
Reincarnated as a Sword
WRITTEN BY
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Llo
16
NOVEL

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Al Azif
"Feast on my blood and come forth! Patchwork Bodies!"
Fran
Kuhne
Teacher
Jean du Vix
Jet


When are we gonna get to the palace?
"That one smells good."
"Woof!"

Reincarnated as a Sword

16

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

Llo

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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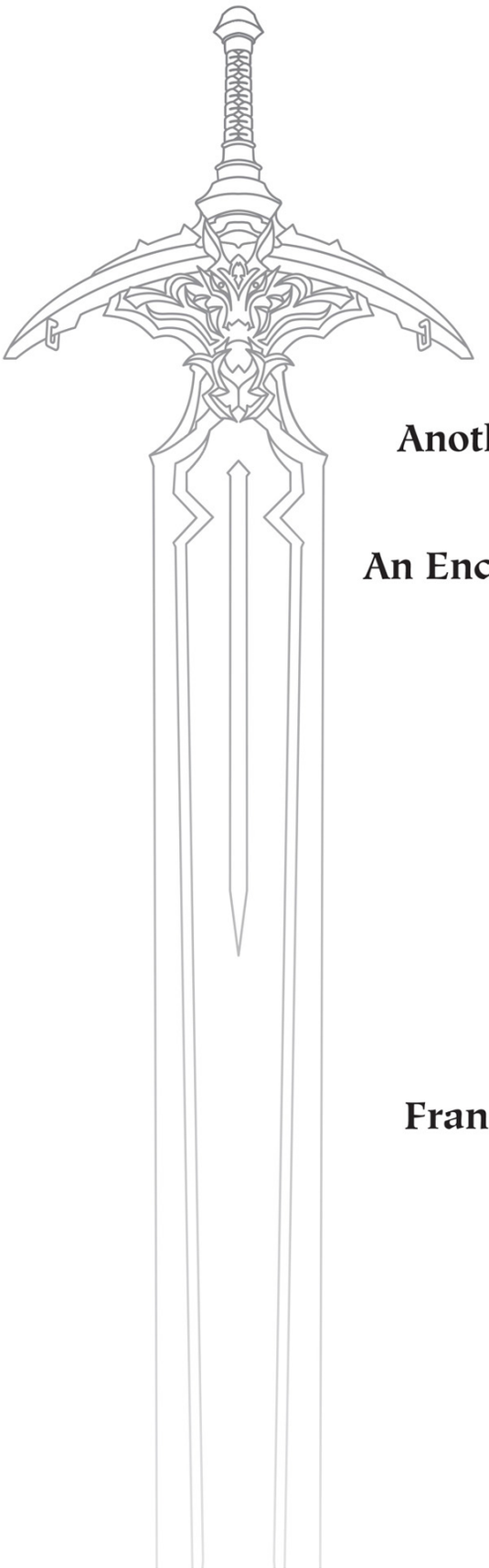
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Chapter 1:
In the Kingdom of Belioth

“WELCOME, FRAN. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Hm.”

“Tea for her, please.”

Pots and cups floated through the air at the high elf’s command, carried by invisible spirits.

Ten days had passed since the destruction of the Beast of Lake Vivian, and Winalene—or rather, Wina—had recovered enough of her powers to use simple magicks. She’d also finished dealing with the aftermath of the incident.

She’d started referring to herself as Wina after she split from Winalene. Though people were confused by the sudden name change, they weren’t eager to pry. The change in her appearance also caused some shock but didn’t change the people’s respect for her.

Although most of the actual ground work was carried out by local viscounts and guilds, the orders had still come from Wina. Her current weakness didn’t diminish her past achievements. If anything, she gained even more influence after the surrounding towns witnessed her victory over the beast. The Adventurers’ Guild treated her like a hero and followed her orders as such.

After issuing her orders and handing the reins over to a government official, she returned to the Academy. The officials really wanted her to stay, but they couldn’t force her. They could only watch as the high elf walked home.

After finishing some outstanding quests, Fran joined Wina back at the Academy. The institution was in an uproar over how Wina looked. Her right hand and right eye had been tinted with a mysterious black substance.

Things settled down a couple of days later. The students didn’t really interact with Winalene to begin with…and if the headmistress said it wasn’t a problem, then it wasn’t a problem.

The instructors still needed to get used to it, but they would adjust in time.

Since we were leaving tomorrow, there wasn't much for us to do. Today was the last day Fran would be in uniform. We discussed what lay ahead.

"Are you sure about giving us custody of Theraclede and Romeo?"

"Hm."

The current subject was the treatment of the pair. I was quite interested in this myself.

Theraclede had sworn an oath to Fran, effectively giving her his life. He said that he was hers to do with as she pleased once everything was over. But Fran no longer wanted to kill him.

She sympathized with Romeo and Sierra after everything they had been through. While they weren't exactly...*friends*, there was so much overlap that she couldn't help seeing herself in them.

Killing Theraclede would make Romeo resent her and turn Sierra against her. She didn't want that. While her grudge hadn't faded, she was no longer compelled to kill him outright.

Kiara did her part by telling Fran not to waste her time on vengeance. She gave Fran an out right from the beginning.

For now, Fran decided to leave Romeo and Theraclede under Wina's care.

"You're absolutely certain? You would be sparing your enemy."

"...Romeo needs him."

The water was not under the bridge, but she had no interest in obsessing over Theraclede's life.

Fran was thinking about Romeo.

Romeo didn't want to be raised in a good environment or under the protection of kindhearted guardians. He wanted to be with Theraclede.

But Theraclede was still a wanted man. There weren't many places in the world where he could walk about freely. The Academy was a rare exception.

With Wina and Lene heavily weakened, the Academy's defenses were reduced. Theraclede would come in handy—and he, Romeo, Wina, and Sierra would all owe Fran a huge favor. Even so, she wasn't one to think this far ahead. In fact, she'd basically shifted the burden of the decision to Wina. After spending a lot of time thinking about it, she still didn't know what to do.

Meanwhile, Sierra and the sword Theraclede had disappeared. They had no reason to linger, after all. They'd committed no crimes and weren't working for the Academy. They were ordinary adventurers, as far as this world was concerned. They had remained a while to see what would become of Romeo and the current Theraclede. But with that matter settled, so was their business here.

I didn't know where they were headed, but if I had to guess, they were probably pursuing their timeline's Zelyse. Though *our* Zelyse had died, their real score was with the version of him that had become a sword.

We didn't know what had happened to Nameless, either. Wina hadn't kept track of him, meaning it was probably safe to assume he had escaped. She'd thought he was just another undead on the battlefield.

Which left my and Fran's future to consider.

Fran had finished her tenure as instructor. Although she'd only became an instructor to trick the guardian spirits of the Academy, this *was* why she'd originally come here. Now that the spirits had acknowledged her as an instructor for helping Wina and the others, she could safely resign without fear of retribution.

I wondered whether Wina's contract would be all right after her weakening, but she assured me that there were no changes to the established contracts. The Academy would still be protected by its iron wall of spirits. And Lene was now among them.

"You saved us. Thank you." Wina bowed deeply.

She still had most of Winalene's mannerisms, but something inside her had changed. Her instability was gone, replaced by a kind of peace. Her mind certainly appreciated the fact that her body no longer had to house two souls. Wina had returned to her original self.

And now she sighed, placing a hand on her cheek. "There's just the matter of your compensation."

"You can't just give me money?"

"I can, and I will. But that won't be enough to repay you for what you did. I will see to it that you are compensated properly."

"Ooh!"

Fran's eyes lit up. *Properly* meant a lot coming from Winalene. She understood that it meant something big, and she wasn't about to say no. Fran was more than happy to get what she deserved.

"What do you have in mind?"

"First, let me fulfill the promise I made to you before."

"Promise?"

"Yes. You must remember, Sword."

Ooh, that. Of course.

"Oh yeah." Fran had also remembered. It wasn't something that she would forget.

"Information on the Intelligent Weapon that remained sane."

Wina had run into plenty of Intelligent Weapons in her life. Among them was one that had not gone mad. This information was more important than any payment, and she'd promised it to us if we figured out what was behind the lake anomaly. It was fair to say we'd gone above and beyond to do so... The reward would be well deserved.

"I don't know whether she still exists, but..."

"She?"

It's a woman?

Fran and I were stunned.

Though Intelligent Weapons didn't have to be male, the ones we had run into so far had been men. Me, Zelyse, and even Fanatix's basic personalities were all male. P.A. was female, but she wasn't human to begin with. I'd just assumed we would be dealing with another guy.

A woman.

Being formerly human, the soul retained its sense of gender. Though a sword lacked sexual organs, it remembered whether it was a man or a woman. Take me, for example. People would be infuriated if I just hovered into the women's baths. Fran was still a child and I was her guardian, so an argument could be made for that (for now, anyway). But entering a bath with other women in it would be awkward.

Now, if I had been born a woman—

"You seem distracted. May I continue?"

Oh, sorry. You just caught me off guard. Go ahead.

"Sorry."

"I met her on the cursed continent of Goldicia."

Goldicia…

A continent ravaged by a potentially world-ending monster—now sealed with a barrier to prevent the monster from escaping. The kingdoms of the world had sent their best soldiers and adventurers to stall its advance.

It was a fitting place for something as mythical as an Intelligent Weapon to be.

But it's already been a thousand years since Winalene met the weapon and its master.

"Yes."

The weapon had probably changed hands by now.

Doesn't sound like she'd still be in Goldicia…

"Hm…"

As with Godswords, these weapons changed hands so many times it was hard to know where to start looking. But Winalene put

our fears to rest.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. My main concern is whether she’s still in one piece.”

“Hm?”

What do you mean?

“Her user is still alive.”

What? How?

It’d been a thousand years! Though I guess that wasn’t out of the question considering Wina’s age.

Is the owner a high elf?

Wina shook her head.

Were there other races with long lifespans? I certainly wasn’t familiar with the anthropology of this world.

So…what’s this user’s deal, then?

“He is the immortal sinner. Trismegistus.”

