Okay.”

Charging headlong through the front door would be foolish on our part.

Fran jumped with Air Hike and landed on the roof without a sound. During our fight with the Lich, P.A. compounded Air Hike with some other skills to create Wind Manipulation. It sounded complicated, but it was easy enough to

use once you tried it. I don't think Fran even felt much of a difference when she used it.

The trade-off was that it cost more mana to use. Compounding several skills together into one advanced skill came at the cost of them being harder to use. We would just have to get used to it.

Fran landed on all fours and rolled forward, using her body as a spring to dissipate the force of the impact. It also made for a quiet landing. She really had the grace of a cat beastman.

Let's start with this room.

All right.

We broke into the attic through a window. I used Silence to mute the sound of shattering glass.

There was a figure in the bed, asleep, who hadn't noticed our arrival. A quick Identify revealed that it was one of the slavers. Intimidate and Swindle were listed under his skills, and he had such titles as Fraud and Slave Merchant. Definitely not a good person.

Hostile.

Hm.

Fran unceremoniously stabbed me into the heart of the sleeping slaver.

"Hrk!" The sudden pain awoke him, but his screams were silenced thanks to my spell. He took his last breath with my blade lodged in his chest.

I stored him away before he could start leaking blood, so as not to leave behind any evidence. I felt like a professional assassin.

I think the slaves are in the basement, but…

"We'll need to clean up this floor before we go there."

That would make our rescue operation easier.

Nothing like antiseptic to clean up an infection! We carried on our stealth run, quietly disposing of all the slavers we could find. We didn't run into any problems since they were all asleep.

We were much stronger now thanks to our run of the undead dungeon. We wouldn't have had any trouble even if we had gone with a frontal assault. Even so, we didn't want to raise an alarm. Our enemies were still a pain to go through if they coordinated with each other, and some of them might end up fleeing the scene. Worse, they could even take any of the kids we were trying to save as hostages.

This is the last one.

We approached the final room on the second floor after taking down eight slavers. It had taken us all of five minutes.

There was something odd about this room, though. I could see light coming from it. There was only one presence within the room, but it must be awake. Even if we sneaked in using Silence, there was still the possibility of it noticing us.

Jet, can you take care of it?

"Woof!"

Quietly, all right?

"Awoo—"

A short while later, Jet returned.

That was fast. You're all done?

"Arf!"

We hadn't heard a sound as we waited for Jet. Being a wolf that lived in the shadows had its perks.

We entered into a room that looked like some kind of study. We drew close to the writing desk and found the Blue Cat beastman manning it dead. Jet had used his Shadow Magic to kill the man without so much as a sound.

His attire was more proper than the rest of the slavers we had disposed of. He must have been a clerk or something.

All right, let's see what he had stowed away in his desk. We might be able to find some dirt.

We rummaged around and found some dossiers and ledgers. They contained records of the slaves that had been sent to Raydoss. I think there was some information about the dealings they had in Seedrun as well. Next to the names Suarez and Julius were the numbers ten million and twenty million, respectively. Were these their asking prices? That was a lot of money for ordinary slaves. They might be important figures.

I think we just found some damning evidence. I should hand them over to the authorities, but who…?

I stored them away for the moment.

Aside from that, we found seven scrolls of parchment paper which were sealed with magic. I had seen these before—they were slave contracts. They had names already written on them. Somewhere in this building were seven people who had been forced to resign their lives into slavery. We should definitely take these with us.

We also found a small metal safe tucked away in a corner of the room. There might be valuable evidence in there, among other things. A quick pat down of the man's corpse revealed a key.

I didn't sense any mana coming from the safe. It didn't seem to be rigged with traps, either.

"Is this the key?"

Probably. I'll open it. Stand back.

Although the safe wasn't rigged, we still couldn't be too careful. Fran stepped back, and I manipulated the key with Telekinesis to open the safe.

The safe was…safe. Opening it didn't trigger any traps.

Oooh.

"Money," Fran muttered flatly. She wasn't interested in the hoard, although she knew its value. There was 100,000G worth of cash along with expensive-looking jewelry. Money, indeed.

I'm sure these are stolen goods. We're in a thieves' hideout, after all. It's only right that we take these with us. Right?

“Meh.”

Of course!

I quickly pocketed everything in the safe. Fran didn’t seem interested, so I had to make up for her lack of enthusiasm. This was definitely not a case of me being swayed by pretty gemstones and money.

It doesn’t look like there’s anyone left on this floor.

“Yeah.”

It was time to move on to the first floor. I sensed multiple people moving about, so the place must be heavily guarded.

We might not have many places to hide on the first floor since it was a storage space. The worst thing that could happen would be the slavers escaping after catching sight of Fran. I wanted to keep them from finding out that their attacker was a child if at all possible.

No mere child was capable of taking down a slavers’ hideout on their own. If Fran stayed in Dars for any amount of time, the slaver syndicate would soon find out that she was the one responsible for the raid.

Our best course of action was to take down the base as fast as possible without being found out.

Hmm, how should we go about this?

We knew they were keeping slaves here, so all-out extermination was out of the question. We couldn’t raise much of a ruckus either since they might have underground tunnels they could use to escape. I used Omni Radar and Being Sense to find as much information as I possibly could about the basement.

Hmm…

The Compound Skills that P.A. had fused were difficult to use. I was getting a flood of information, and I couldn’t pick out what was relevant. Put simply, when I tried to listen in on sound signatures, I got a barrage of sounds coming from all directions, amounting to just noise in the end.

I needed to level up my Split Thinking skill so I could process all this data.

It took some time, but I managed to figure out where all the hostiles on the first floor were located. There was a big room, likely the storage space, and three smaller rooms which probably housed supervisors.

There were five people in the big room. They were going to be a problem, so I decided we would deal with them last. There was one person stationed in two of the smaller rooms and one person in the remaining one.

Let's go in from the outside.

"Got it."

We went out and circled around to one of the rooms on the first floor. There was a solitary man in this one. I used Silence so Fran could break through the window unnoticed. Just as the man turned around to scream, Jet clamped on his gullet. The man's mouth flapped open and shut in a silent scream.

We took care of the rest of the small rooms in the same way.

Okay, let's take care of the rest of them in one go.

There were five guards left on the first floor. We didn't know how many were in the basement.

I'll use Silence. Jet, use Black Veil.

"Woof."

Black Veil was a Dark Magic spell which cast a dome of darkness over an area. Once they were blind, we would quickly dispose of them before they got a chance to run away.

The only thing I felt in the silent darkness were the men's confusion. I let Fran and Jet run loose in the darkness. They had no problem seeing since Fran had Presence Sense and Jet had his Life Sense. The men didn't know what hit them.

And that takes care of the first floor.

"All that's left now is the basement."

According to the info we got, there are supposed to be twenty-four slavers in total. The remaining four might be down there, so be careful.

"All right."

We quietly descended the stairs into the basement, which was more like a dungeon, really.

There were two men standing guard at the door, but we took them out in an instant. They weren't really on guard, and were in the middle of a game of cards when we got to them.

Only two left, now. I didn't see them, nor did I feel their presence. They must be away from the hideout.

Now we just need to save the kids who are locked up.

Our information was accurate: there were seven children in captivity, slave collars already around their necks. They reminded me of Fran when I first met her, and it stirred my anger towards the slavers.

Let's go save them!

"Of course."

Fran walked to the prison cells.

"Who's there?" a boy called out to us, fear apparent in his voice. He seemed to be the oldest among the seven.

They must have been surprised by this sudden appearance of a child from the outside. He looked quite well off. Was he a noble? The girl he was shielding behind him looked exactly like him. They were twins.



“A friend.”

“What?”

“I’m here to save you.”

“But the people upstairs…”

The boy knew Fran wasn’t part of the slaver syndicate, but he couldn’t imagine her defeating his captors to get here. He must have thought she had snuck in.

“All dead.”

“What?” The boy look puzzled.

“I killed all the slave merchants in the building.”

“Y-you did that all by yourself?”

“Hm.”

The twins stared at each other in disbelief. I couldn’t blame them. How were they supposed to believe that this little girl, who was probably younger than them, had killed over twenty men by herself?

Fran paid the confused captives no mind. She walked closer to the prison bars and gripped my hilt.

“Step back.”

“Huh?”

“It’s dangerous. Step away from the bars.”

“R-right.”

“Hnf.”

Clang!

With a swing of myself, Fran cut the bars clean open.

“What?”

“There’s no way.”

The children stared at the broken bars in awe. They were dumbfounded, still

trying to register in their minds what had just happened. Now that I think about it, seeing a sword cut clean through steel must've felt unreal. I was the one who did it, and it still felt weird to me.

Yet again, Fran paid them no heed and stepped into the prison cell.

"Are you hurt?"

One of the children seemed to be nursing a broken ankle, carelessly wrapped bandages its only treatment. The foot was bound to get infected sooner or later.

We should heal her up, I suggested.

Fran cast a healing spell on the girl. "Mid Heal."

"What? It's all fixed now."

"Are you a mage?"

"Wow."

The children were beginning to clamor around her, but something else had caught Fran's attention.

Fran!

I know! Someone's coming.

We felt someone enter the building. Had one of the slavers returned to the hideout?

Shit. We need to kill him before he notices something's gone wrong.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Hide."

"Huh? What?"

"Don't come out until I come back."

Fran looked at the ceiling as worried looks began to dawn on the children's faces. Fran directed them farther into the cell and bolted up the staircase.

He's walking around the first floor.

“What’s he looking for?”

His friends. Don’t forget to put your mask on.

“Hm.”

Now that we were back on the first floor, we carefully looked at the intruder. The man was fully armed and looked formidable. The slavers we had killed earlier were nothing compared to him. He was good at concealing his presence, too. We had only managed to detect him thanks to our myriad of detection skills, without which he would’ve been impossible to spot.

Time to Identify you.

Name: Salut Orland

Race: Human

Class: Dark Knight

Level: 31/99

HP: 169; Magic: 288; Strength: 236; Agility: 127

Skill: Shadow Resistance 3; Assassinate 4; Intimidate 5; Stealth 3; Identify Jammer 6; Suppress Presence 3; Advanced Sword Arts 1; Sword Arts 10; Advanced Sword Mastery 2; Sword Mastery 10; Royal Etiquette 3; Shield Arts 7; Shield Mastery 8; Interrogate 4; Poison Resistance 4; Poison Magic 3; Storm Resistance 6; Capture 5; Paralysis Resistance 4; Dark Magic 5; Spirit Manipulation

Class Skill: Shadow Aura

Title: Oathbreaker; Guardian

Equipment: Fine Shadow Mithril Longsword; Black Mithril Shield; Black Mithril Armor; Black Sky Tiger Mantle; Bracelet of Magic Resistance; Ring of Bonds

He was strong. He looked kind of evil, too. I mean, he was a *Dark* Knight. He had all the skills associated with working in the underground like Assassinate, Interrogate, and Capture. And Oathbreaker? Come on. Although Capture and Interrogate were the only skills directly related to slaving, he might have acted

as their strongman with his collection of combat skills.

His Identify Jammer was outclassed by my Heavensight. I was able to Identify him just like everyone else.

“Dammit, where are they?!”

The Dark Knight had noticed his allies were missing. He looked ready to kill.

Fran, he’s pretty strong. Be careful.

“Hm.”

Jet, we might need you to ambush him. Take position.

“Woof!”

The man surveyed his surroundings and in time turned around to look at Fran. She leapt at him that very instant.

“Here we go!”

The man was ready for her. He sensed Fran’s presence and immediately dropped into his fighting stance. He was used to this kind of ambush.

“Who are you?!”

“Hmph.”

“You will not deign to tell me your name? Coward!”

“Haa!”

Fran ignored the man’s provocations. He skillfully deflected her strikes with his sword and shield. That Advanced Sword Mastery wasn’t for show.

“Raaah!”

“Haa!”

They went back and forth with their attacks. Fran was the better swordsman, but her opponent was a knight who was proficient with his shield, his defenses were hard to penetrate. The man was also far more experienced in combat than her. This was not going to be an easy fight.

We were up against an unexpectedly strong opponent in an unexpected place. A surprise attack from Jet or a Telekinetic Catapult from me would’ve

been enough to finish him off, but we wanted to subdue him without killing him if at all possible. We could get more information if we captured and questioned him.

Fran, try not to kill him.

All right.

“Graah!”

“Haa!”

Sparks flew out of the clash of their swords as sharp metallic clangs filled the room.

“Nuoooh!”

“Ha!”

The Dark Knight realized that Fran was going to be hard to kill. He dropped into a defensive posture as if waiting for backup to arrive. The swordfight was going to last for a while if we didn’t do something about it. The man also had Dark Aura, a skill which boosted his strength by several magnitudes at the cost of his health. We needed to end this fight before he resorted to using it.

First, we need to get rid of his sword.

“Ha!”

“Wha?”

We used Wind Manipulation and Elemental Blade Thunder at the same time. Our next blow was so strong that it caused the man’s swordhand to waver. He dropped his sword, unable to bear the shock waves of our strike.

“Ungh!”

The man himself didn’t waver, however. He shielded his sword and began casting a spell.

“Dark Arrow!”

Not that it would do him any good. We still had the Shadow Immunity we had absorbed from the Daemon. The black arrows flew but were dissipated by an invisible wall just as they were about to touch Fran.

“Impossible!”

We were the better swordsman, and we had means of rendering his Shadow Magic useless. Fran was a terrible match for this Dark Knight.

“Gotcha.”

“Guah!”

Fran exploited the gap in his defense as he stood there, stunned. She smashed the flat of my blade against the man’s leg. She pointed her sword against his neck as he dropped to one knee. We had won the battle.

The man looked up at Fran, vexation clear in his features.

“Curses…!”

“Who are you?”

“I do not need to give my name to the likes of you!”

The middle-aged man had chutzpah, I’ll give him that. We were going to have to hurt him to get him to talk.

Jet, come on out.

“Grrr.”

“Aargh! Wh-what is that?”

He’s scared now. I’ll have Jet growl at him while we lop his limbs off one at a time.

Or so I thought. The kids had come up from the basement. The highborn twins were at the front, peeking their heads from the door which led to the dungeon. They must have felt anxious since we had left them alone to fend for themselves. It was a good thing they came up when the fight was over.

“It’s dangerous here. Stay back,” Fran announced.

All seven of them stopped in their tracks from fear. But the highborn boy looked at the Dark Knight and exclaimed with surprise. “Salut!”

“My prince! Are you unharmed?”

Uh, prince? This kid?

“You came to save us…”

“Princess!”

Wait, I guess he’s not one of the slavers? I think I just crushed his entire leg, though…

We promptly healed the Dark Knight after that.

Ten minutes later, having healed the Dark Knight, we asked for an explanation.

“Prince and princess?”

The Dark Knight nodded at Fran’s question. “Indeed. They are the sixth and seventh in line to the throne of the kingdom of Phyllius!”

“And you’re their guardian?”

“That is correct.”

“You came to save them after they were kidnapped?”

“Y-yes.”

The prince and princess had snuck out unnoticed and were kidnapped during their little escapade. I couldn’t blame the poor guy for letting that happen.

“Those fiends! How dare they put Their Majesties in such bondage! Bastards…!”

Seeing nobles with slave collars around their necks was off-putting. Salut’s neck was on the line too, I imagine.

“That they would force such young children into slavery… You have my gratitude, girl. I would not have been able to rescue Their Highnesses if not for you.”

“I was doing it for myself.”

“Even so. You rescued Their Highnesses in the process. Whatever happened to the slavers? I have not seen any of their corpses.”

I knew it was gonna come to that. How should we explain this…

As I wracked my brain for an explanation, Fran answered simply, “Cleaned it

up.”

“But there should be quite a number of those brutes manning this place…”

“You know how Skills work.”

“Well… Ah, never mind. I shan’t probe you any further. It would be rude of me to force you to explain your skills.”

“Hm.”

“I know you’re not lying. Our fight taught me that much.”

That was nice of him. Despite Fran’s youth, she had proven to be Salut’s superior in combat, and he now treated her as an equal. He treated the rest of the rescued children like a guardian would, though.

We should get out of here. Their friends might come looking for them soon.

Hm.

Would be bad if we ran into them on our way back, though. Let’s get rid of those collars.

There were seven children and seven slave contracts. No harm in trying to break them.

Fran took out the contracts out of her inventory.

“Wh-what are those?”

“I found them upstairs.”

Salut focused his eyes on the bundle of parchment that was in Fran’s hand and immediately recognized them as slave contracts. According to the captives, they had been coerced into signing their names on them.

The seven contracts belonged to the children who were held here. Their names written on each one.

Do it!

Hm!

Once having looked through their names, Fran through the bundle of documents in the air and sliced it into pieces. Bits of the contracts floated down

like confetti. Immediately, the children's collars split and fell to the ground with a clang. It was just like the day Fran had been freed from slavery.

They all stared at Fran, stunned. They must not have expected they could be freed so easily—even Salut was surprised. Shock soon turned into delight as they celebrated their freedom. It wasn't hard to imagine why. Only moments ago they were threatened with the fate of being slaves for the rest of their lives. Now, the heavy slave collars that burdened their necks lay broken on the floor.

The young prince could not contain his gratitude and grabbed Fran's hand. "Thank you so much!"

It felt nice being appreciated for once. Still—

"You're welcome. We need to get out of here, though."

We weren't out of the woods yet, and Fran understood that. We had to leave, fast.

"Y-you're right." The prince turned serious. "We can go to the lodge where we are staying."

"Yes, m'lord! Allow me to lead the way."

The royal family had leased an entire lodge to themselves for the duration of their stay, mostly for security reasons. With nobles like these, no wonder it was next to impossible for us to find a single room!

We left the slaver hideout and headed to the prince's lodge; Fran, Jet, and Salut protecting the children as we made our way there. Jet had scared some of the children at first, but they soon grew used to him after seeing how friendly he was. Some of them had even grown brave enough to pet him by the end of our little trek.

"How's everyone doing? We're almost to the lodge, you can do it."

"We'll be home soon."

I expected the prince to act arrogant because of his royal bloodline, but I was pleasantly wrong. He was nothing like the scummy nobles I had the displeasure of encountering in Alessa. He cared for the former captives, taking the lead and even accommodating his walking pace to suit the slower members. Although

still a young prince, he carried out his responsibilities like a noble king. The princess was as gentle as they came. She was polite in her speech and offered the kids kind words of encouragement.

The both of them were still kids, though, still childish enough to sneak out of their chartered lodge unsupervised. Their current air of maturity could be because they had regretted and reflected upon their actions.

We arrived at our destination, an inn which catered specifically to noblefolk. I really could blame the prince and his cohort for our terrible luck with finding a room earlier. I had really wanted us to stay at this kind of establishment.

The kids were taken aback at the grandeur of the place.

“Uh, are we going inside?”

“It’s huge!”

Their commotion caught the eye of a guard who was stationed at the front gates. Some of the children weren’t exactly dressed for the occasion. He did his job of staring at them suspiciously. He knew the prince when he saw him, though, which was enough to lay all suspicion to rest.

“What is it? Come on in.”

“Don’t be shy.”

The prince and princess called upon the rest of the children and beckoned them inside. Unable to disobey the commands of a highborn, the common children fearfully entered the building.

“Welcome back, Your Highnesses.”

A whole crew of hotel staff was lined up despite it being the dead of night. There were about twenty in total, an old man who looked to be the manager, and an array of maids. Talk about royal treatment. I guess this was normal considering they were dealing with literal royalty.

The manager bowed deeply to the young prince. Still, the sight of the less impressive children behind the royal bothered him somewhat.

“And these children…?”

“We ran into some trouble. Prepare a room and a meal for each of them. And a bath, as well.”

“But, my lord…”

“I shall pay for their expenses, of course. I trust we won’t have a problem with that.”

“We’re so sorry about this. We really are.”

Oooh, princely! The young royal had a way of intimidating adults, and the princess followed it up by being, well…a princess. They were the perfect carrot-and-stick combination. In the face of intimidation followed by meekness, the manager was helpless to comply. Could the twins have planned this out in advance?

“Understood. We shall prepare their accommodations immediately.”

The manager left along with the hotel staff.

A nervous old man with white hair came up to us; this must have been one of the prince’s people. Anyone could tell from his robe, which was decorated with ritzy embroidery, that he was a man of high standing. He might be a noble himself.

“What on earth is all this ruckus about?!”

“Hello, Sellid. We have returned.”

“Ohhh, Your Highness! I was worried sick!”

“I know. I apologize. We took a wrong turn and got lost.”

“You were…lost in the city?”

“Yes. Salut came and found us, and now here we are.”

They neglected to mention the entire episode of being kidnapped by slavers and having slave collars bound on their necks. The twins were covering for Salut’s mistakes; he must be one of their favorites.

“And what of these children? Did you go out and purchase some slaves?”

“No. I asked them the way around when we were lost.”

“I see.” Old Sellid stared at the children suspiciously. “That means you have no more business here. Here, have some money and leave. Go on.”

This Sellid guy was an asshole nobleman through and through. He wanted to separate his prince from the filthy urchins as soon as possible. That was his excuse, at least. In all likelihood, he didn’t want to spend any more time than he had to in their presence. He didn’t even bother to conceal his hostility.

“Silence, Sellid! I shall not allow you to speak ill of my guests.”

“Y-your guests?! Wh-what are you thinking, Your Highness! I shall not let you associate with such fi—”

“I said, be quiet. I owe these people my life.”

“Ugh…!”

Hah, suck it! We have the twins on our side!

Sellid glared at us spitefully, turned around, and left. The kids didn’t seem to care all that much. If anything, they seemed used to it. Arrogant temper tantrums must’ve been the standard reaction of the nobles they interacted with.

“I apologize for our chamberlain.”

“It’s all right.”

“He is competent, if unaccommodating at times.”

He had to be as stiff as a plank if the kind princess called him unaccommodating.

“What about you? We would love it if you could stay the night.”

Well?

Our roach motel doesn’t even have a bath. Let’s stay here.

I wasn’t using the term roach motel lightly. Our hard sought room had bugs crawling out of the holes in the bed. I wanted to pamper Fran by staying at a five-star hotel, and now we had the opportunity to do so.

Fran nodded. “Okay. I’m in your care.”

The twin heirs raised their voices in gratitude.

“Will you? We must prepare your room at once!”

“I am honored that you would let us repay you.”

And so, we scored a night at a beautiful hotel courtesy of the Phyllian royal family.

“You should take a bath to get rid of all that dirt and grime.”

“Let me take you to the bathhouse.”

The bathhouse was as big as it was luxurious. Snow-white marble graced the floors, a dragon head spout poured steaming water into the bath, and potted plants decorated the four corners of the bathhouse. It had the look and feel of a botanical garden. A fresco depicting the creation myth of this world was painted on the ceiling and the walls. The bathtub itself was enchanted to prevent mold from growing and the water from going stale. Underscoring this extravagance were bars of soap made out of herbs with magical properties. Shampoo and liquid soap were stored in glass bottles which looked like they belonged in a museum.

The lodge really was an establishment exclusively for nobles. I had never been in one, but I would imagine this was what they all looked like.

Why was I able to describe the bathhouse in such detail, you ask? Because Fran took me inside, of course. Would you believe that she wanted to give me a bath? What a good girl she is! She might be the kindest girl this world had to offer. And I’m not exaggerating, either.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. Even though I am currently a sword, I was still a man in my past life. Taking a bath with Fran would be the height of indecency.

Aah, but I’m her guardian, you see. I’m well within my rights. Besides, I’m a sword! I can’t have sex even if I wanted to!

“Stay still, Jet.”

“Arooo.”

Stop wagging your tail!

Jet whined. We started off by giving Jet a good wash. We started with his back and then moved to his legs; I took his hind legs while Fran cleaned his front. Finally, we laid him on his side and gave him a good scrubbing. His tail wagging was clear indication that he enjoyed it. He did spray suds all over me and Fran, though.

We rinsed him clean after that, all of us covered with soap bubbles.

“Arf.”

Whoa!

“Jet…”

The direwolf whined again. He had tried to shake himself dry, nearly drowning Fran with soap suds in the process. He had a thick coat of fur which turned his shaking into a miniature shower.

Fran squinted, glaring at Jet. He turned to escape into the hot bath. His attempt to avoid his master’s wrath caused a big splash which drenched her, and she maintained her glare.

“Arf…”

Jet rested his chin on the edge of the bath and relaxed. He looked like a mass of long hairs floating in the water, his jet black fur swaying in it like seaweed.

You’re next, Fran. Have a seat.

“Okay.”

It was Fran’s turn next. I took a sponge, lathered it, and began scrubbing her back.

Any place in particular you want me to get to?

“No… I’m good. This feels nice.”

I’ll shampoo your hair next, okay?

“Mm.”

There we go, all lathered up.

“Aah, it got in my eye.”

What?! Don't move. We have to rinse that out of your eyes, stat!

"Uhhh."

Having half of my blade broken off was no big deal. A bit of shampoo in Fran's eye, though? Bring in the cavalry.

Still, it was a relief to see her act her age for once.

Make sure to close your eyes this time, all right?

"Okay. I'll shut them real tight."

She squeezed her eyes shut, and I began to shampoo her hair. The sting of the shampoo must have made an impression on her. She focused on shutting her eyes until the shampoo was rinsed away with hot water.

"Is it over?"

Uh-huh, you can open your eyes now.

"Your turn next, Teacher."

And so we switched places. Fran took a sponge and scrubbed it all over my blade.

It felt good, and I probably had the Blacksmith skill to thank for it feeling good, low level as it might be. Honestly, it was probably because Fran was working so hard to clean me up. How should I put this? It felt like she was giving me a back rub.

Oooh, yeah. That hits the spot.

"Here?"

That's a good one, too.

I felt like I was getting drunk off the sensation of Fran's sponge.

Now that we were all cleaned up, we soaked ourselves in the hot bath. Any other sword would be rusted to oblivion by now. As Fran lowered herself to shoulder level, water overflowed from the bath and made a satisfying splashing sound. This high-class establishment wasn't stingy with their water, that's for sure.

“Huff.”

Fran closed her eyes and sighed as she rested her chin against the edge of the tub. She had a towel wrapped around her head and looked completely relaxed.

What do you think? Good?

“Mmm.”

“Arf…”

We had to get out eventually, of course, but Fran and Jet enjoyed every moment of the baths.

The baths were impressive enough, but the food is exquisite.

There was a feast in the dining hall despite it being the late hours of the night. On the menu were seafood chowder with lots of clams in it, soft buttery bread, steak made from a giant chicken thigh, and an assortment of fruit. All of it was waiting for us by the time we finished our bath.

The children we found at the hideout were already seated and were being treated just as well as any other guest of the establishment. The hotel of the upper crust was living up to its reputation.

Speaking as a middle-aged man in my former life, I thought there was too much food on the table—there was no way we would be able to finish it all. The famished boys and girls proved me wrong, though. Although some of them hesitated at first, they gobbled everything down once they had taken their first bite.

The twins displayed magnificent hospitality throughout supper. They asked each child whether they had a place to go home to. If they did, they promised to escort them the following day. If they didn’t, the twins reassured the child that they didn’t think less of them. They had warmth and manners you couldn’t find in an average thirteen-year-old.

The twins turned to us and bowed their heads in gratitude for saving their lives.

“Thank you so much for saving us.”

“We don’t know what would’ve happened to us if you hadn’t.”

Prince Fult and his sister Princess Satya bowed their identical heads in perfect unison.

Fran seemed to have taken a liking to them. Although she kept her answers short, she actually took the time to respond to their questions. It did my heart good seeing Fran get along with kids of her age. The sight of it was reward enough for saving them.

After supper, Fran was led into a luxurious room. I had never seen such extravagance even in my previous life. There was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a bed with curtains surrounding it, and fluffy carpeting on the floor. I wondered how much a night would cost in this place.

“So soft.”

“Woof.”

Fran, Jet! You can’t just jump into bed like that! We might go bankrupt if you break something and they ask us to replace it!

I understood their excitement, though. I wanted to feel the fluffy bed myself!

“Good night…”

“Awoo…”

Already tired from the events of the day, Fran was no match for the powerful magic of expensive pillows and blankets. She fell asleep instantly.

Good night, sweetie.

One hour later, I sensed a rat concealing his presence to sneak around the establishment. I took the liberty of casting Identify on him and confirmed that he was, in fact, an Assassin. Dark stuff, scary stuff. Although, I didn’t think he caught on to me, yet. He had Presence Sense on him but I doubt it registered me since I wasn’t an organic creature.

I was already using Silence so I followed it up with another wind spell to knock the intruder out cold. Then I carried him back to Fran’s room.

Hey, I finally caught something.

“Big haul.”

In more ways than one.

Let's see if we can get him to tell us who sent him before handing him over to the prince.

"Okay."

Our assassin was human. He might not have anything to do with the slavers, but we couldn't know for sure until we talked to him. We had a lot of questions for him if he turned out to have some connection to the Blue Cat tribe.

Fran slapped the assassin's cheeks to wake him up. She was really getting into it. His cheeks were turning an angry red as they received the brunt of Fran's wrath. I guess she didn't like being woken up from her beauty sleep.

"Bwuh…?"

"Are you awake?"

"Huh?! What did you do to me?!"

"Knocked you out, tied you up."

"When did…"

The assassin immediately tried to make a break for it. He failed, though. My mana rope was much too strong for him.

He started panicking once he realized he had been tied up. "Damn it!"

"I have some questions. Answer them and I promise I won't hurt you."

"Grrr…"

As if being bound wasn't bad enough, the assassin was now being held at swordpoint. To top it all off, he was being stared down by a giant wolf.

The assassin knew his ultimate fate.

"…!"

Hey! He just took some poison!

He swallowed a poison pill which he probably stowed away in the far back of his teeth. I didn't think real live assassins actually did this. I always thought it was a trope in my manga. Or maybe he swallowed his poison pill by accident? I

imagine those things take some practice to pull off properly.

I Identified him and saw that his health was rapidly declining. The poison he took must've been boutique stuff. Not that it could work with us around. We cured his Poison and healed him back to full health.

Mid Heal.

"Antidote. Sorry. Not happening."

"No way… You cured Deadly Poison…?"

"I'm pretty good at healing spells."

"Urgh!"

He wasn't giving up. This time, the man managed to bite his own tongue off.

"Mid Heal."

"Dammit!"

"Do you want me to hurt you?"

"Ugh…"

And so the Assassin spilled the beans. He was prepared to face instant death but not so much long hours of torture.

It turned out that he had nothing to do with the slaver syndicate. He was a hit man by trade, and he had been hired to assassinate the prince and princess. His client was anonymous but had given him information regarding the best way to infiltrate the hotel where the royals were staying.

The client had paid up front, which to the assassin meant that they had bought the right to their privacy.

I guess he doesn't have much to tell us.

"Hm."

Let's hand him over to Salut.

"Jet, stand watch."

"Bark!"

We knocked the assassin unconscious again before heading to the first floor to meet the prince. Salut, along with other soldiers in full armor, were standing guard at his door. It was almost morning, but they had gone the entire night without sleeping a wink.

“Fran. What brings you here at this hour?”

“I found a rat.”

“Oh?”

Salut seemed to know what she was talking about. He told the soldiers to stay on guard as he left to follow Fran. When he entered the room, he looked surprised to find the assassin which looked like a shrimp roll the way he was tied up.

“So this is the assassin?”

“Yeah.”

Thus, Salut proceeded to interrogate him. The assassin seemed to have given up by now, though. He answered most of his questions without complaint.

“Hmm… You don’t seem to be lying…but who could it be that hired you…?”

Salut was going through the rolodex of his mind for possible conspirators. We knew nothing about the circumstances, but he seemed to have a few suspects ready.

“We’ll take it from here.”

“Okay.”

That was a load off our shoulders. There was no point in keeping him chained up here. The current plan was to give him to the Dars authorities tomorrow.

“We shall talk about what happened here later. We have prepared a reward for you as well. We hope you find it sufficient.”

I guess we got another reward for capturing the assassin. Boy, they were generous. Fran didn’t look the least bit interested, though.

“I’d rather have breakfast first.”

“Hahaha! Indeed. It is a buffet, after all. You can eat as much as you want!”

The following afternoon, Fran had woken up late because of the ruckus the other night and was now in the process of eating her breakfast's share of food along with her lunch. Everyone at the table was startled, to say the least.

She stuffed her cheeks to the point that she was looking more like a squirrel beastman than a cat one. Food disappeared off the table as if they were being stored away into Pocket Dimension. Even Salut had a hard time believing what he was seeing.

The twins broke the silence of Fran's feeding frenzy.

"Fran, do you have any plans after this?"

"Hm?"

"Do you have anywhere you plan on going?"

"Urghm, burgheon."

"…I apologize. We'll save the questions until after lunch."

"Hrmph."

Fran went on to gobble enough food to feed ten people. She patted her stomach, now bloated and full.

Prince Fult rephrased his question. "I hear you are on a journey. May I ask where your destination is?"

"Sure. Ulmutt."

"And you plan to go there by boat?"

"Yeah. First stop, Bulbola."

"I see…"

The prince looked contemplative for a while and then broke the bad news to Fran.

"Have you made arrangements for a ship yet? I believe the ferries headed to Bulbola are fully booked by now because of the Festival of the Moons."

"Seriously?"

"The Festival of the Moons in Bulbola is one of the biggest ones in Granzell."

“It’s even grander than the one they hold in the capital.”

We didn’t know that. I guessed we wouldn’t be able to go to Bulbola for at least a few days. Understandable, considering the state of lodging in Dars. I really wanted to show Fran the greatest festival in the country… I guessed that wasn’t happening.

“I didn’t know that.”

“There is a way for you to get on a boat, though.”

“Hm?”

“Would you like to work for us as a bodyguard? At least until we reach Bulbola.”

“We’ll pay you, of course. Bulbola’s Festival of the Moons is our final destination, so we should be able to make it.”

Prince Fult and Princess Satya were offering us a way out.

It didn’t sound like a bad deal. Looking for a ship now would take some time. And they were Fran’s first friends who were of the same age. It would be sad to part ways so soon.

“We’re going to need you to fend off monsters for us.”

“But you have Salut with you.”

“Actually—”

There had been sightings of a giant monster on the open waters off the continent. The rumors had left them worried for their safety. So they wanted some extra muscle just in case things got hairy. Fran would be perfect for the job since she was stronger than Salut but also because there was no risk of her being an assassin.

“Your Highness, I must object! You cannot simply hire such help from the lower class!” Sellid, the chamberlain, raised his voice in anger. The royals had neglected to tell him their plans. “Did you seduce the prince, you wench?!”

“Silence! Fran is my friend. I told you I will not allow my friends to be badmouthed, did I not?”

“Urgh…!”

Sellid glared at the prince, swallowed his pride, and sulked. He was still glaring daggers, though.

Teacher, can we take this job?

Fran sounded up to it. She didn’t want to say goodbye to the friends she had just made quite yet.

Why not? We’ll get a boat ride out of it, too.

“Okay, I accept.”

“Thank you.”

Fult and Satya clapped their hands and smiled. They came from different classes, but Fran didn’t seem to mind, and neither did the royal twins. I hoped they would be good friends. Fran needed friends that were her age.

“Don’t blame me if anything goes wrong!”

Fran stuck her tongue out at the grumpy chamberlain as soon as he had his back turned. He really hated her, didn’t he? We should avoid him as much as possible once we were on the ship.

“We’re counting on you.”

“I’m so glad that we can go on this trip together.”

“Me too.”

And so we were hired as guards for the royal family.

Chapter 2:
Maritime Monstrosity

W*hat a beautiful day for a cruise.*

"Hm."

Blue waters, white clouds, the infinite horizon, the sticky sea breeze, and ultraviolet rays that might burn your skin. Now *this* was the ocean!

We were on a ship which the prince had chartered. Despite being a medium-sized vessel, its interior was anything but mediocre. As a ship that catered to noblefolk, its rooms and halls were lavishly decorated. It was also geared with magical machinery, right down to the very last screw, giving it significant reinforcement against the elements.

Fran was basking on the deck of the vessel this fine, sunny day. She was lounging in a folding chair as the salty breeze swept her hair. A glass of punch was next to her, its contents as colorful as the fruit it was made of. She was in true vacation mode.

What about the ship's security, you ask? It was taken care of, obviously. Jet was our frontline defense.

Here he was, back from defending the ship against approaching fish monsters. He was quite dry despite the fact he'd been fighting literal sea monsters; he had Air Hike and Shadow Magic to thank for that. His muzzle was wet with seawater, though, since he had to pick his prey out of the ocean somehow.

Fran wasn't goldbricking, either. If Jet was preoccupied and a monster attacked us from the other side of the ship, she would promptly take it down with a well-placed spell.

We took the liberty of relaxing during our downtime.

"Bark, bark!"

"Welcome back, Jet."

Let me store that monster meat for you. I'll make something delicious out of it

later.

"Woof!"

It's nice that we're getting a decent amount of crystals.

Jet had taken down five and Fran two. Not bad for only being out at sea for a couple of hours. I couldn't risk absorbing crystals out on deck, so I stored the carcasses away in Pocket Dimension for the time being.

The captain thanked us and considered it no small miracle that the boat had been unscathed despite the number of monsters we had run into so far.

Even the chamberlain Sellid, who had scolded Fran at first for lazing about, had to admit through gritted teeth that she was pulling her weight. Not that he actually admitted it, of course. It didn't do much to temper his agitated glares, either.

He really was getting on my nerves, though. He wouldn't shut up about proper manners during mealtime. He annoyed Fran so much that she used Royal Etiquette to become the perfect picture of dining etiquette. He quieted down after that. He still resented us, though.

Sellid seemed to dislike Salut and was hostile towards us because we got along with him.

"Teacher, snacks."

My lady Fran was calling for sweets.

All right, what do you want?

"Hmm… Cookies."

I took out the cookies we bought in Alessa. So far I had only had the chance to make her pancakes, so we bought most of the sweets in our inventory from the store. We bought these cookies from a store which catered to noblefolk, so they were all right. Still, they were no match for the delectable treats of Terra. Proper cake and pudding would blow Fran's socks off. I'll make sure to bake lots of it for her.

"Tasty."

Jet whined, asking for a treat himself.

Here's your share, Jet.

"Bark!"

The monsters attacking thus far had been easy to deal with. Fran and Jet were relaxing on deck. This was a wonderful job.

We kept lounging about until Princess Satya came to fetch us. Her blonde hair fluttered in the sea breeze as it reflected the glow of the sun. Fran's black hair and eyes created quite a contrast between the two. The princess's hair and facial features were much closer to the westerners from back home. Standing next to each other, they looked like the sun and moon. I was convinced the adorable princess would grow into a beautiful queen.

"Fran, we are all thinking of going fishing. Would you like to join us?"

"Sure."

We headed to the rear of the deck to find Prince Fult and three kids enjoying themselves, each with a fishing rod in their hands. There were two boys and one girl; they were all orphans when Fran had saved them, and none of them had a family to go home to. The prince took this as providence and had thus decided to employ them as servants in his royal court. Seeing as they weren't officially employed yet, he told them they were still free to treat him as one of their friends.