“Huh?”

That *Trismegistus?*

Fran gasped. We hadn’t expected to hear that name today.

The king of the drakes? Cursed to battle the monster forever?

“The very one.”

“Trismegistus…”

Fran wore a rare expression of surprise. I didn’t blame her. The world’s greatest sinner was so notorious that he sounded like a figure in a fairy tale. Even someone as sheltered as Fran knew who he was.

The great villain was well known throughout the land…but I remembered something upon hearing his name.

I think Frederick mentioned that Trismegistus owned an Intelligent sword.

Frederick was the guardian of Velmeria, a drake halfling who got possessed by Fanatix. He seemed to know a lot about Goldicia,

since he hailed from there. Though he disappeared after the battle of the capital, he let that bit of information slip after learning about Fanatix.

The Intelligent Weapon must really exist if Wina was willing to share this info.

“Her—its name is Fannaberta.”

Fannaberta.

Another sane Intelligent Weapon.

“Yes. She was aide and partner to Trismegistus, King of Drakes. The cold-blooded witch. The genocidal swordswoman. Shadow of the Golden King. A powerful elf who amassed many titles for herself—and one well versed in powerful magicks—who turned herself into an Intelligent Weapon.”

She used to be an elf?!

That was probably how Wina knew about her.

She doesn’t sound friendly, judging by her titles.

“Indeed. She isn’t the type you can just strike up a conversation with.”

Wina had a distant look in her eyes as she rummaged through her memories. She couldn’t remember all the details, but Fannaberta’s cold personality had left an impression. She must have been quite the individual if she was found worthy to be Trismegistus’s aide.

“She is an ardent devotee of Trismegistus.”

Don’t tell me… She’s not crazy as a sword because she was already crazy before *turning into a sword.*

Maybe she couldn’t go crazier.

“No. She’s sane enough to carry on a conversation. She’s a fanatic…but the fact remains that she’s stayed herself throughout the centuries of being a sword.”

Fair.

Keeping your personality was the same as remaining sane. If she had a way of preventing me from becoming a sword, I’d have

liked to hear it.

My resolve had only strengthened after seeing my alternate self. I couldn't let myself end up like that. I couldn't make Fran cry!

"The only question is whether Fannaberta is in one piece. I don't know how long she can last in that hellscape. Being Trismegistus's favorite sword means constantly fighting pitched battles."

Trismegistus was cursed to battle the monster forever. It was easy to imagine his equipment breaking every other day.

"Goldicia…"

It's dangerous, but…

I honestly wanted to give meeting Fannaberta a shot. The continent was insanely dangerous, but Fran gave a firm nod.

"We're going."

Thanks. I'll need all the help I can get.

"Hm!"

Fran was prepared to go to Goldicia for my sake. Even if I told her it would be dangerous, she wouldn't have chosen any differently. But I wasn't going to try and stop her this time. For my sake and for hers.

This wasn't the time for *sorry*, but *thanks*. We would need each other's help to find the Intelligent Weapon.

"Woof, woof!"

I know. I'm counting on you too, Jet.

"Arf!"

"Good to see you're all on the same page."

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

Fran and Jet nodded proudly. Wina sighed and shrugged. Despite her sarcasm, she was genuinely enjoying the conversation. It wasn't something that Winalene would've been capable of.

“Well, that’s about everything I know about the Intelligent Weapon. Now, is there anything you need in particular? I could just give you money…”

“Hmm… Teacher?”

Hang on…

We weren’t really pinched for money. Adventurers would usually invest a lot of their gold into equipment, but ours was already top notch.

Not to brag, but you couldn’t buy a better sword than me. And Fran’s armor was already godsmith grade.

They might cost the national treasure of a small kingdom… maybe even a big one.

We didn’t really need money to maintain them either since they were self-repairing.

Besides, we had already gotten a pile of cash from this whole thing. Getting our powerful potions reimbursed had already netted us over ten million gold. We really didn’t need any more.

And we were talking to a high elf here. Powerful both in combat and influence. She had better things to offer.

We don’t need money. It would be nice if you could give us some useful items or intel, though.

“Hmm… Let me think.” Wina cupped her chin with her left hand. “How about permission to enter the Sky Dragon’s Bed? I’m sure Fran would like that.”

“Sky Dragon’s Bed? You mean the sky isle?”

“Yes. I’ll even give you transport.”

An S-Threat haunt where A-Threat Sky Dragons lurked.

I don’t think we’ll make it on our own even with permission. It’s too dangerous.

“Aww.”

Fran objected, but I wasn’t about to yield.

No. That is one place we are not going!

“He’s right. I could come help you if I were better, but as you well know…” Wina shrugged her left shoulder and sighed.

I would have been a lot more reassured if we had a high elf as our guide.

Sky dragon materials were of extremely high quality. Amanda’s whip was made from the stuff. Her old partner broke during the tournament and she had yet to find a better replacement for it. The materials to craft it were rare and powerful.

They might even be powerful enough to upgrade Fran’s gear.

But it was too dangerous. A single sky dragon would be a difficult battle; getting swarmed would mean death.

Most adventurers resorted to stealth to get small amounts at a time…

But I doubt a single scale would be a meaningful upgrade.

“Hm… I wanted to give it to Amanda.”

Amanda?

“Hm. For her whip.”

No wonder she was so interested in the Sky Dragon’s Bed!

Fran was growing up so fast. I was so happy! I wanted to help her see her intentions through, but…

Wina, what do you need to craft a whip from sky dragon material?

“A whip? Whiskers, definitely. You’d also need the crystals, scales, and hair.”

Figures.

Not the kind of materials you could grab being sneaky. I was sure Amanda would’ve been happy with a few extra scales, but if we were taking the risk then we might as well go all out.

Wina understood what we were getting at. She nodded and said, “Actually, the Academy does have sky dragon materials in the treasury.”

You do?

“Yes. I hunted one down in the past for its materials.”

The king at the time had fallen ill and needed medicine made from sky dragon parts. The creature’s scales, whiskers, horns, and crystal were left unused, packed away in the treasury. They would usually have been used to craft equipment, but the high elf had no need for that sort of thing. The Academy was doing well enough that they didn’t need to be sold for money, either.

Wina had forgotten about them until now.

“I’ll take it!”

“Hmm… And Amanda will be the one using the whip?”

“Hm.”

“Mediocre materials would break in the hands of an elite like her. You’ll definitely need hair, whiskers, and crystals. But as for eyeballs and bones…”

Wina thought about it for a while and then summoned a spirit to her side. I could feel their presence but couldn’t hear the exchange which took place.

Wina frowned and said, “I wouldn’t mind giving you all the sky dragon materials in our possession, but that would be against Academy rules.”

Stored within the Academy treasury, the materials were technically Academy property. Meaning they were under the custody of the guardian spirits.

Even as the headmistress, Wina didn’t have free reign over it. The Academy was more than pleased to compensate Fran for a job well done, but…

“…There is an upper limit to your compensation.”

Fran had been deemed worthy to receive the highest possible reward. Still, the maximum compensation was twenty million gold. The spirits would not allow anyone to go over that amount no matter how long and hard they worked.

The price of sky dragon materials was much more than that.

“There wouldn’t be a problem if it were from my personal stock.”

What if you just paid us in sky dragon materials? We don't need cash.

Our compensation would come from both the Academy and Wina's own pocket.

Twenty million from the Academy and twenty million from Wina. A grand total of forty million gold. And perhaps Wina could use her twenty million to buy the materials for us?

"Even so. If only I had a few more years of savings… I can only add an extra ten million."

Wina didn't own a lot of property considering she had been around for millenia. Though still a millionaire by ordinary standards, she wasn't as rich as she was powerful.

But there was a reason for that…

Living in the Academy didn't take up any money, and she didn't like the luxurious lifestyle. She didn't care for loot and didn't need to save up money to acquire more. She could always go and get whatever she needed by herself anyway.

This practically eliminated her need for money. It allowed her to freely donate her wealth as she pleased while enjoying the simple life.

Still, Wina was able to pay us twenty million gold from her savings as headmistress. She could add an extra ten million on top, but that still wasn't enough to cover the cost of materials.

Can you just sell us the whiskers and crystals, then?

"I could… But you might as well use the money to buy some better dungeon goods than make gear without the proper materials."

"Hmm…"

I guess it wasn't that simple.

As we mulled it over, Wina gave us a suggestion.

"How about this? You could take on a quest from the Academy."

"A quest?"

Depends on the quest.

Sky dragon materials cost well over fifty million gold. A quest that would cover that kind of money couldn't be easy.

"Do you know about the Goldician Obligation?"

"?"

Never heard of it. But I'm guessing it has something to do with Goldicia…

"Put simply, it is a joint obligation of the nations to send out soldiers and supplies to Goldicia."

That was the continent where Trismegistus unleashed the forbidden Abyss Eater. Combat with the creature continued to this day. That was all I knew. The specifics were still a mystery.

Apparently, the nations of the world stood united against the beast. Some would send out soldiers while others shipped supplies and handled transport. Each helped in their own way.

This duty was called the Goldician Obligation and there were severe penalties attached to neglecting it, up to invasion from neighboring kingdoms.

Once there was a kingdom that attacked its neighbor whose army was away on the obligation. Its neighbors united to crush the offending kingdom instead. They utterly destroyed it.

The Goldician Obligation was necessary to protect the rest of the world. The penalties were attached so the nations would not shirk the cause. Even Raydoss played its part. That alone said volumes about its gravity.

"For our part, Belioth usually gives monetary aid and sends out transport fleets. At times, I even go myself. However…"

You're in no condition right now. And I'm guessing money and soldiers are out of the question as well.

"Precisely. Belioth must fulfill its obligation either this year or the next. But this…*incident* has caused heavy losses."

"This year or next year?"

I hadn't expected it to be that soon.

Sounds rough.

“I’m sure we can scrounge up the money. Soldiers, on the other hand…”

Belioth would need a lot of manpower to rebuild. They couldn’t afford to ship out their adventurers with all the recent casualties, either. It was doubtful they could replenish their full number by next year.

“The obligation can be lightened or postponed in the event of natural disasters. But I’d rather save that as a last resort.”

Belioth’s influence could diminish if it showed weakness.

All pointless politics to us, but it was an all too grim reality for the politicians in charge.

So you want Fran to represent Belioth in the Goldician Obligation?

“Yes. You will be representing the Magic Academy as well. Both Belioth and the Academy will reward you.”

Fran would have to cross over to Goldicia along with the other Beliothian forces.

I guess we were planning to go there anyway…

But on behalf of a nation? I was a little worried. This was Fran, after all. She wasn’t lacking in raw power, but she might cause other kinds of trouble while there.

As her guardian, I wasn’t about to let Fran shoulder that kind of responsibility.

I voiced my concerns to Wina and she responded with an easy shrug.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing formal.”

“I don’t think anyone would be fool enough to raise their voice against an adventurer backed by a high elf and the kingdom of Belioth.”

But how would anyone keep track of your progress when you get there? Do you have to submit monster materials like the guild?

“Even simpler.”

Apparently you would be registered with a device upon reaching the continent. It would keep track of your progress, recording how Fran fought the Abyss Eater on behalf of Belioth.

“My task for you is to represent Belioth in the Goldician Obligation. You’re free to let loose when you get there. That’s all.”

I see… So how strong is the Abyss Eater?

All I knew was that it could get infinitely stronger. Apparently, your average soldier could take it on, though…

“That’s a little…complicated.” Wina began to explain.

First, the Abyss Eater looked like a translucent slime. Some had even taken to calling it a slime ghost. As for its size, it covered the whole continent. It had filled the entire area of the divine barrier, making Goldicia look like a dome full of invisible slime.

Wait, so you just go inside the barrier and fight?

“That’s right.”

Wouldn’t that mean you’re inside *the Abyss Eater? That doesn’t sound good. How do you even breathe?*

“The Abyss Eater is part spirit. And like a spirit, it’s there but incorporeal. Being inside it does us no harm.”

So it’s harmless?

“No. The Abyss Eater’s body won’t attack you, but the same can’t be said of the monsters it produces. They attack everyone and consume them to nourish the Abyss Eater.”

So it’s a monster that keeps spawning monsters. And you want us to go in and defeat as many monsters as we can?

“That’s right. These monsters are called Antibodies, and you just need to defeat as many of them as you please. You’re free to do what you want as long as you make your quota.”

The quest sounded like a good deal—especially since Goldicia was somewhere we needed to get to eventually. Seeing that we still had reservations, however, Wina gave us one last push.

“Compensation wouldn’t be the only benefit of taking on this quest.”

What do you mean?

“There are many regulations for those wishing to go to Goldicia on their own. The quota, for one. Take up my quest and we will provide transportation, and the terms of enlistment will also be much more favourable. You won’t have to join any units or listen to any orders. You can do as you please.”

“Hm. Freedom is a good thing.”

Yeah.

Might as well take the quest. But just as I was beginning to feel optimistic about the deal, Fran looked like something was bothering her.

What’s eating you, Fran?

“Hm… Raydoss. Do we just ignore them?”

I’m worried about them, too… But there’s not much we can do about them.

Raydoss didn’t admit adventurers, and besides, even if we managed to sneak in, what would we do there? Did we expect to find Nameless and Zelyse in the large empire while remaining hidden? The whole nation might come after us if we were discovered. It was too reckless, especially with no leads on where Nameless went.

“I’ve already contacted the other nations and guild about Raydoss. They can’t take immediate action against them, either. It’s not like we can take down the whole empire overnight.”

“Hm.”

“But the time will come when we launch an offensive against them. We’ll need you then…but you must be patient for now.”

Wina had no intention of letting Raydoss’s frequent plots go unpunished. Though she might not be able to fight back against them by herself, there were other ways of keeping them in check.

The best we could do was take on this job so Wina could focus on Raydoss. Taking on the Goldician Obligation on her

behalf would only be in our favor.

“All right.”

Fran didn’t like Raydoss because of all the trouble they caused to their neighbors. She hated them, but not enough to destroy them outright. At most, she just wanted to teach them a lesson. But now they had Zelyse working for them, and we knew that Nameless was out to kill Jean. Fran knew that sooner or later, their leadership had to be dealt with.

Still, she couldn’t do it alone. The best she could do was wait for Wina to do her thing.

“Then I want you to send a warning to Jean.”

“About the demi-lich Nameless?”

“Hm.”

“Very well. I’ll tell the guild everything you’ve told me.”

“Thanks.”

Wina was quite influential in the Adventurers’ Guild. They’d listen to her.

As we talked about our future plans, someone entered the room…but the door remained closed. The figure just appeared out of nowhere.

“Allow me to thank you also, Fran. I’ve managed to become a guardian spirit because of you.”

“Lene.”

Lene was now under contract as an Academy spirit.

Although she had been successfully separated from Winalene and the beast, her body was long gone. She would have to live out the rest of her days as a spirit. Returning to her high elf form was impossible. Wina had said she would look for a way to reincarnate her, but Lene refused.

“I made my decision to live as a spirit when I became the spirit of the lake.”

Lene had formed a contract with the spirit trapped inside the belly of the beast. It joined her to the spirit of the lake, making her

part spirit.

All this talk about spirits made me wonder. *Why did you form a contract with the Academy instead of Wina?*

Lene was now bound to the Academy instead of being Wina's personal spirit.

"Wina and I wouldn't be equals if I hadn't."

Isn't there a hierarchy between the guardians and Wina, anyway?

"That's fine. Both Wina and I are equals under the rules."

"Because we are both bound to the Academy."

To my knowledge, the Academy had some of the strictest rules in this world. It was a place where violation was a violation and merit was merit, regardless of feelings and affinities. Winalene had probably set it up that way on purpose, to keep herself in check should she ever go on a rampage. It was also a failsafe, in the event anyone else ever took up the mantle of headmistress. Here, the powerful could not bend the law to their benefit—a rare thing in this world.

"With Lene here, I actually wouldn't mind retiring."

"No! Not when my dream has finally come true," Lene immediately objected.

Was her dream to be bound to the Academy? Fran tilted her head, not understanding what she said either.

"Your dream?"

"Yes. My dream was to build a school and surround myself with children."

Winalene had mentioned that in her frenzy before the separation—something about founding the Academy for Lene's sake?

"Lene bore the title of Protector of Children once."

The same title Amanda had! It was a title bequeathed only to those who absolutely loved children. She must *really* have liked kids if she had that title.

But a guardian spirit and a teacher are very different things.

"Maybe so, but either way, I get to protect the kids. I am satisfied."

And Lene meant what she said. She wanted to protect children more than she wanted to teach them.

An elf who was a Protector of Children. When I told her that she was just like Amanda, she revealed something surprising. Winalene had mentioned earlier that Amanda was her descendant, but it turned out she was *Lene's* descendant, to be precise.

Amanda hated Winalene because she thought Wina had usurped Lene's identity. She must have fumed at the idea of Winalene being headmistress and pretending to care for children. As a Protector of Children herself, she could never trust Winalene.

Well, as long as you're happy, Lene.

"Ha ha. This is the most I've enjoyed myself in thousands of years."

"Hm. That's all that matters."

Lene smiled, though not as mysteriously as before. Her smile was now genuinely warm and human. It had a saintly, approachable quality to it. She looked as reassuring as a young and kindly teacher.

This was Lene's real smile.

Maybe I would've liked going to school more if I'd had a teacher like her.

And so, we ended up taking Wina's quest offer. It benefited us too much to pass up. We would leave tomorrow...though not for Goldicia. First, we needed to submit the quest application at the capital. Then we would leave, together with other members of the obligation.

"Do you have special classes after this?"

"Hm."

"I hope you can learn something from them."

Fran left Wina's office and headed to a small classroom where her private lesson would take place. There, an elf she had seen countless times in the faculty room engaged her in a one-on-one session.

"—And that's the gist of it. Did you get all that?"

"Hm."

The subject was Spirit Magic. Wina had allowed Fran to be a student on her final day in the Academy, and Fran managed to sneak in one last lesson. In the end, she still had to find a spirit who was compatible with her.

Next came a farewell party arranged by the students. Everyone ate together in the Fran-improved cafeteria and said their goodbyes.

"Thank you for everything you've taught us."

"Thanks for saving us!"

"I hope you'll come and visit us one day."

Despite their initial fear of her, she was one of them now. Fran had lived the student life ever since she came back from the lake. They were sad to see her go.

"It's unfortunate that you're leaving so soon."

"Yes! Just when I thought I'd get a fellow beastman on the faculty..."

Ines, Holial, and the other teachers were also there.

"The students are visibly stronger under your instruction. I'm sure they would love for you to keep teaching them...but alas. I must pick up where you've left off!"

"Hm. Good luck."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

Fran looked happy at Ines's comment. Though she appreciated that she would be missed, she was glad that she had Ines's approval as an instructor.

Surprisingly enough, Fran didn't hate being a teacher. The childish side of her enjoyed people looking up to her, but she was

gratified by people benefiting from her experience. Ines's compliment only underscored that feeling.

"Fran."

"Carona."

"Thank you for taking care of us."

Next came Carona, with her blonde curly pigtails and exposed forehead. Her eyes looked kind of puffy, which warmed my heart to see. The girl had shed tears for Fran's departure. The girl whom we had an awkward encounter with at the Adventurers' Guild had turned out to be one of Fran's dearest friends.

For Carona, Fran had led her and her cohort to become better fighters on the field. She bowed her head deeply with gratitude and respect.

The feeling was mutual. Fran was also thankful and respected her—if it weren't for Carona, Fran's student life would've played out differently. It would've taken more time for the rest of the students to warm up to her, and they certainly wouldn't be having this going-away party right now.

Fran knew this. She understood that even though she was more experienced on the battlefield, Carona was more socially experienced.

"I should be thanking you, too." Fran bowed her head. "I had a lot of fun and it was all thanks to you."