This was the reason why the kids got along with the twins so well without worrying about their difference in class. Anyone looking in from the outside at the scene would only see a group of friends having fun with each other. As long as that anyone wasn't Chamberlain Sellid, anyway. Best not to listen to that jerk.

"Would you like to fish, too, Fran?"

"Of course. It's my specialty."

Really? When did that happen?

"Is that so?"

"Then, let's have a contest!"

“We’ll eat everything we catch!”

I was surprised that the fishing rod they handed us had a reel on it. It used magic to reel in the fishing line, top shelf stuff. Even the pole itself was reinforced with magic. They really were fishing rods fit for a king.

The kids cast their lines into the sea, never suspecting the luxurious nature of their fishing tools.

Soon, they started landing fish one after another.

“Yes! I got one!”

“It’s a big one!”

“Wooow!”

They showed each other their catch, comparing sizes or the rarity of their game. The princess, who was not participating, looked on warmly with a smile on her face. Fran was the only one who hadn’t managed to catch one yet. The prince and the other kids proceeded to make fun.

“I thought this was your specialty.”

“You’re the only one without a fish, Fran!”

“I got three already!”

“It’s okay, we can share!”

Fran grinned in reply to their playful jests. “Heheh. I’m not interested in a small catch. Only the big ones for me. It’ll make you eat your words when you see it.”

“Hahaha! Looking forward to that!”

I thought Fran could’ve just enjoyed herself and fished something perfectly average. She didn’t even tell me that she wanted to land something big.

For bait, she used some of the leftover Rock Worm we hunted on an extermination quest near Alessa. The worm stank, it was tough and inedible, and its skin was brittle when it dried out. It didn’t seem particularly useful for anything other than its crystal, so we just left it in Pocket Dimension and forgot about it. I thought we could use it as fertilizer once it was all ground up.

She had chopped a meter of it and hooked it on to the appropriately gigantic hook at the end of her fishing line to use as bait. It was so big that the only things that could get hooked on it were a shark, a whale, or a monster. I guess that was what Fran was going for; all good in my book as long as she enjoyed herself.

The children carried on fishing for about an hour, enjoying every second of it. They had managed to land ten fish in total, but Fran was the only one left waiting for a catch. Although they jeered her at the start, they were beginning to look worried for Fran. The kids must have been praying that she would land a fish soon.

Fran was enjoying the friendly atmosphere, but it was hard to tell because of her expressionless face. If anything, she looked upset at not having caught a fish yet.

And then, it finally happened. Something took Fran's bait.

"Hm!"

"Oooh! Something's biting!"

"Look at that bend!"

"This has gotta be huge!"

Everyone cheered as if they had caught it themselves.

The pole was bending beyond belief, though. Despite knowing this was a top of the line fishing rod, it still looked like it was going to snap any second now.

It wouldn't surprise me if a marlin were on the other side of this line.

"Mmph."

"You can do it!"

"Reel it in!"

"Hn!"

Fran was doing her best to reel in her catch, but the fish took yards of fishing line as it struggled for its survival. It was like one of those fishing shows I used to see on television.

“Hmmphh!”

“Come on!”

“Don’t let go!”

Beads of sweat were forming on Fran’s forehead as she reeled in her fishing line with all her might. All this would be over in a second if I helped her out. It would be easy, too. I could sneak into the water and weaken or put the fish to sleep. There would be no point in that, though. Fran wanted to land this one herself.

Thirty minutes went by. The fish still struggled and showed no signs of quitting. Fran, on the other hand, was showing signs of exhaustion. Her fishing duel began to look more like a trolling operation.

Fran was getting impatient with her catch and started to use some skills to even the playing field. She used Elemental Blade Thunder to send shocks of electricity down the fishing line. She then used Water Current Manipulation to ease her catch closer to the ship. To top it all off, she buffed herself with Somatic Manipulation and Support Magic, increasing her Strength. All this to land a mere fish.

Ten minutes later, the huge shadow of a fish came rising to the surface of the water.

That’s a little too big to be a fish…

The shadow was bigger than Jet. It had to be at least ten meters in length.

“Gyaaa! What is that?!”

“F-Fran, are you all right?”

“Oh shit, oh shit!”

The kids were beginning to panic while Fran coolly reeled in her prey. The giant fish slapped the water with its tail, splashing the entire deck with seawater. Its body sparked from time to time, likely because of Fran’s Elemental Blade. This thing was putting up a fight… There was no way it was an ordinary fish!

Name: Fleet Breaker Tuna

Race: Fish Monster

Level: 29

HP: 356; Magic: 109; Strength: 207; Agility: 108

Skills: Harden 6; Water Current Manipulation 6; Swim 5; Enhanced Sense of Smell; Hardened Carapace

Explanation: It uses its head, which is as hard as mithril, as a battering ram. The Fleet Breaker Tuna gets its name from its tendency to ram into ships at high speeds to destroy them. Although its stats would classify it as an E-Rank Threat monster, it is particularly dangerous in the ocean which brings it up to a D-Rank Threat. Its flesh is quite delicious and is used in fine dining establishments.

Crystal Location: Head

Fran, that thing's a monster! It's strong, too!

"Hm!"

Fran yanked the Fleet Breaker Tuna out of the water with the help of some wind magic and elbow grease. Its gigantic body flew majestically through the sky.

"Whoaaa!"

"Kyaaa!"

"Oh my God!"

The giant sea monster was on a straight course to land right on the boat. Everyone started screaming, children and deckhands included.

Well, everyone's panicking.

Fran, I don't think the ship can take that thing landing on it.

Having that giant tuna flap about on the ship would illicit heavy damage on the vessel. The impact of its crash might be enough to cause some cracks.

"I'll take care of it!"

Fran took me in hand and brandished me. She used Mana Sense to locate the

creature’s crystal and threw me right at its head.

Woo-hoo!

“Giiii!”

Having been accelerated with Wind Magic, I pierced right through the Fleet Breaker’s crystal. Its scales might have been tough, but they were no match for my blade. With the creature dead, Fran softened its landing with Wind Magic.

The tuna was more than ten meters long. It was wider than the ship, and its tail ended up hanging out of one side. Imagine catching a large whale shark and landing it on your boat. This was not something you could see back on Earth.

“I guess I win the fishing contest.”

“Okay… But…”

“Now’s not the time…”

“Hm?”

Fran paid no attention to the panic unravelling on deck. She was far more concerned with the taste and freshness of the tuna.

Uhh, Fran?

Hm?

She was already disassembling the monster. First, she cut off its head and then took out its guts and filleted it. It took less than a minute with the skills she had. I had once watched an exhibition where a sushi chef made tuna sashimi starting with a whole tuna, but this was a hundred times more impressive.

Why are you taking it apart?

We promised to eat everything we caught.

Aah… Of course.

Disassemble was one hell of a skill if it could take apart something this big this fast. The ship’s crew members gathered around Fran and watched her with awe. We should share our catch with everyone on the ship once the commotion died down. Consider it grievance pay for the panic we caused. I wasn’t sure when the panic would die down, though.

This thing was so huge we could make nigiri sushi for several hundred people out of this one fish monster. Seeing gigantic slabs of meat in the marketplace and a chicken egg one meter in diameter was exciting, but they were nothing compared to seeing so much tuna in one place. This thing could yield a hundred servings of fatty tuna at the very least.

Seeing the white marbling on the gigantic slab of tuna made my Japanese blood run—if I had any blood, that is. The tuna-loving spirit of a Japanese man had been permanently imprinted in my soul, and it persisted through my reincarnation.

The Fleet Breaker's head was so huge that you'd need an entire furnace to grill it on. You could pass it off as a tent.

"What are you up to, little lady?"

One of the crew members asked her the exact same question I did, and she gave the same answer, "We're eating everything we caught."

The crew member nodded and fell silent. He joined the rest of the crew in watching Fran's high-speed disassembly of the Fleet Breaker. They were quiet, either with awe at Fran's bottomless belly, or because they figured this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the girl to have some top-grade fish.

Fran stored the Fleet Breaker's head and tail away, and made sushi and sashimi out of the rest of its body. Things had quieted down by the time she was done.

…Only for it to be followed by a commotion at how good the fish was.

"This is great!"

"S-so this is Fleet Breaker Tuna?"

"This is enough to last a lifetime!"

"I knew you were strong, Fran, but this is…"

"You really are stronger than Salut. That was amazing."

The ship was in a melodious uproar once all hands were fed with Fleet Breaker. It was a wonderful commotion, unlike the desperate panic that had transpired several moments earlier. It was to be expected; none of the

shiphands ever thought they'd be treated to such fine dining this day.

The food was good enough to put a smile even on the royal twins' faces. It must have tasted amazing. I felt so jealous that I wasn't able to eat it.

"My goodness, you're going to throw in a free meal for us, too?"

The captain took his time to thank her personally. "My name is Rengill. Might I ask for yours?"

"Fran."

"Are you an adventurer?"

"Yeah. D-Rank."

Fran showed Rengill her guild card, eliciting gasps of amazement from the rest of the crew; an understandable reaction, considering her age.

"Very impressive. Although, to be expected considering how you took down that Fleet Breaker by yourself. I wouldn't be surprised if you were of a much higher rank… I am very fortunate to have met you."

Captain Rengill took something out of his pocket and gave it to Fran.

"What's this?"

"That is a coin that bears the seal of the Lucille Trade Association of which I am a member. We are based in Bulbola, and you can get many benefits if you show that coin."

"That's amazing! The Lucille Trade Association is one of the biggest trade associations in all of Granzell. Captain Rengill is one of its executives."

This coin was a big deal judging by the prince's reaction. Having the backing of a great trade association would come in handy. I had to hand it to Captain Rengill; he had a great eye for talent.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It is a pittance for associating with a budding great adventurer."

The captain's words caused another stir of astonished murmurs among the crew. Rengill didn't say this to just anyone.

“The captain’s got his eye on her!”

“She’s a D-Rank, and she’s what, twelve? Of course he does!”

“Did you see the way she took down that Fleet Breaker?!”

“And she’s so cute.”

“Never knew you were a kiddie fiddler.”

“A-am not!”

“We would love it if you would visit our head office once we reach Bulbola.”

The captain bowed his head and took his leave. It was the crew members’ turn to thank her now, and they all took turns in expressing their gratitude. The other kids looked at Fran with a longing jealousy.

“You’re so cool, Fran!”

“Heheh. Of course.”

“I wanna be just as strong as you are one day!”

“Good luck.”

“Show us the coin!”

They all got along so well! If only this moment could last forever… We would have to part ways with them once we got to Bulbola in a few days. Such a shame.

My sentiments would be betrayed, however.

There was a storm that night, so big that the mere act of standing proved difficult.

Whoa, the ship’s rocking hard.

“Yeah. It feels like I’m gonna roll over.”

“Awoo.”

Fran and Jet swayed in time to the ship’s rocking. We weren’t able to go on deck during a storm like this, and we were forced to remain in our quarters.

I really hope it stops soon…

We weren't going to sink or anything, were we?

Dawn.

Our ship rumbled as the violent storm continued to rage outside. Waves crashed against the hull, tossing our ship as it creaked incessantly. The noise was distressing, to say the least. At one point, the rocking got so bad it felt like one of those pirate ship rides in the amusement parks back home.

This was still better compared to last night, though; the rocking and the noise had gone down by about half. It was no longer raining outside, either, the wind being the only thing left that still assaulted us. Compared to the full blown typhoon we had last night, this was a small mercy.

"Zzz."

Which was why I found it amazing that Fran could sleep through all this. She really was cut from a different cloth.

Suddenly, Fran's eyes shot open, and she sat up. Jet woke up at the same moment she did.

It was still dawn, what was going on?

Fran? Jet?

"Something's coming…"

"Grrr…"

What is it?

I expected someone to come into our quarters, but that wasn't what Fran was talking about. A few moments later, I felt the presence that had alerted them.

A gigantic sea creature, fast approaching the ship.

Fran and Jet had felt it sooner despite being asleep… Their animal instincts surprised me.

Wait, now's not the time to be impressed!

What the hell is that thing?! Why is it so big?!

It was much bigger than our entire ship.

A whale… No!

A whale would be too small.

The approaching giant creature made me tremble in fear. It was slender—if you could use “slender” to describe something that gigantic. Its shape resembled that of a worm or a snake with its girth being roughly the same length as our ship. I couldn’t quite sense how long it was. My guess was that it had to be over a hundred meters long.

What I did know was that the beast had its sights on our ship and was coming in hot.

This is bad! We have to warn the others!

“Right!”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet bolted out of the room. Jet galloped down the living quarters, howling as loud as he could to wake everyone up. Meanwhile, Fran made a mad dash to the captain’s quarters. There was a mana-powered voicepipe there we could use to announce the emergency to the rest of the ship.

Fran banged against Captain Rengill’s door.

Wow, she didn’t just barge in for once. She’s gained a level in politeness!

“Wh-what is it?”

A surprised Captain Rengill responded from the other side of the door. He was awake.

Fran opened the door, yelling without waiting for the captain to let her in. “Captain, sea monster!”

We were in a state of emergency, after all. Cut her some slack.

“Fran? A sea monster, you say…?”

“Yeah! It’s bigger than this entire ship! And it’s headed this way!”

“U-understood!”

Taking the little girl’s words at face value, the captain immediately scrambled

for the voicepipe. He had no reason to doubt Fran after seeing how easily she took down a Fleet Breaker Tuna.

Captain Rengill's voice rang throughout the entire ship.

"Emergency! Giant sea monster is approaching the ship! I repeat! Giant sea monster is approaching the ship! All hands on deck!"

As soon as he had made the announcement, a large shock wave rocked the ship.

"Urgh!"

"Hm?"

If Fran and the captain hadn't leaned on the walls for support, the shock wave would've swept them off their feet.

Was that the monster?

The ship's crew were screaming from below us. The monster had punched a hole into the ship's side, right into the galley. Our stored foodstuff leaked into the ocean, including highly odorous fish sauce. The creature passed us for now, but that might have been what attracted it to our ship in the first place, especially if it had a strong sense of smell.

Come on, Fran!

"Hm!"

We ran to the deck of the ship. It was still dark outside, the morning sun only beginning to rise from the horizon. We were about thirty minutes away from sunrise.

There it is!

About fifty meters from the boat was the giant monster which looked like it slithered through the water. We failed to notice it before because of how dark it was and how high the waves had been. Our ship was still shaking like a leaf in a river, and we were dealing with a monster many times the size of it. We would be goners if we took another direct hit.

"F-Fran, what is going on?!"

“Captain, over there.”

Captain Rengill took one look at the thing Fran was looking at and turned deathly pale.

“M-Midgardsormr…”

“What?”

“They call it the Maritime Monstrosity. A giant beast of a monster!”

That sounded menacing. It might be a bad idea to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves by attacking it.

“They call it the Living Natural Disaster. Once, it obliterated the naval forces of an entire country by itself…”

“Is it too late to run, Captain?”

“Not with these waves. The Midgardsormr is much faster than we are.”

Does that mean we have to fight it?

The Midgardsormr was coming closer as we discussed our options.

“It looks like it has its eyes on our ship.”

The beast’s head was indeed pointed in our direction.

No running away, I guess…

Fran, it looks like we’re in for a fight.

“It’s a really big catch.”

That’s the spirit! We’ll open with our strongest attack!

“Hm!”

Could our attacks even hit underwater targets? Even if it could, much of our impact and heat would be absorbed by the sea’s surface, rendering our attacks next to harmless by the time it reached the sea serpent.

Jet, can you provoke that thing and draw it out to the surface?

“Grrr!”

He was up to it. Jet loved fighting as much as his master did. In the meantime,

Fran and I had to prepare our attack. There was no reason to show that giant monster any mercy.

I'll use my finisher, Telekinetic Catapult. Fran, I'll need you to reinforce me with wind magic and Elemental Blade.

"Roger that."

I used Transmogrify to change my shape into something more destructive. I had the picture of a bullet in my mind, I got rid of any unnecessary parts and carved grooves into my blade. The result looked less like a bullet and more like a long needle, which still had high penetration capabilities. It would have to do.

I then activated Elemental Blade Flame, Wind Magic, Supersonic by way of Wind Manipulation, and Harden. Double Mind made it easy to cast all these complicated spells at once. I was burning through my mana pool, but this was no time to be stingy.

Are you ready, Fran?

Whenever you are.

All right!

I was prepped and ready to go. Seeing Fran ready to leap into action, the captain called out to her with dread in his voice.

"Fran! What do you think you're doing?!"

But his face practically did all the talking for him.

You're not really thinking of fighting that thing, are you?

Fran nodded. "I'll take out that squirmy thing."

"A-are you serious?"

The thought of challenging the giant sea monster never once passed the captain's mind. To him, fighting the Midgardsormr was akin to fighting a natural disaster. It was common sense.

Fortunately, we lacked that particular bit of common sense. Monsters get killed. Simple as that.

Fran answered Captain Rengill with a nod.

And then it happened.

“Gyagagooooo!”

“Good job, Jet.”

Jet’s harassment of the creature worked. The creature drove its head out of the water to chase down Jet who was hopping through the air using Air Hike. The gigantic sea monster looked like it was big enough to swallow a blue whale whole. The Midgardsormr was shaped less like a serpent and more like a worm. Its grotesque maw was lined with rows of teeth like formations of anemone.

“Let’s go!”

Yeah!

With the Midgardsormr’s head clearly exposed, Fran used all her skills and magic to launch me as hard as she could. The force of this throw should be strong enough to pierce the entire length of a Lesser Wyvern.

I amplified my acceleration by focusing even more energy into Telekinesis.

Uoooh!

Instantly I made contact with the creature’s body. Whether it was his head or neck, I couldn’t tell, but I did manage to leave a crater, about ten meters in diameter, somewhere around its head.

I was hoping to penetrate it completely, but its wall-like thick skin absorbed most of the impact of Telekinetic Catapult.

Did that do it?

The recoil of my crash landing sent me flying away from the Midgardsormr. My blade was half gone, the remainder severely cracked. It couldn’t take the pressure of fully charged skills and magic.

Unfortunately, my kamikaze attack proved ineffective, at best.

What the hell…?

I was shocked by the subsequent Identify.

Name: Midgardsormr

Race: Sea Serpent

Level: 60

HP: 35991/38709; Magic: 531; Strength: 4019; Agility: 302

Skills: Absorb 2; Regenerate 2; Predator

Explanation: The Maritime Monstrosity is said to be capable of infinite growth. Possessing little to no intelligence, it lives entirely by instinct alone. Possesses no special powers other than its massive size, which is more than enough to make it a dangerous threat. Legend has it that it is capable of swallowing islands whole. Possesses multiple hearts which makes it difficult to kill. Threat Level A.

Crystal Location: Heart

It has more than 30,000 health?! My best attack barely left a dent in that thing… It's an A-Rank Threat, too?

Although the Midgardsormr had the skill variation of a low rank monster, its gigantic size was in a league of its own.

Dammit! This thing won't stay still!

"Gyuoooooo!"

The Midgardsormr turned its head in my direction. I couldn't tell where its eyes were, but I could feel its gaze. The thing understood that I was the one who had damaged it.

We stared at each other despite our lack of eyeballs.



Goddamn, this thing's huge…

Its exposed length was easily over thirty meters long.

I continued to observe the sea worm as I waited for my blade to recover.

Its wounds are already starting to heal.

The Midgardsormr was recovering large chunks of its health despite its Level 2 Regenerate, probably owing to the fact that its health pool was so huge to begin with.

"Gygruoooooo!"

Whoa!

Suddenly, it spat something at me. Apparently, it could launch its stomach acid as a projectile. It was quite accurate with it, too, and I had to quickly dodge out of the way to avoid being covered with it.

Lively as ever, I see.

It was far from crippled despite having a large hole in the side of its head. As far as I could tell, it was still nimble and sharp. Chipping away at this thing's health pool was going to be difficult. Still, I imagined that wasn't the only way of beating this thing.

Perhaps I could go after its weak point.

Destroying its crystal would be the easiest way to go about it, but locating it would take at least several hours, if not days, with how big the Midgardsormr was. Well, I would just have to start with the weak point that I could see.

I'll blow your brains out!

I overcharged my mana and launched myself with another Telekinetic Catapult. The impact overwhelmed me, and I cracked my blade yet again, but at least I managed to leave another crater in its head. It wasn't as powerful as my initial attack without Fran's support, but I left a five-meter-wide hole in the creature's head.

How do you like this?!

"Grooooarrr!"

Dammit, it's still moving.

A war of attrition it is!

I charged up Telekinesis while waiting for my blade to recover. I had about seventy percent mana left, which would get me five more fully charged catapults.

Take this!

"Graaargh!"

Haaa!

"Kyoooo!"

Raaaah!

"Groooo!"

The Midgardsormr was a tough son of a gun, that's for sure. It was missing half of its head at this point, but it was still moving about, barely phased. I scanned it again and found that its health was still at eighty percent. Was its head not its weak point?

I'll try attacking it a couple more times just to be sure.

Just die!

"Gyogyaaaaa!"

The Midgardsormr's head was obliterated now, its head and brains completely gone. And yet…

How are you not dead?!

It was still moving about. It was slower now, but it showed no signs of expiring. Worse, the stump where its head used to be was already beginning to regenerate.

What is it with you fantasy creatures?! I blew up your head so at least have the decency to die!

The grim realization dawned on me as I witnessed this giant worm regenerate itself.

Is it immortal…?

I could attack it all day, and it would probably carry on like nothing happened to it. The situation was getting worse, so I opted to return to Fran for the time being. I had thought of a way that might just defeat the creature… I never wanted it to come to this, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I flew back to the ship, carefully placing myself in Fran's hand to make it look like she was controlling me the whole time. I was still hiding the fact that I was an Intelligent Weapon.

How'd it go?

A fully charged Telekinetic Catapult couldn't beat that thing.

It would take at least a couple hundred Catapults to kill that immortal supermonster.

That strong?

Fran was shocked. The Lich had been the only creature we hadn't been able to beat with a fully charged Telekinetic Catapult. The realization that the giant sea worm was at least on par with the Ghost King himself alarmed her.

I have a plan.

Shoot.

…

Teacher?

We need Instant Death. We have to use Death Gaze…!

I see.

Name: Death Gaze

Attack: 880; MP: 600; Durability: 400

Mana Conductivity: B+

Skill: Instant Death (3% chance of inflicting Instant Death on an enemy)

Death Gaze should be able to kill anything regardless of health or physical size as long as Instant Death triggered. Granted the chances of it triggering was low,

but as long as it cut enough times it should trigger at some point.

Using it was the toughest decision I had to make…

I didn't want Fran to use any sword other than me!

As a sword, I felt defeated. Just as a master chef would only let his daughter marry a more skilled chef, or a brain surgeon who would only let a master cardiologist perform open heart surgery on his parents.

Still, now was not the time to worry about such petty things.

This is our only way out… Face it!

Here you go, Teacher.

Fran took Death Gaze out of her Pocket Dimension. The ship's crew members swallowed at the sight of it.

"Wh-what is that?"

"I feel cold all of a sudden…"

Vein-like crimson lines ran down the blade, which itself was blacker than the darkest night. Its cold steel looked absolutely ominous.

"Death Gaze. It has Instant Death on it."

"I see. You plan on using that to kill the sea worm."

And yet Captain Rengill still looked doubtful. Why?

"I'm not sure if Instant Death would work on that monster."

"Why not?"

"Legend has it that the Midgardsormr has many hearts. If this is true, Instant Death might not be enough to take it down."

The Identify description had mentioned that earlier. We didn't know how effective Instant Death would be, but it wasn't like the thing had thousands of hearts. The only way to know for sure was to attack it until it died.

Let's go.

All right.

And so I departed on my second raid of the Midgardsormr. I made sure to make it look like Fran was controlling me, of course.

“Blade Dance.”

“Oooh!”

Fran held out her arms and called out the name of a random move. She made it look like she was in deep focus, even adding in the occasional grunt of concentration. It was all an act, of course, and I flew towards the encroaching sea worm taking Death Gaze with me.

To an outsider, it looked like Fran was controlling two swords at once using some mysterious skill. In fact, she was next to defenseless. I left Jet behind to protect her.

Good luck, Teacher.

“Woof.”

No problem!

My immediate plan of action consisted of little more than cutting the Midgardsormr with Death Gaze until Instant Death triggered.

You forced me to swallow my pride and use another sword… I’m going to kill you, you fat bastard!

“Gyaaaooaaaa!”

Damn it. Simple slashes weren’t enough to cut through its thick skin. I needed to put extra energy into my Telekinesis; not that I had to put Telekinetic Catapult levels of mana into each cut.

Death Gaze finally glowed a deep crimson somewhere around the twentieth cut. Instant Death had triggered.

“Gyaaaaaa—”

The Midgardsormr let out a roar which was loud enough to make the steel of my blade vibrate.

Finally, the sea worm stopped moving.

I killed it!

But my celebration proved premature.

Damn it, why'd you have to raise my hopes like that?!

"Gugaga!"

How are you still *not dead?!*

"Gyaoooo!"

Captain Rengill's concern was well warranted. Instant Death wasn't enough to kill a creature with multiple hearts.

Then I'll just have to take out all your hearts! Bring it on!

"Gyoooo…"

What's wrong? I'm right here!

"Gyaooooouu!"

The Midgardsormr ignored me and was now swimming full speed towards the ship.

You fat bastard! Fight me, come on!

I continued my onslaught of slashes with Death Gaze, but the Midgardsormr would not turn to face me.

I suppose it was because I was only a piece of metal for the sea worm. It would much rather go after easily hunted living prey than a dangerous metal object.

After several more strikes, Death Gaze triggered again. The fat bastard immediately stopped moving but started swimming again after a few minutes like I hadn't taken out one of its hearts. It was moving fast, too. The ship was sailing full speed away from the Midgardsormr, but it would catch up to it soon at this rate.

Damn it, what now? I don't think I can poison it to death.

I thought about joining the fray with my own Venom Fang, but it didn't look like the creature could be poisoned. It didn't have Poison Resistance, but the sheer size of the sea worm meant it would take hours for it to succumb to the poison, no matter how strong the poison might be. Its gigantic size still proved a

problem even now.

Fran's on that ship! I won't let you hurt her, you fat bastard!

I launched myself with Telekinetic Catapult in frantic anger. My half-recovered blade jammed itself into the Midgardsormr's head.

Hey, don't ignore me!

I continued stabbing the Midgardsormr over and over. I went red with hate, anger and frustration fueling my assault. I could imagine the mana running through my blade being pitch black. I let the spiral of emotions guide me as I thrust what was left of my blade into the sea worm.

Goddamn it!

I managed to punch the biggest crater during this fight so far into the creature's head, although the recoil caused my blade to shatter to pieces.

Even then, it ignored me completely.

Is there… Is there no other way?

I need to slow it down… But it heals whatever damage I inflict on it in seconds… Can I put some kind of weight on it to slow it down?

Think! I know I don't have a brain anymore, but put that gray matter to work!

And then, I had an idea.

I might be able to use that.

It was a long shot but I was willing to try anything at this point.

Mana Barrier at full power! Telekinesis!

I circled around to the front of the Midgardsormr and launched myself with Telekinetic Catapult. My target wasn't its body this time, however. I was going right into its half-regenerated mouth, right into his guts.

I call this one: Into the Belly of the Beast!

If attacking it from the outside wasn't going to work, then I would just have to take it down from the inside.

Ew, gross!

The Midgardsormr's guts were appropriately grotesque and very much disgusting. It also depleted my Durability at a rapid rate, the entire length of its body secreting digestive acid. If it weren't for my fully charged Mana Barrier, I would've completely melted by now. I wanted to go on a rampage inside its belly, but decided against it. I needed to accomplish what I came here to do and get out quick if I didn't want to be digested by the sea worm.

Still, my plan behooved me to go deeper so it could work its full magic. I put more mana into Telekinesis and charged ahead through the creature's guts. My durability was down by half now, I had wanted to go deeper, but this would have to do.

Try this on for size! Activate Pocket Dimension!

I took out the giant boulders—the fallen remnants of the Undead Haunt—out of the Pocket Dimension and left it, one after another, in the creature's stomach. The Midgardsormr could've thrown up the boulders if I had left it closer to its mouth, which was why I was adamant on going as deep as I could. Its gag reflex couldn't save it now!

I decided not to use the poisonous swamp water I drained once upon a time. Although its total volume was a literal drop in the ocean, I wasn't going to take my chances.

Oh shit, my durability! Short Jump!

Between the Midgardsormr's stomach acid and the peristaltic movement of dungeon rubble, I came within an inch of my durability's life. I hurriedly cast a Spacetime spell to get out of the creature's belly.

Phwoosh!

I warped right out into the ocean. I only had a hundred points of durability left; that was too close.

Shame I couldn't burst that thing's stomach to shreds.

A section of the Midgardsormr's length had bloated to ten times larger than the rest of its body, and it still didn't show any signs of rupturing. I suppose if snakes could swallow prey several times its size, the same would apply to a giant gluttonous sea worm.

Having that many rocks of that size in its body slowed it down, though. As I floated over the ocean, I could tell that it was swimming at a much slower speed compared to last time. All the ship had to do now, was get away before it completely digested those boulders.

All right, time to go dry off!

Dear reader, how familiar are you with the phrase, “When it rains, it pours”? What about “Out of the frying pan and into the fire”?

Because these sayings perfectly described our current situation.

“Pirate ship!”

Our lookout cried out from the crow’s nest as he rang the alarm bell.

We were heading northward in the direction of the island kingdom of Seedrun. We were supposed to go south, but our ship was in dire need of repair and supplies. The Midgardsormr’s attack had left a huge hole in the hull of our ship, and we lost most of our food and water, too.

The storm and the sea worm had rendered us far off course. Returning to Dars was not an option, so the captain decided to make a stop over at Seedrun.

The island nation was located in the middle of the three continents. The continent of Jillbird which housed Granzell, the northern continent of Brodene, and the continent of Chrome which lay to the west of Jillbird. Seedrun was located in the southwestern part of the enchanted sea between Jillbird and Brodene. From where we were, it lay a little bit to the north.

What bothered me was the fact that slavers were using Seedrun as a kind of stopover… But it wasn’t like the entire country was complicit so I should stop worrying about it.

“All hands on deck!”

Captain Rengill called out to his crew members, and they all scrambled into position. They were just in the middle of enjoying Fleet Breaker sushi to celebrate their escape from the Midgardsormr’s maw. The children’s countenance fell, including Prince Fult and Princess Satya.

Crap! Fran was enjoying her time with her friends, you damn pirates!

Captain Rengill and Salut came to the twins to explain the situation.

“We have been surrounded by the pirate fleet.”

“Fleet? How many of them are there?”

“Four vessels in all.”

“Any chance of us escaping?”

The captain shook his head.

“That would be impossible given our current condition. We are unable to go at full speed.”

“Then we must fight,” the prince declared.

Salut rejected his proposal, however. “No. A naval battle puts us at risk of being sunk. It is said that pirates won’t kill anyone who gives up, except in some cases. Is that right, Captain?”

“Yes. These pirates are thugs. They attack ships at sea and kill any who resist. However, they will not harm anyone who surrenders to them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. A naval assault carries with it a huge risk; they never know what their target might be carrying with them. They might have adventurers or military personnel on board as guards.”

Good point. Plundering passing ships at random might end up incurring more cost than profit.

“Which is why they usually opt to take captives hostage and demand a ransom. Less risk, more profit. In exchange, they guarantee the safety of their hostages. Trusting pirates might seem odd, but they still want that ransom in the end.”

“I see.”

“Regarding our current situation…” The captain’s expression darkened.

“Is something wrong?”

“We are way off course. Pirates usually lie in wait in waters with more traffic

in them. There is no reason for them to be out this far."

"Which means?"

"There might be a chance that these pirates are not open to negotiation. We don't know if they would let us go unharmed after paying their ransom."

We were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Flying into open battle was dangerous but so was giving up. Both options put the royal twins' lives at risk.

"Your Highness, you must get on a lifeboat and evacuate immediately."

"And can everyone fit into these lifeboats?"

Salut shook his head.

"There are enough lifeboats, but someone needs to stay to fight the pirates as a distraction. The only ones going on the lifeboat are Your Royal Highnesses, the children, some of your caretakers including myself, and a crew member to operate the lifeboat."

Seedrun was a stone's throw away, so even a small boat might be able to reach there within the day.

The prince and princess refused. "And what of the others?"

"No need to worry. They will surrender once we are a safe distance away."

The prince frowned at Salut's attempt to console him. I didn't think the pirates would accept the crew members' surrender that easily, either, especially when they had put up resistance in the beginning. The pirates might just kill them as an example.

"No, I refuse to leave my men behind."

"Yes. We must all escape together."

Such kindness from the royal twins. It was common sense for the royal family to use their retainers as human shields to make their escape; you could even call it the duty of those with a royal bloodline. These kids were too naive.

They were naive, but they were also kind. I liked these two royals quite a bit.

"I cannot agree to that, either." Selid the chamberlain had joined the conversation at some point.

“You think we should all escape together, Sellid?”

“No, I’m saying we should surrender.”

“You old fool! Did you not hear a word of our discussion earlier? We don’t know if they will accept our surrender!”

“Perhaps not, but I doubt our chances of surviving out in the ocean is much greater, either. We should surrender, and tell them who exactly it is they are mugging. I doubt that they would want to make an enemy of an entire kingdom. They should let us pass as long as we pay them their toll. On that note, we shouldn’t put up any needless resistance, either. We don’t want to aggravate these pirates and close any chances of negotiating with them.”

I saw his point…but I wasn’t sure if it would go that smoothly.

“I object!”

“Know your place, Salut. A knight should not be sticking his nose into this business.”

“I am their guardian! This is precisely the kind of situation where I must practice discretion!”

The knight and the chamberlain were at odds again.

“You have let your position as a mere bodyguard get to your head!”

“I have not! My duty is to protect the prince and princess with my life! I have dedicated my entire being to it!”

“You are nothing more than an outsider who the queen happened to take a liking to! I have every reason to doubt your words!”

“Sellid! Are you accusing me of treason?!”

“Anyone would with the way you are deliberately leading Their Highnesses into danger! I don’t even know for sure whether you’ve absconded your kingdom of Raydoss! You’re likely a spy sent to steal our Divine Sword!”

“You have a Divine Sword?” Fran interrupted the gentlemen’s argument when she heard the words Divine Sword.

“Y-yes. Our kingdom happens to be in possession of a Divine Sword.”

“You don’t get to call Phyllius your kingdom, Raydossian!”

“What?!”

And they were at it again. Their argument was going nowhere and was mostly a waste of time.

Fran, this is getting annoying. Let’s just go take care of things, and we can ask them about their Divine Sword later.

All right.

We were in the middle of our meal, too.

The sushi’s good.

Jet, you stay here and look after the prince.

Woof!

And save some sushi for me.

Awoo!

You like it that much?

Yeah! This is the second greatest dish since curry.

Curry was still the undefeated champion.

Fran made her way to the ship’s edge.

Prince Fult called out to her when he noticed this. “Fran, where are you going?”

“Hm? I’m going to go sink them real quick.”

“Wait! Don’t be rash!”

The prince tried to stop her, but she pulled her hand away from him and continued to make her way to the edge.

“I’ll be back.” She jumped off.

“Kyaa! Fran!”

“Fran!”

The children hurried to the ship’s edge and looked over the railing, thinking

she had jumped into the ocean. No matter how strong Fran was, it would take some time for her to swim all the way to pirate ships.

What they saw when they looked over the deck was not a Black Cat beastgirl being overwhelmed by the waves, but Fran who was mysteriously skipping through the air. She threw me out in front of her and hopped on to my blade.

“Wow!”

“That’s so cool!”

“She’s flying through the sky!”

Fran proceeded to surf through the sky with my Telekinetic Air Ride.



She reached the first pirate ship in a little under thirty seconds.

They have a skull and crossbones on their flag. How cliché can you get?

“Yeah.”

It might be out of place for me to say this, but the sight of their banner excited me.

The pirate ship was rundown. It looked beat up as if it had seen its fair share of battles. Upon further inspection, I found no catapults or cannons. There weren’t even holes on the side of the ship to fire cannons out of.

The vessel bore no resemblance to any battleship. In fact, its shape reminded me of something else.

This ship looks like it used to be a fishing boat…

I identified the pirates and found they weren’t Pirates at all. Most of them were Fishermen or Boatmen. Even their skills were limited to Fishing and Net Fishing; a far cry from the battle oriented Throwing Weapons and Javelin Throw.

What is going on?

“Beats me.”

Well, they’re still pirates, and they do have weapons. We can’t just ignore them now that we’re here.

“Should we leave the biggest ship and sink the rest?”

I don’t know about that… They might claim to be pirates, but they’re really not…

“I’ll hold back and not kill them.”

Yeah, let’s go with that.

“Hm.”

Fran flew over to the flagship. The pirates stood with their mouths agape at the sight of her.

“Let’s go.”

Right. Don't kill them, now.

"I know."

Fran jumped off my blade, and I flew into her hand as she fell towards the pirate flagship.

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

The sudden appearance of the beastgirl left the pirates in a state of shock. As they stood around her, dumbfounded, Fran began swinging me at them, albeit without unsheathing me so as not to inflict damage.

I felt myself smash into the pirates' faces, and I was pretty sure I broke a couple of arms and legs, too. In a few moments, most of the pirates had crumpled to the ground, and all of them were no longer in any condition to fight.

"Gyaaa!"

"Guuuh!"

I told her not to kill them, but I never said anything about heavily injuring them. At least they were getting away with only a few broken bones.

"What the hell…"

These pirates weren't very good at their jobs. They couldn't respond to the situation at all. None of them got into fighting position, and they all stood there watching their friends' faces getting smashed in like a deer in headlights. We proceeded to wipe the floor with them.

The pirates finally started retaliating after several more of their friends fell to Fran's sword club. They shot arrows at us, which were unfortunately deflected by her Mana Barrier. Fran turned her attention to her attackers and took them out instantly.

"Wh-who are you?!"

"An adventurer."

"Shit! This wasn't part of the plan!"

“Die!”

“That’s my line.”

We’re not killing them, Fran!

“Gyaa!”

“Eeergh!”

Soon, only the captain was left standing.

“M-monster!”

I don’t like this. I don’t like this one bit.

You seem disappointed, Teacher.

I mean, look at him!

“Hm?”

A pirate was supposed to have an eyepatch and a hook for a hand. At the very least a hat with skull and crossbones on it. Ideally he would look like Captain Hook, with Jack Sparrow being the next best thing.

He looks like a regular middle-aged guy!

The captain was wearing a helmet you could find anywhere. He didn’t look the part at all! If I hadn’t Identified him earlier, I would never have figured out that he was the ship’s captain.

“Let me go! Let me go, damn it!” yelled the captain as Fran subdued him. Seeing the petite Fran seize the bigger man was an odd sight to behold.

Time to start asking questions.

Where should we start?

Ask him if he’s the boss of this fleet.