"Oh my..."

Carona widened her eyes. Even from the little she knew about Fran, she knew that she wasn't someone who would just say these things.

I was surprised, too.

Fran noticed and tilted her head.

What's wrong?

I was just thinking how talkative you are today.

I am?

Yeah.

Fran hadn’t noticed.

I think it’s good that you’re saying what you’re feeling.

Not that she could just say anything she wanted, but gratitude was a good thing to express.

Fran seemed to get the point and nodded.

You’re right.

You get what I’m saying?

Hm. Maybe the other me and Teacher wouldn’t have ended up that way if they talked more.

You have a point there.

Although we only interacted with our alternate selves for a short period of time, it really left a mark on Fran.

“Fran…” Carona covered her mouth, emotions threatening to spill out. “Do come and see us again…”

“Hm.”

“I-if you’ll excuse me!” Carona fled, perhaps embarrassed about crying in public. To the end, she maintained her upper-class dignity. I respected that.

“I’m glad that you’re safe and sound, Fran.”

“Thanks for the info. Really helped.”

Last was Carna, the girl we met on the way to Belioth. Her tip about the Messer Trade Association had been invaluable in solving the anomaly.

“Please, I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

“Hm?”

“For protecting this kingdom from Raydoss.”

“I was just looking out for myself.”

“Even so. That doesn’t change the fact that you’ve saved countless lives. Both Raydoss and Belioth would’ve suffered heavy losses had war broken out.”

Carna bowed her head. Unlike Carona’s happiness and reassurance, her gesture looked like it was concealing a great deal

of pain and sorrow.

I wondered why. Carna was possibly a Raydossian. So why did she look relieved that the invasion had failed?

She must have had her reasons…but she left before we could pry deeper. Carna had her own matters to attend to.

I hope we can talk about it someday.

“Hm.”

The party continued late into the night, and Fran actually stayed up for once. She joined the good boys and girls of the Academy in their fun.

Fran.

“Hm?”

This is nice.

“Hm! Really nice.”

Despite everything that happened, seeing Fran smile was worth it for her peers.

Fran returned to the inn after leaving the Academy. She ate her supper while watching the great tree in the center of the room. Although she had just consumed a feast, Fran and Jet could always go for seconds.

The innkeeper had also brought out her food without so much as a peep. Maybe she just liked taking care of kids. Either way, we had the privilege of staying at an excellent inn.

Guess we’re saying goodbye to this inn, too.

“Woof.”

“…Hm.”

Fran didn’t sound energetic despite the delicious meal.

Is something wrong?

…We couldn’t see the spirit in the end.

Now that you mention it.

We couldn’t meet the spirit abiding within the tree. I still couldn’t detect them despite acquiring Spirit Perception.

But suddenly Fran cast her gaze upwards.

What is it?

“Woof?”

“It’s the spirit.”

Huh?

I didn’t understand what she was talking about.

I couldn’t feel anything. And I didn’t see anything when I turned to where she looked.

…But Fran’s eyes were fixed upon a point in the emptiness.

“…”

Fran continued gazing at the giant trunk for a few seconds.

And then it happened.

Hey!

“I can see them.”

I-I can see them, too!

“W-woof!”

So did Jet. His mouth hung agape as his food was suddenly forgotten.

“…”

A squirrel with a faint green glow was floating in the air. Even though it looked like a small woodland animal, I could feel the intense power contained within.

Was this the spirit of the Old Evergreen? It was definitely a great spirit despite its unassuming appearance.

It was strange, but the instant I saw it I could immediately gauge its size. I hadn’t felt a thing before seeing it.

If nothing else, the spirit was powerful enough to completely deceive my Detection Skill.

“I see that the spirit has chosen to reveal itself to you. They must like you quite a lot.”

“Me?”

“You.”

The old elf smiled as she watched over Fran and the spirit. The green squirrel in front of us was really the spirit of the tree.

“They are grateful to you.”

“How come?”

“Well…I don’t know. Why not ask them now that you can see them?”

Just being able to see the spirit was enough of a miracle. Actually talking to them sounded impossible…

“Hm. Okay.”

“Go on.”

Fran heeded the old elf’s advice.

You sound confident. Are you sure about this?

“It’ll be fine.”

And so Fran slowly approached the spirit of the evergreen.

“…”

“…”

They wordlessly stared into each other’s eyes for a time.

The whole thing took about ten seconds. Not long enough for a conversation.

Then both Fran and the spirit nodded at each other.

Wait, you guys were talking?

You didn’t hear us?

…No?

I certainly hadn’t.

You were talking to the spirit, right?

Hm. They thanked me for saving Lene.

Jet?

Woof.

Jet didn't hear it, either.

Apparently, Fran was the only one who heard the spirit's voice.

This must have been that affinity thing. Compatibility with a spirit was more important in Spirit Magic than skill level or technique.

Even a beginner who had just learned Spirit Magic could form a contract with a Greater Spirit if that spirit *really* liked her.

The spirit of the old evergreen had a great affinity for Fran but none for me and Jet.

Was it even possible for me to have spirit affinity? I was a sword, after all. Maybe they didn't even know I existed.

"Hm. I see."

"…"

"Uh-huh."

Fran was easily conversing with the spirit now.

Is the spirit a friend of Lene?

Hm. They are. They're happy that Lene has been freed from the beast.

Plants and water go well together. The great spirit of water and the great spirit of the tree must have communicated a lot. Apparently, they were close enough to consider each other friends.

"Ah…"

Oh.

"Woof."

The spirit then disappeared. Fran could still sense them, however, and her eyes darted to where their presence was.

The spirit had only wanted to say thank you. But we got something greater than their gratitude.

Fran's Spirit Magic has leveled up due to interacting with a powerful spirit.

Wait, what?

"What?"

Her potential has been realized.

I quickly checked her stats and found that she had learned Spirit Magic.

Fran and Jet had gained five levels from yesterday's events, but Spirit Magic wasn't on that list.

Was that why the spirit of the evergreen revealed itself? In any case, I was happy to see Fran gain a new ability.

Fran, you have Spirit Magic now.

"Really?"

Yeah. Wanna give it a whirl?

"Hm..."

Fran got excited and focused. She'd had a natural knack for magic from the day I met her. She shouldn't have had a problem using it.

But she quickly halted her efforts. Her ears and tail drooped. Something did not go smoothly.

Fran?

"Nothing."

It didn't work? Do you need help using the Skill?

"It works, but I can only sense the spirit of the tree."

So it works with the spirit of the evergreen, but you can't sense any other spirits?

"Hm. I can't borrow the tree spirit's powers, either."

Fran was denied access despite being able to use Spirit Magic. Even though she seemed to really hit it off with the spirit...

But it looked like Spirit Magic was harder to use than we thought.

I recalled our lessons. The spirit probably wasn't looking to make new contracts since the one they had with the innkeeper was enough. Some spirits didn't mind forming multiple contracts while others preferred bonding with a single person.

The spirit of the evergreen was in the latter camp.

This was always going to be a super hard magic to use because of how rare it is. Let's just take it easy.

"Hm. I'll do my best."

Morning dawned.

We stood before the gates of the Academic City Ladyblue.

We had some crazy adventures in this town.

Hm.

We figured out a way to prevent me from becoming a sword thanks to Other Fran. My Fran matured after teaching the students here. And we faced true horror after our encounter with the great beast.

The resurrected beast was the most powerful enemy we had faced so far. To that end, Winalene was the most powerful of our acquaintances after defeating it.

Witnessing a battle of such immense scale was a great experience.

All for the low, low price of almost dying!

We started walking as I looked back on everything we did.

"Fran, I've been waiting for you."

"Sierra?"

A young man was waiting for us outside the gates of Ladyblue. We hadn't seen him for the last few days.

This young man was a grown-up Romeo, crossed over from another timeline.

But he insisted on being called Sierra, so Fran and I rolled with it.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to thank you again. For letting us go,” Sierra said, bowing his head.

When he revealed the identity of his sword—Theraclede—Sierra promised Fran that they could fight after everything was over. He had accepted Fran’s desire for revenge and was willing to pay the price.

But Fran let them walk. Although she still hated Theraclede, her hatred was for the Theraclede of our world.

She didn’t really have any negative impressions of the sword Theraclede. If anything, she sympathized with Sierra and had no good reason to fight him. She avoided the confrontation by saying there was still unfinished business since Zelyse had gotten away.

Did you come all the way here to thank us?

“No. Well, that was part of it…but I remembered something that might be of use to you.”

Intel?

“Yeah. Something I picked up on the other side.”

The other side. The alternate timeline.

“Go on.”

“I heard Fran calling her Teacher a Godsword back when the old man was still human.”

A Godsword?! Are you sure?

“Dead sure.”

Wait, was the alternate me a Godsword?

But that would be…impossible?

You sure there wasn’t a “discarded” before “Godsword”?

“Pretty sure. She released her Godsword when fighting the old man.”

Not something a discarded Godsword could do.

“So Teacher might evolve into a Godsword?”

Took the words right out of my mouth… Is that even possible?

Yes. Teacher is connected with the gods, and Fenrir and Cherubim will make for a sufficient vessel. Attaining Godsword status is possible via certain methods. However, those methods are unknown due to a lack of information.

You said you exchanged information with the other P.A., right? You didn't pick up anything about it?

Yes. She did not have information regarding Teacher turning into a Godsword.

That was odd. If the P.A.s could exchange something as complicated as Skills, why not simple information? She could've just mentioned that the other Teacher was a Godsword.

Did you just not have time?

No. We had plenty of time to share information.

So what gives? Being able to turn into a Godsword was vital information. Even with alternate timelines, I couldn't imagine the other P.A. being mean or resentful...much less forgetful.

So...did she just not tell you about the Godsword stuff?

There is a high possibility of that being the case.

That means the other P.A. decided it would be better if I didn't turn Godsword.

There is a high possibility that you will lose something dear in exchange for becoming a Godsword.

Probably not something I want to lose...

The other P.A. should also have known about our battle with the great beast. The cost of becoming a Godsword must have been awful if she withheld information regardless.

Would I cease to be me because of my name change? The other me had completely turned into a sword. Maybe being a Godsword had something to do with it. As much as I admired Godswords, I would have to be careful.

Thanks for the info.

"I'm just glad I could help."

Trust me, you were a great help.

Becoming a Godsword was a possibility, albeit a highly dangerous one.

“What will you do now, Sierra?”

“I’m going to track down Zelyse. He is my real enemy.”

“I see.”

“What about you?”

“I have a quest from Wina.”

Fran and Sierra talked about their next steps.

For now, he was looking to figure out a way to sneak into Raydoss. He would also see if there had been undead trouble in the area lately.

Zelyse currently belonged to Nameless, a Raydossian demilich who was captain of the Black Bones. There was a good chance of him sending out his undead soldiers to carry out espionage in the area.

It seemed like as good a starting place as any. Sierra would figure out the rest as he went along.

Meanwhile, Fran was headed straight for Belioth’s capital and would likely cross over to Goldicia soon after. She would look for Trismegistus while carrying out Wina’s quest.

Her long-term goal was to undo the curse of the Black Cats. This was going to take a really long time, though.

“The curse of the Black Cats?”

“Hm.”

Sierra didn’t know anything about it. It wasn’t really something you’d come across unless you knew to look for it. Fran gave him a brief rundown.

“So the Black Cats have to defeat an S-Threat Fiend on their own?”

“Or a servant of the Evil One.”

“Either way, it’s going to be a brutal fight.”

“But if we win, we’ll lift the curse.”

“I see… I hope you can make it happen. I’ll tell any strong Black Cats about it if I run into any.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep a lookout for Zelyse, too.”

“Appreciate it.”

They shook hands before Sierra got on his horse. It was a familiar—not very powerful, but it got him from point A to point B.

“See you around, Sierra.” Fran waved goodbye.

Sierra waved in return.

With both of them praying for each other’s success, they really had become friends.

“See you!”

“Hm!”

Fran watched Sierra leave before getting on Jet herself. Her resolve was evident on her face.

“Let’s get going, too.”

“Arf!”

Yeah.

“Can’t let Sierra beat us.”

I won’t lose to the other Intelligent Weapons, either!

“Hm!”

We left Ladyblue and made a beeline for the capital.

Jet ran against the refreshing backdrop of a blue sky dappled with clouds.

“Awoooo!”

“You look like you’re having fun, Jet.”

Enjoying the full-speed run?

“Woof!”

The canine race *loved* to run. There were no obstacles for his sprint this high up in the sky.

We were traveling at an incredibly high altitude. Still beneath the clouds, but two kilometers above the ground.

At this height, Jet wouldn’t stand out even if he ran in his original size. Nobody would have to worry about sighting any unidentified flying dogs today.

“Woof, woof!”

“Whoa.”

Hang on tight, Fran!

Jet was so excited that he started getting erratic. He took us higher and higher, varying his pace with leaps and sprints.

“Arf, arf, arf!”

“Wow!”

Careful, we’ll fall!

Jet climbed in a spiral as if running along the walls of an invisible tube. It felt like being on a roller coaster.



Fran screamed with excitement, enjoying the omnidirectional assault of G-forces on her body.

Meanwhile, I was sweating bullets and worried about her falling off.

Jet! You were going too fast!

“Ruff...”

“It’s over?”

Fran, don’t encourage him!

As we continued our jaunt through the sky, we spotted a strange light shining above us.

“Arf?”

“Teacher, is that a sky dragon?”

Looks like it.

We looked at the sky isle. Something was slithering between the clouds covering the floating landmass.

An A-Threat sky dragon. Though they were usually hidden within the clouds, we had somehow managed to spot one outside of them.

“It’s glowing.”

Must be reflecting the sunlight.

Sky dragons were proficient in light magic, so its body was covered with light mana. It perfectly reflected the light of the sun.

The scales of a living sky dragon were nothing like the ones we saw in the Academy storage. The scales in storage were dull brass, like an old, neglected cymbal. Apparently, they shone like a mirror when charged with mana.

A radiant sky dragon, rising between the clouds. The sight was beautiful enough to inspire reverence. No wonder people thought seeing one was a good sign.

Guess that means good luck for us.

The sky dragon looked like it was blessing our journey as its magnificent body twined through the sky.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Two days after we left Ladyblue…

We carried on east, stopping by some towns along the way to sample the local delicacies. Eventually, we reached the capital of Belioth without a hitch.

Wow. This city’s almost as big as Granzell’s capital.

“Hm. It’s got wide streets and high walls.”

“Woof.”

The sheer scale of Ladyblue had surprised us, but we were mostly impressed by the size of the Academy. The streets of this city, on the other hand, were just as crowded as the capital of Granzell.

“Let’s go to the palace.”

Yeah. Stay small, Jet.

“Woof.”

Unlike Granzell, we didn’t get lost this time round. Though granted, Fran wouldn’t have gotten lost had she simply avoided the detours. But here we found a straight path from the main gates to the royal palace. The city was very well organized.

The main street was so wide that it could probably fit twenty horse carriages across it. Up ahead sat a giant castle.

Let’s go.

“Hm.”

But the attractions along the road became a trap for Fran.

“Nom, nom.”

“Munch, munch.”

Good?

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

She was sampling the food stalls on both sides of the street. Fran and Jet moved in a zigzag pattern to hit as many vendors as they could.

With how wide the street was, it was the biggest zigzag pattern I'd seen since coming to this world.

It took thirty minutes to cover a hundred meters. We could've gone much faster if we had stuck to one side of the road, but Fran and Jet's noses kept leading them to shops on the other side.

"That one smells good."

"Woof!"

They deftly wove through the crowd when they spotted something interesting on the other side.

When are we gonna get to the palace?

At our current pace, we will arrive at the palace in four hours and thirty-eight minutes.

That was forever! It would be dark by the time we got there!

I steeled myself to tell Fran and Jet to cease their culinary excursion.

Guys, we still have a ways to go before we get to the palace… How about we finish our errands first?

"…Hm."

"…Woof."

Don't give me the puppy eyes!

But I wasn't about to fold this time.

We can continue this later! We just need to get to the palace, all right? You can have anything you want after that!

"Anything…I…want…? All right. To the palace."

That might have been a mistake…

Fran got to the palace in double time, and they let her in right away. Wina's letter of recommendation was very persuasive, and news of the lake incident had reached them before we got

there. It went without saying that they'd learned about Fran's involvement.

They took one look at Fran and let her through the gates, no questions asked. It was a little disconcerting.

I didn't know what kind of information had circulated, but they were looking at her like she was some kind of hero. The captain of the guard even came out to personally greet her, a sign of great respect.

Now, we were face to face with an old man in one of the palace's many rooms. He was a slim, swarthy, ugly fellow with white hair and sharp eyes like a killer. There was a nick in his right ear, and he had plenty of other scars. He seemed like a really tough customer. Anyone meeting him for the first time would easily mistake him for a retired gangster.

The old man's name was Brunnen, and he was one of the admirals of the Beliothian navy. He looked like he had seen his fair share of battles, but he resembled a pirate more than an admiral. Still, it was a good look to have in a world where might made right.

Brunnen was in charge of sending men out to Goldicia.

"I have received word from Lady Winalene. You'll be the only one representing Belioth in Goldicia?"

"Hm."

"I see! Best news I've heard all week!" Brunnen smiled when Fran nodded. The kingdom's leadership had been worried about people following through after what happened at the lake—the fallout of which they were still dealing with. Winalene had rated Fran an A Rank, which made her a godsend as far as the kingdom was concerned. "Glad to have you on board."

"Hm. When do we leave?" Fran asked, full of enthusiasm. The hellscape of Goldicia was just another training ground for her.

Brunnen's countenance darkened slightly. "Well... About that..."

"Hm?"

"You see..."

I wasn't expecting him to get tongue-tied all of a sudden.

In the thirty minutes that we had known him, Brunnen had shown himself to be a gregarious man. But he soon revealed the reason for his consternation.

"So…three months?"

"Yep."

The original departure period was somewhere around late March to early April. But then the Great Beast happened, causing delays in the supply chain and troop movements. Faced with compensating victims and rebuilding the Trade Fleet, Belioth was forced to change its plans.

"I see." Fran nodded.

Brunnen looked more desperate than ever. "I understand if you have other things to do now, but won't you please come back in two months?"

A two-month delay wasn't long as far as the affairs of nations were concerned. But for itinerant adventurers, it might as well be years away. A typical adventurer would say, *I don't even know if I'll still be around that long. I'll have to pass.* And Brunnen knew this. Asking free-spirited adventurers to wait for two months was the kiss of death. They'd just lose patience and walk out.

He also knew it was difficult to pressure Fran because of how powerful she was. And she wasn't exactly loyal to Belioth, not being from there.

In the end, Brunnen could only lower his head and beg.

Well?

I'm okay with it.

There won't be any penalties for us if we break it since it's only a spoken agreement.

Although Brunnen and Wina would resent us if we did.

But we were pretty much settled on going to Goldicia, anyway. Might as well have Belioth supporting us. Having a kingdom owe us a favor wasn't a bad deal.

Leaving as soon as possible would be *better*...but not *necessary*.

“All right. I’ll be back in two months.”

“Y-you will? We owe you big time!”

“Hm.”

“So what will you do in the meantime, Lady Fran?”

And there was the real question. We didn’t really have anything planned besides the expedition to Goldicia.

But Fran had an answer ready. “Bulbola! The cooking contest!”

Oh. Yeah, I guess we’ll have enough time for that.

There were two big events going on in Granzell now. The cooking contest in Bulbola and the fighting tournament in Ulmutt.

We’d participated in both last year but had decided to skip it this year. The Goldicia trip took priority, and Fran was far more interested in seeing the strange continent. But now that our trip was delayed, it gave us enough time to go back to Granzell.

Hearing our plans, Brunnen looked thoughtful.