Question time. My job was to verify the pirate’s statements with Essence of Falsehood as Fran interrogated him. Was anyone else in on this? Where was their hideout? We had lots to ask.

However, we had to delay our questioning since the other ships were bombarding us with cannon fire. They sure were eager to sink their boss’ ship.

“Those traitors!”

Was this one of those “If the boss dies, I become the new boss!” situations?

Let’s go beat up the other ships for now.

“Sure. Ha!”

“Gyuge!”

Fran delivered a chop to the back of the captain’s neck. The sound he made was not reassuring. She had rendered him unconscious, but now he was foaming at the mouth.

What was that about?

“Hm? Something cool. A karate chop to the back of the neck to knock him out. It worked.”

Well…he’s still breathing, I guess. Let’s tie him up.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Fran carried the now tied-up captain on her side and rode me. Cannonballs were flying in our direction, but we were too small of a target for them to hit.

“Here I go.”

She then incapacitated the pirates on the rest of the other ships. All in all, it took a little under five minutes for her to subdue all four pirate ships. She knocked them out and left them sprawled out on their decks.

Let’s take the pirate captain back to our ship.

“Hm.”

“Do you know what you have just done?!”

We had successfully captured the pirate captain and Sellid decided to welcome us back onboard with angry yelling.

“Hm?”

“Who gave you the order to attack?!”

“I got all of them. No problem.”

“You are supposed to guard the prince and princess, not go out raiding pirate ships! What if they launch a counterattack?!”

The old chamberlain wouldn’t be pleased no matter what Fran did. Could it be that he was trying to downplay her accomplishments? It wasn’t like Salut was on our case, either.

Just apologize for now.

People like Sellid were easily appeased with such formalities. If he still insisted on raising complaints, we might have to get drastic.

“Sorry.”

“Hmph, as long as you understand!”

Look at him being all smug. What I’d give to smash his face in…

“Bwuh…?”

“Are you awake?”

Our loud argument seemed to have woken up the unconscious pirate captain.

“Y-you! Where am I?!”

“On a boat.”

“What did you do with my men?”

We should apply some pressure on him now. He might get cocky if he found out we hadn’t killed anyone.

Fran, lie to him and tell him you sank all his ships.

“Napping with the fishes.”

Sleeping with the fishes!

“Sleeping with the fishes.”

“N-no…”

The pirate fearfully looked at Fran. He knew what she was capable of since he had seen her beat down his crew first hand. Rengill and Salut kept quiet, knowing that Fran was trying to gouge information out of the pirate captain.

“Answer my questions and you won’t have to join your friends.”

“G-good luck with that!”

The pirate’s face turned pale despite his haughty display; he really was afraid of Fran. Just a little more pressure and he should start talking.

Or he would have, if someone had kept his mouth shut.

“What nonsense are you talking about?! Their ships are right there, and their crew members are very much alive! Just torture him and get it over with!” Sellid angrily interrupted Fran’s questioning of the pirate.

This idiot… Maybe we should toss him overboard to show the pirate how serious we were.

Knowing that his friends were alive and well, the pirate relaxed and looked down on Fran. He was less fearful now that there was a chance of him making it out of this alive.

I really didn’t want to resort to torture if we didn’t have to, but Sellid’s needless complaint had forced our hand.

Fran, it’s gonna be rough, but there’s no way around it.

“Hm. Salut, take the kids downstairs.”

“…Understood.”

Salut knew what Fran was about to do. He took the prince and the princess along with the children down into the bow. As a royal, Prince Fult understood the necessity of such methods, so he left Fran to her discretion.

Now we could begin our questioning with no reservations.

“Well then…”

“Wh-what?!”

The pirate’s face stiffened as soon as Fran started threatening him. If you didn’t know Fran well enough, she looked like a cold-blooded killer.

“How many of you are there? Where’s your hideout?”

“I-I’m not telling you jack squat!”

“All right.”

Fortunately, Fran’s torture session was over before it even began. She ordered Jet to return to his full size, and a single cut across the pirate’s cheek was enough to make him subservient.

These men weren’t pirates at all, as it turned out. They were originally Seedrunian fishermen, driven out of house and home because of extortionate taxation. They had no base to speak of and instead hopped around the surrounding islands to make a living from fishing and piracy.

Captain Rengill grunted as he listened to the pirate’s explanation.

“I know Seedrun is in a state of chaos because of the power flux…but I didn’t think it would be so bad that its own citizens would run away from it. You’re saying the government imposes heavy taxation on all its citizens?”

“Y-yeah. The crown prince is taking advantage of the transition period to impose all sorts of weird taxes on us. If we don’t pay up, the military comes knocking on our door.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t revolted.”

“How do you suppose we do that? The crown prince basically owns the military; they’re his lapdogs. Even if we were to take arms and rise up, we would be crushed in no time.”

The pirate sat cross-legged, his expression growing grim as he cursed his kingdom. He really wanted to get this off his chest…

“Still, that doesn’t excuse you from being a pirate.”

“Shut up! Damn it all! If only the princess were still with us…”

“And who is this princess?”

“The firstborn princess Sellimea, of course! She was a friend to us, the poor! One day she just disappeared without a trace…”

The firstborn princess was known throughout the kingdom for her compassion. She set up multiple relief policies for the oppressed, but she didn’t stop at giving handouts. She also made facilities for free medical consultation and offered aid for fishing boat repairs, among other social policies.

However, she went missing as soon as the current king took the throne, and there were rumors going about that she might have been assassinated. The current king had gotten rid of most of her social policies and reallocated the budget to the military.

“I would think conducting piracy so close to the capital would be a risky venture. Aren’t there patrols?”

“The navy doesn’t care as long as we give them a piece of the action.”

“You’re saying the military are rotten to the point that they would take bribes from pirates…”

We had gotten most of the information we wanted. We asked if they had supplies wherever they set up port, but the pirates were low on food, too. Granted, I was the only who could verify his statement with the help of Essence of Falsehood.

We set our course for the pirate’s haven just to be sure.

“What if we don’t find food and water there?”

“That is a very good question…”

Captain Rengill answered with a worried look. He was thinking about whether it was in our best interest to make port at a country that was in such chaos; so much chaos that its own citizens chose to run away from it.

With the prince and princess on board, the decision became even more difficult to make.

“What I do know…is that we need supplies if we are to continue our voyage.”

If worse came to worst, the captain was ready to make port at Seedrun. We bound the remaining pirates and boarded them onto the ship. We would hand them over to the authorities if we made it to Seedrun.

I felt sorry for them since they were only escaping severe taxes, but resorting to piracy was their choice. They were also fully intent on targeting us, so I had no sympathy for them there. We could score some points with the Seedrunian government by handing them over, too. In any case, Captain Rengill was prepared to do everything to ensure the safety of Their Royal Highnesses.

One hour later.

We had made port on one of the small islands which the pirates used as their hideout and came away sorely disappointed. Captain Rengill slumped his shoulders.

“So much for that idea.”

“We might have to resupply at Seedrun…”

We found little food and even less water.

Suddenly, one of our crew members called out to Captain Rengill in a panic.

“C-captain! Incoming ship!”

“Where from?”

“Northward, sir! From Seedrun! It’s a larger vessel so we have reason to believe it might be part of the navy!”

“I see… Get ready to disembark! Make it quick! We don’t know who we’re dealing with so keep your eyes on that thing!”

“Sir!”

The deckhand left us. The captain now turned to face Fran.

“Fran, we need you to be on guard as well.”

For some reason, he didn’t think they were here to help. It didn’t help that we didn’t know how Seedrun would choose to approach us, especially now that we knew their government was imposing extortionate taxes on their people. We definitely needed to keep an eye out for them.

“Okay.”

“And please. Please, do not attack them. All right?”

“I know.”

“Good.”

We hadn’t known each other for very long, but the captain knew about Fran’s aggressive tendencies. But even Fran wouldn’t be so reckless as to provoke a naval fleet.

Really, she wouldn't.

"Hm?"

Nothing. Just don't attack and get ready to go on defense.

"Yeah! I know what to do."

You too, Jet.

"Woof!"

Fran and Jet's excited replies worried me…

The mysterious ship drew closer to the island. Its coat of arms was a seven-headed dragon. The vessel definitely belonged to Seedrun.

"Let's see what they want."

Twenty minutes had passed since the appearance of the naval vessel.

"I'm telling you, we are not pirates!"

"Blatant lies! If you're not a pirate, what are you doing in a pirate's hideout?"

"We had captured one of the pirates and they told us of this place."

"So you're selling your friends out to save your own skin. How loyal of you."

Captain Rengill and the man in charge of the naval ship had been having this argument this entire time.

His name was Dwight. A short, stout man who somehow managed to resemble an orc. He had the understanding of an orc, too. He absolutely refused to listen to our explanation of why we were here.

At first, I thought he was just playing it safe by assuming we were pirates, but that didn't seem to be the case. He was dead set on making us to be pirates whether we liked it or not. Nothing we did could change his demeanor, not Captain Rengill's handing over of the real pirates or Chamberlain Sellid's declaration that he was a retainer of the kingdom of Phyllius. The old noble even gave the Seedrunian captain his best condescending glare.

Dwight ignored all of Captain Rengill's attempts at reasoning with him with a hateful smirk on his face.

We didn't know how the Seedrunian navy would treat us, so we kept the fact that we were carrying Phyllian royalty a secret from them. Sellid had spiritedly explained to the captain how he was part of nobility, but Dwight stood unbending to him.

Captain Rengill hinted at offering Dwight a bribe, but he ignored that, too.

"I have no intention of negotiating with pirates! Even if you are really Phyllians, piracy is still a crime!"

"I'm telling you, we have the proper permits to land in Seedrun!"

"Counterfeits!"

Anyone could tell he was set on arresting us as pirates. I couldn't help but feel that he was being overly pigheaded, though. Demanding money from a noble who happened to be on one of the ships you raided sounded like a plan that would eventually bite you in the ass.

Maybe he was thinking of silencing his victims even if they were nobles. That was a risk, though. Dead men tell no tales, as they say back on Earth, but the Phyillian royal family would raise their eyebrows if one of their retainers failed to return home. What if they called upon the spirit of the dead and asked them what happened? A scandal would break out between the two kingdoms. It might even turn to war.

I dunno… Dwight might be that stupid…

I didn't know what else was going on, but I really wanted to get out of here as fast as we could and leave Seedrun behind.

Fran's safety was my utmost concern. I thought of cutting Dwight down and attacking the enemy ship in the ensuing chaos. He wasn't that strong when I Identified him; he only had basic Sword Mastery and Wind Magic as his combat skills. We could kill him, no problem.

International relations? Not my problem!

At least that's what I thought we would do.

"Don't move."

"!"

It was the fighter who had been at Dwight's side. He had snuck up behind Fran and was pressing the tip of his sword against her back as a warning.

Wha?! When did he…?!

The man wore a dull-colored cloak over his kung fu garb; he looked like an adventurer you'd see anywhere. The only thing that set him apart from the rest of Dwight's guards was that he used a sword instead of a spear. Also, unlike the Seedrunian soldiers whose skins were a tanned copper, his was a lighter shade of yellow.

His long gray hair was tied into a ponytail. His eyes were squinted as if half-asleep, accenting the stubble growing around his jaw. His cheeks looked sunken, making him look weak, but I knew he was stronger than he looked.

Increasing the level of our Advanced Sword Mastery had allowed us to sense the strength of other sword masters, and this man definitely felt dangerous despite looking like a low-rank adventurer.

Our past victories against great monsters had gotten to our heads. Well, no more. Being held up by this man was enough to make me break out into a cold sweat.

Fran, don't make any sudden moves.

Right.

His gear looked like they were mass-produced, but I could feel mana coursing through them. His equipment was handcrafted from monster materials and had enchantments cast on them.

Name: Valuza

Race: Human

Class: Flash Knight

Level: 45/99

HP: 309; Magic: 135; Strength: 217; Agility: 251

Skill: Dodge 8; Bow Arts 2; Bow Mastery 4; Presence Detection 7; Sword Arts 2; Sword Mastery 10; Advanced Sword Mastery 2; Flexibility 6; Flash Step 7;

Swim 6; Water Strider 5; Swashbuckler 7; Throwing Weapons 5; Climb 5; Poison Resistance 4; Heightened Reflexes 5; Paralysis Resistance 5; Spirit Manipulation; Numb Pain; Reflexes

Class Skill: Flash Sword

Title: Knight Captain; Murderer

Equipment: Enchanted Water Longsword; Sea Dragon Hide Armor; Sea Dragon Leather Boots; Monster Whale Mantle; Choker of Underwater Breathing; Hawkeye Ring

I was right in my assumptions. He even had Advanced Sword Mastery. We were much stronger in a battle of pure stats, but Valuza had the upper hand in combat experience. He had control of the situation; one wrong move from us and all he needed to do was stab Fran in her back.

This was the strength of a human, not a monster. A strength achieved through much study, practice, and experience. He hadn't used any particular skills to get the jump on Fran, either. He must have practiced how not to make a sound all his life; there were no wasted movements. Adding to this, the man wasn't nervous at all, and this was the main reason how he had slipped past our defense systems.

Wow…

Fran?

I barely had time to react. Wow.

Fran was disappointed, but she was also impressed by the man's skills. Not admiring your foes was difficult when they were this good. Sneaking up on us like that wasn't something that we could do.

We could probably take him on since he didn't know about my existence yet. However, we needed every bit of advantage we could get against an opponent with so much experience. Not to mention Swashbuckler, which made him deadlier when he fought on a ship. Furthermore, Fran was still exhausted from our encounter with the Midgardsormr, decreasing our chances at victory.

We would need to be at full strength to take him on. Hell, we might even

need to sink the entire ship if it came to it. If we held back and failed, the Seedrunians would treat us as pirates and might end up killing the prince and his entourage. Our best course of action was to comply and remain quiet.

Although, there was still a chance that Fran might leap into action at the first sign of danger.

“What is going on?”

“Ah, Prince Fult.”

Prince Fult came up on deck with Salut, probably alerted by the loud argument that had been going on. I just hoped the situation wouldn’t escalate any further.

“We have made contact with the Seedrunian navy. However…”

“Hey! What are you people plotting?!”

Dwight shouted down Captain Rengill as he was explaining the situation. Salut didn’t take kindly to it and returned the favor.

“Mind your manners, knave! You are in the presence of His Royal Highness, Prince Fult of Phyllius!”

“Prince, you say…? What is a prince doing on board a ship which doesn’t even bear his own nation’s coat of arms?”

“The prince did not wish to attract attention to ourselves while on this voyage.”

“A likely story… but can you prove that this boy really is the Prince of Phyllius?”

“Here!”

Salut presented a small card, gilded with gold: a unique form of identification reserved for the Phyllian royal family. Dwight glossed over it and dismissed it with a smirk.

“I suppose it looks real…”

“Because it *is* real!”

Dwight’s suspicion aroused Salut’s anger. I inspected Dwight’s intentions with

Essence of Falsehood and found that he did understand the identification as the real article. He was clearly trying to provoke us by putting up this act of arbitrary skepticism.

Now that the prince was on deck, Sellid attempted to use his identification as a negotiation tool.

“The future king of Phyllius is aboard this ship! Do you want to start an international scandal?!”

Sellid had his noble speech on point. Unfortunately, Dwight remained unfazed.

“That’s my line. Even if you were part of Phyllian nobility, we have not received reports of your arrival. Coming into our waters without a permit is considered an act of territorial intrusion!”

“I’ve been telling you from the start that our permits are in order!”

“Our kingdom of Seedrun has ceased all talks with the kingdom of Phyllius. Even if this vessel possessed documents which allowed to cross over Seedrun, said documents would not apply to members of the royal family!”

“Ceased talks…? I suppose the new trade deals have made it difficult to negotiate,” Sellid muttered. The coronation of the new king of Seedrun seemed to have strained relations between the two countries. If the current king really were as cruel as he sounded, he would force unreasonable trade deals on his neighboring countries. As long as no deal was made, both kingdoms were at a stalemate.

“B-but this is an emergency situation. Surely we can take refuge in Seedrun?”

The sea was an unpredictable place. The slightest accident could knock out a ship’s entire navigation system. There was an unspoken agreement among kingdoms that they would help each other’s boats if one of them were in trouble in their territory, enemy or not. It was hard to imagine the Seedrunians, itself a maritime nation, would be unaware of this unwritten rule.

“How shameless of you.”

“We would not ask Seedrun for help unless we absolutely needed to. But I

promise you that the Lucille Trade Association will repay its debts. I will see to it myself that you are handsomely rewarded, Captain."

"Oh?"

Captain Rengill had piqued Dwight's interest. His approach seemed to work until Dwight opened his mouth.

"You're trying to bribe me, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Do you really think that you can buy the admiral of the honorable navy of Seedrun for a paltry penny…? You, sir, have made a grave mistake!"

"W-wait, please! I mean that I was only going to repay you for your kindness!"

That was the only thing Captain Rengill could say. What else could he say? "Please accept our bribe and let us go"?

Dwight grinned and ordered his men, "Arrest these people! Use lethal force if they resist, no matter who they claim to be!"

The Seedrunian soldiers drew their weapons and boarded our ship. Just as the one of the Phyllian soldiers reached for his sword, Valuza instantly cut him down. It happened too fast for anyone but Fran to see. He was fast as he was remorseless. It didn't seem to matter to him who he killed, even if they happened to be the children of the Phyllian royal family.

Valuza's display of strength was enough to deter everyone else from further resistance. His grim expression and cold eyes brought silence upon the deck. The only ones unaffected by his intimidation were Fran and Prince Fult.

The prince rose up against Valuza. Whether it was because of his pride as a prince or from sheer boldness, I don't know.

"What are you doing?!"

"Applying lethal force on any who resist."

"Th-that doesn't mean you can draw your sword without warning!"

"Does it not?"

"You—" Valuza's hand was nearing the hilt of his sword as the prince

objected.

Crap, we need to stop this.

Before Fran could step in between the two, Captain Rengill's voice rang throughout the deck.

"A-all right! We surrender! We'll turn ourselves in! Just don't hurt them!"

He knew the prince was moments away from being cut down. The captain put up his hands and surrendered himself to Dwight.

"No one would've needed to die if you had just done this sooner. All right. Don't try any funny business until we get to port."

"Everyone, listen to me. We will need to do exactly as this man says. Do not object and certainly do not put up any resistance. That goes for you, too, Fran."

"Hm."

"Have I made myself clear, Sir Sellid?"

"Blast it all! I know!"

"Well and good. If our honorable knight would comply we might be able to get out of this alive."

"Sir Salut, please! You must stand down."

Salut had no intention of putting up a fight, I'm sure. But the sight of the prince being carried away by armed guards caused the knight to reflexively reach for his sword.

"Salut, there will be bloodshed if you fight them now. Stand down."

"…Yes, Your Highness."

He quietly handed himself in according to his prince's request.

"There are children on board. Please do not be violent with them."

"As long as they remain quiet, I'll think about it."

There weren't enough handcuffs and rope to go around, so at least we weren't treated like freshly minted slaves. We were still vigilant in case things took a turn for the worse but otherwise complied and turned ourselves in.

Later, Fran was thrown into a room together with everyone on board of Captain Rengill's ship. They pushed all of us—crew member and Phyllian entourage and royals alike—into the same large room. I expected them to split us up into smaller groups to keep a better eye on us, but Dwight had other plans. The room only had one exit, which was guarded by Seedrunian soldiers, but Valuza was keeping watch, as well. This made it easier for them to threaten us if we showed any signs of revolt. The packed room also made it impossible for us to escape, let alone plot. This was, in fact, the safest way of locking all of us up.

I carefully observed Valuza, taking care not to be noticed, and found that he was staring at us, too. He knew that Fran would be a problem if he let his guard down. He kept an eagle eye on her through that unchanging face of his. Standing out now would make things more difficult for us. Fran needed to lay low. With a title like Murderer, it was best to steer clear of him.

Two hours later.

A small commotion arose from within the military ship. We seemed to have made port at Seedrun.

"Come this way."

Valuza opened the door where we were locked away and led us out onto the deck.

We faced a gigantic port, built with boorish, gray stone, absent of any unnecessary decoration. Large military vessels were docked all around us. I guess we were in a naval port.

Dwight came out to greet us then.

"We will now proceed to listen to what the Phyllians have to say."

"All right."

He had his obnoxious grin as always.

"Where are you taking us?"

Salut asked out of his duty as the guardian of the royal twins. Or perhaps he was just nervous. It would be the worst if they threw us all in jail at this point.

“We will treat you as nobility until we can verify your identification.”

The prince and his entourage were taken to an interrogation room for nobles. Discouraging as it was, we could all be released if the negotiations went well.

The only ones left on deck were the ship’s crew members, the Phyllian guards, Fran, and the children. Just as I wondered what would happen, the soldiers were ordered to take us in. I was prepared for the worst given our dealings with the Seedrunian military so far. Their obnoxious attitude as they ordered us around did not disappoint.

We meekly followed their orders, and I fully expected us to be sent into a waiting room. Instead, the Seedrunian guards led us to a building to the side of the port.

The stone building looked dull and intimidating; maybe it was a guardhouse of sorts. I didn’t think it could accommodate all of us, but perhaps they were going to have us wait here.

I was sorely mistaken, of course. Seedrun was run by a corrupt government, after all.

The guards led us down to the basement where plenty of rooms were waiting for us, each with its own set of steel bars.

“Get in.”

“Wh-what is this place?!”

“This is a prison cell! We’re not criminals, damn it!”

One of the crew members protested, although the guards’ treatment of them didn’t change one bit.

“Be quiet! Do you plan on fighting back now?”

“We’ve been given permission to use lethal force to deal with any and all resistance. If you cause any more trouble, consider your life forfeit.”

“Or do you want us to kill you?”

“Damn it.”

He had seen how one of his friends had been killed in cold blood earlier, so he

knew the Seedrunians meant business. The crew member's protests were soon quieted after being surrounded by pikes.

"Hmph! You should learn to stay quiet, fool!"

"Next time you won't get off so easy!"

"Gah!"

The guard struck the crew member, making him fall to the ground. Another kicked him in the gut for good measure. The example was enough to quell any feelings of resistance among the crew members. That could very easily have been one of them.

"Hand over your weapons."

They confiscated our weapons, as procedure demanded.

Crap, I stick out like a sore thumb! Anyone can tell that I'm an amazing sword!

It was too late to hide now.

Fran, we have to get out of here. It's not too late to warp out.

No.

But you'll be left alone in this cell…!

I can't leave Fult and Satya behind.

I know, but…

Just no.

Convincing Fran was hard when she had made up her mind.

Even if we had used Space-time Magic to get out of jail, we still faced the problem of leaving the island of Seedrun itself. The island nation was quite small, and it wouldn't take long for us to be surrounded by the military if we got out.

I discovered from a quick observation of the prison that it wasn't equipped with any magical installations. But even if we did escape, we'd end up running in circles all around the city…

It couldn't be helped. I would have to hand myself in to the guard and leave

Fran by herself.

Don't do anything drastic.

I won't.

Jet, you stay with her.

Woof!

Jet was still concealed in her shadow, but I gave him a direct order anyway just to be safe.

And try not to use any magic if you can help it. Make them think you're an ordinary Swordsman.

When I had finished advising Fran, a guard was standing in front of her.

"You, hand over that sword."

He ordered obnoxiously. Valuza was still observing us, though. He had positioned himself so he would always have Fran within his sights. He was careful, all right.

"Hm."

Fran hands me over without a fight.

"Well, well. What a fine sword… Are you seeing this, Sir Valuza?"

"I am."

The bastard Valuza inspected me with his cold pokerface, though I didn't seem to spark any life in his eyes. Still, as a seasoned swordsman, he couldn't take his eyes off me.

In the end, they threw me into a storeroom with the rest of the confiscated weapons. It was a good thing, too. I wouldn't have been able to escape if they had somehow sealed away my magical powers. Here, I had some freedom of movement.

I overheard some of the guards talking about pawning me off. That would be my opportunity to reunite with Fran.

Chapter 3:
Prison Breaks and First Encounters

Five minutes had passed since I was left in the storeroom. I used my skills to make sure no one was around before I quietly made my move.

Fran, can you hear me?

Yeah. Loud and clear.

Fortunately, Fran still had me equipped since the storeroom wasn't too far away from the dungeon. Skill Sharing was still in effect, and I could pinpoint her exact location using Telepathy. If I focused, I could Warp myself back to her.

How are you doing? Anything happen while I was gone?

No. We're doing all right.

Good… I'll be back when it's completely dark outside. I think we have an hour until sundown.

Got it.

In the meantime, I'll have a look over the building.

Be careful.

I will. You too.

Hm.

And so I carefully exited the storeroom through the window. I needed to make sure to be quiet. I didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to myself.

The prison's straight down this corner, I mused to myself.

I quietly floated over to the cells where Fran and the others were being held. The crew members were kept in six separate cells where a lone guard made the rounds, securing them. I Identified him. Weak, definitely small fry.

The major threat of the hour, Valuza, was nowhere to be seen.

Fran should be in the clear, then. I thought it unlikely that any of the other

guards could harm her. Still, these bastards were slimy and could hurt her in a different way. They might force her to into listening to them by taking the other prisoners hostage. I could just imagine one of those scenarios right now:

"No."

"What was that? Are you refusing to cooperate? If you don't want your friends killed, come over here!"

"Urgh."

"Heh heh heh. Well? Why don't you do a little striptease for us, and we'll call it even?"

"Fine…"

"Hyahyahya! Oooh, you've got a fine body on you, girl."

"Ugh… Kill me."

Those dirty bastards! I'll kill them if they did that to Fran! Actually, killing them would be a mercy. I'd make them wish they had died after I was through with them!

Then again, these guards should prove to be no problem for Fran. She could take them out easy. Although, things might get hairy if their friends found them unconscious. Getting attacked by prisoners would probably be the last thing on their minds.

Silly fantasies aside, let's see if there's a way out besides the main entrance.

A backdoor would come in handy in our escape.

Thus began my sneaking mission. Although it turned out I didn't need to do much sneaking since the guards were either incredibly lazy or shorthanded.

Eventually, I figured out the general layout of the guardhouse. They had a backdoor. There were under ten guards patrolling the place, all of them weak. We should be able to easily make our escape, provided Valuza didn't come back. Having completed my preliminary inspection, I returned to the storeroom.

I waited for nightfall before contacting Fran again.

Fran, how are you doing over there?

We've all calmed down a bit.

I see.

One of the maids screamed when she saw a sea roach, but that's about it.

I'm sorry you had to see that, Ms. Maid.

Sea roaches were quite gross when I thought about it. Imagining them scuttling about with their little feet gave me the creeps.

What about you, Fran? Were you scared of the sea roach?

No? Why would I be?

Fran was the kind of girl who would be unfazed by such things. She had seen worse creatures; I imagined she wouldn't mind eating a sea roach.

Glad to hear you're holding up all right. Anyway, listen to this. I've had a look around, and escaping this place should be easier than we thought.

That's good to know.

Yeah. Anyway, I'm coming back to you.

I prepared myself to return to Fran's side.

I should make myself smaller.

I used Transmogrify to turn myself into something more discreet and suppressed my presence so others wouldn't be able to spot me. I didn't expect anyone could find me since I was already shrouded in darkness. Even if they did, they'd probably think I was some random bug. A sea roach, perhaps.

I quickly found my way to the prison cells.

I just need to find where they're keeping Fran…

Everyone had seen how Fran controlled her sword during our encounter with the Midgardsormr. She could pass this off as an extension of that mastery. I didn't want to risk this information leaking to the enemy, of course, so I had to lay low.

I crept on the ceiling and snuck through the metal bars. Once inside, I plunged down and put myself into Fran's hand. No one seemed to have noticed.

Welcome back.

I'm home. I don't think I can maintain this small form much longer, though.

What now?

I'll hide myself in Jet's shadow. Jet, do you mind?

Woof!

Jet was able to equip things with his mouth and bring it with him into the shadows. He stuck his muzzle out of the shadows, enough to bite me but not enough to be seen by others, and then returned.

D-don't bite me so hard.

Arf.

Oh God, the saliva!

Deal with it. Just deal with it! I suppressed my disgust at being covered with slobber and sank into the shadows with Jet.

Well, this is interesting.

Being in the shadows was an odd feeling. It looked and felt like the black abyss of the ocean. This was probably a realm Jet had created using his magic. It was big enough to accommodate Jet, plus thirty centimeters give or take. I could still move around in it.

I reverted to my original form and sent Fran a message.

Fran, can you hear me?

There was no reply. It didn't seem like my Telepathy could get out of this place. Jet was able to move freely between the spaces, though. There must be a way to connect with the outside world.

"Woof!" Jet barked, creating a small black hole in front of us. We could see and hear the outside world through it, although the outside world wouldn't be able to see us.

No one could find us, let alone detect us, if they didn't have a skill like Mana Sense. Very useful, also dirty.

Fran?

Teacher?

Now we could talk to each other.

Good job, Jet.

“Woof!”

I’m testing to see if Telepathy could get through from the shadow realm.

I’m hearing you fine.

Good. Let’s see how the situation develops.

Hm.

As we finished our short conversation, I sensed someone come down the stairs. They stopped in front of the prison cell.

It was Dwight, and he had brought a guard along with him, one of his subordinates. I was hoping the negotiations had reached a conclusion, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Servants of the Knight Salut, come forward.”

“What’s going on?”

“Are the negotiations over?”

Captain Rengill and his crew were hopeful that they would be released soon. I doubted things would go that smoothly, though.

“Go on, bring them out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dwight ordered his subordinate to let Salut’s men out of the cell. However, they left the rest of us behind. Dwight gave us a sickening grin, clearly plotting something. He looked like a schoolyard bully who had settled on a target and was now toying with them.

“You asked if we have come to a conclusion, yes?”

“Y-yes. Aren’t you going to let us go, now?”

“We have indeed come to a conclusion. We are going to let the Phyllian royal family and their servants go free.”

“A-and us?”

“In exchange for letting them free, you are going to live out the rest of your lives as slaves.”

“Wh-what are you saying?”

“Heheheh. I’m saying your prince and princess don’t care about you one bit. They were begging me to let them go, even if it came to selling the rest of you out.”

The crew had fallen into despair while Dwight’s smile grew crueler with each word.

But it just didn’t check out. The prince wasn’t the kind of person who would say that.

“The Phyllians are going to be set free on the condition that the rest of you are sold into slavery. You’ve been sold out!”

“N-no!”

“Look at the bright side. Tomorrow you can see the light of day again. As slaves, that is! Hahaha!”

As Dwight relished in the sight of the crew’s despair, I used Essence of Falsehood to verify his claims. His statement that the prince had sold us out was a blatant lie.

Calling him out on his bluff now was a bad idea, though. And it was true that we were going to be sold into slavery the next day. I didn’t understand why he had to make up that first part, though. Then again, he was a living scumbag. He probably wanted to see us suffer.

Fran, I don’t know why, but Dwight is lying.

The prince hasn’t sold us out?

No. But the part about being sold into slavery is true.

We needed to think of a plan to get out of here, fast.

Escaping the dungeon was easy enough, getting off the island, on the other hand, was tricky, at best. We had an entire ship's worth of a crew so they might be able to operate a ship, but I wasn't sure if we would be able to outrun an entire naval fleet. Not to mention if they started firing their cannons, we would sink to the bottom of the ocean in no time.

"Spend the last of your free hours in despair! Hahahaha!"

Dwight left us then, cackling all the way. The only ones left now were the crew members and the soldiers of Phyllius, both groups bemoaning their fate.

"W-were we really left behind?"

"Uhh."

In the midst of it all, Fran raised her voice. "I don't think Fult and Satya would abandon us."

"B-but…"

"He has to be lying."

"H-how do you know that?"

"L-Lord Fult and Lady Satya are kind and gracious. You know this."

"Sure, but I wouldn't put it past them to sell us out to save their own skins!"

Even as they grumbled, I saw a faint glimmer of hope in their eyes. They didn't want to believe it, either. They wanted to believe what Fran was saying but were afraid in being disappointed and fall into deeper despair.

"Call it an adventurer's intuition."

Fran, I think you could've phrased that a little better.

Maybe tell them how Dwight looked like a chronic liar? I didn't think they would believe her intuition.

"…I see."

"You're right."

Never mind, I guess they bought it. Everyone present here knew Fran as an excellent adventurer; she had managed to single-handedly fend off the

Midgardsormr, after all. No one could laugh off her “adventurer’s intuition” after seeing that feat firsthand. Furthermore, experienced adventurers were a cut above the regular crowd. That was a general rule of this world. Men of the sea were also known to be highly reliant on intuition, almost bordering on superstition. They knew the value of experience.

Captain Rengill nodded, easing his men. “I believe you, Fran.”

His endorsement was enough for the rest of the crew to believe her.

“Y-you’re right. There’s no way that our highnesses would abandon us.”

“Yeah!”

“Damn right! That filthy pig’s a filthy liar!”

There you go. Captain Rengill breathed a sigh of relief now that morale had been restored.

Escape would prove difficult if we started making a ruckus; they might tighten up security. There were still guards around so the only thing we could do now was wait.

In the meantime, I was going through a few escape plans in my head. I could go ahead and look for a moderately sized ship I could store in my Pocket Dimension. Once everyone was out, we could ride the ship out of Seedrun. Plenty of things could go wrong with this plan.

First, I didn’t know if such a ship even existed. Even if it did, I didn’t know how many men we would need to operate it, nor the ship’s top speed. If I got a hold of a slow moving ship, the Seedrunian navy would catch up with us in no time. Not to mention the commotion that would break out over a missing ship.

Commandeering a fishing boat instead of a military ship wouldn’t work, either. The bigger the vessel is, the faster we would get spotted.

There was still the matter of the prince and princess, too. They could handle negotiations well enough, so I didn’t think they would be sold into slavery, but if Fran and the others escaped, things might take a turn for the worse for them. I didn’t think anyone here was willing to abandon them, either.

I could start by looking for the prince myself, but if I went too far, I would be

unequipped from Fran. This was the one thing I absolutely did not want to happen. I refused to even consider it. If they had taken me any farther earlier, I had every intention of using all my skills to escape.

And say we managed to find the prince. How were we going to get them out? I could create a clone of myself with my skill, but that would look too suspicious. There was also the risk of them finding out I was an Intelligent Weapon.

Let's say we managed to secure everyone for an escape and had Fran go and look for the prince and princess. There was no guarantee that the royal twins would agree to leave. If they left of their own accord, the already strained relations between Seedrun and Phyllius might worsen.

As you can see, getting everyone out of Seedrun in one piece was going to be a challenge. I could discuss our escape plan using Telepathy, but I didn't think anyone here would be able to stifle their surprise at a sudden voice in their heads. On the other hand, if we started talking out loud for too long, the guards might get suspicious.

The only thing we could do now was wait for nightfall.

I didn't see any other option.

Midnight.

Tensions were rising in our little prison cell. They had moved us to a smaller cell without so much of a meal, so our chances of salvation looking slimmer by the second. Everyone was frustrated, and I sympathized with their irritation. Fortunately, no one had begun shouting or arguing with each other yet, but it was a ticking time bomb all the same. Friendly conversation was a thing of the past.

The mood in our little cell was approaching that of a funeral when I heard the sound of footsteps come down the stairs.

"Huh? Is it time to switch patrols already?"

The guard in charge was expecting his substitute. But I felt something odd in the sound of the footsteps. It was too fast, like they were running down the stairs. The footsteps belonged to a figure in a long black cloak. One that covered

their tall body. They looked suspicious to say the least.

The cloaked figure then proceeded to knock the guard unconscious.

“Gah…!”

The blow delivered to the guard’s head happened so fast that he barely had time to scream in surprise.

“Huh?”

“What?”

We took it upon ourselves to be shocked in his stead. Even Fran couldn’t stifle her surprise at the random act of violence that just occurred. More so because it was carried out by a woman. Her figure was difficult to see under her cloak, but she definitely had an hourglass figure which was uniquely womanlike. She stood at a tall one hundred and seventy centimeters, if not a hundred eighty. The bits of skin I could see under her cloak were a copper brown tone; she was a native of the island.

Who was she? Was she a friend? I didn’t want to jump to such conclusions, not when we didn’t know what her aim was. She was an enemy of our enemy, at least, and quite a strong one, too, going by how she knocked the guard out with one blow.

Name: Miriam Seedrun

Race: Human

Class: Pikeman

Level: 28/99

HP: 177; Magic: 111; Strength: 123; Agility: 153

Skill: Strength Sense 5; Breathing 3; Command 3; Kick Mastery 3; Swim 7; Water Strider 2; Swashbuckler 4; Fishing 2; Poison Resistance 4; Equilibrium 5; Pike Arts 5; Pike Mastery 8; Spirit Manipulation

Title: Princess

Equipment: Narwhal Pike; Sea Dragon Leather Armor; Blue Whale Leather Sandals; Cloak of Concealment; Ring of Water Resistance; Bracelet of

Increased Strength

I ended up Identifying right away out of habit. She was decently strong, about as strong as a D-Rank adventurer.

There was one detail that caught my eye, though: her title of Princess. She had Seedrun in her name so it had to be true. But why would she attack one of her soldiers? It didn't make sense to me.

A simple order would've sufficed if he had stood in her way…

Teacher, friend or foe?

I don't know. She's a princess of Seedrun, that's for sure…

The woman drew close to our cell as I wracked my brain for answers. She started talking to our oldest crew member.

"Are you the ones affiliated with the Phyllian royalty?"

"Y-yes, that's right."

"I see. I'm here to save you."

"What?"

"I'm here to get you out of here. Come on."

Her offer was so sudden and out of the blue that everyone stood there dumbfounded.

"Wait, hold on. What are you talking about?"

"I'm breaking you out of prison."

"Wh-why would you…"

They had never seen this person before, so mild confusion was par for the course. Even we were confused despite Identifying her earlier. What did this woman want? I didn't see any reason why the royal family of Seedrun would want to help us.

"Here."

The woman rummaged in the guard's pockets, who was still comfortably unconscious, found a key, and tossed it into our jail cell. The woman said

something shocking as the crew members were still trying to process what had just happened. “You’re going to be sold into slavery if you stay here.”

“What?”

“Uhhh.”

At first, no one could understand what she was saying. The reality of her words soon sank in, and they began to ask her for clarification.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. If you remain imprisoned, they will come and sell all of you off into slavery.”

The woman uttered her statement with such conviction that worried looks began to spread over the crew members. She certainly didn’t look like she was lying.

Captain Rengill took it upon himself to ask questions for the rest of his crew.

“A-are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“B-but wouldn’t we put the prince in danger if we escaped?”

“Would you prefer to be sold off into slavery?”

“N-no, but!”

“There’s no time. Be quick now. If you come with me, we might be able to save the prince yet.”

“H-how do you plan on doing that?”

“We can discuss the matter later. I will leave if you do not wish to escape.”

The crew members exchanged uneasy glances with each other. They couldn’t decide if escape was the right decision. Breaking out of prison would make them criminals, and it might do the prince and princess harm. Add that to the fact that they didn’t know the identity of their savior and you had a recipe for uncertainty.