“So you’re going south... Would you mind taking a quest for us?”

“A quest?”

“Yes. I need you to deliver a letter to someone. We want him to go to Goldicia as well.”

A Granzellian? I immediately thought of Amanda, but she was probably busy. The same went for Jean. Maybe Forlund?

“He usually wanders the southern countries but he’s been invited as a guest of honor to the tournament in Ulmutt. You might be able to see him.”

“Who is it?” Fran asked.

Brunnen gave us a surprising name: “Dimitris. An S-Rank adventurer.”

“Dimitris.”

We've heard of that name before.

Dimitris was Colbert's master and founder of the Dimitris School of Combat. He was the ultimate martial artist, favored by the gods. Despite his advanced age, he was still very much active.

He had also earned the nickname of The Unmoving.

"So I just find him and give him the letter?"

"Yep. Will you do it?"

"Sure. I'm interested in meeting him, too."

"Thank you!"

"And I just give him the letter, right?"

"Yes. We won't force him to accept our quest, either. We know he's a busy man. He's a tough guy to track down most of the time."

He was an elite adventurer, after all. Though he might be compelled if a high rank like Fran did the talking.

"He's not a bad man, but he can be…*difficult*."

Now I was worried…

"I'm glad that you're the one taking this quest, though!"

Expressing his gratitude, Brunnen took out a pouch. It looked like an ordinary leather pouch, save for bearing the royal seal of Belioth. But anyone could tell it was charged with magic.

"An item pouch?"

"That's right. It has the letter to Dimitris along with some other things inside. Wait. Don't go opening it, now." Brunnen stopped Fran just as she was about to take a peek. "The letter is top secret, and the quest will fail if anyone but Dimitris opens the bag. That's what the enchantment is for."

"You can do that?"

"Courtesy of our head royal manatek technician. Their area of expertise is item bags and timespace magic."

"Uh-huh."

Fran wasn't impressed because of her own magic and Skills, but this was quite a feat. They might even be able to do long-

distance item transportation.

Brunnen seemed annoyed at Fran's lukewarm response and started bragging about the royal technician.

Then he happened upon a subject which piqued her interest. Honestly, it piqued mine, too.

"They're researching how to open item pouches?"

Pleased by Fran's interest, Brunnen proceeded to explain how groundbreaking this would be.

"Yeah. It's not usable yet, but you know how some pouches can't be opened once their owner is dead? That's what this aims to solve."

The success of this research would make supply management much easier for the military. Currently, unregistered item pouches were used to store food while medical supplies, cash, and other valuables to be used on the field had officers assigned to them.

While this method deterred theft and bootlegging, it had its drawbacks. If all the registered officers died, the item bags were worthless. There were accounts of whole armies collapsing in battle because their food and medicine officers were assassinated. Killing a few officers was a far more efficient way of cutting off the supply chain. No wonder it happened so often.

They'd tried having multiple officers registered to the item bags, but more officers only increased the odds of people wanting to dip their fingers in the stash. But what if you could open the item pouches regardless of who they were registered to? That would eliminate this concern altogether.

"But there'd be no point in item officers then."

Fran made a good point. Registering item pouches would lose all meaning with this new technology.

"If it gets abused, sure." Brunnen already knew about this problem, though he was still in the middle of ironing out the details.

Every nation on earth was racing to complete this technology. Belioth couldn't afford to fall behind. The first to

achieve it would have an advantage over everyone else.

"We don't have to worry about that yet. We can't even open smaller pouches. Normally, you'd have to call in an elite contract mage and pay huge sums of money to open them."

"Elite contract mages…can open item bags?"

"Depends on the size and rank of the bag. But yeah. It's connected to Curse Magic, the advanced form of Contract Magic. Got any unopenable pouches?"

"Hm."

Fran took out an assortment of item pouches—ones we'd picked up from black market slavers, goblins, and so on.

"These are registered using Contract Magic. A competent curse mage should be able to overwrite the registrations."

"Oh…"

Honestly, I *could* open them myself.

I just needed to level up Contract Magic to get Curse Magic. I wasn't too excited about spending points on a gamble, though. The stuff inside these pouches might end up being junk…

We would just have to look for someone who could use Curse Magic along the way. Or a monster in possession of it. Consuming a crystal with the Skill would be the fastest way of getting it. But considering we'd basically forgotten the existence of these pouches till now, I didn't really care.

"So I just hand the pouch over to Dimitris?"

"That's right. I'm counting on you."

"Hm."

Dimitris the Unmoving. I wondered what he was like. I was anxious. High-rank adventurers were usually weirdos.

Fran?

My lovely, pretty, adorable Fran?

How dare you?!

Everyone in the world should love her!

“What is it, Teacher?”

Oh, just thinking to myself.

“Uh-huh. Can’t wait to meet Dimitris the Unmoving.”

Yeah?

“Hm. I wanna fight him.”

…

Granted, she wasn’t exactly a *normal* adventurer, but still!

Chapter 2:
Another Cooking Contest

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since we left Belioth, and we were now back in Granzell, having safely crossed the border.

It's been a while.

"Hm."

We could've been back sooner, but we needed to iron out the details of our quest... And we spent a few extra days shopping in Belioth's capital.

But we managed to replenish our exhausted potion and food stores. We had enough to make the Academy's mapo curry now. Fran quite liked that recipe.

Our extra time in the capital had been well worth it; for Fran and Jet, at least. They sampled the capital's top restaurants in between our shopping.

I'm getting kind of emotional just crossing the border.

Granzell was the place I woke up in, after all. Because it was the closest thing I had to a home, I had a particular nostalgia for it. But Fran, who shared none of my sentiments, hopped on Jet the first chance she got. She pointed south.

"Move it, Jet. No time to lose."

"Woof!"

Jet broke into a full sprint. Both rider and wolf looked gravely serious. They weren't making any stops on this trip. Usually, they would take breaks to replenish their magic and stamina. Today, it was a non-stop flight.

They would even eat on the road. If Jet got too tired, Fran would run by herself.

We were currently en route to Alessa. Though we might as well check in with Klimt and Amanda, being nearby, our final destination was Bulbola. We could make it in time for the cooking

contest if we hurried. We couldn't participate, but Fran and Jet just needed to reach the city in time to sample the food.

This was the reason behind their haste. They would eat their fill come hell or high water.

"We'll make it to the food stalls even if our legs break!"

"Bark!"

It was very much like them to get as worked up for food as for a battle.

But they really pushed their limits. While no bones were broken, they almost collapsed from exhaustion. Three hours later, we reached Alessa.

The trip would've taken four hours before our adventure in Belioth. They had definitely improved, but I really wished they wouldn't use their hard-earned experience like this.

After seeing Donadrond, the ogrekin who had inducted her into the guild, we went to see Klimt to fill him in on what had happened. After taking a short break (which lasted as long as the meeting), Fran excused herself. Even Klimt was surprised at her haste.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Hm."

"You know, Amanda is coming back in half a month."

"I won't make it if I wait that long."

Not to the cooking contest, anyway.

"You're on a quest, then? I suppose it can't be helped."

Amanda was currently on a scouting mission in the northern borders.

The great beast's mana had been felt by Belioth's neighbors, and Granzell was on high alert. Adventurers were sent to the borders to keep an eye on the frontier.

The guild was delighted with the information we presented them. Naturally, we kept all the confidential details to ourselves. In exchange, Klimt told us a little bit about Spirit Magic and Dimitris.

We didn’t really learn anything new about Spirit Magic, but the stories about Dimitris were fascinating. Once, he single-handedly stopped a goblin stampede. Another time, he charged through a castle in the midst of open war and came out with the king’s head. As for his “Unmoving” nickname, he got that after defending a bridge alone from an invasion for three days and three nights. And these were only a few of his exploits.

He had mellowed out a lot recently, but that didn’t mean he was a kindly old grandfather. He was still training, hunting monsters across the land.

After all the info we got, I was glad to have stopped by this town.

As we got ready to leave, some of the guards and adventurers by the gate waved goodbye to Fran. They must remember her. Fran waved back.

It really is a good town. Are you sure you don’t want to stay a little longer?

“We can always come home to Alessa.”

Despite Fran’s nonchalance, I was happy to hear her say that.

Alessa must have become something like a home to her, too. She could always come back, so leaving so soon didn’t sadden her. She knew that she was always welcome.

“I’m off.”

“Woof, woof!”

“Ugh… I can already hear Amanda screaming at me for having met you alone…”

Sorry, Klimt. But there was no getting in the way of Fran’s appetite.

Say hi to Amanda for us!

We’ve almost reached Bulbola. That was fast.

“Hm. We worked for it.”

“Bark!”

We had traversed Granzell at breakneck speeds, spurred by Fran and Jet's appetites. Avoiding passing through towns so Jet wouldn't cause panic, we ended up taking a serpentine route. Still, it only took four days to get to Bulbola from the northern border. This route would ordinarily take over a month.

Such was the power of the stomach!

What really surprised me was the fact they managed to traverse the mountain range in Central Granzell in just a day. The mountains caused the air currents to shift, preventing Jet from staying airborne. Our only attempt ended with him falling to the ground. We'd been forced to go hiking instead.

The range was made up of mountains the size of Mt. Fuji. They were taller than the Himalayas. Such mountains were ordinary in this world.

But Fran didn't seem bothered by the cold air, low oxygen, and sudden changes in incline. She just used Air Hop to ascend cliffs, climb out of any crevasses she fell into, and cut right through the mountains.

When blizzards blew in and rendered Air Hopping impossible, Fran activated her barrier and went rock climbing. She didn't feel cold, despite her exposed midriff. The whole journey really drove home how the people of this world seemed superhuman compared to my world.

The mountain was also home to some powerful monsters, but they couldn't stop us. Instead of being slowed down, Fran and Jet took the opportunity to feast on them. They were apparently delicious and chock full of mana. Jet even kept his eye open for more monsters, eager to have me turn them into a delicious meal.

The snowy mountains put me in a weird mood. I ended up making over ten new recipes on the trip.