Even we didn’t know what to make of this situation. We would need to draw

some information out of this woman.

Fran, you're gonna have to ask her some questions.

Okay.

Let's see what she made of this.

"Why do you want to save us?"

"It is the will of my master."

Master? The master of a princess was usually the king.

"And who would that be?"

"I cannot say."

"Someone who would have something to gain by letting us escape… The king?"

"Wh-what? What makes you say that?!"

Well, I did Identify you earlier. I didn't want her to know we had Identify, though. We were going to have to keep pressing our bluff.

"Having us escape would be in his favor."

"Why?! I don't see why that would benefit the king at all!"

Teacher?

Uhh, hang on.

The kingdom of Phyllius, which Fult and Satya belonged to, was currently engaged in trade disputes with the kingdom of Seedrun. Perhaps Seedrun was in the process of making a bargaining chip. A scandal involving the prince's escaped subordinates would make for a strong card. And if we were recaptured, they could use us to put more pressure on Fult.

Huh. I made that story up as I went along, but it sounded pretty convincing.

Our inmates started murmuring after they heard Fran's speculation; they supposed we might be walking right into a trap. They had better keep it down, though, or someone from the outside might hear us.

Miriam grimaced at Fran's conjecture. Were we right? Did we hit the

bullseye?

That didn't seem to be the case, however.

"I would never serve the king, that fool brother of mine! My only master is my beloved sister, Sellimea!"

No lies here.

Miriam was following the orders of another member of the royal family, Sellimea. She was opposed to the current king, considering how she talked about him. Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely recall the pirate captain mentioning the name Sellimea when we interrogated him. Wasn't she the firstborn princess rumored to have been assassinated?

"So why do you want to save us?"

"Our goal is to save the Phyllian royals. To that end, we will need all the help we can get."

"You want to save Fult and Satya? Why?"

We knew full well the danger we were in by remaining captive; we were going to be sold off as slaves, after all. But weren't the prince and princess going to be all right? They needed to be kept alive if Seedrun was going to negotiate with Phyllius. As corrupt as the current king was, I doubted he would be violent with the twins.

"The Phyllian royals will not be released at this rate. They have been lied to."

I guess the king was more of a scumbag than I gave him credit for. Well, we could talk about him later.

For the time being, everything Miriam had said up to this point was true. Even the fact that she wanted to save the prince, and the fact that the prince had been tricked.

"Lied to? Why?"

"That is—hm?!"

Suddenly, Miriam turned to look behind her. The reason was obvious to us. Someone was coming down the stairs. If we dawdled any longer, the enemy

might notice the signs of an intruder.

“There’s no time! Decide!”

“I don’t know… Fran, please!”

Rengill and his crew all turned to Fran for guidance. They weren’t able to come to a decision by themselves, so they decided to turn to Fran who was the strongest one here.

Teacher, I think we should go.

Yeah, go for it. Miriam looks trustworthy, and we were going to bust out of this place sooner or later.

“All right. I’ll go with you.”

Fran nodded to Miriam as the rest of the cell waited on her with baited breath.

“Good. What about you lot?”

“…I’m going, too.”

“Me too!”

“Heh, I sure don’t wanna be sold into slavery!”

Everyone present followed Fran’s lead, even the kids. Although, if the children had objected, Fran would’ve dragged them along anyway.

We’ll lay low in the shadows for now.

Woof.

Fran unlocked the cell door and followed Miriam.

“Over here.”

Miriam didn’t go back where she came. Instead, she went further down, deep into the underground.

“I-I thought we were escaping.”

“We are. Just come here.”

Miriam brushed off the worried crew members and carried on.

We eventually stopped in front of an empty cell.

“We’re here. Wait.”

She unlocked the door and went inside. She began feeling up the walls as if looking for something.

Was I going to be treated to a staple of fantasy stories everywhere?

I kept watching, expectant, until suddenly I heard a click and the wall began sliding open of its own accord.

“An escape hatch for the royal family.”

There we go! You can’t have a dungeon without a hidden escape route! Man, that was great. It made me forget the danger we were in for a second.

“Are you sure?”

“About what?”

“It’d be easy to figure out who was the last person to have used this escape hatch.”

I didn’t know how many royals were opposed to the current king, but Miriam would be included in the list of suspects.

“It matters not.” Miriam had already taken that into consideration, and she stepped inside the tight opening without hesitation.

The walls were cramped and the ceiling low. Fran didn’t have to adjust her gait to walk through it but the others had to stoop if they wanted to move forward. It was pitch black, too. Our main goal was to not lose sight of the person in front of us.

“Over here.”

The ground sloped down, now, at quite an angle at that. Going deeper underground from the dungeon cellars made me nervous. There was a fork in the path, but Miriam took it without a moment’s hesitation.

It took us another thirty minutes of walking and groping around in pitch black darkness, but we seemed to have made it to the end of the path. It looked like a dead end at first glance, but closer inspection yielded something that looked

like a handle. Miriam twisted the handle, and the wall opened up to a place which looked similar to the dungeon we were in.

“Where are we now?”

“Watch your step.”

“Hm.”

We followed Miriam where she led us. We really were in a basement of some kind. We went up a staircase, opened a hatch, and found that we were in a decrepit monastery within a forest. It was just like the escape routes I used to read in my stories.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” said a small-framed female knight waiting outside.

“Carla. How goes the mission?”

“Ma’am. The other pathways are now operational. We’ve even modified it so that more people can pass through it at once.”

I see. They had anticipated the possibility of them being followed, only instead of covering their tracks, they opened up other routes to throw their pursuers off their scent.

“This way.”

Miriam’s countermeasure wasn’t foolproof, of course, and she maintained her caution as she continued to guide us. The formerly nervous crew members straightened up under Miriam’s lead. There was something about the stern look in the princess’s face which commanded attention; just like Fult and Satya. I guess it came with being royalty.

Miriam led us out of the forest and into an inconspicuous hamlet. There was a carriage waiting for us there, and we crammed inside it. It was a tight fit, but all of us managed to get in.

We were thirty minutes away from our destination, but I was beginning to worry. We were the only carriage on this otherwise deserted road. Wouldn’t the guards be suspicious if they spotted us?

Miriam had it covered, of course. She bribed any guard who approached us

and asked them to change course. God, corrupt nations are the best! Although we wouldn't be in this situation had this country not been so corrupt. No, corrupt governments were absolutely detestable! Vote for transparent, morally upright officials!

The rest of our trip was uneventful as no one questioned who we were. Eventually, we reached our destination, a dingy looking village with wooden houses lining the streets. I'm being polite, of course. Honestly, it looked closer to a slum with how tightly the little shacks were built next to each other. The stench was enough to make even Fran flinch. It made for a decent hiding place, but I recalled that Miriam was following the instructions of her sister, the first princess. It was hard to imagine a royal being here.

Miriam took us deeper into the slums, turning a corner to every back alley she could find. We were drawing the attention of the slum's denizens, and I wondered if we would be all right. Not to be stereotypical, but people who lived in places like these seemed like they would sell us out for a penny.

Miriam laughed off my concerns. The king's scouts had been sent here before, and their base of operations had yet to be discovered.

Well, if she felt confident about it, I would defer to her judgment.

We turned another corner and reached a small house tucked away in the backstreets of the slums. The house was tiny. Never mind a royal hiding out here, I was more worried whether we could all fit in this house.

Can we really trust her?

"Come in."

"Okay."

The house was as small on the inside as it looked from the outside, 1.7 square meters at best. It was filled twice beyond its intended capacity, and it felt like I was inside a Japanese train during rush hour with how all of us were forced to stand…

I appreciated Miriam's aid and shelter, but packing all of us into such an enclosed space was a bit much.

Thankfully, the wall on the far side opened up to reveal a hidden room. This secret area was much more spacious and had enough room inside for our crew to lie down.

“We should be safe now that we’re here.”

Miriam relaxed for the first time since we met her and took off the cloak which was covering her whole body. Her face had a masculine quality, her very short hair red with streaks of gray running through it. She was quite a looker.

She was wearing wine-red leather armor. It looked light, but it was actually made of the same material as Valuza’s Sea Dragon armor and therefore stronger than the average plate mail.

Miriam still didn’t look like royalty to me, certainly not princess-like. She looked more like a tough and manly female adventurer who could run her own crew.

“My master would like to see you now.”

“So soon?”

“Yes.”

“You mentioned she was part of the royal family.”

“She is. She won’t be able to see all of you at once, so pick five to represent your crew,” Miriam said, triggering an exchange of glances between our members. It was clear from the looks on their faces that none of them wanted to go. They had gotten used to being around Miriam over the course of our escape, but an audience with another member of the royal family was something they’d rather pass on.

“You, girl, you’re coming with me.” Miriam pointed at Fran.

“Me?”

“You’re strong, and even the adults looked to you for support. You’ve proven yourself to be wise, as well.”

Miriam had a good eye. I commended her for being able to see Fran’s talent so easily.

“All right.”

“I shall come with you.” Captain Rengill was an obvious pick.

“What about the rest?”

“Uh…”

“I mean, I dunno…”

Everyone stood around looking at each other, unable to come to a conclusion and not willing to come forward by their own accord. The squabbling irritated Miriam, and she scolded them to get a move on. She did seem impatient, especially when she was breaking us out of prison.

“Hurry up!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

“We’ll do it right now!”

The captain’s first mate was another easy choice, but we didn’t have any of the bigwigs left from the Phyllian side. After more squabbling, it was decided that the oldest soldier and the maid would go. Well, as long as they didn’t resent each other for it. The argument did get quite heated.

Once the five of us were ready, Miriam went to a corner of the room and started feeling up the walls. There was another hidden room located within the hidden room.

“This way.”

We carried on a narrow hallway with branching pathways designed to make intruders lost.

“Wow. There’re so many hidden rooms.”

“Quite a feat, is it not? This was an emergency safe house built by the previous king. Documents detailing the existence of this place have been lost; my sister and I merely found it by accident.”

I see. So even the reigning king doesn’t know about this place.

Miriam carried on, not a hint of hesitation in her steps. A small chamber was located at the end of the path. The previous king took no chances when he

designed this safe house.

“Sister, I have returned.”

“Miriam. I’m so glad to see you’re safe.”

A woman in her late twenties was waiting for us in the room. Her hair was long and blonde with streaks of purple running through it. Her bangs were parted perfectly down the middle. A tiara the same color as her hair graced her forehead. Her eyes were purple, exuding softness and warmth, unlike Miriam’s sharp almond eyes which looked almost cat-like. She was about a hundred sixty centimeters tall which made her taller than the average woman. She was still shorter than Miriam, of course.

She might not have resembled Miriam in many ways, but her skin tone was the unmistakable Seedrun copper tan. But unlike the common man and Miriam, whose skin was burnt even further by the sun, hers was lighter in color. She looked like a Japanese woman with a suntan.

Her attire was simple but striking. It was dress armor, dyed blue and white. It vaguely looked like a sailor uniform. Despite its looks, her armor was still created with the same Sea Dragon leather as Miriam, providing ample defense for the princess.

She had Sword Mastery, and it didn’t look like it was for show, either. Her armor provided great mobility, taking into account the princess’s battle competence, which was why it was sleeveless and had something that looked like a miniskirt. It looked much too dull to be something royalty would wear. This lightweight gear suited the local conditions of mild climate and humid sea air, of course. Seedrun was no place to be running around in heavy plate armor.

Unlike Miriam, who looked liked an ordinary warrior, she had an air of nobility and elegance around her.

This was Sellimea Vellmelio Seedrun, Miriam’s sister and master.

“I was worried about you.”

“It was a simple sneaking operation done under the cover of night. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“You’ve always had a knack for stirring up trouble…like that time you picked a fight with the guard dogs at the royal palace—”

“Th-that was in the past!”

“And then you rode that horse to—”

“Sister, please!”

I wasn’t sure if “stirring up trouble” was enough to describe infiltrating a guardhouse, knocking out a watchman, and breaking thirty people out of prison. Sellimea was either magnanimous or didn’t know the risk involved. Maybe she just trusted her sister. Hell, it could be all of the above. She definitely didn’t look like a bad person.

“Ahem. We can talk all you want later. May I first introduce you to our guests?” Miriam cut her sister’s talk by clearing her throat. She was blushing, embarrassed by the old stories of mischief her sister had brought up.

“Oh goodness, where are my manners? I’m so sorry for calling you all here.”

“No problem.”

Fran had the ability to talk to everyone exactly the same way, royalty or no. It was one of her strengths…although sometimes I wished she would learn some manners.

Rengill and the others turned pale when they saw how rude Fran was being to the princess of Seedrun. I trained my eye on Sellimea and saw no trace of anger. In fact, she looked at Fran like the cute beastgirl she was. Thank God she was as magnanimous as she was.

“Why, thank you.”

Unfortunately, Miriam did not approve. “Girl, do you know who you are addressing?!”

Her words sounded vaguely reminiscent of the lieutenant we ran into earlier. However, Sellimea covered for us.

“Look at you, getting all touchy over a child’s words. What am I going to do with you?”

“B-but!”

“Not to mention she’s from abroad. I’m just an ordinary woman to this girl.”

“I have made mention of your station. She knows you are royalty!”

“Sure, I’m royalty, but I’m royalty that has to hide in a hidden chamber of a hidden safe house. Also, discriminating against others based on their bloodline is something our brother would do.”

“Ugh…”

This lady wasn’t very princess-like, but that’s exactly what I liked about her! She reminded me of Fult and Satya. I was sure they would get along if they met each other.

Miriam admired this about her sister, and if Sellimea didn’t have any problems with Fran’s demeanor, that was the end of that discussion. She sighed, having given up on the situation. “Oh… I suppose you’re right.”

“Hehe. Thank you, Miriam.”

Good thing we avoided that unnecessary argument.

“This girl may be young, but I have reason to believe she is stronger than I am.”

“Really? Stronger than you?”

“Yes. She is at a higher level at the very least. She is very skilled judging by how she moves. I’m not sure I could beat her head-on…”

Miriam possessed Strength Sense which she used to calmly analyze Fran’s strength. She maintained her pride as a warrior by saying she wasn’t sure if she could beat her instead of stating the obvious.

“You must be really strong, then.”

Sellimea took Miriam at her word without so much as a question. She really trusted her sister. I didn’t think she would easily believe Fran being much stronger than Miriam. But here she was, looking at Fran with much admiration.

“Hm.”

“Looks like we’re getting additional firepower.”

Firepower, she said. I guess we weren't getting the prince out through peaceful means. I had wanted to avoid getting involved in political conflicts, but they did get us out of that bind… It would be really ungrateful for us to say thank you and leave now.

Besides, Fran wouldn't have agreed to it anyway.

"You said Fult and Satya were tricked."

That was Fran's opening statement.

"About that…"

"Is it true?"

"Yes. I am certain of it."

Sellimea's face grew stern as she nodded. "How much do you know about our nation's current conditions?"

"An idiot took over the throne and things are bad now."

"Haha. That's about the gist of it. Allow me to elaborate."

"Sure."

"Which reminds me, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm so sorry about that. My name is Sellimea Vellmelio Seedrun, the first princess of Seedrun. And you are?"

"Fran. Black Cat Adventurer."

"Nice to meet you, Fran."

"Hm."

The captain and his crew introduced themselves after that. They had been silent and pale this whole time, and they could barely tell the princess their name. I didn't blame them. It had been a long day, and we were now finishing it with an audience with royalty. Their nerves were thoroughly wrecked.

At first they felt belittled by the fact that the princess was only talking to Fran, but they seem to have changed their minds. They were now content to let Fran do all the talking. I didn't mind this plan of theirs, but I had to wonder if the adults were okay with being sidelined.

“Let me reintroduce myself. I am Miriam Seedrun, the second princess of Seedrun.”

The sisters were nothing alike. How did a princess get so strong, anyway? Fran seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“You’re a princess *and* a fighter?”

“I was born of a mistress, you see. I was never quite good at blending in with high society. I found military training much more enjoyable.”

“She looked so happy swinging a sword around during teatime.”

“I-I was a child, then. Also, although I am technically a princess, I have no right to the throne.”

“Couldn’t you at least be a bit more graceful?”

“I shall leave the matter of grace to my sister. I have long decided to serve as her sword and advisor. I have no need for courtly manners.”

The sisters got along despite one of them being illegitimate. Still, Miriam didn’t seem to get along with her eldest brother, the current king. Why was that?

Miriam’s expression soured upon Fran asking that question.

“Because he is a fool.”

I understood the sentiment but wished she would elaborate. Fortunately, Sellimea provided an explanation to her sister’s concise statement.

“Our brother always brags about his pure bloodline. He always gave Miriam a hard time about it.”

“That is true, but I did not devote myself to my sister because of a petty grudge. A bigoted, moronic, violent, fool lineage such as he has no business being on the throne.”

It sounded harsh, but I couldn’t deny it after seeing the state the kingdom was in. Judging by Miriam’s tone, the current king had always been like that since he was a little boy. It was hard to believe they let him be king at all.

Miriam’s expression soured again. Even Sellimea was frowning, now. They

were reluctant to tell us the reason why their brother was chosen to be king.

“Right. That’s as good a starting point as any, I suppose.”

The process of being king wasn’t as simple as I thought.

“One of the reasons our brother became king is because he is the eldest son and therefore the rightful heir. That much is obvious.”

“Hmph. There are too many fools who became king by the mere accident of being a firstborn.”

I know Miriam was illegitimate, but should a princess really be saying that?

“Our brother may be selfish, violent, and uncaring about the lives of our people but it isn’t as if he didn’t have any redeeming qualities.” Even Sellimea was in on it.

“Suarez, our brother, is one of our nation’s greatest warriors.”

“As much as it pains me to admit, even I can’t beat him in a fight…”

He must be quite the fighter, then.

“That is why many of our citizens supported him before he took the throne.”

“Though his approval rating now is approximately zero.”

“You become king by being strong?”

“In our kingdom, yes,” answered Sellimea.

“The founding of Seedrun is quite unusual, you see…”

Sellimea proceeded to give us a history about the founding fathers of Seedrun. “Our nation of Seedrun was founded by pirates.”

“Pirates? Pirates made this country?”

“Yes. The island of Seedrun used to be the haunt of a great pirate company. The royal family is descended from the captain of that company. Cool, isn’t it?” Sellimea puffed her chest, bragging about being descended from pirates. People usually didn’t talk about their ancestors if they were criminals, but Sellimea and Miriam weren’t ashamed of their forefathers. They were unabashedly proud about it, in fact.

The great pirate company of yore built themselves not so much on ruthless pillaging, but by excavating ocean resources and coercing merchant ships into hiring them as escorts. During that time, they attacked corrupt government navy vessels and crushed other more ruthless pirates, claiming the spoils of their victories as their own.

The old pirates were a rowdy lot who loved freedom, adventuring, and their companions. They were much closer to the stereotypical heroic pirate that I knew in fiction, although I wouldn't call them heroes since they still looted and plundered.

I wasn't sure of the accuracy of the historic account since it was told by descendants of said pirates; lionizing was inevitable. The accounts themselves might be rewritten in order to justify acts of territorial invasion. Not that I was going to point that out.

The citizens of this country respected their pirate forefathers.

"Our citizens are all descended from pirates, too."

"That is why strength is highly respected in our country."

Traces of the old pirate blood remained in the culture of Seedrun. It was why the current king was so popular. He was stupid and violent, but strong. Even if not much of his popularity remained after running the country into the ground.

"Our country has always had a strong military because of our past."

"Our brother has a lot of supporters within the military. He gained even more followers after he increased the military budget."

"The money had to come from somewhere, of course. He increased taxation and all but eliminated welfare payments."

"It's a good time to be a member of the military. The higher ups are all living it large from Suarez's pocket."

"The whole situation disgusts me! The military is meant to serve and protect our people, not oppress them!"

He was imposing heavy taxation on his citizens which in turn caused trouble throughout the country. Not only that, but he was also increasing his influence

by buying out military officials. I don't know whether he was stupid or a genius. He had a perfect recipe for creating a military dictatorship.

"Suarez has already eliminated all the nobles who dared oppose him. The only ones left now are the ones who are completely obedient to him."

There you go: dictatorship.

"The military general, our uncle Julius, is also in full support of our brother."

"Julius is a treacherous man. It is clear that he is the one pulling the strings behind Suarez's rule."

"My brother is easily manipulated as long as he gets to fulfill his ambitions. Our current government is only barely holding together thanks to Uncle Julius; he used to be a bureaucrat before he was a general. Although, I don't think my brother realizes that."

The general was the previous king's younger brother, which made him a shoo-in as an advisor for the current king. I'm sure it gave him huge benefits in supporting Suarez, too.

The king of Seedrun, Suarez, and his uncle, Julius. We had seen those names in the ledger we found in the slaver hideout in Dars. They were listed under officials whom the slavers had bribed. I expected them to be Seedrun big shots, but I didn't think they would be royalty…

These were the same people who were casually going to sell us into slavery, after all. Seedrun's corruption ran deeper than I thought.

"And recently, my brother has been meeting with messengers from the kingdom of Raydoss. Quite often, may I add," continued Sellimea.

"The kingdom of Raydoss?" Fran's ears perked up upon the mention of our old invisible enemy.

The kingdom of Raydoss. We kept running into them, albeit indirectly. In Alessa, they were the shadow forces who sought control over its dungeons. They had even invaded Granzell in the past. Our guild receptionist, Nell, and our A-Rank adventurer, Amanda, both told us to be careful when the name Raydoss came up.

We ran into Raydoss again in the floating dungeon, within the Lich's diary pages. They created a military facility on a floating island and performed unspeakable human experiments. The Lich made it his unlife's work to wipe Raydoss off the map.

Suffice to say, we didn't have a good impression of the kingdom of Raydoss. They were a shady bunch who would invade your country in the name of profit and work in the shadows to bring about your downfall should they fail their first attempt.

I didn't think we'd run into them again so soon.

"That can't be good."

"Oh, you're familiar with Raydoss, then?"

"Hm. An awful country who causes nothing but trouble."

Fran shared my opinion. After all the trouble they had caused us, how couldn't she? I know that you couldn't run a country without getting your hands dirty, but there was no need to dip your entire body in mud.

"Hahaha! Well said. Yes, they are quite troublesome with the way they invade their neighbors, aren't they?"

"Our country especially."

It looked like Seedrun had seen its fair share of Raydossian trouble.

"They've never attempted to annex us thanks to our superior military might, but…"

Really? I didn't think anyone could be so confident in comparing their military strength against Raydoss. Seedrun was descended from pirates, but were they really so strong?

"They've been chipping away at Seedrun's resources through tariffs and port fees."

Sellimea put a hand against her cheek and sighed. "Those Raydossian hyenas are trying to keep Seedrun and her naval forces under their jurisdiction."

"We have to stop by a Raydossian port to use the northern route. It can't be

helped.”

Sellimea and Miriam breathed a resigned sigh. As much as they personally hated Raydoss, they were faced with the reality of having to cooperate with their government. I couldn’t imagine the migraines they got from it.

“Our brother is offering the might of Seedrun’s military to Raydoss so that he might become a duke of Raydoss and viceroy of Seedrun. He then expects to use his achievements to slowly take over the entire kingdom of Raydoss itself…”

“A foolish pipe dream. There is no way our fool brother’s imbecilic plot would work against a large country such as Raydoss.”

“Yes, I think so, too.”

“Raydoss would crush us with our own navy and turn us into one of its colonies. That is, if they didn’t decide to absorb us outright. On paper, it would seem as if our fool brother has control over this military alliance, but it is obviously a lie.”

“There’s no way Raydoss would concede so much power to a small country like ours. If Raydoss got hold of our warship, the Water Dragon, they would take over in an instant. It would spell the end of Seedrun.”

“Raydoss is infamous for imposing exorbitant taxes on its territories and treating its people like slaves.”

What an awful country. What was it that Sellimea mentioned about a warship? The Water Dragon? The name roused my old junior high fantasies, and I asked Fran to inquire further.

“So what’s this ‘warship water dragon’ thing?”

“Aah, I suppose outsiders wouldn’t know about it.”

“The Water Dragon is Seedrun’s secret weapon.”

“Ooh, secret weapon. Sounds cool.”

I knew it! The HMS Water Dragon, Seedrun’s Last Resort. It’s so cool!

“Hehe. I know, right? She’s really strong and is quite a beaut.”

“Oooh.”

“The Sea Dragon is a large battleship named after the fact that it is driven by a Sea Dragon. It is three times faster than your average battleship, and it’s powerful enough to sink any vessel into a watery grave.”

Having monsters pull your boat was nothing new; the people of this world had done it for ages. However, the founding king of Seedrun was the first in history to have successfully tamed a Sea Dragon, a B-Rank monster.

“There are only four Sea Dragon class warships in the world, and all of them belong to Seedrun. This is how we’ve maintained our independence for so long. No naval fleet can withstand the might of our Sea Dragons.”

“B-Rank ships?”

“Uh-huh! Cool, isn’t it?”

“Cool” didn’t even begin to cut it. A single B-Rank monster was capable of wiping an entire country off the map. And Seedrun had four of them? No wonder they were considered the strongest armada on the planet.

“The four Sea Dragons are divided amongst my fool brother, my uncle, my cousin, and Sellimea. Our Sea Dragons will only heed the will of the blood of the first king. Also, it can only be controlled by its particular owner. My sister’s Sea Dragon is currently docked at the king’s Sea Dragon port because of this.”

“Oh, Warnate… I hope she’s doing okay.”

Warnate was the name of Sellimea’s Sea Dragon ship. It had been taken away from her at some point. Without Sellimea to control it, it didn’t count towards Seedrun’s naval strength. It would remain unusable as long as Sellimea was alive, so there was no concern of our enemies being able to use it against us.

“My fool brother has been in talks to establish an alliance with Raydoss ever since he became king. He has been using our Sea Dragons as bargaining chips.”

“As foolish as our brother is, I don’t think even he would actually hand one of our Sea Dragons over to Raydoss.”

“That is where the Phyllians come into play.”

We had finally come to the heart of the matter. Although, we were the ones who digressed by asking about the Sea Dragons.

I couldn't help myself, all right? A battleship with the name of Sea Dragon roused my curiosity.

"Why did they have to trick Satya and Fult?"

"Phyllius is a small kingdom comparable to ours. Only instead of having Sea Dragons, they were able to deter Raydoss' invasion attempts with their Divine Sword. They have also formed an alliance with Granzell, Raydoss' sworn enemy."

"Basically, Phyllius is the only thing preventing Raydoss' southward expansion. You know what would happen if my brother captured it?"

It would increase Suarez's standing with Raydoss. Phyllius would make for a great bargaining chip.

"So he's going to hand Fult and Satya over to Raydoss?" Fran asked.

"At this rate, yes. The Phyllian royalty would make for a fine tribute. You said you were captured by Dwight earlier."

"Hm. Smug bastard."

"That smug bastard paid his way to become admiral, but he still remains my brother's trusted advisor. He's also cunning, and he knew to take advantage of you as soon as he saw your ship. He is the worst Seedrun has to offer."

So that's why he insisted on denying all our credentials. If he had treated Fult like royalty, he would be forced to treat them as guests of honor and give them freedom of movement associated with it. On the other hand, treating them like suspects would allow him to limit their movements and give him the upper hand in negotiations. Tricking them was the only way to achieve this effect.

"We wish to prevent that. If the Phyllian royal twins get sold off to Raydoss, we would make enemies with Phyllius, a kingdom in possession of a Divine Sword. We would have to ally ourselves with Raydoss to have a chance at surviving the ensuing war."

"I see."

Phyllius was allied with Granzell, wasn't it? Seedrun would make enemies out of Granzell if it went to war with Phyllius. The only way for Seedrun to

withstand the combined might of the two kingdoms would be to ally itself with Raydoss. The ensuing conflict would bring the two countries closer together.

“Military conflict wouldn’t be the last of our problems, either.”

“As you can see, Seedrun is a small island nation. We don’t have enough land to grow our own crops. We’ve been importing foodstuffs from Granzell, Raydoss, and Phyllius up to now, but…”

Seedrun would need to depend on Raydoss for imports if they came into conflict with Granzell. Raydoss’s impact on military, economy, and even food supply was far too great. If conditions soured with the other countries, Seedrun was on a one-way track to becoming a Raydossian colony.

“My brother is already in possession of the Phyllian royals. The Raydossian messenger has also been staying in the royal palace for a while now.”

“And they’ve asked for many things of our brother as his superior.”

So the messenger might have already secretly asked Suarez to hand over the Phyllians.

“We have to do something before the messenger returns to Raydoss with the Phyllians.”

“That is why we need your help.”

It was a long discussion, but I understood the main thrust of it. We had to retrieve Fult and Satya from Suarez before they were handed over to the kingdom of Raydoss.

“If Fult and Satya get captured again, there’d be no point in saving them.”

“Leave that to us. We have people who can help. We’ll take it as our responsibility to smuggle them away from the island.”

So far, Sellimea and Miriam had yet to utter a single lie. Everything they said was the truth. We had to help them, then. I didn’t think we could save Fult and Satya on our own.

“All right.”

Fran looked determined.

“W-we’ll do everything in our power to help, as well.”

“We will put our lives on the line for Our Highnesses Fult and Satya.”

The two Phyllians agreed, of course. Captain Rengill, who had been silent so far, finally mustered enough willpower to talk.

“We shall help, too, of course.”

“Really? Are you sure? I know you are not Phyllians yourselves.”

“Perhaps not. But I have been commissioned by the prince and princess to take them safely to Bulbola. I cannot abandon their request no matter the situation. That is our policy at the Lucille Trade Association.”

“I see. Glad to have you aboard.”

“Yes. Just remember to take us with you when you make your escape.”

“Haha. You merchants always have an eye for opportunity.”

“I am a merchant and the captain of my own ship. The safety of my crew is part of my duties.”

“I know. We are willing to reward you so long as you lend us a hand in our venture.”

There was no binding contract, but Miriam’s word was enough to make Captain Rengill and his crew breathe a sigh of relief. She seemed to be morally upright, and the short time they spent together was enough for her to gain their trust.

In any case, we were all agreed in helping Sellimea, now.

“Can the kids stay here in the meantime?”

“Of course. We have no intention of putting the children’s lives in danger.”

“I’ll look after them, so don’t worry.”

Fran wasn’t part of the children Miriam mentioned, of course; she knew that Fran was a stronger warrior than she was. As for Sellimea, she seemed to have drawn the conclusion that Fran was no ordinary child from their conversation.

“Our people are contacting our conspirators in the palace now. We will begin

our operation tomorrow. I shall prepare some rooms for you. They won't be private rooms, but you'll be able to get some rest."

Oh, right. Fran, I think you should give them the documents we found.

Documents?

I'm talking about the ledger we found in the slaver hideout back in Dars. Sellimea might be able to put it to good use.

I see.

There wasn't much point in us carrying the ledger around. The names Suarez and Julius were written in the ledger's bribe list anyway, so we gave it to Sellimea.

The sisters bulged their eyes at the document.

"I didn't think they had become so corrupt…"

"This is awful. And look at this one here."

"What?! These are plans to turn the residents of the slums into slaves!"

"This is unacceptable."

"It seems that the rumors going on about Raydoss wanting a huge number of slaves is true."

"Not only do they want the naval strength of Seedrun, they want her people as well."

Sellimea, who up until now was all smiles, now squinted at the documents with a particular anger. The aura she was giving off was as ferocious as when Fran got into battle stance.

"Are you sure we can have this?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you. I'll put it to good use, I promise."

Sellimea nodded, a determined look on her face.

After our discussion, Miriam's men led us down another hidden path. We went down a set of stairs, then up another, and ended up at a shack different

from the ones we'd seen up to now.

"The rest are already on the way here. That's your room over there."

"Hm."

As it turned out, the shack had several rooms.

"If you need anything, call the guard at the door. Whatever you do, do not leave this place on your own."

That was a fair warning. If we left this place for a walk, we might not be able to find our way back.

What about Jet?

Hmm… Sorry, boy, it looks like you're gonna have to remain hidden for now.

Ruff…

Come on, don't give me that sad whine. Look, you know how you're supposed to keep your secret weapon a secret?

Secret weapon! Like the Sea Dragon.

Exactly, and you're our secret weapon, Jet.

So cool.

Arf, arf!

That pleased him for now. I didn't want to manipulate our beloved direwolf that way, but I was serious. Jet really was our secret weapon, and I wanted to keep his existence a secret for as long as possible.

Rengill's men and the Phyllians might have seen Jet in action, but they didn't know where he was at the moment. Certainly, none of them could've suspected he was lurking within Fran's shadow. If anyone asked, we would tell him that Jet was a summon and therefore needed to be properly summoned to appear.

I trusted Sellimea and Miriam, but that trust didn't extend to the company they kept. Suarez's spies might have infiltrated their crew. If not, some of them might be willing to sacrifice Fran in order to save Sellimea.

I wanted to keep our private information private.

“By the way, we’ve recovered your confiscated gear. It’s right over there, so go and find your equipment.”

Our guide, a Fighter, pointed to the pile of swords and spears on the floor. This was my chance to quietly return to Fran. It was unlikely that anyone would be able to miss my ornate construction, but we were ready to brush it off by saying that I was mixed deep into the pile.

Not that anyone was likely to ask us about details, since everyone was busy rummaging through the pile for their own gear. Still, you can never be too sure.

I snuck out of Jet’s shadow realm and hung myself over Fran’s shoulder once again. The familiar angle of her back instantly made me feel at home. *Aahh.*

“Hmm.”

Hm? What is it, Fran?

I felt restless without you, Teacher. I’m glad you’re finally back.

Haha! That makes two of us. I don’t think I could do without your back either, Fran.

Two peas in a pod?

I don’t know about that.

There had to be a better expression for what we experienced than “two peas in a pod”.

But you know what? Close enough.

“Yes.”

Well, what now? There wasn’t really anything for us to do. It wasn’t like we could go outside. Jet and I could probably go scout the surrounding area, but I really didn’t want to leave Fran’s side right now. Call me overprotective, I don’t care! I am not about to leave Fran by herself in unknown territory!

I didn’t want to leave her side, not tonight.

Let’s get plenty of rest.

“Hm.” Fran nodded, headed to her assigned room.

“Fran!”

“Where have you been? Are you okay?”

“We thought you got into trouble with the adults since they wanted to talk to you.”

This was the children’s room, it seemed. Inside were three of the kids that we saved along with Fult and Satya, and a single Phyllian maid. She must’ve been taking care of them. She seemed to love children, and I remember her volunteering as their caretaker back on the ship.

Everyone got up from the bed to greet Fran. As uneasy they felt about being in this strange place, they were still more worried about her.

“I’m okay.”

“Nice. Glad to have you back.”

“I told you she’ll be fine. Fran’s really strong.”

“Yeah. By the way, where’s Jet?”

The kids were quite fond of our direwolf.

“He’s not here right now.”

“Oh…”

The girl sounded sad as she faced the floor. Oh no, did we make her cry? I was getting flustered, unsure what to do, when a strange rumbling noise echoed throughout the room. It startled the children, and they all began looking for the source of the noise; the teary eyed girl included. The strange sound had prevented her from crying.

What the hell was that disturbing noise? It sounded like a bear growling.

It was then that Fran rubbed her stomach.

“I’m hungry.”

Why, the adorable sound was the sound of Fran’s empty stomach. Yes, now that I think about it, it sounded like the cute yelps of a little puppy. What’s this I hear about her stomach sounding like a bear? Such slander!

Fran’s adorable stomach rumbling set off a chain reaction, and the other children’s stomachs followed suit. I don’t think we had eaten since yesterday afternoon.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Stale bread and water.”

“That’s it?”

“Preparing food in the slums is quite difficult, so they asked us to make do with it until morning.”

I see.

Warm food required cooking, and cooking was a little difficult this late into the night.

Teacher.

I’m on it. We can’t let the kids go to bed on an empty stomach.

The saddened expression on the hungry children reminded me of Fran when we first met. I couldn’t leave them alone after seeing that. Fran couldn’t let her fellow orphans go hungry, either. These kids were the closest thing she had to relatives.

I looked through Pocket Dimension for food to feed the children. Anything with too strong of an odor could get picked up from the outside, so I decided sandwiches would be appropriate for the occasion. I threw in some juice, on the house.

“Huh? What are these?”

“Shh. Our little secret.”

“A-are you sure?”

“Hm.”

“Yes! Thanks, Fran.”

“You can have some, too, lady.”

“Oh dear, may I really?”

“Hm. Just don’t tell anyone.”

It was kind of cruel to make the maid watch while the children ate, so we gave her a portion, too. Her meal also doubled as hush money. The adults in the other rooms would have to suck it up until morning.

The hungry children wasted no time in gobbling up their sandwiches. The maid also put away her sandwich in record time, albeit being much more tidy about it. Of course, Fran was the fastest in eliminating her sandwich.

“That was good!”

“Shhh! Keep it down! Fran took these out of her personal stash.”

“S-sorry about that.”

“This juice is tasty, too.”

“Indeed. This sandwich might be the best sandwich I’ve ever eaten in my life.”

I imagined a maid employed by the royal family would have a fairly sophisticated palate, but even she was surprised by the sandwiches.

The sandwich had become my staple of sorts, I was quite confident with it. There were monster cutlet and monster ham sandwiches. There were also egg sandwiches I made with cockatrice eggs—with homemade mayonnaise, of course. The juice was a punch I made by mixing the juice of a peach-looking fruit and a pineapple-looking fruit. The resulting beverage was very refreshing.

With their stomachs filled with sandwiches and anxieties reassured, the children’s eyelids were starting to get heavy. Fran was ready to go to sleep as well; it couldn’t be helped, as this was her usual bedtime.



“Come on, now. You must sleep in bed, not on the floor. You too, Fran.”

“’Kaaaay.”

“Hm.”

Our hideout didn’t have enough beds to go around, and our room only had three beds in total. One for the maid, one for the two boys, and one for Fran and the girl. This would be the first time Fran had ever slept in a bed with another human being. Would she be okay?

Can you sleep?

No problem. We slept side by side when I was a slave.

I see.

Yeah. We’d die from the cold if we didn’t.

That was a much more practical reason than the one I was thinking of. *I-I see. You’ll be fine then.*

Uh-huh. Good night, Teacher.

Good night. I’ll keep watch tonight, so get plenty of rest.

Thank…you…

In an instant, Fran was fast asleep. She never did have sleeping problems. They say kids grow like weeds when they’re asleep. Fran’s ability to fall asleep under any circumstance was a huge advantage, then.

Can you sleep in the shadows, Jet?

Woof!

I took that as a yes. As expected from a Darkness Wolf, he was able to maintain mana output even while asleep.

Zzz.

You fall asleep as fast as your master, Jet.

Ah, well. Guess I’ll be alone on my watch.

There were people around me today, so I couldn’t float around the complex. I

killed time by playing word association by myself.

Chapter 4:
Betrayals and Revelations

It was the morning after Fran and the others had been broken out of prison. The guardhouse would be in an uproar by now. Close to thirty people had escaped, after all, so they must have been looking for us. Eluding their search parties would be up to Miriam's ingenuity.

Miriam's men were calm, so I didn't think the royal guard had found our hideout yet.

"Sorry for the wait. It's time for breakfast."

"Hm."

Our guide from last night showed up at our door with a wagon. I doubted this enclosed area had a canteen, so we were going to have to eat our food in our rooms. Our breakfast was fish soup and a piece of bread. There was also a sizeable pile of sautéed clams, each decently large. That said, there wasn't a single vegetable in sight. It couldn't be helped; fresh vegetables were hard to come by in the kingdom of Seedrun.

The kids loved it, of course. I had expected some of them to be picky with the clams, but they all gobbled it down with smiles on their faces with compliments to the chef. That's what I loved about orphans, they were tough.

When asked what they usually ate back in Dars, they said they would eat spoiled leftover meat from the adventurer's guild. They also ate animals they found at the beach, like clams and starfish. When they couldn't find any, they would resort to eating sea roaches. They tasted terrible, but eating them was a matter of survival.

"Sea roaches…"

F-Fran? May I know what's on your mind? You are not having sea roaches, all right? I won't allow it! Not when we still have good food on hand!

Eating in our rooms worked out to Fran's advantage. Our breakfast wasn't going to be enough to sate her, and so we topped it off by taking more food out

of Pocket Dimension. Everyone in our room was already aware of our stock, and they quite liked the sandwiches and punch. They weren't going to tell on us as long as we shared.

"Here."

"Again? Are you sure?"

"Hm."

"Yes!"

"I'll take this one!"

"May I have this one?"

"I have some punch, too."

The sandwiches and punch were exactly like the ones from last night but everyone loved it, all the same.

"Don't tell anyone."

"Okay!"

"You got it."

"I won't tell."

"Hm. If you keep quiet, I can give you more."

"Oooh!"

"In that case, your secret dies with us!"

"Yeah!"

"I swear on it!"

Even the maid was getting as excited as the children she was looking after. She was more than willing to cooperate. I had better remember to feed them all later, though. People get a little crazy when you cheat them out of a meal.

There was nothing for us to do after breakfast time. The main point of being in a hideout was, well, to hide. I couldn't leave, at least not without leaving Fran behind, and going out in broad daylight would be too dangerous for me. I couldn't risk being seen. I thought about making a clone and having it

investigate, but it would probably stand out and capture the attention of the slum's residents. I couldn't take risks even if I wanted to.

Fran was playing a game with the other children. Something that looked like Othello, which I didn't know existed in this world, as well. There went my plans of introducing Earth games into this world and making a lot of money from it.

This world already had games like chess and shogi, and I didn't think a similar game with different rules would sell; igo was a viable option if I actually knew the rules to it. This world also had something that was identical to snakes and ladders.

Hmm, I may have underestimated this world.

I had expected the existence of magic to hinder the development of science and therefore delay the development of games, but that clearly wasn't the case. This world used a cornucopia of spices, and its cooking was quite advanced. Their simple yet delicious cooking was thanks to monster ingredients and the Cooking Skill, I imagined. They didn't have much in the way of deep fried foods, but that was only because cooking oil was hard to come by.

At first glance, this world looked like Earth back in the Middle Ages, but far more advanced at the same time.

"Urgh."

"Hehe! I win."

Fran had lost her game of Othello. She was quite terrible at it, in fact. Not a single black disk was left on the board, and the 8×8 playing field was covered with white disks.

"Rematch."

"No, it's my turn next!"

"Mmph."

Despite her losses, Fran still had fun with the game. She had never experienced playing board games with friends before. I didn't want to become the kind of parent who butted in when his kid was losing in a board game. I was so good at Othello in my previous life that I was dubbed the Monochrome

Monster; said monster's otherworld debut would have to wait for another day.

The maid joined the kids in playing Othello, anyway. She wasn't holding back, either, winning most of the matches against the kids. Doubtless she was adjusting her skill level so the kids could still have a fun time playing against her.

Oh well, I guess I could do some skill management in the meantime.

According to the P.A. who took over my body during Unleash Potential, most of my skills had been consolidated and evolved into Advanced Skills. Honestly, I still didn't understand most of what these skills did. I couldn't ask the P.A. for details, either, since she had reverted to her usual task of announcing nothing but essential information. I would have to experiment with these Compound Skills by myself. The short session I had in Jean's backyard after conquering the dungeon of the dead was nowhere near enough.

I should start with something inconspicuous…

Which left me with Omni Radar (a product of detection skills like Presence Sense and Danger Sense) and Being Sense (a product of sense skills like Mana Sense and Trap Sense). These were the easiest to practice.

These skills were alike, although the detection skills were passive since they were always on, and the sense skills were active skills since I had to activate them manually. Concentrating while using detection skills had its benefits, of course. It widened its effective range and increased its accuracy. No harm in practicing these skills.

Skills I wanted to try out aside from those two were Water Manipulation (a product of Swim and Water Current Manipulation), Wind Manipulation (a product of Air Current Manipulation and Air Hike), and Poison Manipulation (a product of Drain Poison and Generate Poison). So far, I had not managed to use any of these three skills successfully.

I could use them as their pre-compound form, like using Wind Manipulation to reproduce Air Hike or Water Manipulation to reproduce Water Bullets. However, using them required more mana and attention, likely due to them no longer being their own individual skill. Honestly, I felt that they were weaker in this current form, as well.

But that couldn't be the end of the story. According to the skill's name, I should be able to manipulate water and wind more liberally than before. There was a world of applications to explore, but I lacked the imagination to find these new applications and was therefore stuck grasping at straws.

Now, I was thinking of trying out a new form of Water Manipulation. I wondered if I could vibrate water particles. It would make for one hell of an attack if I could. Golems and undead aside, the bodies of monsters—and humans—consisted mostly of water.

What if I could send vibrations to that body of water from afar? Would the vibrations result in a concussion? That was the first thing that came to mind when I saw Water Manipulation.

The idea was far from original, of course; I read about it in a manga in my past life. Still, the ability to create shock waves within another creature's body was an attack that would be impossible to defend against. My crude imagination thought of a vibrating massage stick lodged throughout the target's body. It would be hard to fight in that situation.

I turned my attention to the pitcher of water that was left in a corner of the room.

Vibrate… Vibrate…

I used the skill and pictured the intended result in my head. I was rewarded with ripples of water. Close, but far too weak to be a success. I wanted something finer, something that would be able to make the pitcher of water itself resonate and whistle.

Finer… Stronger…

I concentrated again. The water rippled stronger this time, which was why I considered it an even bigger failure. It looked like I was just stirring the water with my hand.

This is hard…

It wasn't a trick I could learn in a day. The splashing pitcher of water was beginning to draw the kids' attention, too.

“Did you guys hear something?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“It came from the direction of the water pitcher…”

“It’s probably only a rat, children.”

Thank you, maid lady. That was it for Water Manipulation practice, I guess.

I switched gears and started experimenting with Wind Manipulation.

I should probably focus on perfecting my current repertoire of skills than trying to learn a new skill right off the bat.

I was still at the stage of learning the basics. Skipping ahead to the advanced tech was only going to be a detriment.

I started with something simple. I focused on the air in front of me and started compressing it. The kids weren’t able to see it, of course, but since I had Omnidirectional Radar, I was able to see the effects of my Wind Manipulation. I had formed a small ball of compressed air.

Now that I had a ball of compressed air, I tried reversing the operation and slowly decompressed it. Releasing it all at once would cause a conspicuous pop which would draw the children’s attention.

I expanded the ball of air, alternating between gentle compressions and decompressions. I was starting to get the hang of this wind manipulation business now. My mana consumption decreased despite creating more pressurized air than before. My skill level remained the same, but I had just gotten more efficient at using it.

Nice. Let’s try out Omni Radar this time.

Omni Radar was a difficult skill to use. Understandable, considering its greater application compared to ordinary detection skills. It could detect anything and everything; even I thought it was a little much.

I doubted I could use it at its full potential at all times, though. The skill detected everything, resulting in a deluge of indecipherable data. No human could possibly process all that data at once, myself included. I remembered the trouble it gave me when it would pick up all of the noise in the vicinity back at

the slaver hideout. Blocking out all unnecessary data was crucial while using this skill. I wasn't sure if it came with using the skill or if I was just using it wrong. What was certain was the fact that I couldn't use the skill very well. The best I could do was parse through the array of data and pick out the bits of information that I wanted.

Time to get to work!

My earlier session with Wind Manipulation had given me the ability to perceive air currents. I could see the flow of air in the room through a combination of air current and vibration perception. Doing so would grant me sight even in pitch black darkness, which made for a perfect countermeasure against any ambush.

I turned off my vision and concentrated. I would start by trying to pick up on the children's movements. My sightless vision wouldn't amount to much if I couldn't sense my immediate vicinity.

At first, I only heard the clicks of Othello discs being placed on a board. I then focused on the airflow around me. With it, I was able to map out a rough layout of the room. I knew there were people inside, although I couldn't tell their exact details like their faces, size, and what they were doing at the time. At least I could tell when they were moving…

Being Sense would be much more appropriate in this use case. There was no need to read the room's airflow with it.

I'm going to have to put more hours into this before it becomes useful.

I continued practicing my skills for a time, until I sensed a change in my surroundings. Fran and the others were still enjoying Othello even after lunch when a guard came in our room to ask for her.

"Is the Black Cat Fran here?"

"Hm."

"The princesses are calling for you."

"All right."

She got up and smiled at the worried-looking kids.

“I’m off.”

“H-hey, you better come back in one piece, you got that?”

“Be careful out there, Fran.”

“Um, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The guide knew the kids were feeling uneasy. She didn’t want to make them cry or fuss and was more than willing to wait for them to say their goodbyes.

The kids were playing Othello to calm their anxieties. Knowing this, Fran had played along to humor them. There was the possibility that Fran had fun playing it herself, but I was guessing at this point. I had never seen Fran be that kind to anyone other than myself until now. The kids were now her friends, people worth protecting. I always thought she could do with more socializing, so this was a step in the right direction. I hoped she would interact with more people and take an interest in them.

“Let’s go.” Fran nodded towards our guide from last night, and she responded with a bitter smile before leading the way.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Right this way.”

She led us to Sellimea’s chamber from last night.

“Ah, you’re here.”

“Very good.”

Sellimea and Miriam were waiting for us inside. The female fighter we saw after our prison break, Carla, was also present. No one else was in the room.

“Just me?”

“Yes. You are the strongest among the Phyllian crew. Briefing you on our plans first would make our lives easier.”

I see. There were other soldiers, of course, but none who were crazy strong. Rengill’s crew members were used to heavy lifting, but they weren’t exactly trained for combat.

“We’ve made contact with our man on the inside.”

Miriam began the briefing; she was the woman in charge of such matters, it seemed. Sellimea was quiet and listened to her sister. She wasn’t avoiding responsibility, but she knew Miriam was best suited for the job.

“We’ve found a new conspirator willing to help us.”

“Conspirator?”

“Yes. It’s the prince’s bodyguard.”

“Salut?”

“That’s the one.”

Salut was a reliable conspirator if there ever was one. He was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield, and he had his heart set on protecting the royal twins.

“The royal twins are currently being entertained in one of the royal villas.”

“Entertained? Not captured?”

“Yes. They are still captives, but they haven’t been thrown into a dungeon and retain their freedom of movement to a degree.”

I guess it’s because they’re still royalty. But that wasn’t the whole story.

“It would appear that they are worried about the rumors circling the Phyllian royal family.”

“Rumors?”

“You don’t know? The Phyllian royals are under the protection of their Divine Sword, and a curse might befall those who dare harm them.”

A curse… Really?

The whole thing sounded like mere superstition to me, but the room was silent. Fran, Sellimea, Miriam, and Carla looked serious. They really believed in this curse. After all, this was a world of Magic and Skills, a world where its denizens firmly believed in the existence of gods. I had never met one before, but I wouldn’t be too surprised to find out they did exist. The Divine Swords were weapons wrapped in mystery, their power seemingly coming from the

gods themselves. It wasn't too much of a stretch that a curse would befall on the enemies of its owners.

A piece of information about the Phyllian Divine Sword had been making the rounds.

"What are you talking about?" Fran asked.

"Do you know what the Divine Sword of Phyllius can do?"

"No."

"I see. The kingdom of Phyllius is in possession of the Divine Sword of the Demon Lord, Diablos. It is a weapon capable of controlling demons."

"Demons? Like actual demons?"

"I'm not sure what demons you are talking about…"

"Like the ones you find in Dungeons."

"Yes, those demons."

Really? It could control literal demons? That would make it dangerously strong. Even that Daemon we fought back in Alessa's Goblin Dungeon was a B-Rank Threat. Although the one we fought had all sorts of restrictions on it which made it closer to a C- or D-Rank Threat.

Still, if it could command an entire army of demons, that would make Phyllius demonically strong.

Why is it still a small country?

Even Fran thought it was odd for Phyllius remaining as small as it was.

They probably can't use it indefinitely.

I see.

There had to be some restrictions on its usage, like a set number of uses, or the time it could be used. If Phyllius could summon hundreds of demons for long periods of time, they could take over the continent in no time at all.

As a defensive countermeasure, however, it would do just fine.

"These beings called demons are wrapped in mystery to begin with."

“There are researchers who study them, but even they haven’t made much progress.”

Demons only spawned in Dungeons. As long as you weren’t willing to enter one, your chances of a demonic encounter was slim to none. Research was slow, to say the least.

“We don’t know the details, but rumor has it that demons would come for and curse those who would attack the Phyllian royals.”

“My brother is appropriately fearful of the possibility.”

That was why he didn’t dare put them in chains or treat them like actual prisoners. He didn’t know what to make of the validity of the rumors, demons being the mysterious beings that they were.

“I suppose that is why he’s keeping them at the royal villas instead of the royal palace. My brother must not want to chance a demonic encounter.”

“I think he’s already doing them harm by lying to them and selling them out to Raydoss.”

“We also thought of that at first…but I think we’ll be fine on that front if only by a fraction.”

“It all depends on whether he is swayed by Raydoss’s compensation.”

This whole talk about “harm” was fuzzy to begin with. I thought lying to the royal twins already qualified as “harm,” but I guess it was all right as long as they weren’t physically hurt. To take the argument further, would harm also befall those who gave the order to harm the Phyllian royals? There were many ways to interpret the rumor, but the fact of the curse remained.

“In any case, we have that rumor and my fool brother’s paranoia to thank for the Phyllians being placed in the villas and granted some freedom of movement.”

“Although I’m sure he would continue lying to them until the moment he hands them over to Raydoss.”

“We’ve been able to establish contact with Sir Salut because of it.”

They had made plans for Salut to be our inside man during the time of our

escape. Although the prince and princess were carefully monitored, he would be able to take them and lead them down the unlocked hidden paths to freedom.

“We’ll carry out our operation tonight. We shall infiltrate the royal villa with the aid of Sir Salut and rescue the royal twins. You’re coming along. Stealth will be the main focus of our mission, but I can think of no better fighter to have by my side in case things go wrong.”

“You got it.”

“We’re counting on you.”

It was the dead of night before we knew it.

Fran and the others had infiltrated the noble housing complex which was located next to the royal palace. They were currently in the courtyard of one of the mansions in the far eastern corner.

The mansion used to belong to some lower class nobility who were once Suarez’s political opponents. Its owners long since expelled, it was now deserted. There were many estates that shared this mansion’s fate in and about the complex.

The deserted mansions weren’t well secured, and so Miriam took it upon herself to use one of them as our base of operations tonight.

“The five of us will make up the infiltration party. The rest of you will secure an escape path for us.”

We began our final debriefing in the mansion’s courtyard. Miriam led our rescue party which consisted of Fran, Carla, and Byke—the latter two being Miriam’s subordinates. There was also a Phyllian soldier who was one of Salut’s charges.

The Phyllian called Yorth wasn’t a great fighter, but it couldn’t be helped. As much as Fult and Satya believed that Fran would save them, the same couldn’t be said about the rest of the Phyllians. They asked that we bring a Phyllian along with us for peace of mind.

Truth be told, I would’ve taken the royal twins’ attendant over Yorth. The

royal maid was born to a lesser house of Phyllian nobility, but she was nobility nonetheless. She would be much more persuasive in a negotiation compared to an ordinary soldier. But I suppose she would get in the way of a sneaking mission, so we didn't take her with us.

We also had Sellimea's personal guards on our team. They used to be part of her imperial guard but deserted when Sellimea left. We also had double agents in the royal palace posing as Sellimea's traitors and spies posing as ordinary fishermen. Sellimea had more influence than I thought.

"We will infiltrate the villas upon the diversion squad's signal. Sir Salut will have opened one of the backdoors for us, and we will use that to escape with the Phyllian royal twins."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Understood."

"Hm."

"I-I'll do my best."

Yorth did not look dependable, and it would be up to the rest of us to help him make it out of this mission alive. I would secretly give him an extra boost if he needed it, too.

"We shall then use the hidden routes located under the mansions to bring them back to Sellimea's safe house."

With the mention of the safe house, Miriam concluded the briefing. Even then, the briefing she just gave was nothing more than one final rundown. A rundown which Fran hadn't needed to attend since she already knew the ins and outs of the plan…

But Miriam's aim was to ease poor Yorth's nerves. He was visibly less tense compared to before the final briefing. Miriam might seem callous, but she kept a close eye on all her men. She was Sellimea's right hand man, after all, and I imagined that she had picked up the habit of close observation from all her dealings with military men.

"Let's have a look at the map again. We won't get a chance to open it on the

field so pay attention.” Miriam laid out the simplified map of the royal palace along with the map of the island of Seedrun on the table.

The island of Seedrun looked like a gourd which lay on its side. Most of its land was concentrated in its fat eastern part, which contained the royal palace, military facilities, and the noble housing area.

The constricted northern and southern parts of the islands were made into ports, and also the general residential area for ordinary citizens.

The western area was rocky and hard. This was where the lower classes lived, all of them bunched together in terrible living conditions. The slums, in particular, were highly susceptible to high tide, and many houses were left behind because of it.

As a side note, the escape route Fran used to get out of the guardhouse ran from the southeastern part of the island all the way to the residential areas.

The royal palace was built on the east coast which was prime real estate. It also came with its private port, usable only by the royal family, underlining Seedrun’s maritime heritage. The royal palace was where the king carried out his duties of governing Seedrun while the royal villas were used to entertain guests, something of a resort. The royal villas lay to the north of the royal palace.

Fran would first head to the royal villas where the security was lightest, as the villas were fortified with two walls. Once they got past those, they could easily infiltrate the villa’s interior.

As Miriam was wrapping up, the sound of bells rang through the air. This was the military’s call for support. Our diversion had begun their operation.

“Here we go.”

Our diversion was straightforward enough. Miriam’s operatives were to attack the naval base and cause enough of a stir to force the military to send in backup from the palaces. There was no need for the operatives to capture the naval base since their main goal was distraction, as long as we managed to fool the navy into thinking we wanted to conquer their base. Still, if we dawdled and missed the timing of our escape, the distraction squad might end up completely

eliminated, so it was quite the risky operation.

I didn't think we needed a distraction as long as we could remain hidden, but…

"We must prevent the Phyllian royals from falling into the hands of Raydoss at all costs."

Once Miriam put it that way, Fran had no more objections. All we could do was pray for the safety of our diversion team.

"Let's move to the rendezvous point."

And so we began our operation.

I didn't feel too many life signatures coming from the royal villas, although the double walls were higher than I expected. Scaling them would be a challenge which I didn't think Yorth was up to.

Miriam then took something out of her pouch.

"What's that?"

"It's a grappling hook. We'll use this to climb up."

It was an analog way of doing it to be sure. The walls were equipped with a barrier which triggered upon detecting magic in its vicinity, so this was the safest way of doing it.

We would have to do something about the lookout before we can hook the rope up there, though. Fortunately, there was only one lookout patrolling the wall. Knock him out, and we could continue our infiltration.

"I'll do it."

"Thanks."

Miriam casually thanked Fran for her volunteering. This act of nonchalant relegation highlighted Miriam's royal lineage. She was more than ready to give the assignment to the right man, or beastgirl, for the sake of the mission, age requirements be damned.

Here we go, Teacher.

Ready when you are.

Simple skills didn't seem to trigger the wall's alarms. Fran flung me upwards and I put some extra Telekinesis into my flight. I cut through the darkness of night and headed towards the patrolman. I then delivered a knockout blow to his head, rendering him unconscious. The only thing the poor guy was guilty of was following his orders of dull patrol work; there was no reason to kill him. However, if he became a threat to Fran's safety I would be more than ready to cut him open.

Miriam then threw her grappling hook and fastened it to protrusion in the wall. Granted, I gave her a bit of Telekinesis assistance.

"I'll take point."

"Be careful."

"Thanks. Be on the lookout for any patrols."

"Ma'am."

Miriam grabbed the rope and started scaling the wall. Her movements were so smooth that she made the operation look harmless. It was clear to all of us that she didn't need any help. Fran wasn't much different; she climbed the wall so fast it made Miriam widen her eyes in surprise.

And so we came to Yorth, who didn't seem like he would be able to pull himself up against the wall, but Fran took care of the problem. She tied him up with the bit of rope and pulled him up. This gained another surprised stare from Miriam. She had expected Fran to be skilled with the sword as a product of speed and skill, not brute force. And here she was, towing a full grown adult up by herself.

"You really are strong…" Miriam muttered, high praise coming from her.

"Eek…" Yorth, an acrophobic, was pale the entire duration of the trip. He did a great job of keeping his voice down, though. He let out a tiny squeak towards the end, but I cut him some slack and let it pass.

In the meantime, Miriam tied down the guard I had knocked out. No problems so far, but we had to be quick before his replacement came in.

We let down the rope from the grappling hook and climbed down to the

other side of the wall. Then, we climbed the second wall. Yorth looked like he was having second thoughts about the operation, but we gave him no time to really reconsider. As much as we wanted to let him have a moment to steel his resolve, now was our only chance. The second wall was absent of patrols, likely thanks to our diversion squad. If we let this chance go, we might have to deal with more guards down the road.

We had to be quick.

“Let’s go.”

“Hm.”

Fran pulled Yorth up as the latter was making inaudible squeaking noises. No patrols showed up during her tow of him, and we all scaled the second wall without a hitch.

We were now in a corner of the courtyard of the royal villas, still some distance away from the main building where Fult and Satya were kept. The courtyards were quite spacious seeing that it was originally designed as a waiting area for guests of honor.

“Over here.”

Miriam led our way. We passed a huge garden which had bushes and tall trees that made for decent hiding spots. The closest Japanese parallel I could think of was our Imperial Palace in Tokyo: a building complex surrounded by nature.

“Not a single soldier so far…”

Miriam was right. Security was exceedingly thin tonight with about less than ten guards making the rounds. The operation was going surprisingly well.

“They must’ve sent them all to deal with our diversion team,” she mused.

“Yes. It doesn’t look like there’s much security left.”

“Let’s hurry up and get this over with.”

“You’re right.”

Even as I used my skills, I didn’t detect many life signatures coming from

within the royal villa. They really loosened security here.

“Come on. We’ll sneak in through the backdoor.”

“Hm.”

We made our move, careful not to unknowingly rustle the surrounding foliage. We were going to have to be more cautious from here on. There was a soldier making the rounds on the other side of this wall. Fran and crew quietly and carefully headed to the backdoor while suppressing their aura to remain undetected.

“It should be over there…”

As its name suggested, the backdoor was a small door located behind the royal villa. It was originally used as an entrance for palace servants. Miriam quietly walked towards it and pulled on the door handle; the door was unlocked, just as planned. Salut had carried out his mission.

Miriam signaled us to come in once she made sure the coast was clear. A familiar figure was waiting for us when we entered the villa.

“Lady Miriam, I presume.”

Dark Knight Salut.

“Sir Salut?”

“At your service. You’ve done well to make it this far, Yorth.”

“Not at all, sir!”

“Come. I shall lead the way.”

“Please.”

We would now meet up with the prince and princess and break them out of the royal villa. We would then use the underground passage to escape to the slums, hopefully losing any pursuers in the process. Miriam seemed relieved now that she had rendezvoused with our Phyllian contact and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hopefully the rest of our operation will proceed just as smoothly…”

“We’ve made it this far, so I think we’ll be all right.”

“I think so, too.”

Carla and Byke both agreed as they walked down the villa hallway, but…

Fran!

“Hm!”

Fran stopped, drew her sword, and readied herself. She stopped concealing her presence and was now in full battle mode. If there were any guards who had the ability to sense her presence, it was a matter of time before they swarmed us.

“F-Fran, what are you doing?!”

“Do you want to lay this whole operation to waste?!”

Miriam and the others yelled at her while still remaining quiet—which was no small feat—but Fran remained firm, sword in hand, poised to attack.

“What is it, Fran?”

Salut stopped to see what the commotion was about. But Fran had no time to respond to his question.

Teacher, there’s someone here!

I know. They must be professionals from the way they can conceal their presence.

The aura came from behind a door in the middle of the hallway. That was enough to alert us. They weren’t just holding their breaths, they were using skills to cut off their aura. If we weren’t around, they would’ve gotten the jump on Miriam and the others. Our ambushers were waiting for us.

“There might be someone here,” Fran declared in a soft voice.

“What are you talking about, Fran?”

“I don’t see anyone…”

“Come on now, this is no time for jokes.”

Carla and Byke were skeptical of Fran’s findings, but Miriam nodded grimly.

“No, Fran is stronger than we are. She’s also a beastman with finer senses

than us. It would be of no surprise if Fran was the only one who could sense them."

"But to say they've been waiting for us… Impossible."

"Yeah, what she said."

If the enemy had been lying in wait for us that meant they had completely seen through our plans; we might have a traitor in our midst.

I scanned our crew's reaction. Miriam and her allies seemed genuinely surprised. There might still be a traitor among us, but Carla and Byke had asked to be put on this assignment by their own volition. But then again, leading right into the trap they had laid out for us beforehand would be the easiest way to do us in. They weren't off the hook yet.

What we knew for sure was that it was dangerous for us to carry on.

Fran intimidated our attackers, forcing them out of their hiding spots.

"…Show yourselves."

"Aah. I knew you'd notice."

The door in the middle of the hallway responded by opening itself. Out came a familiar looking man in black clothing along with his charge of soldiers. The man in black looked so intimidating that just looking at him was enough to send chills down your spine and make you run a cold sweat. He was the last person we wanted to see. He stood there with an air of sharpness forged only by years of adventuring. A seasoned veteran who had seen plenty to last a lifetime.

"B-Black Fang Valuza! What is he doing here?!"

Miriam seemed to know the man as well. I guess fame was difficult to escape when you're that strong.

"You know him?"

"Of course. He is the captain of Seedrun's elite fighting force, the Dragon Fangs."

He was much more of a big deal than we thought.

"They are the strongest Seedrun has to offer."

That's right, "they." Valuza wasn't alone, and had brought his men along with him, all of them excellent fighters in their own right. They weren't so strong that they would give Fran and Valuza trouble but were more than a threat to an ordinary soldier.

There were six of them.

I thought the lack of security was odd, but they more than made up for it in quality.

"You're kidding…"

"Those are Dragon Fangs standing behind him!"

Carla and Byke paled as they gazed upon Valuza, despair was clearly written on their faces. They were only decent fighters, and Valuza's men would be a difficult challenge for them.

Salut broke into loud cursing when he saw Valuza and his men.

"Damn it! That bastard Sellid! He betrayed us all!"

"What are you saying, Sir Salut?!"

"I saw the bastard conversing with him!"

Salut gritted his teeth while pointing his finger at Valuza, his face anguished.

"I thought he was just blasting one of his idle complaints at anyone in the vicinity but…"

"That damned chamberlain! I thought he was annoying, but I didn't think he'd actually betray us," gasped Yorth, the Phyllian soldier, looking just as hurt as Salut. Their already low opinions of Sellid bottomed out upon the realization he had betrayed them.

"Hah. So you noticed. That's right, that man Sellid gave us all the information we needed." Valuza grinned.

Upon hearing those words, Miriam and the others immediately prepared themselves to withdraw. We wouldn't be able to escape with the prince and princess now that our plan was completely leaked.

Fran, we're getting out of here!

But!

Fran hesitated, feeling Fult and Satya's presence from within the villa. She didn't want to give up when she was so close. We couldn't afford to stay here, however. Reinforcements from the outside were already closing in on the villa.

"You're not getting away that easy."

Valuza and his Black Fangs did the most logical thing and attacked us. Valuza took on Fran while two of his men faced down Miriam. Carla, Byke, Yorth, and Salut all had to take on one each.

This guy knows Fran's the strongest one here!

"Ugh…"

"You really are as strong as I thought."

"You too."

"Heheh."

The sound of clashing swords rang throughout the hallway. Fran's Sword Mastery level was higher than Valuza's, but he was still putting up one hell of a fight. Their difference in skill level made up by his combat experience and preemptive attack.

"Gyaa!"

"Yorth!"

Yorth had fallen. It was inevitable considering the Black Fang operative he faced.

Teacher!

No! He's already dead! You need to focus on Valuza!

Though Fran had barely known the man, he was still part of the team, and her swordhand wavered because of her fallen friend. Valuza wasted no time in exploiting the opening.

"I'm sorry, Yorth."

In contrast to Fran, Salut, his immediate superior, was unnaturally cold as he

muttered Yorth's eulogy.

Fran, focus!

"Ungh…!"

Fran re-established her footing, but the loss had left her shaken. With Yorth dead, the Black Fang who killed him was now free to move to another target. Salut was doing well in fending off his Black Fang, but the difference in skill wasn't so stark that he was able to dispose of him immediately.

Skilled fighter that Miriam was, she was barely handling the two Black Fangs she was facing, but Carla and Byke were barely scraping by. If Yorth's killer started attacking either of them, they would die instantly. Carla and Byke knew the predicament they were in, and with knightly resolve they shouted, "Lady Miriam, you must get out of here!"

"We'll buy you time to escape, ma'am!"

"I am not leaving by myself! And we must still rescue the Phyllians…"

"It is not possible for all of us to escape! You must save yourself!"

This was bad. The more time passed, the more we would be put at a disadvantage. We needed to do something, fast, but it was hard. We were more than willing to use our big skills and magic, but the enclosed hallway made it difficult. Miriam and the others were fighting beside us, and they might get caught up in the skills themselves.

Fult and Satya were also still in the royal villa. Any skill that had the potential of harming them was out of the question since it would defeat the whole purpose of the rescue operation. There was also the matter of the rumor. Fran might be counted as an ally, but what if she hurt them by accident? That curse or whatever it was might fall upon us.

"Damn it! Carla, Byke, retreat! Fran, you go help Salut!"

"Not so fast!"

"Urgh!"

As we tried making our escape, Miriam was surrounded by three Black Fangs. It would seem that all hope was lost.

But Fran and I weren't dumbly exchanging blows with Valuza, either. We were slowly moving, counting down to an opportune time to make our escape.

Now!

"Jet!"

"Groooar!"

"What the—Gah!"

Fran set herself up so her allies wouldn't be in the line of fire while making sure all of our enemies were. She repositioned herself while deflecting Valuza's sword strikes. Seizing the opportunity, Jet attacked Valuza from within the shadows.

As seasoned as Valuza was, I don't think he had ever experienced having his ankle bitten by something in the shadows. Jet was still in his speedier, smaller form, but a monster bite was still a monster bite. You could hear the sound of Valuza's greaves being crushed along with his ankle.

We were still up against a veteran swordsman, though. We'd be underestimating Valuza if we thought he'd be slowed down by a mere monster bite. I activated Telekinesis, focusing its powers on the space in front of us, to push our enemies away. They all fell down, and Fran, not letting this opening go to waste, knocked Valuza's sword out of his hand.

"Haa!"

She aimed for his neck on the downswing, but—

"Too slow!"

She was no match for his reflexes—even when he now only had one leg to stand on. He dodged her slash by a hair's breadth. My blade, which was originally going to lop off his entire head, only produced a thin cut on his neck.

That was enough for me.

"Guh… This is…"

I had activated Venom Fang. Poison crept through Valuza's system, decreasing his life points. It wasn't going to kill him since he had Poison

Resistance and Dull Pain, but the heaviness brought on by the poison was enough to slow him down.

Wind Blower!

“Wind Arrow!”

“Grroaaar!”

Then we launched a barrage of spells. Wind Blower had no attack value by itself, but it let out a strong gust of wind which blew away everything caught up in it; nigh impossible to avoid in a tight space such as this. With Valuza and his men’s footing lost from Wind Blower, Fran and Jet proceeded to fire Wind Arrow and Shadow Magic at them for good measure.

Even if it didn’t kill them, it would be enough to buy us time.

“Now!”

“Y-yeah! We’re getting out of here!”

“Damn it. I’m sorry, Yorth. Rest in peace.”

Salut threw one last mournful look at Yorth’s body, shook off his grief, and made his escape.

In the distance, a disheveled Valuza grinned nihilistically. “Let’s kill each other next time.”

“One win, one loss. I’ll win the next one for sure.”

“Heh.”

Fran turned and ran after her companions.

Upon leaving the villa, we saw a lot of soldiers marching in our direction. They would have us surrounded if we dawdled for even a second. I guess we could use one of our flashier moves now that we were out of the villa.

Flame Servant!

“Flame Servant!”

“This is…!”

“Amazing. A flame sprite?”

The spell elicited inevitable shocked gasps from our companions. It was hard not to look in awe at two three-meter-tall giants, their bodies wrapped in flames. The flame sprite could carry out our orders, too.

Don't cause any damage to the royal villa, but attack those soldiers and mess up their formation.

The flame servants moved according to my will. Although the spell was a spectacle to behold, it wasn't actually that strong. For starters, the flame sprite's stats weren't all that high. Putting all my mana just yielded a flame sprite that was only as strong as an average orc, its flaming body mostly for show. It could shoot bursts of flame but at the cost of consuming its own body, which decreased its staying power in a long fight. It did have high defense values to make up for its less than stellar attack power, though. The fact that its body was composed of flames also made physical attacks ineffective against it. The Flame Servant was at its core a defensive spell used by mages to cover the rear line of a squad.

The flaming giant still looked intimidating, though, enough to make our pursuers flee in terror. And it worked great on the Seedrun military, most of them turning pale upon looking at the Flame Servant—not bad for a defensive spell. There was no way for them to tell how strong the flame sprites were by looking at them, so we should be fine as long as they remained ignorant. The soldiers couldn't afford to let Valuza and the Phyllian royals die either, of course, and the sight of a flaming sprite next to the royal villa must have made them hot around the collar.

"Now's our chance."

"Y-you're right. This way."

"Damn, you're good at this, little lady."

"She is as skilled with magic as she is with the sword. I expected nothing less from a D-Rank adventurer."

The rave reviews Fran received as we made our escape did not make her feel better.

"We still couldn't save Fult and Satya…"

She regretted leaving her friends behind when she had gotten so close.

“Don’t look so down. It’s not like we’ve completely failed,” Salut said.

“That’s right. We haven’t given up, either. All we have to do is rescue them before they get handed over to Raydoss,” Miriam added.

“Yes. I will save Their Highnesses if I have to give up my life for it.”

Miriam and Salut’s consolation seemed to have revived Fran’s resolve.

“Yeah. We’ll save them.”

Damn right we will. I have a plan cooked up. I’ll tell you about it later.

Okay! I can’t wait.

No problem.

Our top priority was to get as far away from the villa as possible. Fran and the others hurried to the front gate, taking care of any patrol guard that got in their way. We were originally going to quietly leave the way we came in, by scaling the double walls, but we abandoned all pretense of stealth now that our plan was completely exposed.

We did the complete opposite of our plan now, charging out the front gates instead of quietly leaving from the back. Normally, the front gates would be tightly secured, but we might catch them off guard by our unexpected frontal escape.

Salut initially opposed this plan but ultimately deferred to Miriam, who knew more about the villa’s security. He still couldn’t shake off his worried expression, though.

“There! All we have to do is make it past that, and we’ll be back in the city!”

“Hm… Someone’s there.”

“Is that…Gladio?!”

“Who?”

“A piece of garbage!”

Miriam was concise, but we didn’t know what she was talking about.

Fran tilted her head, prompting Carla to elaborate.

“The cousin of Lady Sellimea and Lady Miriam. The son of General Julius who serves under King Suarez. He currently serves as the General’s aide.”

Miriam grew more murderous with each word of Carla’s explanation. Her initial rage was soon replaced with a bubbling fury. She was trying to suppress her anger, but I can’t say she was doing a good job of it.

“Enemy?”

“Yes! The biggest enemy!” growled Miriam as she reached for her sword. She must really have a bone to pick with him.

Gladio himself was not a spectacular fighter, but he was surrounded by a group of armed soldiers who were well trained. He must have noticed us, too, because he shouted to his men, “There she is! Miriam, the rebel! Apprehend this fool who would disobey our king!”

“Hah! Big talk for an idiot lackey of my fool brother!”

They were prepared to go at it, but Miriam was definitely the more furious between the two of them. She had drawn her sword and was now charging headlong at Gladio and his crew, clearly unable to hold back her anger at seeing her mortal foe. Miriam was already cutting down enemy soldiers without Carla getting a chance to calm her down.

Compared to her, Gladio was calm and collected. The expression he wore was still as resentful, but he was at least cool enough to give out orders.

“There will be a great reward for whoever manages to capture the rebels! Look alive, men! Hunt them down!”

With his loud voice, he motivated his men with promises of fortune. It also reached its intended effect of attracting all other guards who were within earshot. His provocation would render Miriam unable to ignore Gladio. She would keep fighting until she was eventually outnumbered and surrounded.

We need to calm Miriam down somehow.

Hm.

As if on cue, more soldiers came from the outside of the villa.

“Lord Gladio, let us assist you.”

“Aah, Sir Galloudie. Bring me the head of Miriam. You are free to do as you please with the rest.”

“I understand.”

The man called Galloudie must’ve been important if Seedrunian royalty addressed him as “Sir”. Who was he?

A quick Identify revealed that he wasn’t much of a fighter; decent but only slightly stronger than the average soldier. His titles and skills on the other hand… They stank. His Class was Fraud. His skills were Threaten, Lie, Assassinate, Counterfeit, Swindle, and Identify Jammer, skills no honest man would ever need. His titles were no slouch, either: Sadist; Joyful Killer; Illegal Slaver. The man was pitch black, an indefensible scumbag among scumbags.

He brought along with him his own crew of scumbags: Assassins, Mass Murderers, and Illegal Slavers. Most of his crew were Kidnappers and Illegal Slavers, more than half of them belonging to the Blue Cat Tribe.

To Fran, a member of the Black Cat tribe who fell victim to the Blue Cats’ deception, he was her mortal enemy. We might have found our link to the illegal slavers. Although, now was not the time to be thinking about that. The enemy soldiers had nearly overwhelmed Miriam, and we couldn’t afford to lose her here.

“Miriam!”