Snow strawberry smoothies made with fresh glaciers turned out to be a hit. Fran and Jet enjoyed drinking them in a magically warmed igloo.

It had been quite a while since they liked something that wasn't curry. They stopped for a few hours to collect snow strawberries and glacier ice. We now had enough to make

smoothies any time. But we also gained some new Skills after spending so much time on the snowy peaks.

Snow Running, Snow Diving, and Snow Swimming. All Skills which helped traversing winter terrain. Not something you encountered every day, but they would help immensely in the right situation.

Snow Swimming was my favorite. It allowed me to glide through snow like it was water. Although Fran felt like she was freezing to death, I wasn't affected by the low temperature due to my inanimate nature.

Let's get to the Chefs' Guild.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

We immediately made a beeline for the Chefs' Guild upon reaching Bulbola.

The contest was already underway so we couldn't participate, but we wanted to at least check in with them since we competed last year. Going around the stalls would be easier if we knew the contestants, too.

"If it isn't Miss Fran of the Black Tail!"

"Hm."

"Please, right this way!"

The receptionist immediately showed us inside as soon as Fran introduced herself. This wasn't Fran the adventurer, but Fran the amazing cook who brought curry to Bulbola.

An old man was waiting for her in the exquisite private room.

"You've come, child."

"Hm. Here I am."

This was Meckam, the food critic we met last year. He was a lot like a stubborn old man in cooking manga, but I didn't hate that about him. Although he had been a harsh critic of my food, he was more Fran's rival than he was mine. Fran looked at him like

the way she looked at worthy opponents met on the field of battle. Although the cooking contest had ended with him acknowledging the merits of curry, neither he nor Fran were the type to get friendly with each other.

The standoff would have continued if a guild employee hadn't come into the room. We continued talking until we were given a surprising proposal.

"A food stall?"

"Yes. We've been bombarded with questions wondering whether the Black Tail will open up shop this year!"

The attendant asked us whether we could open a food stall, unrelated to the contest.

The curry of Black Tail had become the stuff of legends over the past year. People were clamoring to get a taste of it again.

If Fran were just here to eat instead of cook, the guild would get a lot of complaints.

"How about it? We can provide ingredients for you as well. Up to a point."

Although he sounded callous, Meckam was actually pleading with us. The guild must have gotten a LOT of letters.

Teacher?

I don't mind if you want to do it, Fran.

We had hurried all the way to Bulbola because Fran wanted to eat. I didn't mind running a food stall if Fran didn't mind it detracting from her eating time.

Isn't making curry a lot of work?

That's what you're worried about? Relax. I like cooking and it sounds like the guild's going to provide us with ingredients this time.

Also, curry was the perfect food to make in bulk. It wouldn't be too hard to whip up.

Fran nodded happily.

She really wanted to run a food stall again. She'd been excited last year, but I hadn't thought she would actually sacrifice

her eating time to do this.

“Hm. I’ll do it.”

“Oh, thank you so much!”

The attendant patted his chest with a look of great relief. I felt a bit sorry for him. Our fans must’ve been hounding him.

Meckam remained composed as ever, but he did ask about the food.

“Will you be making curry again?”

“Hm!”

“Well! This will be intriguing. Curry has exploded in popularity over the past year. You won’t have novelty on your side this time.”

“Heh. No problem. Teacher’s curry isn’t your average curry.”

“I look forward to trying it.”

“I’ll show you that curry is the pinnacle of cooking!”

I understood. Promoting curry was still important to Fran. But more than that, she wanted to make Meckam love curry the way she did. Honestly, he probably already did. The old coot just couldn’t admit it out loud.

“We shall prepare a location for you a day before the grand finals. We can also get you sales assistants should you need them.”

“Okay.”

And so, we would once again partake in the festivities as vendors…

“So what curry are you making, Teacher?”

Wait, you haven’t decided?

I’d thought Fran already had something in mind with how confident she was!

We can’t just make the same curry as last year…

Don’t worry. I know you can do it.

Uhh, thanks.

I wasn't expecting her to just throw this whole thing on me…

I was definitely making curry to meet Fran's and the customer's expectations. But I wanted something different from last year. Curry bread would be fine…but what about curry rice?

"We couldn't do curry rice last year."

Yeah, but this time it might work.

Last year, we were competing; profitability and sales mattered, among other things. Not so this year.

Our stall had nothing to do with the contest. It was pretty much an exhibition. No need to worry about profits now.

"I see."

That means we don't have to worry about pricing! I can even make a gourmet curry that throws profits out the window!

Our diners would probably love such a dish.

"Then you should make something great!"

But how great?!

"Hm. We'll get the best potatoes and the best meats to make the ultimate curry. People won't be able to live without it!"

That sounded a bit much. But I think Fran had a good point.

We still had a lot of meat from the Demon Wolf's Garden. Even the lowest-tier monsters made for good eating.

Who knew my poverty mindset would come in handy now! I had been saving up everything edible because I didn't want to see them go to waste.

The only problem now was rice. Could we get it ready in time?

If the guild could supply us with enough rice, we would go with curry rice.

However—

There's so little rice right now…

"Hm."

We couldn’t find enough rice even looking through Bulbola ourselves. Most of it was from last year’s harvest; not quite appropriate for our purposes.

Belioth was the land’s greatest exporter of rice. The climate was similar to the Tohoku region of Japan. With plentiful water and cooler climate, they grew rice by the bushel. Rice was even a staple in the Magic Academy.

But imports had ceased because of the lake beast incident.

Belioth needed all the rice it had to deal with the aftermath of the great beast and planned to slowly export more rice as the months went by. This allowed them to export only the finest of their produce while keeping most of the supply for themselves in case of a rainy day.

Looks like we’ll have to think of something else.

“Hm.”

I just didn’t want to make curry bread again. Too obvious.

“What if we just made roux?”

Hmm… Something like soup?

Curry soup. A hearty one with loads of stuff in it. Loads of meat in it.

“A meaty curry soup.”

“Arf!”

Drool was already hanging out the corner of Fran and Jet’s mouths. The mere thought of it was enough to get them to salivate.

With the curry lovers’ seal of approval, all I had to do now was make it.

ASIDE: A CERTAIN TRIO

“**B**OSS, IS THAT the harbor town of Bulbola over there?”

“Yeah. There aren’t many harbors of that scale. That’s the one.”

“Finally. I didn’t think the sea route would be so boring…”

“Oh? I could’ve sworn you were the one most amped up about it, Biscott.”

“Yeah, nice seeing you, Cricca. It was great at first, but then the same scenery day after day… You feel me, Boss?”

“It’s not too bad. The sea monsters have provided a decent challenge.”

“Sure. But never mind, I was going to ask a dumb question…”

“Well, what is it?”

“N-nothing! B-but couldn’t we have landed in Dars if we wanted to go to Granzell? No reason for us to go all the way south…”

“No. Security is too tight around the borders. We don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“What’s wrong with blasting our way through?”

“Everything! Ugh, this is why you’re called Biscott!”

“Hey, don’t treat my name like it’s a synonym for moron!”

“Listen. We don’t have supplies or reinforcement where we’re going. We’d have nowhere to run if they started giving chase, either. We might end up dead.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We also do not know how strong our enemies are.”

“What, these outsiders can’t be *that* strong.”

“…Biscott.”

“Y-yes, Boss?”

“I get that you look down on outsiders. It’s part of our culture and you’ll probably never stop. But do not underestimate the enemy’s strength. Do you want to end up like the stupid elites back home?”

“S-sorry.”

“Besides, the purpose of this expedition is to figure out whether or not the outsiders really are weak.”

“Right.”

“Also, the demon knights of Phyllius are deployed around Dars.”

“Wouldn’t wanna run into them. No wonder we’re going the long way.”

“At least you finally get it. Cap…er, Lady Sibyl, there are several ways of measuring the strength of the outsiders. Adventurers, in particular.”

“Really? Do tell. I was just going to scrap with the first person who seemed worth my time.”

“Please don’t. We are currently traveling mercenaries. Our identities have been provided to us by the Morley Trade Association. If we cause trouble, our nation will lose a trade association that has spent years building trust in Granzell.”

“They have been quite useful in providing currency, information, and infiltration channels.”

“Indeed. Morely also has more dealings with the outside, so we cannot count on their loyalty. They might just cut us off. We gave them a fallen Crimson Knight when they asked for a bodyguard for their daughter, but I doubt that favor counts for much.”

“Are you sure we can rely on them, Cricca? I don’t wanna get offed by their cute maids.”

“There won’t be problems as long as we don’t cause problems. Besides, if it comes down to it, the three of us will be enough to take on this whole ship.”

“I mean sure, but…”

“If you’re worried about what to think, all you need to do is listen to me.”

“Ugh.”

“Can it, Biscott.”

“Fine…”

“So. How to measure an adventurer’s strength?”

“First, the orthodox method. We could simply issue a quest. We can have them escort us under the guise of a job. But this approach has certain drawbacks.”

“Such as?”

“Should our escorts be strong enough to gauge our strength, they will become highly suspicious of us issuing an escort quest to begin with. Questions will be asked.”

“I see.”

“It’s a little roundabout, but we could check the quality of monster meat, herbs, and equipment being sold. It should give us a rough estimate of the power level in a city. Bulbola will be perfect for this approach considering how bustling it is.”

“I understand, but I’d rather not get stuck in the weeds examining produce.”

“Same. Much easier to just ambush a random adventurer.”

“Have you not heard a single word I said?! Granted, I wasn’t *expecting* either of you to do that. I was just making a suggestion.”

“You can call me a moron all you want as long as I don’t have to inspect vegetables.”

“I’ll do it for you.”

“Thanks, Cricca. Any other ideas? It sounds like you’ve got something else in mind.”

“Yes. There will be a fighting tournament in Ulmutt soon.”

“A tournament? Now that sounds fun! We’re bound to spot some strong fighters there!”

“We should be able to gauge their strength because a lot of famous adventurers will take part in it.”

“Gauge? What, just watch?”