“Haaaa! Gladioooo!”

Fran suppressed her anger towards the Blue Cats and shouted to warn Miriam. But it didn’t work. Miriam’s rage had gone to her head, and she could think of nothing but destroying Gladio. He was now walking towards her, sword in hand, as she was nearly subdued after being surrounded by more than ten men.

We had to cool Miriam’s head somehow and get out of here.

What can we do…?!

Rushing into the fray to her aid wouldn’t necessarily calm her down…

I got it.

Do you have a plan?

Fran nodded, brimming with confidence. I should let her handle the situation.

All right, I'm counting on you.

Hm.

Uh, Fran?

The spell Fran started casting was a spell that I used all the time. It proved its usefulness in the goblin raid when it blocked off nearby attackers from continuing their advance. I didn't understand her logic of using it here, though. I sure wouldn't use it.

"Fire Wall!"

"Whoa!"

"Gyaa!"

A wall of flame appeared between Miriam and the soldiers, separating them. The flames had burned some of the soldiers, which was good, but the flames also set Miriam's cloak on fire!

They stopped fighting, all right, and there was a good deal of distance between them now, too, but I thought the Fire Wall might have been a bit excessive.

"Aqua Create. Mid Heal."

Fran calmly doused the flames and healed any burn wounds that Miriam might have suffered.

"Wh-what was that for, Fran?!"

"Th-that was unnecessary!"

Carla raised her voice along with Miriam, now dripping wet. Fran calmly looked at Miriam and asked her.

"Did that cool your head?"

Miriam pursed her lips at Fran's question, subtly acknowledging the fact that

she had lost her cool. Fran had purposely used a dangerous spell to chill her temper. That the spell in question was Fire Wall only made it more ironic.

Or maybe Fran was picking on Miriam since she was doing her best not to fly into a rage at the slavers while the Seedrunian princess went off cutting down soldiers.

“We have to focus on escaping.”

“You’re right. I apologize.”

“L-Like we’ll let you! After them!”

Galloudie’s men had circumvented the Fire Wall and were getting ready to make their attack. The flaming wall managed to slow them down for a bit, but now they were on the move again. They weren’t any threat to Miriam now that her senses had returned to her, though.

We made our escape, Fran laying multiple wall spells to obstruct our pursuers’ chase. In the end, we were able to escape the royal villa without a single straggler coming after us.

Jet had assisted us while remaining in the shadows by pelting our enemies with Shadow Magic. The ensuing bolts of shadow startled our enemies, causing them to suspect that we’d had snipers posted to cover our escape. Quite a number of them ran away after that. That was a top notch assist.

“What now?”

“Escaping through the city will be dangerous. We’ll use one of our escape tunnels in the noble district.”

“Is it safe?”

Wouldn’t that reveal the location of our safe house?

Miriam had it covered, though.

“Don’t worry. The tunnels here only go as far as the port.”

The escape tunnel we were using tonight was completely separate from the one we had used for our initial escape. The tunnel itself was located in a mansion that once belonged to a supporter of Sellimea. They had been chased

out, leaving the property abandoned, but the escape tunnel remained. There was also a high possibility that king Suarez didn't know about the tunnel.

"That's the one!"

Fortunately, there were no guards in the vicinity of the mansion. We climbed over the wall, landed in the courtyard, broke through the backdoor, and infiltrated the mansion. The place was derelict after a few years of abandonment. There had been intruders, coming and going as they pleased, some of them even tracking mud with their shoes. Granted, we weren't ones to talk at the moment.

Miriam walked deeper into the mansion without hesitation before stopping in front of the fireplace. She didn't waste any time looking for the hidden tunnel.

"It should be under this tile."

Miriam used her sword to pry open one of the tiles in the hearth. It popped open, revealing a staircase which led down to the underground tunnels.

"Do you remember where all the tunnels are?"

"Of course. I learned them all precisely for moments like these."

Really? That's amazing. I know I wouldn't be able to do that.

Miriam didn't falter when faced with the fork in the road back when she broke Fran out, either. She might be smarter than I made her out to be. I thought she was one of those strong but stupid types. Sorry about that, Miriam.

"I'll take point. Carla, you take the rear."

Miriam gave Carla her orders. It felt like it was a few moments ago that Miriam was screaming bloody murder, but now she was back to her reserved self.

As we traversed the underground path, Fran asked her something that had been on her mind.

"Who was that Galloudie person?"

"Him? He is the messenger from Raydoss."

"He's the one?"

I didn't expect him to be the messenger we had been discussing. What was Raydoss thinking, making a guy like him an official? Then again, Raydoss wasn't exactly known for being upright, either, what with its tradition of invading neighboring companies and clandestine plotting. What an awful country to deal with.

Also, Galloudie had the Fraud title along with the Fake Identity skill. We couldn't know what his real goal was from one encounter.

"He was the one who originally urged my fool brother on to make a mess of our country. If negotiations with Seedrun goes well, he will be installed here as an ambassador. The mere thought of it irks me."

Well, that was bad. If a guy like him had control over Seedrun, he could supply an endless amount of slaves to Raydoss from Granzell.

Teacher.

Yeah, you don't have to remind me.

That one's mine.

If Miriam had an eternal grudge with her brother then Fran's nemeses were illegal slavers. Galloudie seemed to have deep ties with the slaving ring, too. She wouldn't be able to let him live for long.

I don't mind you targeting him. Just don't forget your priorities.

I know. Saving Fult and Satya is still more important.

Good.

I have to save my friends.

That's right.

That was the only thing she needed to remember. It eased my worries that she put her friends ahead of her vengeance.

"We must stop our country from falling into the clutches of Raydoss," Miriam said.

"Hm. We have to save Fult and Satya, too," Fran replied, as if to remind herself.

“I trust we can count on you as well, Sir Salut.”

“Of course.”

Miriam had not lost heart, and she was now determined to make our next operation succeed. I’d been cooking up some plots of my own, too. We were going to trap them this time.

We’re going to have to do some prep work, though.

Preparation was an essential part of any operation. We should start with whatever we can immediately do. This place would be our crux, actually.

Now, hear me out, Fran—

“Uncle Julius. Is everything proceeding as planned?”

“Yes. I doubt those fools have noticed.”

“Excellent! There would’ve been no point in letting them escape otherwise! Oh, if I could only see the look on Miriam’s face when she heard of the betrayal. Unfortunate!”

“Indeed, my lord.”

“And what of Sellid? We’ve no further use for him, have we? Shall we cut off his head and feed him to the fish?”

“Yes, my lord. We plan on disposing of him within the day.”

“Hehehe. Pitiful man. His betrayal of his masters will now be rewarded with death. This would spell the end of them, too.”

“We are close to finding where Sellimea is hiding.”

“It would seem that your son is taking different measures, however.”

“All for the sake of perfecting the plan, my lord. You must understand.”

“Really? I thought he hated Miriam enough to kill her on sight. Tonight would’ve been his best chance.”

“Your Highness, you know he would never knowingly oppose you.”

“That’s ‘Your Majesty’, to you. You might be my father’s brother but remember that you serve under me now.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty.”

“Hmph. Consider it your final warning.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“So where are they now?”

“The underground tunnel they used in the manor leads west. If they keep going further…”

“They’re hiding out in the slums.”

“There is no other place for them to hide.”

“I thought we did a thorough search of the slums. We didn’t find anything back then.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty. We did not break the slumlings enough.”

“Mobilize the military. Search every house and smoke Sellimea out. If she dies, I shall be able to establish a contract with Warnate. Then, I shall have all the Sea Dragons under my control.”

“I’ve sent Dwight to the slums, Your Majesty.”

“I see. That was quick.”

“Hahaha. I can only carry out your orders before you give them because I am Your Majesty’s most loyal subject.”

“Hmph. Say what you want. But the slums… My sister has fallen on hard times, indeed. I would’ve chosen death over living with dirty slumfolk. She has no respect for the dignity of her royal bloodline.”

“Indeed, she doesn’t.”

“How many people live in the slums now?”

“I believe…a little over three thousand.”

“Three thousand rats who can’t even pay their taxes. Much better to sell them off as slaves. Have you sent out the slave hunters?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We’ve captured a hundred slaves per Lord Galloudie’s request. They will be shipped off to Raydoss along with the Phyllian royalty.”

“Muahaha! I’m sure those useless fools are proud for finally being of some use to their king in their final moments.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.”

“Still, we must strive to capture the foreigners that were a part of the Phyllian royalty’s crew. Raydoss seems to be collecting all sorts of people.”

“They appear to be in hiding with Sellimea. I’m sure we’ll capture them along with her.”

Two hours later.

The streets were in a heightened state of alert with the number of soldiers that now patrolled it. Still, trying to spot five people among the masses proved impossible for them, and we slipped past undetected and returned to the slums.

“Right this way, Sir Salut.”

“Thank you. Is Princess Sellimea present? I would like to have an audience with her if possible.”

“I apologize, but she is not here right now. She moves from time to time to avoid detection.”

“I see. When shall I be able to meet her then?”

“Tomorrow. I’m afraid you must stay in these cramped halls until then…”

“That is all right. I merely wanted to thank her for aiding us in saving the prince and princess is all.”

“How proper of you.”

As Miriam showed Salut his quarters, Carla accompanied us back to the children’s room. Everyone greeted us with a smile as soon as we opened the door.

“Fran, you’re okay!”

“We heard some crazy stuff happened in town.”

“We were so worried!”

“Thanks, but I’m all right.”

“Good. By the way, where are Fult and Satya? I thought they’d be with you.”

“Sorry.”

Fran could only apologize. She promised she would save them and had returned empty-handed. She must’ve felt ashamed of not fulfilling her promise.

Fran’s apology was enough to make the children understand the mission’s failure, and their mood visibly darkened. Their spirits didn’t remain low for long, however, and they smiled again to encourage Fran. They were good kids and even better friends.

Now that Fran had been reunited with her friends, she proceeded to hand them out sandwiches and juice. They were quite hungry by how fast they gobbled down their food. The maid was the only one left whose face was still darkened.

“So…are Prince Fult and Princess Satya all right?”

“They should be fine for now.”

“I see…”

She was worried over the failed rescue operation of her masters. Yorth had failed to return as well.

“It’s okay. Miriam hasn’t given up, and neither have I.”

“Really?”

“Hm.”

Fran gave the worried maid a sandwich. She forced a plate of it into her hands before she could react.

“Fran…”

“You need to take care of Fult and Satya when they come back. Can’t do that on an empty stomach.”

“I… I suppose you’re right.”

“Hm.”

“Thank you.” The maid smiled awkwardly at Fran and bowed her head.

“I’m going to go hand these out to everyone else, too.”

Fran?

You don’t mind, do you?

No. And you’re right. We can’t expect anyone to fight on an empty stomach. And our biggest fight’s coming right up.

Hm.

And so Fran visited the other rooms and gave them all food out of her own Pocket Dimension. Stews, sandwiches, rice balls, and even her favorite curry. She would usually guard her stock of golden curry, but today she took out an entire pot of it to distribute to the others.

Are you sure you want to give them curry, too, Fran? If you give it out to this many people, it’s going to actually affect our stock.

It’s fine, Fran replied, looking longingly at the pot of curry. She had reservations about giving away part of her hoard, but she didn’t stop. *They can fight harder if they have good food in their bellies.*

So, curry?

Hm. To Fran, curry was the finest the culinary world had to offer. *Your cooking’s delicious, Teacher. I can do anything once I’ve had your cooking.*

That’s an exaggeration, don’t you think? You’re putting a lot of pressure on me here.

Your food’s the only reason I can fight so hard. I’m sure everyone will feel its effects, too.

Fran continued setting the table after giving me the highest of praise. The secret base was shorthanded because most of its men had been allocated to assisting the diversionary forces. Thus, they didn’t have enough time to allocate to preparing a satisfying dinner. Fran had been served some salted ham and cheese sandwiched between a piece of stale bread, and dried fish. The rest of our forces weren’t as fortunate, only being served plain, salty soup. They were still starving.

Everyone ate Fran's offerings with beaming smiles on their faces, thanking her the entire time. Miriam returned as well, having just shown Salut to his quarters. I expected her to scold Fran for handing out food without her permission, but she thanked her instead.

"I thank you for assisting us in our time of great need."

"Yes. Now, we can fight."

"We owe you a big one, little lady."

Having been on rations for so long, they were grateful to Fran who had gone through the trouble of exposing her skills and was now offering them food out of her own stock.

"Thank you, Fran."

Sellimea, who had returned with Miriam, smiled as she ate Fran's curry. She had refused special treatment and insisted on eating the same amount and quality as her men; she must've been hungry, too. She cleaned up her plate politely and elegantly, at quite a rapid rate, too.

"This really is delicious, though."

"Hm. Curry's the best."

"So this mysterious dish is called a 'curry'. I've never even had it in my days at the palace."

I guess the princess liked my cooking. I must've been one hell of a chef. Not that I would amount to much without my Cooking skill.

"Hm. This is my teacher's greatest dish."

"My goodness, your teacher came up with this all on his own?"

"Yeah."

"That's amazing."

"Teacher is the world's greatest teacher. He can do anything."

I was glad that I had won Fran's great respect, but it made me slightly worry about what kind of Super Sword she thought I was. I didn't think I could live up to all her expectations. Although, I would do everything in my power to grant

her wishes, of course, so long as she didn't make like Princess Kaguya and ask for the robe of a fire-rat and a jewel from a dragon.

Then again, they might just exist in this world. I was reasonably sure that we could look for fire-rats and dragons. A jewel which grew on the branch of a tree and a bird that laid pearls didn't sound like too much of a stretch.

Could Princess Kaguya have been an otherworlder? One that was transported to Earth from another world, that is. Would that make the legend more of a historical fact?

Something on your mind, Teacher?

Huh? It's nothing. I was just running some hypotheticals.

You're thinking up a plan to save Fult and Satya?

I-I guess you could say that?

Oooh. Give me the details.

All right, sure.

Fran was going to have to relay my plan to Sellimea and Miriam so I needed to tell her sooner or later. I explained to her my battle plan.

First you take Salut—

I see. You're a genius, Teacher.

Ain't nothin' really—

A few minutes later, Fran understood the strategy.

Well?

Yeah. I think that'll work.

Right? You're gonna have to explain it to Sellimea and Miriam. I'm counting on you.

You got it.

Fran ran our plan to Sellimea, and to my surprise, she accepted it. Miriam had explained the gist of it to her on their way here, so she had already been half-convinced about it.

Sellimea and Miriam looked determined, eager to carry out their given roles.

One hour later, Fran was in a meeting with a couple of men who were serving in the secret base. They were Miriam's subordinates who had also pledged their loyalty to Sellimea. One of them was even the former leader of the imperial guard, and each of them used to hold a high office in their own regard.

All of them were tall, well built, and had frighteningly hard faces. They all looked intimidating just standing there. Then again, I guess that could be one of the requirements to make it in the imperial guard. In any case, they looked reliable.

"Understood. We will carry out this plan no matter what."

"Even if it costs us our lives. The prospect of a frontal assault on the royal villa does make me shiver with excitement."

"It sets my blood on fire, that's for sure! I've always wanted to try attacking Suarez head-on."

The meeting played out like a scene in an old movie about knights. It startled me that these terrifying men would be so loyal to Sellimea. Miriam declared our earlier operation a failure after the casualties incurred during the distraction at the harbor. One of the men present had bandages wrapped around him, his injuries still fresh. I had expected some of them to voice their complaints.

But these men looked at Miriam without a shadow of doubt in their eyes. Their intense gaze would seem more like a glare to an uninitiated observer, but their eyes signaled trust in their leader.

"I'm sorry. I would like to tell you the rest of the plan, but…"

"That's all right, Lady Miriam. The fewer people there are who know the full plan, the less likely it is to leak."

"We have no intentions of leaking the plan, but it's better to be thorough about these things."

"We're at your service, be it as decoy or diversion."

"Heheheh. We can dispatch right now if you want. We're always ready for a revolt."

“Young lady, we leave Lady Miriam in your hands.”

“And we’ll take care of the front lines,” the men said, puffing their chests. They didn’t doubt Fran’s words either despite her young age and looking like a weak little girl. They were strong themselves, of course, so they must have figured out Fran was no ordinary girl. Their belief was only amplified by Miriam’s own trust in Fran’s strength.

“I’m sorry. And thank you.”

Miriam looked over the room with eyes that were overwhelmed with emotion. Her men’s words had moved her.

“We’ll need your help to make this operation a success.”

Miriam’s men bowed towards her, when—

Bam! Bam! Bam!

“Hey! Open up!”

Someone was banging on the door of the secret base. I had sensed people approaching earlier, but I didn’t expect them to hone in on our particular room. The banging continued.

“There’s a possibility that there are criminals using this place as a hideout!”

“Open this door if you’ve got nothing to hide!”

Suarez’s hands had finally reached the slums. The information was probably leaked by the traitor we had. All they needed to know was that we were hiding somewhere out in the slums. An exact address wasn’t necessary.

“Lady Miriam, you must go to the safe room at once.”

“Will you be all right?”

“We’ll be fine. We’ve lived in these slums for years. We’re used to this kind of stuff.”

“This way, hurry.”

“Sorry about this.”

Fran went to an underground room, led by Miriam’s men. The room was

simple as it was carved out of hard rock. Considering how tight its dimensions were, it was more akin to a makeshift storage area under the floorboards. The rooms ceilings were reinforced with wooden planks, but I worried whether they would hold up. We could clearly see whatever was going on up there, and I wondered if they could see down here, too. Fortunately, night had fallen, and we were safely hidden under cover of darkness.

The large burly men, formerly of the imperial guard, really were used to sudden raids by Suarez's men. Once they had made sure Miriam and Fran were safely hidden away, they quietly opened the door, leading the man who was in the process of giving the door another solid bang to almost trip from his own momentum. The timing was so perfect that he must've planned it.

"D-don't just open the door like that!"

"Sorry 'bout that."

"We heard some criminals were hiding out here. We'll show ourselves in."

"Criminals? We haven't seen any criminals."

"That's for us to decide. Out of the way!"

The two soldiers pushed the man out of the way and strutted into the safe house. They acted more like thugs looking for stuff to rob than policemen in search of fugitives. They examined a candlestick that was left on the table, and I overheard one of them say, "Looks cheap. Leave it." Miriam's men must've overheard them, too, but they remained quiet and showed them the rest of the room.

Miriam's men immediately changed their attitudes once the pleasantries were over, though. They surrounded the two soldiers and began pressuring them. They folded their arms over their chests to show them their bulging biceps.

Anyone could tell by the way the two soldiers were putting on airs that they were nothing special. Weak, in fact. Compared to them, we had five well-built, well-trained men on our side, all of them glaring the two street thugs in soldier clothes down.

That was enough to scare the two soldiers. They must've been terrified over

what would happen should the five men decide to get aggressive, and while they tried acting strong, they weren't convincing with how pale they had become. Soon, they left the room.

"Hahaha, did you see the look on their faces?!"

"And they expect us to hand over our Ladies like that?"

"The quality of recruits has gone down lately. I can't believe that scared them away."

Well, I don't know about that. These old guys looked like full-blown outlaws, each of them capable of leading their own legion of military rebels. Compared to them, those two guards looked like thugs who had freshly graduated from high school. There was no contest. I honestly felt sorry for our intruders and had almost warned them to run away.

"Hm, I wonder if the other hiding spots are doing okay," Miriam muttered.

Sellimea should be fine considering her quarters could only be reached via a passage of underground tunnels. The same could not be said of our other companions who were hiding out in a shack located deeper in the slums. There was a possibility the soldiers had found them by now.

We had a bad feeling about it. Fran hurried Miriam along and broke into a light sprint to the other safe house. We were almost spotted by some patrolling soldiers because of it.

Fran's instincts were unfortunately correct.

We immediately concealed ourselves in the shadows and observed the situation. Soldiers were banging on each door, yelling at whoever inside to come out. I really hoped they would ignore them, but…

My prayers were left unanswered, and someone opened one of the doors.

Tomorrow was the day we were finally going to rescue the prince. They must've wanted to get the racket over with and let the soldiers in. I hoped that the soldiers would be satisfied after their random inspection…

We would be in trouble if we raised their suspicions somehow, although I do think it was unavoidable. There were over thirty foreigners crammed into this

tiny shack, you see. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together and figure that we must be connected to the mass prison break from the other day.

Should I kill them?

Not here. Everyone can see you. The other soldiers would spot you instantly.

The soldiers came out again as I thought about our next step.

Well, that was fast and uneventful.

That proved to be wishful thinking, however.

"NO! Let go of me!"

"Shut up! Come over here!"

One of the soldiers had gotten hold of the little girl. She was crying as he dragged her by the arm, struggling every step of the way.

"Stop! Stop it!"

"I told you to shut up, you little bitch!"

"Gya!"

Fran's intent to kill burst out of her the moment the soldier struck her friend. This was worse than the time she was mocked for her Black Cat lineage. Her murderous rage was palpable, enough to send shivers down the spines of the guards posted outside of the safe house. They looked around, wondering what ghost must've passed them by. They brushed it off as mere fancy and returned their attention to the safe house.

"Hey! Don't be rough with the merchandise!"

"Heheheh. Come on, no need to be so strict. There are still a lot of people inside. What's a broken slave or two?"

"That's right. You're all getting the death penalty for escaping prison anyway. Might as well make yourselves useful."

The girl started wailing after hearing the guard's words, prompting him to hit her again. He struck her other cheek this time making her cower in fear.

"Heheheh. You know what, I always wanted to make a punching bag out of

kids.”

“Gyahaha! You’re a nutjob, you know that?!”

“Ya hear that, Punching Bag? You’re my punching bag now! Good for you!”

“Then I’ll take the woman that’s inside.”

“Go for it, go for it!”

That was an awful conversation. I wish Fran didn’t have to hear that. It was too late now, though. Her body was shaking with anger. As hard as I found that conversation to listen to, the effect it had on Fran was staggering. Her emotions overwhelmed her, and she gripped my hilt so hard her hand started shaking.

Fran?

Fran didn’t answer.

Fran!

But she was too far gone with anger to listen to me now. All I got for a response was the gnashing of her teeth. She leapt out of the shadows, ignoring all the other soldiers who had surrounded the little girl to watch her cry. The only ones Fran could see now were the crying girl and the bad man who hit her. She dashed close to him and uttered with a chilling voice.

“Die.”



“Aah—”

“Urgk?”

Fran slashed me twice, a merciless, all out strike. She ended the lives of two adult men in a mere flash. One of them was sliced clean in half, from top to bottom. The other’s skull was cut horizontally across the bridge of his nose.

Fran sheathed me, the men’s corpses falling gently on the ground. I doubt they felt the pain of their death because of how fast it all went by.

“You’re okay, now.”

“Huh?”

Fran held the girl close and jumped away. Doing so allowed her to gain some distance from the men’s corpses before they hit the ground and splattered their guts everywhere. She didn’t want the girl to see any of that.

Fran talked to the girl in a soothing voice while she healed her, all traces of the cold-blooded killer gone from her face.

“Are you okay?”

“Fran?”

“Yeah. Sorry I’m late.”

Fran hugged her gently. The girl started crying again, big drops of tears streaming down her cheeks. They weren’t tears of fear, however, but tears of relief.

“Fran…! Waaah!”

“It’s okay.”

“I was scared! So scared!”

“I know.”

“It hurt so bad!”

“Mhmm.”

The boys who were hiding in the safe house came out, probably because they heard their friend wailing into Fran’s chest. The maid followed suit, along with

the other adults.

This might be bad.

Our crew weren't the only ones who had taken notice of the girl's crying.

"Wh-what's this?!"

"Who did this?!"

The other soldiers, close to ten in total, had found their friends' bodies. Some of them started throwing up on the spot. I can't blame them, the scene was quite grotesque.

"Y-you did this!"

"Hey, they're the ones we're looking for!"

"It's the prisoners!"

It didn't take long for us to be exposed. There were a lot more soldiers around us now. Among them, there was one figure who clearly was no ordinary soldier. He wore gold armor, with equally gaudy gold robes. A short, flabby man who looked more orc than human. I didn't think we'd meet him again here. This man was the main reason we got roped into the chaos of Seedrun in the first place. The pig of an admiral who wanted to make a slave out of Fran, Dwight.

"Lord Dwight!"

"What's all the ruckus about? Have you found Miriam and Sellimea?"

"S-Sir, some of our men have fallen and—"

"Be quiet, you. Do you think I care about dead people who couldn't make themselves useful and find the target? I'm glad those bastards are dead."

I agreed on calling soldiers who would dare lay their hands on a little girl "bastards," but wasn't that a little much considering they were his own men? The soldiers seemed to agree with me too as they glared daggers at their superior. If only looks could kill. Dwight didn't stop with his harsh comments, however.

"This is why you army men are useless."

"I-I'm sorry, sir."

“These slumfolk are far more valuable. At least I can sell them off as slaves!”

“Uhm…”

“Hmph. No matter. It infuriated me when I heard the foreign slaves I went through the hard work of securing escaped prison, but now you are here in front of me. I’ll sell you off to Galloudie this time. He’s going to pay a pretty penny for you, too. If I use that money and the fact that I was the one who captured the Phyllian royalty, the day where I become the general isn’t far off!”

He had his mind set on using money to buy the General’s seat.

“You’re with Sellimea and Miriam, aren’t you? You know they plan on saving the Phyllian royalty who left you behind.”

“No one believes you. Fult and Satya would never leave their people behind.”

“Hmph! Such blind faith. That’s where you’re wrong. They sold you out to save themselves!”

“No? You’re clearly lying.”

“You refuse to understand, little girl. What proof do you have?”

“Why do I have to believe a talking pig?”

“P-pig…!” Dwight’s face reddened with anger. I guess he was sensitive about his weight among other things.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?! It’s too late for apologies! I’ll make an exception for you. I’ll spare you the life of a slave and kill you right here!”

“I’m not apologizing to you. I’m apologizing to the pig.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t fair of me to compare a pig to the likes of you. You’re closer to a pseudo-orc than anything else.”

Fran was getting witty, a clear sign of her anger. Dwight just declared his plans of making slaves out of us, so it was only expected.

“I didn’t know pseudo-orcs could speak human. You must be a mutant.”

“Silence! That’s right, it was all a lie! I wanted to see you all tremble at the prospect of becoming slaves for a few cheap laughs, but none of that matters to me now! I’ll just torture you into despair myself! You lot, grab them! Bring them to me!”

The soldiers looked troubled, knowing full well there was no way of apprehending all of us, especially Fran. Dwight didn’t seem to care, though. He glared at his soldiers and continued barking orders at them.

“You better have them tied up by the time I come back with Sellimea’s head. Understand?!”

“B-but, sir, we can’t… Not when there’re so few of us—”

“Then go call for backup, you useless fools!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“So have you found where Sellimea is hiding?”

“N-no, sir. We are still searching the area—”

“Enough. You have made your incompetence very clear. How long do you think it would take if you used the human wave to search the area? Do they teach you nothing? Think!”

“Then what should we do, sir?”

“This. Slumfolk! I know you can hear me. Bring out Sellimea before I set fire to your houses!” Dwight shouted, his terrifying voice amplified with Wind Magic. No doubt the entire slums could hear his threats.

“S-Sir, what are you saying?! We can’t do that!”

Despite their enthusiasm of capturing locals to sell them off as slaves, the soldiers apparently drew the line with arson. Personally, I thought both deserving of the death penalty, but at least they still had standards.

“And what are *you* saying? Do you have reservations about burning down this dump? I am not a complete monster! Bring me Sellimea and I won’t burn down your homes! I’ll even throw in some reward money for you! 1,000,000G alive, 500,000G for her head!”

No matter how well hidden Sellimea was, the slumfolks could still sell her out. There had to be at least a few people who knew where the princess was. These slum people must have been hurting for money, too. Bribing them was a great way of winning them over.

I felt an unrest among the people of the slums as Dwight finished his announcement. We were surrounded then, mostly by onlookers who were just hanging around the vicinity. There were close to a hundred of them in total, and I could tell they all watched the spectacle with bated breath.

This is bad…

What should we do, Teacher?

We have to break through.

We didn't want to expose the underground tunnels by using them so that way was out. Our only option left was to break through the crowd of slumfolk.

It shouldn't be a problem if you're the only one here, Fran…

But we were going to have to protect our allies on our way out, increasing the level of difficulty. What was supposed to be Normal difficulty immediately shot up to Hell.

"What, are you just going to stand there and watch! Fine, give me information on Sellimea's whereabouts! I'll buy it for a high price!"

Dwight shouted again. And then—

"Oh, would you shut up!" someone shouted back, and Dwight was pelted with stones. Soon, the barrage of rocks came from all directions.

"Wh-what are you doing?! Don't you know who I am?! I am Dwight, Admiral of the Seedrunian Navy!"

"Tell it to someone who cares!"

"S-stop that! You're supposed to give me Sellimea! Why are you stoning me?! Do you want to die?!"

Even as he was being stoned by the masses, Dwight kept up his arrogance. It was odd that he still expected them to follow his orders after mocking and

threatening them so much. I guess the slumfolks had cooperated in the past despite of it, but their patience had run dry with the pig admiral.

“Burn down our house and home will you? Well, here’s how we feel about that!”

“Do you really think the Princess would hide out in a place like this?!”

“This is what you get for running your mouth! A pig like you calling us pigs? How dare you!”

“Even if she were hiding out here, we’d never hand her over to you!”

“That’s right! We owe the princess our lives ten times over!”

“Get outta here!”

Soon, rubbish and sticks were added to the arsenal of throwing stones.

“D-damn it! You, little girl! Come o—Gurk!”

Dwight must’ve wanted to use Fran as a hostage. She casually killed him as he tried to grab her. A tiresome fellow, he deserved it. I stored away his corpse for now to get rid of the evidence. We could just toss it out somewhere later.

“Get outta here, little lady! While you still can!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, don’t you worry about us. We’re on your side.”

“Good luck out there.”

“Take care of Lady Sellimea for us!”

“And Miri, too!”

The slumfolk had been on Sellimea’s side all along. Thank God we didn’t start panicking and cut all of them down.

“You lot, over here!”

“Hm?”

“Come on!”

A little old lady was calling out to Fran.

“What is it?”

“Use this to clean yourself up.”

The old lady gave her a wet rag as she pointed to the girl that was on Fran’s back. Fran took the rag and used it to wipe the girl’s face.

“I got a fresh one for you so don’t worry, it’s clean.”

“Thanks.”

“Ain’t nothin’. Anything to repay what Sellimea’s done for us. You should get going. We’ll take care of the king’s dogs.”

“Will you be okay? You’re up against soldiers…”

“Hahaha! We won’t lose to the fool king’s sycophantic army. Don’t worry.”

“Okay. I’ll give you back this rag after cleaning it.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“No. I’ll be back. And I expect to see you again.”

“Hahaha! I suppose I could still use that old rag. I’ll be seeing you again, little lady.”

The slumfolk sent Fran off with smiles on their faces and big thumbs up. Fran bowed her head, and took the kids back to the safe house.

She closed the door before giving her surroundings one final glance. There was close to two hundred slum dwellers now, and she could hear the sound of yelling somewhere off in the distance. It sounded like the sound of people fighting, most of it the pained cries of Seedrun’s soldiers. The slum dwellers were ganging up on them quite well.

“Are you all right?”

It was Miriam and Carla. They had come to check the situation after hearing Dwight’s declaration.

“Yeah, we’re fine now.”

“I see. Did something happen?”

Fran explained the situation to them. The kids helped her whenever she

lacked the diction to describe a certain scene.

“I see. So you killed some soldiers,” Miriam said, weighing the situation. Even if she had killed some soldiers to save her friend, the fact remained that Fran killed some Seedrunian soldiers. The incident was going to draw Suarez’s attention to this place, and another envoy of soldiers wasn’t out of the question.

Fran looked down, knowing that she had gone too far this time. “I’m sorry.”

“Hm? No, no need to apologize. You did nothing wrong, and I’m not particularly upset.”

“But…”

“It’s all right. I’m sure my sister wouldn’t blame you, either.”

“I agree.”

“We fight in order to protect the little things that are important to us.”

“Thanks.”

“I was just thinking about how the people of the slums might just rush the royal palace at this rate.”

I see. There was a possibility our small riot would turn into a full-scale revolt because of all the harbored resentment. That would work perfectly in our favor.

“Let’s speed things up a bit. Our initial plan was to take the palace by ourselves, but now—” Miriam grinned. “We have the support of all the citizens living in the slums. I can see my fool brother panicking now.”

Miriam and I were thinking of the same thing.

“Hm.”

“Commence operation.”

Chapter 5:
The King of Seedrun

A few hours had gone by since the slum riots started, and it was now midday. Fran could be seen among the people, two thousand strong, all armed and all marching towards the royal palace.

Sellimea and Miriam could be seen at the head of the crowd. They were protected by their envoy of bodyguards, but the fact remained that they were at the front lines. Among their guards were Salut, Fran, Carla, and some other cloaked figures.

The masses were mostly composed of slum dwellers. After Sellimea and Miriam bowed their heads to them after their assault on the soldiers who had invaded their homes, the slumfolks immediately pledged their cooperation to the princesses. Sellimea explained that going up against Suarez's soldiers was going to be dangerous, but their minds were made up.

"A small risk as long as we get to be useful to you, Lady Sellimea."

"Without your help, we would've died that year we couldn't get any fish."

"You gave my mom free medical treatment when she was sick."

Sellimea had gone out of her way to help these people during the reign of the previous king, and they all expressed their gratitude to her. The slums now stood with her, eager to repay her kindness.

After a little digging, it turned out that the slumfolk had known of Sellimea's whereabouts all along. Still, they had continued to cover for her and protect her without her even knowing. Thinking about it now, it was impossible to keep the hidden paths a secret from the people who lived near them. The slumfolk all agreed that they wouldn't let any information linked to Sellimea leak to the outside.

Sellimea and Miriam were completely oblivious to this fact, thinking all along they had done a good job of keeping their operations a secret from the civilians around them. Both of them blushed when the slumfolk told them the truth.

They were undoubtedly embarrassed upon finding out their efforts at subterfuge only succeeded because they were helped by the people around them.

Their subordinates who had been tasked with blending into the slums knew about it but kept it a secret from their masters anyway. They didn't want Sellimea to think that her presence was a bother to the people she lived among.

The princess loved her people, and her people loved her back. There was a bond of kindness between them.

Truth be told, I didn't think royalty would be able to rule a kingdom based on good intentions alone. Still, I wanted to see Sellimea heal this broken country, and Fran felt the same way. On the other hand, a ruler like Suarez, who abused his power to milk his people dry, had stirred up resentment among the masses.

If you were to look at the reason behind the slum people's revolt, eighty percent of it could be attributed to their love for Sellimea, but twenty percent of it was anger towards Suarez. Seedrun's citizens weren't the only ones up in arms, either. They had helpers like us thrown into the mix.

There were about two thousand of us when we started out, but the mass started accumulating more people by the time we got closer to the palace. Now, there were about three thousand of us in total. What goes around comes around, as they say, and this mob was the embodiment of it. Every act of kindness and evil would be repaid.

Suarez had prepared three thousand soldiers to respond to Sellimea's mob. It wasn't much, but it couldn't be helped given the current circumstances. Suarez had to increase security for the royal palace, but he still had to safeguard the military ports as well. Three thousand was the maximum number of soldiers he could mobilize on such short notice.

Not that Suarez was necessarily going to lose. Although we were about equal in terms of number, our mob still consisted mostly of civilians while Suarez commanded an army of troops. His men were also better equipped and better trained. Sellimea's militia had no chance of winning.

At least, under normal circumstances.

“We have the upper hand,” Miriam said, noting how the tide of battle was in Sellimea’s favor. Seedrun was originally founded by pirates, after all, which amounted to most Seedrunians being quick tempered, hot-blooded fishermen. Most of them worked menial labor all their lives, and it showed through their thickly muscled bodies. Untrained as they might be, they could wreak quite a bit of havoc when left to their passions as the Seedrunian soldiers were quickly learning.

Compared to the civilians, the Seedrunian soldiers were clumsy and unmotivated. Their superiors were stuck in petty conflicts for power which decreased the quality of their physical training. They were hated by Seedrun’s people, and their compensation was cheap. No wonder their motivation was through the floor. There were some scumbags in the army who did atrocious acts, but most of the soldiers only stayed in the army to put food on the table. Motivation and drive made up for the difference in equipment. The end result was Sellimea’s followers ragdolling most of Suarez’s forces about.

Things might have played out differently had Valuza’s Dragon Fangs and the palace’s imperial guard been a part of the battle, but they were nowhere to be seen. Having former imperial guards on our side bolstered our troops’ morale as it meant Sellimea was among her followers. We weren’t going to lose this charge.

I was going to have Fran help with the assault if it came down to it, but there was no need so far. She continued to stay by Sellimea’s side as her guard. Sellimea was supposed to wait in the safe house, at first. She was our commander, after all, and we weren’t going to lose as long as she remained alive. And yet, she had insisted on coming along to the frontlines. She said letting the people fight for her while she stayed hidden in her safe house didn’t sit right with her. Miriam tried to convince her otherwise but Sellimea’s mind was set. The younger princess meekly conceded to her older sister, in fact. If Miriam wasn’t opposed to it, then we weren’t going to muddle things further.

Besides, there was no guarantee that hiding out in the slums was a safe choice. There was no place to run if someone torched the place, as the late Dwight had suggested the other night. There might be traitors in the midst, too. Therefore, it was much easier to safeguard her where we could see her.

“They’re running away!”

“Serves ’em right!”

“Do not pursue! Killing soldiers is not our main goal!”

The mob quickly vanquished Suarez’s troops who were now retreating. Miriam prevented the mob from chasing the soldiers down in their fever pitch. She couldn’t stop them all, however, and the more hotheaded of our number strayed off to terrorize some terrified soldiers. At least most of the mob listened to her orders.

“Onwards! To the royal palace!”

“*YEAH!”* The mob roared as they resumed their advance towards the palace. We were now passing through a residential district. Military resistance had decreased to the point of being inconsequential; they weren’t even attempting to stop us at this point. A lot of civilians joined the mob upon seeing Sellimea in the lead, further bolstering the mob’s morale.

Suddenly, Fran stepped out of the mob.

What is it, Fran?

“There.”

Fran pointed to several men who appeared to be surrounding a shop. As we got closer, I figured out what they were up to.

“Give us all your money, old lady.”

“O-oh no…”

Having people like this in the mob was inevitable as our numbers grew larger. They had been warned beforehand that they would be punished if they acted violent toward any civilian.

Still, I suppose some people joined the mob so they could have an excuse to loot and plunder when things got frantic. The men had surrounded a shopkeeper who was in the middle of running away and was now stripping her down for cash. One of them skipped the formalities and was in the middle of looting foodstuffs from the shopkeeper’s store.

“What are you looking at?”

“Hey, that girl’s part of the princess’s guard.”

“This kid? You serious?”

The men looked down on Fran with the same unpleasant eyes as the soldiers she had killed.

“Let go of the old woman.”

“What’s that? You ordering us around?”

“Sellimea wouldn’t allow this.”

“We’re helping our princess out, you know. For free! She’d let this kind of petty behavior slide.”

“That’s right. How about we give you a piece of the action, too?”

The things they said and did were no different from Suarez’s men. Men like them would only get in our way and sully Sellimea’s good name. Fran seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Haa!”

“Gah!”

“Blurk!”

She closed her distance with a speed too fast for the eye to see, and knocked the men out with her bare hands. She delivered excellent liver shots, and the men crumpled to the ground, silenced by the intense pain. She took out the other two men and then turned to the old woman who was trembling in fear. Fran’s youth worked in her favor for once, as her looks had a calming effect on the old shopkeeper. She bowed her head to thank her.

“I’m so sorry about this.”

“Oh, there’s no need for you to apologize, young lady. The fault lies in no one but these bad men. Why, I can’t believe they would dirty Lady Sellimea’s name like that.”

The shopkeeper was too old to fight, but she was squarely on Sellimea’s side.

“Thanks. You should close early today.”

“I was just about to do that.”

“See you.”

“Aah, hold on. Take this with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Consider it my way of saying thank you.”

The old lady gave her a rice cake wrapped with leaves. Fran took it, bowed her head, and left the store. She dragged the men along, of course. She brought them to Sellimea and Miriam, who were too far ahead for the rest of the crowd to see.

“I took care of some idiots.”

“Well done.”

“Good job, Fran!”

“There might be others.”

“True… These can’t be the only fools trying to take advantage of the chaos of a revolution.”

“Hm.” Sellimea darkened at Miriam’s statement. She must be thinking that it was somehow her fault. The corners of Miriam’s eyes raised upon seeing her sister’s grief-filled expression. We finally approached the men as their pain subsided and they were able to regain their footing.

“Princess, hand her over to us!”

“Why?”

“Why?! Look at what she did to us!”

“We are volunteer soldiers for Princess Sellimea. That girl shamed courageous men like us!”

“You lot were the ones who started looting innocent civilians!”

The men smirked at Miriam’s judgment before blurting out their dirty excuses.

“Perhaps, but surely you understand our reasons.”

“That’s right. We’re working for you without compensation here. Surely you don’t expect us to walk away empty-handed?”

“You guys think so, too, don’t you?”

The men started inciting the people around them. Most of them looked disgusted at the men’s behavior, but there were some among them who nodded in agreement. They might have disagreed with robbery, but looting seemed all right in their books.

Punishing the men would tell the mob that the princess disapproved of such uncouth behavior. We might lose a lot of followers if that happened. Did Suarez send these men specifically to turn the mob against us? That couldn’t be. Fran only caught them in the act by pure chance. However, the fact that they were stirring up trouble remained.

Miriam showed no hesitation.

“I see… Hmph!” Miriam brought the blunt side of her lance down upon him.

“Aiee?!” “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” the remaining men shouted at Miriam for knocking their friend out cold.

“What, you ask? I am merely bringing justice upon the fiends who hurt the innocent!”

“S-stop! Gyaaargh!”

Miriam knocked the second man out. The wound was heavy, albeit not fatal. Miriam was furious despite her calm exterior.

“Please, stop! Gyaaa!”

“Justice must be dealt. That goes for you, too!”

“Ow, argh!”

“Noo!”

Miriam had all four men crawling on the ground in a matter of seconds. The sudden burst of violence silenced the heretofore restless crowd. They watched Miriam with bated breath. As bad as the men might have been, she still beat

down people who were on their side. It wouldn't be out of the question to think that they saw Miriam as ruthless and heartless.

I looked over at Sellimea, expecting the sheltered princess to find scenes of public caning excessive and distasteful. However, I found no trace of fear on her face or trembling in her stature. She seemed prepared for the contingency and stepped forward with determination. She stood in front of Miriam as if defending her and raised her voice to the people without so much as a flinch.

"People of Seedrun, lend me your ears! We are not here fighting to fulfill our selfish desires."

Her tone wasn't forceful, but it still reached the ears of her citizens.

"We fight to restore law and order to our land. We must uphold law and order no matter the cost."

Sellimea moved her hands and body to appeal to her people. Her silver-purple hair glowed as it danced in the sunlight. The effect was enough to draw the mob's attention. She had taken hold of her audience's vision and hearing; all of them looked upon her as if entranced. The riotous air which was bubbling up within the mob dispersed completely as they all leaned in to listen to Sellimea.

She had gained complete control of her audience.

"We must stand tall, maintain our dignity! We must do the right thing!"

Sellimea's tone of voice and expression were not manufactured, reaching the hearts of her citizens. Perhaps, it only touched their hearts because she was so genuine.

"You have been oppressed for too long. I understand that you must want to oppress in return. But that is precisely why we cannot afford to become oppressors ourselves…"

Sellimea's words struck a chord with her people as they tried to digest them. Her words even touched my heart despite my slight cynicism. The people felt like they must think through what she was saying.

"We do not live on good intentions alone. Unfortunately, there will always be people like these who live for their own selfish desires."

Sellimea had managed to win her people over in such a short period of time. She looked upon the men pitifully, and most of the people followed suit. This was proof that many agreed with Sellimea's genuine words and actions.

"But we shall not look to them for help. We, upholders of justice, will not turn to those who seek to ignore it."

Her hair blew in the wind as beads of sweat trickled down her cheek. She looked divine, like a goddess in a play. The people continued to listen, then knelt to her. I could understand why.

"I implore you! Stand tall! Stand tall that no one may dominate us and that righteousness may flourish!"

The crowd exploded as soon as Sellimea finished her speech.

"YEAAAAAH!!!"

They pumped their fists to the sky with a look of exaltation on their faces. The fear of battle and resentment towards their king had been wiped clean, and it was now replaced with a strong look of passion. Now they no longer fought because of their love for Sellimea or their hatred for Suarez. They were now fighting as the proud Seedrunians that they were.

All right, time for a bit of insurance.

Insurance?

Yup.

Using dirty tricks right after Sellimea's impassioned speech felt a bit wrong, but I was a dirty kind of guy who didn't mind resorting to trickery to win. Although I did feel like I had to apologize to Fran for involving her in my scam.

No problem. I'm an adventurer. As long as it doesn't break the law, it's all good.

Heheheh. True that.

Fran waited for the excitement of the mob to die down before opening her mouth.

"I've seen these four before. They're Suarez's men."

I had figured out that they weren't, of course; we had run into them by pure coincidence. But even if it was coincidence, it was much better that they were thought as such. It wasn't like anyone could verify the truth at this point anyway.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Hm. No doubt about it."

"Did you hear that, everyone? The fool king sent his spies to rile up unrest among us! Do not be deceived by his dirty tactics!"

"OOOH!" went the crowd.

The effects were immediate. Sellimea's moving speech had united her citizens, and now their anger towards Suarez was sharpened to a point. There was no way the mob would betray us or run away in fear now.

Miriam nodded at us. She knew the game we were playing, but she was prepared to play dirty so Sellimea wouldn't have to. They really made a good team.

"All right… Advance!"

"Julius, how goes the rebels' advance?"

"My lord. They are headed towards the royal villa as expected."

"Do we have enough guards for the royal palace?"

"Of course. We've laid out our troops for an ambush as well. We'll apprehend them all in one fell swoop."

"Very good. According to our agent, they plan on making a show of attacking the royal villa before diverting to the royal palace to capture me. A brilliant plan had it not been leaked!"

"Indeed. It seems they've ordered their followers to attack the royal villa, as well."

"Heheheh. How unfortunate that they have not realized the traitor is still in their midst."

"Indeed. But is it all right for us to leave the Phyllian twins there?"

“It can’t be helped. Not now. If Sellimea’s spies spot them in the royal villa, they would know of our plot. My life would be in danger.”

“Are you basing it off the information our Raydossian spy gave us? That demons would protect the Phyllian royalty if their lives were in danger?”

“We have no way of verifying the truth… Galloudie seems unaware of it, so why would that man know?”

“They say he’s been spying on the Phyllians for a long time now.”

“I see… Well, I’m not going to put my life on the line to verify the rumors. It would be calamitous if demons started raiding the royal palace.”

“Indeed. Our Water Dragons would be ineffective against them as well.”

“Exactly. You’ve posted some of our elite troops in the royal villa, yes?”

“I have, Your Majesty. Thirty of our most loyal men, none with any sympathy towards the Phyllians. We’ve also told them not to leave the royal villa in case of unforeseen circumstances.”

“So the Dragon Tail are securing the villa?”

“Yes. Their numbers may be few but they are an elite fighting force as strong as Dragon Fang.”

“I heard the man called Sellid has disappeared. Do you know of his whereabouts?”

“Apologies, Your Majesty. However, we managed to chop off his left arm, and he leapt into the sea under the cover of night. He should be dead as dead can be.”

“Very well. All this will be over in a day. He is irrelevant to us should he survive anyway.”

Sellimea’s combined forces, which consisted of the initial mob plus defectors from the enemy’s side, now totaled over five thousand people. We had run into a few skirmishes here and there, although none of them was an all out battle. Most of our enemies lost their will to fight after seeing the congregation of the masses. Some of the noblemen still tried to go after Sellimea, setting up ambushes from within their mansions, but they couldn’t get through the wall of

people in the end.

The mob was well armed now, too, equipped by the weapon store vendors who had pledged their allegiance to Sellimea and the enemy soldiers who had defected. The sailors, who made up our frontline, were particularly fierce combatants. They even made trained soldiers look like pansies. Did this country even need a military? I didn't think its people needed defending, and it was unlikely they could be occupied by invading forces. Having gone through the fires of battle, it was as if the fishermen had changed classes to pirates. Not that the class change actually took place, but it sure looked like it did.

We got closer to the royal palace and villa.

"We're almost there," Salut called out to Miriam.

"Yes. Although I must apologize to you in advance."

"It is all right. As long as we get to save the prince and princess in the end."

"Indeed. People of Seedrun! We are almost to the royal villa! Break through and free its prisoners! Then, the royal palace!"

"YEAAAH!"

"We're almost there, Sir Salut."

"Indeed, Madam."

We carried on marching for thirty minutes before Salut approached Miriam again.

"We are almost to the royal villa, Lady Miriam."

"Indeed."

"Lady Miriam?"

"Worry not. This is all part of the plan."

"Right…"

He dropped back again, dissatisfied. I could understand why. We had leaked our plan of making a show of attacking the royal villa, but now we were actually attacking it. We had told Salut that we were going to turn and attack the royal palace in order to ambush Suarez and seize the country. Despite that, Sellimea

and Miriam were continuing their advance towards the royal villa; it was no surprise that he was beginning to get suspicious.

Thirty minutes later.

“Lady Miriam, what is the meaning of this?!”

“Why are so upset, Sir Salut?”

“Th-this is not how it was planned!”

“There are too many people in our forces, now. It would take too much time to carry out our plan exactly as we planned it.”

“What… So what are you planning to do now?!”

“I’m afraid we have to give up on killing the king for now. We shall carry on our advance toward the royal villa.”

“I will not have it!”

“What’s got you so upset? Is this not better for you? You will be able to save the Phyllian prince and princess sooner.”

Salut looked anxious despite his masters’ liberation being close at hand.

“I-I see. Right!”

“Very good. Cheer up, Sir Salut. I believe things are better this way. The lie we told our people ended up being the truth, after all.”

“Urgh. I suppose so. Hahaha.”

Another hour passed since the exchange.

Sellimea’s forces overwhelmed the royal villa with little trouble. It wasn’t heavily guarded to begin with, so the military gave us little resistance. All it took was a wooden battering ram we had prepared earlier to break down its gates.

There were fifty archers guarding its courtyard, but Fran and I deflected their arrows with our Wind Magic.

Some of the villa’s defenders were decently strong, but they were nothing compared to Valuza’s men. Their stats were pretty good, though not good enough that Fran wasn’t able to dispose of them with a single cut. Perhaps they

increased their stats by using magical drugs to intimidate their enemies. To make matters worse, their combat experience and skill levels were awful.

Still, they bragged about being stronger than Dragon Fang. Don't make me laugh. Do you know how excited Fran was when she thought she'd get a challenging fight? She was in a terrible mood after being so let down. It took me a while to cheer her up.

"All right, let's go save the prince and princess."

"Hm."

"Sir Salut, you take point."

"What? Why me…?"

"Look at the confusion around you, man. The prince and princess might be on their guard right now. If they see a familiar face leading our crew, we would be able to avoid any unnecessary conflict."

"B-but…"

And so it was decided that Salut would take the lead; Fran and Jet close behind him. We had summoned Jet by now, mostly to guard Sellimea by sheer force of intimidation.

We went through the royal villa at a quick pace. Fran had located Fult and Satya using her Presence Sense, and all she had to do was instruct Salut on which way to go. We carried on until we reached a large room located in the center of the villa.

The door itself spelled luxury. It looked like the doors to an expensive wedding venue. Not that I had ever gone through one! The only weddings I'd ever gone to were of my boring supervisors.

"In there."

"I-I see."

"What's wrong? Open it."

"Yes. Excuse me!"

Salut made up his mind and gave the door a forceful push. The ones we had

been looking for were waiting for us inside.

“Salut! Where have you been?!”

“We were looking for you.”

“Well, I…”

Prince Fult and Princess Satya looked the same as the day we were separated. Some of their attendants were with them, too.

“I think that should be enough, Fran. It’s time to bring this operation to a close. I trust you can do it.”

“Hm.”

Miriam gave Fran their agreed upon signal, and Fran narrowed her eyes.

Miriam called out to Salut.

“What’s this? A moment, Sir Salut. You seem to have something on your back.”

“My back?”

“Fran, take it off for the man, if you will.”

“Got it.”

Salut bent down, plainly showing Fran his back.

“What are you doing, Fran?!” he yelped when Fran suddenly pinned his hands behind him. She removed the object in question—a magical device which allowed for long distance communication—and tossed it to Jet.

“Jet.”

“Woof!”

Jet retreated to the shadows, the device still in his maw. As expected, I couldn’t pick up the device’s mana signature once Jet was in his realm. I wasn’t able to send telepathic messages while I was in there myself. The device was rendered useless now, even if it was able to continuously eavesdrop on conversations.

“Y-you…!”

“It seems we have angered you, Sir Salut. Or should I say, traitor?”

Salut’s face tightened upon Miriam’s remark. “Traitor? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you, Sir Salut.”

“I-I don’t know what makes you think that… Are you not jumping to conclusions?”

“Still trying to get away with it even now?”

“Such slander… What reason do you have for calling me a traitor? This is an act of slander towards the kingdom of Phyllius itself!”

He sure had nerve to bring up the name of the kingdom he betrayed.

We had figured out Salut was the traitor in our midst from the time we first infiltrated the royal villa. I thought he was on our side until then. I found out about his betrayal not by deduction or any suspicious act on his part, but by pure chance. I immediately activated Essence of Falsehood and kept it on upon finding out there was a traitor in our midst. I didn’t know whether the traitor was in our infiltration party, but I turned it on just in case.

I just happened to find out when Salut declared Sellid as the traitor and confirmed it again when Valuza supported his statement.

Everything Salut said after that had been a lie. Everything from his eulogy of the slain Yorth and his promise of saving the prince and princess. Salut was our Raydossian mole. His goal was to infiltrate the kingdom of Phyllius.

I thought of a way to use this situation to our advantage. I found out early on that he had a device which allowed him long-distance communication. I let him leak false information to Suarez to manipulate his strategy. Everything worked according to plan by the looks of it. Believing Salut’s false information, Suarez had tightened the royal palace’s security.

We had told Miriam of Salut’s betrayal during our escape from the royal villa. I took the risk of talking to her via Telepathy. I left out the part where I was a talking sword, of course, and instead used Jet as my cover. Talking to her in broken grammar had been exhausting.

“Me, Jet. Lady Fran’s familiar.”

Now expand that to span an entire conversation. I only told her the vital details, such as Salut being the traitor and that he had a device which allowed him to communicate with his masters. Seeing that Miriam had believed me, my broken language paid off.

By the time we left the underground tunnels and returned to the slums, Miriam made up various excuses to prevent Salut’s audience with Sellimea. She had also sent him to a more cramped room to hinder him from sending out information.

We had seen through his deception thanks to the power of our Skill. The unique skill wasn’t one we used perpetually, so it was by pure chance that the circumstances lined up perfectly. Miriam asked me for more details but I didn’t tell her everything, of course. Fortunately, it was common courtesy in this world not to expose one’s strong skills, and so Miriam didn’t press the matter.

“We’ve saved Fult and Satya, but you don’t look happy. Why?”

“Preposterous! I’m ecstatic! These accusations will not stand!”

“The plan we told you was a complete lie. Suarez seems to know about it since the royal palace is packed with soldiers. Why is that?”

“I-I can’t be the only one who could’ve leaked it!” Salut frantically denied Fran’s questioning.

“But the only ones who know about this plan are Sellimea, Miriam, myself, and you.”

“Wha—” He knew he had been caught in his contradictions. Salut’s face flushed with anger. He now turned to the Fult and Satya to appeal to them.

“Your Highness, there has been a mistake! Sellid was the Raydossian spy, not me!”

Salut was now talking like a perpetrator in a detective story. Fult wasn’t falling for it.

“Sellid was the spy? Is that what you’re saying, Salut?”

“Yes! And I have proof!”

That was another lie. He didn't have a single shred of evidence. Although, he must've figured he could make stuff up since he thought Sellid was more or less dead.

"They seem to think that I have betrayed you… Perhaps they are trying to drive a wedge between us. You must not believe their lies! Not when it is clear that Sellid was the Raydossian spy!"

What a bad sport. Before Fran had a chance to defend herself, Fult immediately denied Salut's accusations.

"Sellid would never betray us."

"What…? Wh-what makes you so sure? We're talking about Sellid!"

"Yes, Sellid can be loud and overly concerned about social hierarchies, but he would never betray the kingdom of Phyllius, let alone the royal family."

"How do you know for sure?" It was Fran's turn to wonder now. It wasn't that she didn't believe Fult's statement, but she had wanted an explanation.

"I can't tell you the specifics… Let's just say it has to do with the Divine Sword's protection."

"It is something only the royal family understands. Sellid will never betray us."

"Besides, we have evidence for our accusations."

It was upon Fran's declaration—

"Give it a rest, Salut."

—that the cloaked man revealed himself.

"Wha…"

Salut's eyes bulged upon the sight of the man who was missing his left hand. His shock drained the blood from his face.

"S-Sellid! You're alive?!"

The mysterious cloaked man was Sellid, who had managed to escape all by himself. He had been separated from the prince and princess, and confined ever since we got off the ship. Valuza had been sent to kill him afterwards, but he managed to muster up enough strength to escape, though he ended up

falling into the sea, in the end. His left arm was cut off, and although he took a dive into the winter sea, he still managed to survive. Impressive, but his survival seemed linked to the Divine Sword's protection Fult mentioned earlier. It must've been triggered when Sellid's life was in danger.

Sellid escaped to the slums to go into hiding, and that's where we found him. It was right after we escaped the royal villa and Fran was in the middle of handing out meals. Right about the time Fran explained my plans to Sellimea. I have to say, I was quite shocked at the time when I sensed his familiar aura.

Sellid responded to Salut with his usual regal stature. "Who are you calling a traitor?"

"Y-you! How can it be anyone else?!"

"Then I ask that you produce your evidence."

"I-I don't have it with me…"

Everyone in the room directed their piercing stares at Salut. He knew then that he had no allies left. He tossed glances left and right, but he soon hung his head as he figured out the jig was up. Had he also realized there was no escape?

"Salut, we won't hurt you if you don't resist."

P-Princess Satya, you shouldn't just approach him like—

"Don't move."

As Salut feigned a fainting spell, he rushed towards Satya to attack her. I knew this would happen. We should've been more careful…

He drew the knife which hung from his waist and instantly brought it up to Satya's neck. Black mana emanated from his entire body. He had used his Class Skill, Shadow Aura, which greatly increased his strength and agility at the cost of halving his health. I didn't expect him to be able to use it so quickly and for the buff to be so significant. I didn't have enough time to react.

"Enough of this farce!"

"You really are the traitor."

“That’s right! And you naive Phyllians never suspected me for a moment! Prince, take out a slave contract if you will!”

“An item bag?”

Salut tossed a leather bag which hung from his waist at Fult. I could feel mana emanate from it.

“And take out a slave collar while you’re at it. And once you’ve signed your name on the contract, go ahead and wear it.”

“What… Salut, stop this foolishness!”

Miriam and Sellimea tried to stop him, but Salut wasn’t having it.

“Silence! Get on with it, Prince! I don’t have to kill her, you know. I can pop one of her eyeballs here and now…”

Salut edged his knife from Satya’s neck to her eyes. We couldn’t afford to be brash with the knife so close to her. Even if I could manipulate the knife with Telekinesis, the slightest miscalculation would leave her severely injured.

“All right.”

The prince nodded, signed his name on the contract, and immediately wore the slave collar without a trace of hesitation.

The refined boy with golden hair now had a heavy iron collar hanging from his neck. Young ladies with certain peculiar tastes would have blood gushing out of their noses by now. Lacking those peculiar tastes, I just found the sight pitiful.

“Brother…”

Tears welled in Satya’s eyes. The guilt of having done this to her brother was too much for her.

“Satisfied?”

“Bring me that contract.”

“Here. Now, let go of Satya.”

Having received Fult’s contract, however, Salut only laughed. “Fuhahaha! I won’t!”

“That’s not what you said earlier.”

“And you think I care?! Why should I listen to you after receiving such great power!”

Great power? Fran tilted her head, wondering what the madman was talking about. Fult had received full combat training and so was quite strong compared to other youths of his age, but the fact remained that he was still a thirteen year old boy. His stats were much lower compared to an adult male, and his skills were only slightly better compared to the average soldier. I didn’t see why enslaving the prince would grant Salut great power.

“That’s right. Power! Fult, Satya, kill everyone here except for me!”

Still, Salut confidently ordered his newly attained slaves.

Fran, I don’t know what’s going to happen here. Keep your guard up.

I know.

Fran didn’t blink and dropped into her usual fighting stance. She was covering Sellimea, who was standing behind her, and kept her eyes on Fult and Satya, her hand already gripping my hilt.

“You might not know this, but the Phyllians have the blessing of their Divine Sword. They’re demon users! And now this terrible power is mine to command! Muhahaha!”

“…”

The Divine Sword of Phyllius, of course! I remembered that it had something to do with summoning demons, but I didn’t think they could use it without the sword being physically present. This might not end well. Were we going to have to cut Fult down? I didn’t think Fran would let it come to that.

Fran, if you see any demons, we’re going to have to let loose the strongest spells we have!

Got it.

Get ready…!

But then, nothing happened.

“…What are you doing? I told you to slaughter them all!”

“That’s enough, Satya. There’s no need to show this man any more sympathy.”

“I see… What a shame.”

“Why won’t you do what I say?! Your name is on this contract, Fult! You are my slave!”

“As you have said, the Phyllian royalty is under the protection of the Divine Sword’s blessing; demons protect us. It protects us from severe harm and eliminates whatever it is that causes it.”

“S-so?”

“Why haven’t you been eliminated? Because your actions are not severe enough to warrant the demons’ protection. Protected by the Divine Sword, these slave collars are little more than iron necklaces to us. We have no need to obey your commands.”

“What…? Then how were you captured in Dars? Were you doing it for fun?!”

They were wearing slave collars when we found them in the slavers’ hideout, although I was now beginning to suspect that the contracts had no effect on them.

“The men who captured us had the other children in captivity. We let ourselves be captured so we could free them.”

“So the Divine Sword has the power to do even that? I thought it was limited to controlling demons…”

“We didn’t need to unleash any demons on our captors because Fran came and saved us. Oh, I see now. Were you the one who hired them? I apologize for your wasted effort.”

Salut screamed, furious at Fult’s words. “Damn it all!”

He brought the point of his knife into Satya’s eye.

And that’s when it happened.

A dim light prevented the knife from going any further, stopping it a hair’s

breadth away from Satya's eye. Salut angrily pressed down on the knife harder, but he couldn't penetrate the dim light.

Was this the demonic protection of the Divine Sword? Now, black mist emanated from behind Satya, blowing Salut away.

Good! The princess is away from Salut now!

Fran, Jet, now's your chance!

Fran leapt forward, taking advantage of Salut's carelessness as the latter was preoccupied with Satya.

"Haa!"

"Argh! You little bitch!"

Fran lopped off Salut's right foot, and I blew away his sword as he crouched down in pain. That should greatly reduce his combat capabilities. However, Fran ignored him and instead went to stop Satya from falling to the floor. The black mist was gone from her now. It seemed that it only interfered when it sensed its masters in danger.

"Satya, are you okay?"

"Thank you, Fran… I'm all right."

"Hm. Are you sure?"

"Haha, I'm sorry. I suppose I'm not as all right as I thought," Satya said, shifting her gaze to Salut. Her longtime protector, to whom she had entrusted her life, had just tried to take it from her. There was no one who wouldn't be hurt by the experience. Fran continued holding the princess as she trembled and tears welled up in her eyes. Fran then gently patted her back.

"Thank you…"

"Hm."

Miriam had captured Salut in the meantime. His life was already halved by Dark Aura, and he was close to bleeding out because of Fran's abrupt amputation of his foot. Miriam poured some potions on him. The low-tier potions only served to close his wounds, though.

“Sellid, take care of Satya.”

“I shall. And I thank you. Truly.” Sellid bowed his head. We hadn’t spent too much time together, but I could tell he wasn’t a bad guy. He was just a little too concerned about his country and the royal family’s authority and social standing. His primary concern was appearances, but even then it wasn’t so much his own but of the royal family of Phyllius.

He acted the way he did towards Fran and the other kids out of sheer respect of the royal bloodline. In fact, it felt as if Sellid had to compensate for the prince and princess’s lack of concern about the thing. He protected the nobility of the royal bloodline by playing the role of the mean noble. Someone had to toot Phyllius’s horn, and if the royal twins weren’t up to it, Sellid was. Maybe that’s just how he was naturally, but this natural trait served him well in his role as royal horn-tooter.

“Hm.”

Now, it was time to have a chat with Salut.

Traitor that he was, he still served the Phyllians for a long time. We didn’t want to show Satya the pain that awaited him. Sellid understood this, so he took Satya to another room while consoling her.

And Fult? Well, he would be all right. The prince was a man, after all. It was a good lesson for him, and he said confidently that he preferred to stay. His eyes were calm; he didn’t look like he was squeamish enough to have to go to another room.

“Salut, I’m going to question you now. You have served us for many years, so in return I will not kill you as long as you tell me the truth.”

“Just kill me…!”

Things were proceeding as expected. The only question now was how resilient Salut was.

Or so I thought…

“Eaaargh! P-please, no more!”

It didn’t take ten minutes for him to start squealing. Not to say he was

spineless, but the prince had been merciless. With all due respect, he was very knowledgeable about intense torture methods. He even made Fran cover her ears at one point. He made stabbing Salut with a sword and healing him perpetually look like a cakewalk.

I won't describe the prince's methods of torture, but suffice it to say that it had to do with fingernails, eyeballs, and needles. The pain inflicted went beyond excruciating and right into demonic.

It made me realize that countries with long lifespans had with it an equally dark history.

"Aah, I see."

Fran, no! This is nothing to be impressed about! You are not to imitate Fult! If you do, my cold steel is going to start streaming hot tears!

As I was frantically explaining the virtue of kindness to Fran, Fult finished gathering the information he needed.

"I see. You've been working us for a long time…"

Salut had infiltrated Phyllius over ten years ago. His mission was to enslave the royalty and steal their Divine Sword. Aside from his periodic reports to Raydoss, he was a loyal servant of Phyllius and slowly worked his way into their inner circle. He had even gone so far as to apprehend the errant spy or two. It was a long story, but it underlined the value of a Divine Sword.

When Salut had failed to capture and enslave the prince and princess in the city of Dars, he was forced to change his plans. The assassin who had snuck into our inn afterwards was under his employ. He didn't expect him to succeed and instead planned for him to get caught to cause suspicions of betrayal and conspiracy to fall onto Sellid.

In any case, once the Dars operation failed, Salut planned to kidnap the royals in Bulbola instead. However, the storm and an encounter with the Midgardsormr forced him to change his plans again. Our spy was terribly unlucky. He refused to give up, though, and his refusal to yield made me think of a cockroach.

The greatest crisis for him came when we had a run-in with the pirates. The

prince might have demons under his command, but all of it would be for naught if the ship he was on sank to the bottom of the ocean. Salut's goal was to capture the prince and princess alive to turn them into slaves for Raydoss. He couldn't afford to let them be captured by the pirates, either. Phyllius would pay any amount of money to have their prince and princess back, and they would immediately be returned to their homeland. He wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

However, Salut thought of a way to turn that crisis into an opportunity. He would get on a lifeboat with the prince and princess and escape while letting Sellid and the other hindrances deal with the pirates. This plan failed when Fran defeated all the pirates and brought their captain to our boat. We really got in the way of every step of Salut's plan.

One unexpected circumstance piled on top of another until we were captured by the Seedrunian navy. He contacted his superior, and fellow Raydossian, Galloudie. At the time, Salut didn't know that Raydoss was trying to get its hands on Seedrun. He had cooperated with Suarez so Seedrun could play right into Raydoss's hands. He told them he would trick the prince and princess and ship them over to Raydoss; doing so would make Suarez complicit.

Dwight was the one who originally suggested this idea, and he came up with it when he captured Fult and Satya. He wanted to sell them to Raydoss as slaves and initiate the honeymoon period between Seedrun and Raydoss.

This plan would undermine Salut's labor. In fact, it would make Galloudie, the Raydossian envoy, look like the hero instead. Salut didn't seem to care, though. As long as it served the empire of Raydoss, he didn't mind taking a hit to his status.

As much of a traitorous snake that Salut was, his loyalty to Raydoss had been genuine. Maybe they brainwashed him. Even so, his loyalty shattered in the face of Prince Fult's torture course.

"Fult, are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

"Okay. Good job."

“I am the prince of Phyllius. This is not enough to break me.”

“Good luck.”

“Haha. Thank you.”

Fult may have laughed, but he sounded lonely. Fult was a prince, after all, and being betrayed by his aide had definitely been a blow to him. He put up a front, and Fran had seen right through it. She had grown so much ever since she met Fult and Satya… She had grown not as a warrior but as a human. It was necessary to get stronger in general, and I was glad that she was getting the opportunity.

“Fran, Prince Fult, I would like to hear your opinions on our next move.”

We let Carla watch over Salut as we discussed what to do next. We had successfully saved Fult and Satya, but we were far from our happy ending. We still needed to overthrow the king to save the oppressed people of Seedrun. Our fight wouldn’t end until the king either abdicated or died. If we stopped our rebellion and escaped, the king would snuff out the people who had been involved.

“Allow us to be of service. It brings shame to Phyllius to have been led around this long.”

“I thank you. The power of a demon user is worth over a hundred men.”

“Oh no, please don’t expect too much from us. Satya and I are able to borrow the power of demons, yes, but only under extreme circumstances. And we can’t use them forever, either. It would be difficult for us to strike the king by our own power.”

“I see…”

The soldiers at the royal palace were going to be our major obstacle. They were an impenetrable wall which protected the king.

While we were thinking of a way to get around this problem, Fran said, “Hey, what if we used that long distance communication device Salut had on him?”

Fran explained her plan. By the sound of it, it had a pretty good chance of working.

We asked Salut how his device worked. Not only could it constantly listen in on conversations, charging it with mana allowed the user to talk to another holder of the device for several minutes. Its effective range was ten kilometers which made it a very useful tool.

We ironed out the details of Fran's plan. Then, we resumed the march of our mob. It was moving from the royal villa to the royal palace now, with Sellimea and Miriam leading the charge.

"Now is our chance to retake the undefended royal port! People, lend me your strength!"

"YEAAAAH!"

Sir Galloudie, can you hear me? This is Salut.

"Salut? What's going on out there?! The mob is not assaulting the royal palace! King Suarez is furious!"

I apologize, sir. The mob has grown too big and Sellimea couldn't put them in order. Th-they changed courses and headed straight for the royal villa instead.

"Damn it. I can't believe they would change their battle plan over such a petty reason. She really is letting her people rule over her."

Y-yes. In any case, they have saved the Phyllians and are now headed to the royal port. Once they've captured it, they plan to hijack a ship and flee Seedrun immediately.

"What?! Really?"

They say they're going to destroy all the other ships save their own. Afterwards, they plan to flee to Phyllius and seek asylum there.

"All right, I shall inform the king immediately. Good work!"

Thirty minutes had passed since the exchange. Fortunately, Galloudie was in too much of a panic to notice the trembling in Salut's voice. We were intimidating Salut the entire time just in case he tried to warn his superior, but it didn't seem necessary in the end. I guess he really didn't want to be tortured by the prince a second time.

We tied Salut up and let Sellid handle him. We had a few of Miriam's men

guard him, just in case.

“Now, I think Suarez will redistribute some of his men to secure the royal port.”

“It should work. The royal port is vital to the strength of this kingdom. The threat of the destruction of the royal navy should be enough to divert them.”

“True.”

“It would be to our advantage even if he still focused on defending the royal palace. It would make it easier for us to capture the royal port.”

As Miriam and Fult discussed our battle plans, Fran was talking to Satya on the side. It was an innocent conversation regarding the princess’s hunger. Fran was trying to cheer her gloomy friend up. Fran ended up slightly jealous over the luxurious amount of food served in the villa, and Satya ended up soothing her instead.

You’re supposed to be doing the soothing here, Fran. Well, Satya did seem better for the conversation, so all’s well that ends well.

Soon, the royal palace was within our sight. We would sneak in once we had made sure that the guards were moving to the royal port. We needed as few soldiers in the royal palace as possible to make our assault.

“Huh, the gates are open.”

Fran pointed towards the palace gates which had indeed been left agape. What followed was an outpouring of soldiers; five thousand of them, all frantic. They needed all the soldiers they could get to suppress our fisherman uprising.

If Suarez was part of this mass of soldiers, our plan would fail. Fran pointed this out, but it didn’t seem that Suarez was part of the offense.

“You can spot my brother’s gaudy armor a mile away.”

“Not to mention the gaudy golden armor of his personal guard. He would be impossible to miss.”

“Hm. Good.”

We carried on sneaking into the palace as per our original plan. Infiltrating

any royal palace would've been reckless, but we had two princesses on our side. They knew the ins and outs of the hidden paths, and even the danger rooms, making it possible for us to sneak in.

"Now, let's go. It is time to bring my fool brother's reign to an end!"

"Hm."

"Yes. Let's go."

"We shall help however we can," Fult said.

"I shall aid my brother as well," Satya added.

Now that I thought about it, we had a lot of royalty in our party of seven. Aside from Fran, Carla, and Byke, the remaining four were all royals. The aristocracy was the majority for once.

"There is an emergency path here. If we take it, we'll make it inside in no time."

"Are you sure you can tell us such confidential information? We're not even from this country."

"Not a problem. We have no time to fuss over such petty matters. If we don't act quickly, more innocent lives will be lost."

"I apologize, and I respect the love you have for your citizens."

Miriam touched the walls and found the hidden escape tunnel. She pushed one of the bricks to open the wall next to it. She led us down the path until we exited into a large anteroom. The room looked intimidating with its red carpet and grand chandelier hanging from the ceiling. We looked to be close to the center of the royal palace.

"The royal waiting room is beyond this, which leads right into the throne room."

"Come. Brother is definitely sitting on his throne."

"He's always loved the spotlight. We'll definitely find him there."

I felt the presence of a few people in the large room ahead of us; most of them on the way to the waiting room and the throne room. One aura in

particular felt familiar to me. Their strategy reminded me of our initial raid on the royal villa. There weren't many guards stationed here, but all of them were elites.

When Miriam burst into the waiting room, she was met with the intense gaze of a man we knew all too well.

"Valuza," Fran muttered.

"You remember me? I'm honored," Black Fang Valuza answered, sounding genuinely honored to be recognized. Seedrun's strongest man had been waiting for us in this room.

"I'll take this one. You guys go ahead."

I agreed. It looked like Satya and Fult had used up their demonic protection for the day. It really was a trump card they could only use for a short amount of time. We'd reduce our odds of incurring casualties if we let Fran keep Valuza busy instead of relying on the twins' capricious ability.

Jet, go with Sellimea and protect them.

"Woof!"

"But…" Miriam looked worried, but Sellimea made her mind up for her.

"All right. Come, everyone."

"B-but she's going up against Valuza!"

"Miriam, are you going to undermine this honorable duel?"

"…Understood. I'm sorry for doubting you, Fran."

"That's okay."

"No, it's not. We'll eat some good food once this is all over. I'll treat you to one of my favorites. Stay alive until then."

"Good food? Details?"

"You'll have to live on to find out."

"Okay! I can't wait!"

I kept my eyes on Valuza as they had their conversation, but he seemed to be

content with waiting.

“Are you ready?” he asked with a grim steadiness, sensing the end of our conflict.

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

Valuza let Sellimea and the rest of our crew pass without a word. His seeming negligence perplexed me, and even Fran looked suspiciously at him.

“Are you sure?”

“You wanted me to let them pass, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t see any problems then.”

“Uhh, I guess?”

“Besides, I only signed up with Suarez so I could get a chance to fight powerful quarry. I’ve been waiting for someone strong to make an attempt at his life.”

This guy was a bloodthirsty knight, too. He didn’t care what happened as long as he had the chance to fight someone strong. I understood his position, since Fran was more or less the same. He wanted to fight her with no reservations. That’s why he didn’t ambush her and why he let Sellimea pass. He needed Fran to be at the top of her game without any distractions.

None of this meant that we were going to start thanking him. In the end, Valuza still acted to satisfy his own lust for battle.

“Now that the distractions are gone, let’s start killing each other.”

“Hm!”

The intense fight began with a clashing of swords.

“Hah!”

“Hahaha! You’re good at this!”

One lethal slash followed another while both sides managed to either dodge or parry them all. The harsh sound of clanging metal echoed throughout the

room. It was accompanied with the high-pitched shatters of broken pottery and furniture.

It didn't take long for the room to look like an absolute shipwreck. It was like a tornado had blown through it. Still, Fran and Valuza remained relatively unscathed save for some scratches on their cheeks. The scratches hadn't even been produced by their swords, instead by wooden shrapnel their intense fighting threw up into the air. Effectively, the damage they had dealt each other was still zero.

Fran had the higher Sword Mastery level, while Valuza had more battle experience. The situation produced a stalemate.

"Raaah!"

"Hahaha!"

Valuza was excited, howling with laughter. His initial nihilistic smile had been replaced with bloodcurdling cackling.

The death match grew more intense, but the tide was slowly turning in Fran's favor. You see, there was a slight difference in how each combatant handled their dodges. Having shifted into high gear, Fran had definitely received more damage compared to Valuza. The Black Fang had landed several cuts on her, and it showed.

On the flip side, Valuza had dodged every attack Fran had attempted. In fact, that was her goal. Fran had taken several of Valuza's cuts on purpose. She kept dodging so as to not fall into a critical state, but she always made sure to launch a counterattack afterward. I would heal her superficial wounds, so there was no problem there.

Meanwhile, Valuza focused only on dodging Fran's attacks. He was cautious of her sword thanks to his previous encounter with the Venom Fang. Against an opponent who fought so adeptly, being poisoned once would turn the tides of battle in Fran's favor. Dodging all of Fran's attacks was taking a toll on his stamina, however, and Fran slowly managed to pressure him.

"Muahaha!"

Not that it stopped his beastly cackling. I think he knew he was in a bad spot,

though. He threw the sword he had been using at Fran and jumped back. This was the last thing we expected, and we made blocking the projectile blade our first priority. I wondered what he would do after disarming himself.

That was when Valuza produced a sword out of the item pouch on his belt. He managed to protect this blade against Identify by leaving it inside.

Name: Soul Drain

Attack: 900; MP: 300; Durability: 300

Mana Conductivity: A-

Skill: Drain an opponent's power to make itself stronger.

The power the sword obtained would go to the sword itself, not Valuza. It was an interesting ability. Kind of like myself, I suppose.

"This is an enchanted blade crafted by a disciple of the Godsmith. With this, I can evenly match the strength of your sword! So, let us begin round two!"

Now brandishing an enchanted sword, Valuza leapt into battle.

And with that, the bloodthirsty battle to the death resumed.

"Uncle Julius, Gladio, where is my brother?"

"A very good question. Still, I'm impressed you were able to infiltrate the royal palace with so few people. Very brave of you."

"They may be few, but they are stronger than you will ever be. This is the end. Might I ask you to surrender so we can avoid further bloodshed?"

"The end of what, exactly? All we need do is kill you and that will put an end to your little revolution. Or do you think your peasants will be enough to overthrow us? They have yet to face the full strength of our military. The sight of your severed head will stop your revolutionaries cold in their tracks."

"You are not the only ones who have means of communicating through long distances. Prince Fult has a similar ability. If he were to request the aid of the kingdom of Phyllius, you will be on the receiving end of their wrath, not us. I'm sure the ambassador of Granzell would likely agree with them."

"Wh-what?! You mean you would ask for the assistance of another kingdom

for the sake of your revolution? Have you no shame?! This is treason!”

“My act of ‘treason’ pales in comparison to your wishes of being ruled by Raydoss. In fact, both Phyllius and Granzell have agreed to lift their sanctions if the current king steps down.”

“You…you whore! I’ll kill you for that!”

“I would like to see you try.”

“How dare you! You were raised in the safe confines of the royal palace… Don’t think for a second that you can beat a war veteran such as I!”

“I am a member of the Seedrunian royalty. I know how to fight.”

“It looks like things are heating up between Father and Sellimea. Perhaps we should engage in light conversation.”

“Hmph. Quiet, Gladio. I have nothing to discuss with you.”

“What an awful thing to say.”

“I told you to be quiet. The sound of your voice is enough make my ears rot.”

“Careful now, little girl… Do you want me to do you again?”

“What a bad joke. ‘Do’ what exactly? The little girl you tried to rape kicked you so hard in the bollocks that I’m pretty sure you don’t have them anymore. Oh, the tears you cried as you ran away. I’ll never forget how pathetic you looked that day.”

“Silence! I never would’ve attempted it had Father not ordered me to! I will enjoy beating you to a bloody pulp… I’ve always dreamt of this day!”

“The feeling is mutual. Do you know how I felt when the Water Dragon which was rightfully mine was bequeathed to you? I’ve regretted not taking your life when I had the chance many times over!”

“I am better than you! What madman would give the Water Dragon to a little girl? If not for your royal bloodline, you are nothing more than a mere brute!”

“And you would be nothing more than a rapist if not for your father’s connections! Enough talk! We will settle who is the stronger between us, here and now!”

“Have at you, Miriam!”

“Wind Arrow!”

“Hahah!”

Wind Blower!

“Useless!”

Fran and Valuza’s duel had become a game of avoidance. We couldn’t use fire magic in the palace for fear of burning it down, so we were limited to wind magic. However, his sword kept absorbing all of our spells and reflected it back at us. This fierce battle was going to last for quite some time.

At least that’s what I thought before the stalemate was broken. It happened without warning.

“Urgh!”

“Fuhahaha! What’s wrong?!”

What happened?!

His sword disappeared out of sight and a gash appeared in Fran’s shoulder the next instant.

No, I knew what had happened. Valuza’s sword had struck too fast for our eyes to see.

Heal!

“Kahaha!”

“Argh!”

Heal! Back off, Fran!

“You’re not going anywhere!”

“Ugh!”

Valuza had activated his Class Skill, Flash Sword! As its name implied, it allowed him to wield his sword at blinding speeds. However, its mana cost was so great that he shouldn’t be able to use it repeatedly. It was a skill reserved for the deciding moment of a battle.

And yet, Valuza had used it five times in such a short amount of time.

It's that sword of his.

Valuza was using the mana Soul Drain had absorbed. The enchanted sword acted like his external mana tank. The damn thing really was like me!

"I see your sword is quite powerful! The large amount of mana Soul Drain absorbs every time our blades clash is proof of that!"

It was my fault! I thought his mana regeneration was abnormally fast, but he had been draining my mana to fuel his attacks!

"Tch!"

"I've seen that move before! You're getting slow, little girl!"

"Raaah!"

"Much too slow!"

This was bad. Fran's movements were beginning to slow down. Valuza had also memorized Fran's attack patterns. The difference in experience was going to be our downfall.

Valuza got stronger every time we clashed swords, and he was the better swordsman. Our spells would only feed his enchanted sword. Not only that, but Valuza was not shy in immediately using our freshly drained mana.

He'll have the upper hand if this goes on for much longer!

Hm…

What should we do…?

As I thought about our next move, a mysterious power begins welling up inside me.

Uh, what's going on?

I wasn't doing anything, and yet, my blade began glowing with a jet-black light. The light grew more intense, and eventually, my blade was glowing pitch black.

Wait, uh. What's this? Hello? What?!

Teacher?

I'm not doing this, Fran! I'm not the one causing this!

"What's that you have there…?"

Valuza backed off, growing cautious.

I would be quick to praise myself if any of this had been my doing. Instead, the automatic amalgamation of energy raised fear in my heart.

A similar thing had happened at the Floating Island, although my blade glowed blue that time. It was a result of my and Fran's powers growing stronger at the same time. We hadn't activated it by our own will, and it activated automatically when we were deeply focused in the fight. We only knew because Jean had told us afterwards.

The black light emanating from my blade was similar to the extent that we weren't in control of it. The aura it gave off was absolutely ominous, however.

Something bad might happen if I let go of it.

In fact, I didn't even know how this great power was going to release itself.

Teacher? Are you all right?!

Fran, you need to—

"You need to let go of me," was what I intended to say before the world fell silent. Fran and Valuza were now frozen in time. Not frozen, I suppose, but they had been slowed down to the point of only moving a few millimeters at a time. The scene felt similar to Spacetime Magic albeit at a higher level.

What the hell is going on?!

I looked at my pitch-black blade as I desperately tried to figure out what was happening. Then suddenly, a voice called out to me.

Hey, there! It's been a while.

That voice…

It was the first voice I heard when I came into this world. I remembered talking to it that time I had used Unleash Potential.

I'm a lot stronger now, what with the Festival of the Moons coming up. Still, I can only keep up this conversation for three minutes! We don't have much time, so listen up!

The voice sounded distressed. It seemed to recognize that we were in a state of emergency. I decided to listen.

A-all right.

Things have taken a turn for the worse. The vital seal inside you has been suddenly weakened!

A seal…? Am I sealing something away?

Something like that! Anyway, this seal has no business being undone! But because of that episode with Unleash Potential last time, their powers have been weakened!

Their? Was the voice talking about the P.A.?

Cracks have begun appearing in the seal, and the seal is weakening because of that! I think it's because of that enchanted sword that guy's using!

I see. So when Soul Drain absorbed my mana, it took away mana that would've gone to reinforcing the seal.

Well, it's too late to do anything about that, now. Anyway, we have to release this energy otherwise it's going to go berserk!

B-berserk?

Yeah. It'll blow the roof right off this palace.

Oh my God!

I know. So we have to release this pent up energy somehow!

Wh-what are we going to do?

Give me control of the sword for now!

Like the time I gave P.A. the reins during Unleash Potential?

Yeah! It won't take long!

A-all right! I trust you!

No worries!

Time began to flow again.

Fran, listen to me!

Hm? Who are you? You're not Teacher! There's so much energy coming from him!

You could call me a friend of his. Things have gotten bad, so I was talking to Teacher about it here on the inside.

Huh?

He'll explain it to you later! We don't have time!

Wait, they couldn't expect me to explain something I barely understood!

Anyway, I'm going to release a crazy strong attack. Huddle yourself in a corner and try not to get caught up in the blast!

Okay.

Good girl! Let's go!

I felt the wolf crest on my hilt squirm as soon as the mysterious voice finished talking. It was as if something was crawling out of it. The serpentine entity wrapped over my blade, cocked its head, and glared hatefully at Valuza.

The jet-black entity my wolf crest sealed away was large enough to swallow a man whole. The sight of the black thing wrapped around my blade was otherworldly.

"Wh-what is that? Is this your secret weapon? Hahaha!" Valuza jerked back, his laughter wavering.

But of course. Although Valuza lacked Mana Sense, he had enough Presence Detection to know that this thing was a dangerous threat. The energy I emanated was great enough to match even that of the Lich. Being in its mere presence was overwhelming.

No man could stand against it. In fact, I'd applaud anyone who could stand straight in its presence.

"GROOOOOARGH!" The jet-black thing howled, opening its giant maw. Then a

great beam of light burst out of its mouth. The black beam tinted the entire room.

I saw Valuza try to block the black light with his sword, and when the beam hit it, his body was flung backwards into the wall like a pinball. The impact of Valuza's collision cracked the sturdy palace wall.

The black beam carried on its trajectory, through the palace walls, until it eventually disappeared into the horizon. The beam's shock waves had left the room in absolute ruin. If Fran hadn't braced herself against a corner, she would've been caught up in it.

The wall was gone, and we could see the outside.

I saw a gigantic explosion go off in the direction of the naval base. Even underwater ordnance wouldn't be able to make a pillar of water that gigantic. It was closer to the level of an underwater volcano. The explosion capsized the naval ships that had made port there, and the soldiers were washed away by the ensuing tidal wave.

W-well, the enemy took the brunt of the punishment, so all's well that ends well, I suppose.

If that attack had been allowed to go berserk, Fran and I would probably not be left standing.

I think that should do it. I'll get back to reinforcing the seal. You won't have to worry about it anymore.

A-are you sure?

Ye—See—yo—la—er—

Hey, wait! At least, give me your name!

—

Every time with these people, I swear!

Well, they'd helped me out each time I was in a pinch, so I guess they were on my side…

Teacher?

Fran? Are you all right?

Yeah, I'm fine. Who was that?

I'll explain later. You have to focus on Valuza!

All right.

Well, that bought us time!

"Your blade…has such terrifying power…"

Valuza emerged from the rubble in shambles. He was still alive, after all. However, the blade of his enchanted sword had been broken. The only thing left of it now was its hilt. The man himself was broken and battered, his left arm twisted at an odd angle, his left eye blinded.

"Do you still want to do this?"

"Of course. I intend to keep fighting until my last breath."

His battlelust raged on despite his broken frame. I expected nothing less from Seedrun's greatest warrior.

"All right." Fran nodded, intent on living up to the man's expectations.

"Ready?"

"Hm." Valuza picked up an ordinary sword from the floor and dropped into his battle stance. Fran did the same with me. "Haaa!"

"Kaaah!"

The duel lasted all but a second.

Valuza took Fran's slash with his broken left arm and put his weight into thrusting his sword. He was trying to take the win with a counterattack, but before the tip of his blade reached Fran, it was stopped by an invisible barrier.

I got the idea for a barrier of compressed air after seeing Satya's barrier in action. We had been using it this entire time, but we only managed to block Valuza's expert sword handling by focusing all my mana into it. I guess practicing Wind Manipulation paid off.

His sword broke, and Fran wasted no time in exploiting the hole in Valuza's

defense.

“Haa!”

My blade plunged right through Valuza’s body.

“Gaaah…”

“I win.”

“Yes…you did… That was a brilliant fight to the death…”

“I lost to your swordplay.”

“Hah! The winner…is the one left standing…at the end.”

“Hm…”

“A beautiful fight, indeed…”

“I had fun, too.”

Valuza died with a satisfied smile on his face. The man loved his deathmatches. I couldn’t resent him after seeing his smile.

Sorry about that, Fran. I got in the way of your fight.

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault, Teacher. I would’ve won the fight on my own if I were stronger. I’m the one who had to rely on you in the end. Besides, you and I are one. This victory is ours.”

You think so?

“Yeah!”

Once the fierce battle with Valuza was over, we decided to go over to Sellimea to provide backup. We left from the giant hole in the wall, never thinking about how costly the repairs were going to be. Soon, we saw some familiar faces on our way to the throne room.

“Fult. Satya.”

The prince and princess of Phyllius. They were probably holding the line here so Sellimea and Miriam could go ahead. The twins weren’t the dainty little royals my Identify had made them out to be, but I knew that already. They could defeat a whole host of enemies with their power to control demons.

That being said, they were still quite ruthless. All of the corpses littered about the floor were in odd states of disarray. There was a corpse which was cut vertically in half, a corpse which had countless holes in it, a corpse which looked withered away for some odd reason; all of them looked like they died horrible deaths. One thing that all of the corpses shared was the expression of fear on their faces.

It didn't look like a fight had broken out here as much as a torture session.

Not a drop of blood had gotten onto either Fult or Satya, further underlining the battle prowess.

"Fran? I sensed great magical energy just now, are you all right?"

"No problem."

"So that was your secret weapon that went off."

"You could call it that."

They asked no further questions. They weren't about to talk about their Divine Sword, either, so they must've known the importance of keeping your powers and abilities a secret.

This is quite a sight, though.

"Hm." Fran agreed after looking at the state of the dead around us.

"Um, Fran… You must understand that we didn't do this because we wanted to."

"Satya!"

"Look, if Fran thinks I'm some kind of pervert who enjoys torturing her enemies, I'll…"

"Oh, fine…"

We didn't think that for a second. These were all Raydossians; Galloudie being among the dead. It was tough to pick him out with Identify, though, since he died with his eyes and mouth stretched open to their absolute limit. His death didn't seem easy.

The only thing that crossed our minds was they had resorted to torture only

to extract information from these men.

“We only did this because we have a reputation to uphold.”

“Reputation?”

“That terrible things would happen to people who would dare lay a hand on Phyllian royalty. We must appear to be ruthless and merciless.”

“I see.”

They had to demonstrate the power of Phyllius’s Divine Sword somehow. What better way than to have their enemies die horrifying deaths?

“So please don’t hate us…”

“Don’t worry. I can’t imagine hating you two.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you!”

Satya smiled and hugged Fran. Fult let out a sigh of relief. Oh, you little tsundere! Don’t think you can start dating Fran so easily! If you really fell for her, you’ll have to go through me without your demonic lackeys!



“We should go help Lady Sellimea.”

“Hm.”

“Y-you’re right.”

“That said, we will be of no further use in battle. We’ve exhausted the Divine Sword’s blessings for the moment.”

“Got it.”

We would have to settle any encounter we ran into by ourselves from here on out. Fran took the lead as we rushed to the throne room. When we got there, the bodies of the Dragon Tail—also present at the royal villa—littered the floor. Their bite marks indicated that Jet made quick work of them.

“Sellimea, Miriam!”

Two battles were ongoing within the throne room. Miriam and Gladio were one of the two, and we walked in just as Miriam was driving the point of her spear through Gladio’s body.

“Gurk…”

“I win, Gladio!”

“Dammit…! Why…why can I never…?!”

And with that, Gladio crumpled to the ground.

Now, we were left with Sellimea and Julius. I never thought the princess would actually get her hands dirty. She was covered in wounds, and she looked like she was about to fall over. Still, Sellimea continued blocking Julius’s sword with dogged determination.

“Gladio! Useless boy! I can’t believe he let himself get killed by a woman!”

“Careful, Uncle Julius. The same thing might just happen to you.”

“It’s all that damned wolf’s fault!”

Julius tossed multiple glances at the walls around him. He was getting ready for Jet to lunge at him. The sight of Jet slaughtering his men seemed to have made quite an impression on him. The fear only made Julius’s movement

sloppy.

“Don’t worry. I told him not to interfere in our fight.”

“You expect me to believe you?!”

The line sounded like little more than a paltry threat despite coming from a man of Julius’s stature. He wouldn’t be able to defeat Sellimea in a battle of strength. Despite being a general, he was awfully weak. He must’ve been granted the position solely by the accident of his birth. He wasn’t weaker than Sellimea, but he wasn’t able to focus on attacking her since he was distracted by Jet.

Now that Fran and the Phyllians were here, he knew there was no way out. His eyes began to rove around. Unfortunately for him, Fran and Jet blocked off all his escape routes.

“Damn it! Damn it all!”

He flailed his sword wildly at Sellimea as a last ditch effort; his panic only left him open to attack.

She was able to parry the foolish strike and knocked the sword out of his hand. Julius fell on his bottom, and Sellimea pointed the sword at his neck. The fight was over.

“I…have lost…”

With that, he uttered his miserable surrender.

“Now, where is Suarez?”

“The naval port.”

“How? It didn’t seem like my brother was part of that battalion.”

“Avoiding detection in that large of a force would be easy enough if he wore plain military armor. I advised him to take a small boat and head to the naval port. We would be able to crush this little rebellion so long as we had the power of a Water Dragon.”

Julius spilled everything without the hint of a lie. He was banking on the chances of escaping with his life as long as he told Sellimea the truth.

Julius had initially planned to benefit from a battle between Suarez and Fult. He had cajoled Suarez into using his Water Dragon to crush the rebel forces—us. He was hoping the ensuing battle would've been enough to crush both Suarez and Sellimea at the same time.

At that point, he would make a deal with the Raydossian ambassador and ask them to have his back on this matter. In the end, they would possess Julius and Gladio's Water Dragons and use them to dispose of Suarez's and Sellimea's, thereby securing Seedrun for themselves.

"Such foolishness."

"I am royalty as well… Is it wrong for me to want to be king?!"

He had been resentful of the previous king ever since a young age and watched hungrily for a chance to usurp the throne. How many years must it have taken? Julius wasn't physically impressive nor was he of noble demeanor, but I had to give him credit for holding on to his grudge for so long.

"Let's go to the naval port. We have not won this battle until we've captured Suarez."

"Yes. It's quite a distance from here. We must hurry."

"Fult, Satya, you can take a break if you want."

"I could say the same for you, Fran."

"I'm an adventurer. I'm fine."

Fran struck a double flexed biceps pose to underline her point. She was strong all right, but there wasn't much muscle on her arms.

"I don't want to put you two in further danger, as well."

"I understand the risks…but leaving us out when we've come this far is quite rude."

"I agree. We're coming with you."

Well, when they put it that way…

"Okay. Jet."

"Woof!"

“Take care of Fult and Satya.”

On Fran’s orders, Jet sat down behind the twins. Sellimea nodded and clapped her hands, agreeing to the plan.

“That’s a load off our shoulders then.”

“Woof!”

“And thank you so much for earlier. You saved me.”

“Arf!”

The two had grown close during the battle in the throne room. Sellimea stroked Jet’s chin with her slender arms. A single stroke was all she needed to melt the direwolf’s expression. Sellimea was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

It was nice that neither Satya nor Sellimea were afraid of him.

“Coochie coochie coo!”

“Arf…”

Okay, you’re enjoying yourself a little too much there, Jet.

“Sister, we should get going.”

“Ah, you’re right. Over here.”

Sellimea went over to where Miriam was standing. She wasn’t at the exit, rather she was behind the throne. Miriam began fiddling with the wall there. We had seen her do this many times before. Soon, another hidden passage opened up. It revealed a spiral staircase which went down deep under the earth.

“Let’s go.”

We followed Sellimea down the staircase and were greeted with an odd sight.

We were now in an underground lake. However, the ceilings and shoreline were too organized, hinting that it was man-made.

I didn’t expect to find a place like this underneath the royal palace.

Comparing it with an Olympic swimming pool wasn’t going to be of any use.

To put it simply, you could fit two Tokyo Domes in this place.

A gigantic ship had made port here. I thought Dwight's battleship was big, but it looked like a dinghy next to this ship. The hull was plated with gold, and there were cannons on the ship's sides and deck. This ship was made for warfare, no doubt about it.

The ship was a glory to behold, as well. The statue of a goddess which graced its bow looked like it belonged in a place of worship, and carvings of trees and vines wrapped around its hull. Was there really a need to decorate a battleship to this extent? The cost of fixing this thing if it got damaged made my head hurt.

"Are we going to use this to get to the naval port?"

"Yes."

"But operating a ship of this size…"

Fult was justified in his doubts. You would need lots of experienced sailors to man this ship. A bunch of inexperienced neophytes couldn't hope to get this ship out of port.

"There's something here…!"

Yeah.

I knew why Fran was keeping quiet. We had been sensing a great amount of mana coming from beneath the water ever since we got here. The mana signature was terrifyingly huge. If I had to classify it, it would belong to a B-Rank monster.

The main reason we didn't drop everything and run was because it wasn't hostile towards us. It didn't feel murderous or violent. On the contrary, it felt gentle.

"Come out, Warnate!"

"Kuoooooon!"

A giant dragon broke the water's surface.

"Whoa."

“W-wow!”

“So this is a Water Dragon?”

“That’s right. This is my Water Dragon, Warnate.”

“Kuoon!”

“Oooh, it’s been so long! I’m glad you’re doing okay.”

“Kuon!”

The light red dragon drew its head near Sellimea. Was this all right? Even its smallest fang was the size of the princess herself.

I had expected a Water Dragon to have the smooth skin of a plesiosaur, but I was mistaken. It did have the shape of a plesiosaur, but its scales were rough and bumpy. It also had wings which had been repurposed as giant fins. Its tail was very long, and its limbs looked like a cross between hands and flippers, much like a sea lion. It could probably move about on land.

“Warnate’s going to take us where we need to be. We should be all right as long as it moves at its lowest speed.”

“We’ll use this to make it to the halfway point. Come on, everyone!”

“Hm.”

“A-all right.”

“W-will it be okay?”

We hopped on the Water Dragon and had the best boat ride of my life. The Water Dragon had the ability to manipulate water, so it was very hydrodynamic while making for a smooth ride. The sea was quite wavy that day, but the Water Dragon barely swayed. It was really fast, too, like the ferries back home on Earth. And this was its slowest speed?

“This Water Dragon’s great.”

“Yes, I’ve heard rumors, but now I see why fighting Seedrun is a fool’s errand.”

Fult looked out at sea with a grim look on his face.

The Water Dragon was fast, had tight handling, and had the guns to level a small island state. It was indeed the strongest vessel at sea.

I understood why this boat was so gloriously decorated, too. It was hard to imagine this thing getting hit with anything to begin with. The maker of this ship was confident that it could dodge any barrage that came its way. Also, the brilliant decoration served to intimidate any enemies that came within sight of it.

Soon, we reached the naval port.

“I can see it! We’re almost there!” Miriam declared.

“But it looks like something strange is occurring…” Sellimea said, peering through a magical device which worked like a telescope. Had she spotted something out of the ordinary?

“Is that…my fool brother?! He’s all wrangled up!”

“What…?”

The Seedrun princesses were right. In the distance, we could see a man dressed up in gaudy armor, hanging upside down by his legs. I think the mob had repurposed a pulley ordinarily used for big fish for this public shaming. It was quite the hilarious sight.

Next to them was a Water Dragon which had been anchored to the port. It looked more or less like the Water Dragon we were riding, only that the ship part of it was in tatters. Only a third of its mast was left standing. The Water Dragon part was washed ashore, looking quite the worse for wear. Its back was badly wounded, covered in scrapes and burn marks. It looked like it had taken a large cannonball to its back.

“What on earth…” Miriam muttered, dumbfounded.

I might know what happened to it. Actually, I was sure that it had taken the brunt of the black beam I shot off. I could only see the column of water from the royal palace, but now I knew that the Water Dragon had suffered a direct hit from my black beam. The mysterious voice sounded like it was able to see the things that occurred around us, so it might have aimed it at the monster for our sake.

Even a Water Dragon wouldn't be able to brush off such a powerful attack. I was more amazed by the fact that it was still alive.

"Sister, we must hurry!"

"You're right."

We docked the Water Dragon at the naval port and were greeted with loud cheering courtesy of the people of Seedrun, Sellimea's supporters.

Miriam hurried to find her subordinates to get an explanation of what had happened. They had rushed to the naval port, ready to put their lives on the lines, but the battle was over before they even got there. Half of Suarez's forces were wiped out by the explosion and the ensuing wave the eruption produced. Meanwhile, the other half was too terrified to organize themselves into a fighting position.

The people made quick work of the frightened soldiers but not before witnessing the impossible.

Next to the collapsed Water Dragon, thought of as the guardian of Seedrun, was a familiar man in a sorry-looking state.

"So that's where they found my fool brother."

"Yes, ma'am."

Led on by their fury, the people of Seedrun proceeded to tie Suarez up and hung him like the big fish that he thought he was. Not that the people thought much of him; they only wanted to make it easier to stone the tyrant.

Suarez was already covered in bruises by the time we got to the naval port. The stoning didn't do any favors for his face, either. He would've been difficult to identify if not for his gaudy armor. At least, that's what Miriam told me. I just took her word for it having never seen the man in my life.

Suarez was arrogant, notorious for never apologizing to anyone. But he was very meek by the time we got him down from the fish pulley. The wrath of the people had broken not only his face, but his pride. He was tearful and thankful when we stopped the public stoning.

"Hank hoo… Hank hoo ho huch…!" he bawled, prostrating himself before

Miriam.

The final boss of this kingdom had been beaten and reformed before we even got to him. I was kind of disappointed. The black beam shot out of me, but it wasn't as if I wanted to fire it. Happy as I was for the people of Seedrun, I was left unsatisfied by the conclusion.

Now, Sellimea went up to the people of Seedrun, and began.

"Good people of Seedrun—"

The angry mob stopped, hanging on Sellimea's every word.

"The king has fallen."

She walked over to Miriam.

"The conspirators involved with his tyranny have been duly taken care of by Commander Miriam."

She took Miriam's hand and held it up. The crowd burst into applause for Miriam. She was quite popular among the island nation's women; the higher-pitched voices seemed to eclipse the lower pitched ones.

"The royal family of Phyllius have also helped our nation in her time of need. I owe these people my life."

Fult and Satya gracefully bowed their heads. They looked good doing it, too. I expected nothing less of royalty. The people of Seedrun accepted them with thunderous applause. This act pretty much sealed an alliance with Phyllius. Raydoss would think twice about invading Seedrun.

"Furthermore—"

Sellimea looked over to Fran. It was her turn now.

Wait, is she serious?

Sellimea walked over to Fran and rested her hand on her shoulder.

Fran immediately shook her head and made an X with her hands with a look of alarm on her face. "I don't like standing out."

Fran's refusal startled Sellimea. The princess must've found it hard to believe since she herself was raised with a lot of attention on her.

Sellimea respected Fran's wishes, however, and carried on with her speech.

"Furthermore, we have our brave soldiers to thank for opening the path to victory for us."

Carla and her knights shouted a cry of triumph, prompting the mass of people to do the same.

Are you sure? Folks would've recognized you as a hero as soon as tomorrow.

I'm sure. I just wanted to save my friends.

True.

Hm.

To Fran, saving her friends was top priority. She just happened to save Seedrun in the process.

Which was very much like her, I thought.

"And finally… I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to those without whom all of this would be impossible."

Puzzled murmurs broke out among the people. "Deepest gratitude? Who could that be?"

Sellimea waited for her words to sink in before continuing.

"Who is it?"

"Not Lady Miriam?"

"Then who—"

She broke her silence then, and bowed deeply, her hands resting on her lap. The crowd's gaze immediately fixated on the man who was in front. Said man could only wave his hands in front of his face, sternly denying that he had anything to do with it.

"My deepest gratitude goes to the people of Seedrun, the courageous and glorious people who captured the king and saved our kingdom!"

The crowd exploded into a thunderous roar then. One that seemed loud enough to shake the earth itself. The people thrust their fists in the air,

punctuating their victory over their corrupt government. The joyous celebration could not be stopped.

And then someone in the crowd began to sing Seedrun's national anthem. It was a cheerful song, one that you could imagine Seedrun's old pirates singing as they fared the seas under a clear blue sky.

Everyone was smiling as they belted out their anthem. Even Sellimea and Miriam were clapping their hands to the beat. Fran swayed to the rhythm, enjoying the song with a calm expression on her face.

The singing kept going, spreading throughout the harbor, reaching the nobles' district, and eventually making it all the way to the slums. All of Seedrun joined in the celebration of her liberation.

Seeing the people standing side by side, singing their songs of praise loudly to the sky, made me think that Seedrun had a wonderful future ahead of it.

Epilogue

On March 29, 3627, the First Princess Sellimea overthrew the corrupt government of her brother Suarez with the help of her people. In doing so, she started a new page in Seedrun's history.

The battle wasn't long enough to be considered a war. In fact, the conflict lasted for only a day.

That is an understatement, however. In fact, the uprising began and ended in a little under half a day.

Were the revolutionaries experienced combatants? No. Further research indicates that the massive mob that occurred was purely coincidental.

So were Suarez's forces incompetent? Here, the facts are much clearer on the matter.

There weren't enough soldiers to hold back the revolutionaries on the day of the uprising. This is a great deciding factor on why the uprising succeeded to begin with.

So what happened?

As a result of Suarez's heavy taxation on his citizens, many of them left Seedrun to become pirates. Seedrun's navy was kept busy keeping the pirates at bay. As a result, he didn't have many soldiers left to defend the royal palace and the island of Seedrun itself.

Still, he should've been left with a few thousand soldiers, at worst. However, they proved helpless against the revolutionaries on the day of the uprising. Were they that weak? Or were the revolutionaries that strong?

The evidence of history suggests that defeat was inevitable for the leftover Seedrunian soldiers.

At the time, the majority of the Seedrunian military were made up of people who bought their way into the position and had likely never seen the heat of battle. Morale was low, to say the least. Meanwhile, the experienced officers with half a conscience had left the military of their volition after seeing the

corruption of their superiors. Soon, the corruption of the kingdom trickled down to the training of their military, worsening the quality of their fighters. They were no match for the intensely motivated revolutionaries, no matter how well equipped they had been.

The story gets more interesting when you get to the rumors surrounding the uprising.

Some say that Sellimea enlisted the help of disgruntled adventurers who were planning to leave Seedrun because of Suarez's corrupt government. There are even more absurd accounts of a great beam of light erupting out of the royal palace itself. Some claim that Princess Sellimea was the source of this great beam of light, although confirmation proves difficult because there seems to be some degree of concealment regarding the facts of the matter. Suffice it to say there were forces at work on the day of the uprising which helped the revolutionaries.

Sellimea was crowned queen soon after Suarez was captured. Members of the Phyllian royal family were present at the coronation, which implied their intervention and also led to speculation that this was Seedrun's declaration of hostility towards Raydoss. The specifics remain unclear.

The one thing that is clear within this otherwise opaque revolution is the people's reception to Queen Sellimea. She became a main pillar of government administration ever since that day.

Once seated on the throne, Queen Sellimea proceeded to not only restore Seedrun to her former glory, but actually surpassed it. That she did it with such amazing speed was beyond anyone's speculation at the time.

She was a merciful ruler of her people, and her people worked hard for her in kind.

Commander Miriam took apart the corrupt military and bureaucracy. Known as the Blade of Queen Sellimea, she worked to get rid of unnecessary taxes and laws that previously served to oppress their people.

The impoverished revolutionaries who were at the front line of the uprising were elected as Seedrun's soldiers and continue to guard the nation to this day.

Queen Sellimea's rule marked a golden age for Seedrun. It was a time of great wealth, strength, and happiness. Perhaps the key to such a harmonious kingdom lies within the cooperation between a king and his people.

—Excerpt from "Records of the Maritime Nation,"
by Willow Magnus, High Elf historian.

"We're almost there!"

"Wow, really?"

"Of course. I told you Water Dragons can go really fast."

"I expected nothing less from a Water Dragon."

"Indeed."

The Seedrun revolution had settled down, and so we decided to resume our journey to Bulbola. At top speed, the Water Dragon was able to take us to Bulbola within a day. It was at least ten times faster than the ship we were on. Fult and Satya appreciated it since it meant they would make it there in time for the Festival of the Moons.

"Water Dragons are amazing."

"I know. Aren't they just?" Miriam puffed out her chest, proud of her birthright. Sellimea had appointed her chief of the Water Dragons the other day. She had always wanted to be captain of a Water Dragon ever since she was a child, and she excitedly told Fran all about it last night. Fran listened to everything Miriam knew about Water Dragons as she treated the beastgirl to her favorite island strawberries that she'd promised. She told her about how Gladio took her Water Dragon from her, which I supposed was the root of the bad blood between the two.

"Yes, indeed. My Aqouis is the best there is!"

"Kuooo."

"Aah, you adorable creature, you!"

She was so close with her Water Dragon that it was almost enviable.

"But that means we have to say goodbye soon…"

Fran had been asked whether she wanted to stay in Seedrun as a fighter. Upon hearing this, Fult and Satya raised their complaints that it wasn't fair that Seedrun got to keep Fran all to themselves. Had Fran chosen to stay, I would've agreed, but she refused every offer she received.

Her encounter with Valuza had invigorated her desire to increase her abilities.

"I need more training to get stronger. For that, I'll need to go to Ulmutt."

Considering how unfitting Fran was for a desk job, I thought that was the right choice.

"I'll come visit."

"You will?"

"Mhmm."

"You promise?"

"Of course. I don't lie to my friends."

Fran considered Miriam one of her friends now, and Sellimea, too, by extension. Her brazen ignorance of their status didn't upset Miriam, unlike the first time they met.

"Friends… I suppose you're right. We are friends."

"Hm. So I'll come again."

"We'll be waiting for you."

"Hm."

"Well, what about us?"

"Friends."

"Heehee. Good. I'm sure my brother is happy to hear that, too."

"Wha—No, I'm not."

"What are you getting embarrassed about, Brother?"

"I'm not embarrassed!"

"Hehe."

“Hahaha! Even you are no match for Lady Satya!”

Fran made a lot of friends today, and I thought it was good for her. I hoped she would continue making more friends down the road.

Teacher.

What’s up?

Bulbola’s going to be fun.

Sure sounds like it. It’s a port city. I’m sure there’s tons of good food there.

Yeah. And I can’t wait to see what the people there are like.

Heh, you said it. I hope you make friends with them, too, Fran.

Fran really had grown up. She was still excited about food and killing monsters, but now she had gained an appreciation for human contact. Our detour at Seedrun was well worth it.

Still, her appreciation for human contact also meant that goodbyes were going to be that much more difficult.

I knew she was crying as she lay in bed last night.

But encounters like these were what made people grow. I hoped that goodbyes wouldn’t discourage her from saying hello.

Speaking of last night, I had to explain to Fran who the mysterious voice was. It was difficult considering I didn’t know anything about it, either. I couldn’t answer any of her questions if I tried.

So I settled with telling her that the voice was something that helped me seal something dangerous inside of me. She was satisfied with it. Satisfied enough for now, anyway.

I asked her then whether she wanted to keep using me. I was a sword which held a dangerous secret, after all. I wouldn’t want to use myself, if it came down to it.

Fran hit me when I said that. She hit me so hard that it left a slight dent in my wolf crest. Blood trickled from her knuckles as she told me with a straight face, “I trust you, Teacher. I won’t let you go no matter what.”

But…

“We’ll be fine.”

No, but…

“We’ll be fine. If you go out of control, I’ll stop you. You just need to make me strong enough to do that,” Fran said as she hugged me. Any more of that and I might have cried and rusted myself to pieces.

All right, if you say so. It’s going to be hard from here on out, so you better hold on tight.

“Of course! We’re the ultimate team, Teacher. We’ll be fine no matter what happens.”

Remembering our conversation made my imaginary eyes water. Then, Miriam’s voice boomed from the deck.

“I can see Bulbola now!”

“Oooh, where is it?”

“Really?”

“We’re finally there.”

Fran and the royal twins stood side by side by the railing and looked towards the spot Miriam pointed at.

“Right there!”

She pointed to a city on top of an island. It was quite a big city, too. That must be Bulbola.

What adventure awaited us this time?

Man, I’m getting excited!

You too?

I guess that means you’re as excited as I am, Fran.

Yeah!

We really were the ultimate team!


READ ME ←
RIGHT-TO-LEFT
EXTRA CHAPTER
Fantastic Delusions in the City
STORY: Yuu Tanaka
ART: Tomowo Maruyama
"BOO" ...?
NO-THING! NEVER MIND.
THAT WAS CLOSE! I DON'T HAVE SEXUAL NEEDS...
BECAUSE I'M A SWORD, BUT I GUESS I CARRIED OVER MY TASTES FROM MY PREVIOUS LIFE.
WHOA! THOSE ARE SOME NICE BOO--
THERE SURE ARE A LOT OF GLAMOROUS LOOKING CARNIVORES AMONG THE BEASTMEN TRIBES.
WILL FRAN GROW UP TO BE LIKE THEM ONE DAY...?
JUST IMAGINE IT!


HM...♡
TEACHER IS SUCH AN AMAZING SWORD...
ABSO-LUTELY LEWD!
YOUR FATHER WON'T ALLOW IT! I'M PUTTING THIS AWAY IN THE LEWD FOLDER OF MY BRAIN!!
LEWD ...?
FLAT
HUH?!
YES... THIS IS MUCH MORE SUITABLE FOR HER.
I'M JUST THINKING THAT YOU'RE MUCH BETTER OFF A STONE BULLET, FRAN.
GET IT?
.....?
YOU'RE GROSSING ME OUT TODAY, TEACHER.
...
I REALLY NEED TO WATCH MY-SELF.
END

Afterword

Hello, this is Yuu Tanaka.

I'm sure this isn't our first time meeting each other, but if it is, please give the first and second volumes a shot, too.

As for the rest of you, it's been half a year since we last met. Sorry for the long wait. There's a lot of new content this time round, so those of you reading the online version should get a fresh experience reading it, too.

I end up expressing my gratitude here every time so bear with me.

Thank you Micro Magazine for publishing three volumes of my work thus far and to my gracious editor I-san, who kept cheering on this anguished writer.

Thank you Llo for the wonderful illustrations. This work wouldn't be here without you!

Thank you everyone involved in the publishing and printing process.

Reincarnated as a Sword also got the manga treatment recently, and I hope those of you reading the manga enjoy it.

Until we meet again in the fourth volume.

Thank you for reading.



Thank you for reading!

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