“Of course. We can’t afford to stand out. If our cover is blown, it’s the end for us.”

“Tch…”

“Don’t sass me. You stick out like a sore thumb, Lady Sibyl. They’ll run a background check on you as soon as you sign up. And if you should happen to win… I don’t suppose you’d throw a match, would you?”

“Ugh…fine. I guess we’ll just stick to observation.”

“Thank you.”

“So we’ll rest in Bulbola for a little while before heading to Ulmutt.”

“Yes. I will handle the necessary arrangements.”

“Right.”

“Hope the drinking’s good in Bulbola.”

“I hope we run into some thugs to keep me sharp.”

“Please stay out of trouble…”

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“I’ve made some vegetable stew… Will this be all right?”

“Munch.”

“…What do you think?”

“Hm. Perfect.”

“That’s good to hear.”

We were in a kitchen located in the basement of the Chefs’ Guild. And it was quite a fancy setup because this was the guild’s headquarters.

This might have been the first time I’d seen metal sinks since coming to this world. The stoves, ovens, and faucets were all equipped with manatek and the layout of the kitchen was like one in a fancy hotel back on Earth.

Fran and a woman were currently tasting curry.

“Good job, Io.”

“Oh, I’m nothing compared to you and your master! I would never have thought of such a dish…!”

The woman named Io was a naturally talented cook. Maybe she wasn’t the most reliable girl around, but she was definitely the most caring and everyone loved her for it.

We visited her orphanage the other day where Charlotte said they weren’t participating in the contest this year. They usually needed to participate in order to raise funds. But their financial problems were a thing of the past now that Amanda had them under her wing.

The orphanage also took in a lot more kids this year, making it difficult to prep for the contest. The Linford incident had unfortunately increased the number of orphans.

They were in no condition to compete.

“I would love to set up a stall, though. It’s good to keep in touch with everyone around.”

Hearing that, we asked Io if she would help us with our food stall.

It wasn’t a bad deal. We would pay her even if she was only working for a day. Having a cook of her level would really help us out. She’d also be able to interact with the customers like she always wanted.

With Io’s friendliness and expertise, we couldn’t ask for better help. Truly a win-win situation.

Also, I really wanted to see her cook.

Just because my Cooking Skill was higher didn’t mean my food tasted better.

Much like Fran’s Sword Mastery, my Cooking level got boosted all in one go. Compared to someone who took the slow route, I had huge gaps in my fundamentals.

I also lacked adaptability. All I was doing was recreating Earth dishes as best I could. But even though I could cook this world’s dishes no problem, I had trouble modifying recipes.

It wasn’t bad, and Fran was satisfied with it. But after seeing what Io and the Dragonhead’s Phelms could cook up… Well, I couldn’t say my Cooking reflected my Skill level.

Which brings us to cooking with Io. Her signature dish was soup made out of simple vegetables, and yet it was delicious enough to bring tears to the most hardened adventurers.

I thought I could learn a thing or two by watching her…

But all I got was that it really was a matter of honest dedication. You really couldn’t imitate geniuses.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the kitchen door.

We had asked for privacy since we were developing a new recipe. Apparently, Fran had a guest.

“Who is it?”

“Fran, is that you? It’s Colbert. I heard you were in town!”

Colbert was a B-Rank adventurer and cooking enthusiast. He was also a renowned martial artist, formerly Dimitris’s student.

Unfortunately, he was expelled when he went all out fighting Fran in the tournament.

Can I let him in?

Sure. Just because he lost his Dimitris Skills when he got expelled doesn’t mean he lost his memories. Maybe we can learn something useful about his former master.

I didn’t need to know his weak points or how to fight him. I just wanted to know his favorite food, color—you know, things that would make it easier to strike up a conversation.

A man with short black hair and a fisherman’s bronze tan stepped through the door. Colbert looked as burly as ever.

“Been a while, Fran.”

“Hm.”

“You’re growing up!”

“Hm?”

Colbert was weirdly excited. He grabbed Fran’s hand as a tear formed in his eye.

What was up with him? He was acting a little overly friendly. Hands off, Colbert! You’ve shaken hands with her long enough! Don’t tell me he’s fallen for her... Well, I suppose he can’t help himself with how cute she is. But no! I won’t let anyone weaker than Fran have her!



“I know I’m not a replacement for your master, but you can call on me whenever you’re in town!”

“Hm?”

“Your student is growing up just fine, Curry Master!”

And now I understood. Colbert thought I was dead and had taken it upon himself to look out for Fran. He was compassionate by nature and got emotional just by looking at her.

“Teacher is alive.”

“Yeah! Of course he is!”

“…”

It wasn’t every day Fran got exasperated.

Should I reveal myself to him and clear this whole thing up?

…Not yet.

Huh? Are you sure?

Hm. We won’t be able to ask him questions if you show up now.

Point.

Colbert would be so ecstatic as to be unintelligible.

I guess we can do it later.

Hm.

When we let Colbert in the kitchen, he gave an expression of surprise.

“Is that Io of the orphanage? What are you doing here?”

“You two know each other?”

“Umm, who might you be?” Io wondered, tilting her head. Their acquaintance was not mutual.

“Excuse me. Your soup is so famous throughout Bulbola that I happened to know you. I’m an annual customer!”

“O-oh! Umm… Thank you?”

A big fan of chefs and cooking, Colbert would definitely know Io. There was great respect in his voice.

“My name is Colbert. B-Rank adventurer.”

“A-a B Rank?! Oh my…” Io yelped when Colbert introduced himself.

We were kind of numb to the experience, but B Ranks were quite a big deal to the regular person. Not quite a hero, different from a noble, but definitely someone who commanded respect.

No wonder she was surprised.

“Y-yes. But Fran over there is a B Rank, too.”

“Huuuuuh?” Io looked at Fran and let out another yelp.

Fran had been a D Rank when she first introduced herself. She didn’t update Io on her rank situation after that.

“F-Fran?”

“Hm. It’s true.”

“Bwuuuuh!” Io let out her most distressed cry when Fran nodded.

“B-but last time… You were…”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not sure if I can…”

Io didn’t know what to do as she was pincered in by B Ranks. I kind of felt sorry for her.

“I think you’re much more admirable than I am. An amazing chef like you should get more respect.”

“What? N-no, I couldn’t possibly…” Io blushed at Colbert’s straight-faced compliment. She didn’t know what to do about this B Rank who respected her.

“Oh, you’re being modest…”

“Not at all, I…”

They continued bowing their heads to each other.

This is getting nowhere.

“Hm. Why are you here, Colbert? Did you just come to see me?”

“I was wondering if I could be of use somehow. I’ll do anything you want.” Colbert said, face filled with expectation. I had seen this look before. It was the same expression Fran had when she was asking for curry. Except Colbert wasn’t cute.

He was probably looking to get lunch out of it; it was the same thing he did last year.

“… Sure.”

“Really!”

“Hm. We need someone to run errands.”

“Gladly!”

Fran knew that Colbert wasn’t in it for the money. But this was not an everyday occurrence.

“Huh? What?”

Io was confused again. I didn’t blame her.

The idea of a B Rank like Colbert running errands was unthinkable. It was an absolute waste of a high rank’s talents.

But Fran and Colbert continued their conversation.

“You’ll get three meals as payment!”

“Heck yeah! That’s all I wanted! You’re one hell of a cook too, Fran! I can’t wait!”

“I’ll make you something new.”

“S-seriously?!”

“You’ll have to work hard for it.”

“No problem!”

“Huuuuh?!” Io, an average civilian in all things except cooking ability, had been reduced to making startled gasps.

“You okay?”

“Y-yes.”

“You can take a break if you’re tired.”

“R-right. I think I’ll do just that.”

Io hobbled her way out of the kitchen. She probably needed some fresh air after all that gasping.

After seeing her leave, Fran resumed her conversation.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it? I’ll answer as best I can.”

“I want you to tell me about Dimitris.”

The mere mention of his old master’s name straightened Colbert’s back. “Why do you ask?”

“I need to see him for a quest.”

“Aah, so you wanna know where he is? You should be able to find him in Ulmutt this time of year.”

Dimitris, an S-Rank adventurer, was invited to the tournament in Ulmutt every year.

Last year was the exception as he had other business to attend to. That was why the Beast King had to fill in for him. Fortunately, it coincided with the Beast King’s trip to Granzell.

“I think the Beast King probably loaned the manatek used in the tournament out of spite for my master.”

“They don’t hate each other?”

“It’s not that. But he wasn’t about to be invited as a guest of honor empty-handed. He might be an adventurer, but he’s also a king.”

The Cradle of Time, an artifact used from the quarterfinals onwards, ended up being used after a political struggle with his fellow S Rank, Dimitris.

The Beast King liked his flashy stuff, and he needed to save face as king.

“I know he’s coming to Ulmutt.”

“So what do you want to know?”

“His likes and dislikes.”

“Oh, that’s what you’re after.”

“What’s he like as a person?”

We didn’t want to offend Dimitris when we met him. It was one thing to anger an S Rank—but more importantly, we didn’t want to fail our quest.

“Let’s see… If I had to describe him…”

“Yeah?”

“He’s strict, harsh, and opinionated.”

Not someone easy to get along with.

Coming from Dimitris’s student, those adjectives did not inspire confidence.

“…Is he a bad guy?”

“Ha ha ha! He’s a bit difficult…but he’s not a bad guy at all. He may be merciless with his students, but the people hail him as a hero.”

“Hm?” Fran tilted her head, having difficulty putting the images together.

“He’s very strict with people in the fighting business. He measures them against himself, after all. I remember how he would say, ‘What, had enough? You feel like dying? You’re not dead enough to stop whining, though, are you?!’”

Harsh. Like a drill sergeant in a movie. But he wouldn’t have so many disciples if that was all he was.

Colbert had a wry smile as he talked about Dimitris, but I could still sense the respect he had for him. Being expelled hadn’t changed that.

“But he doesn’t abandon anyone in need and doesn’t ask for a reward from the needy. It’s all part of his training, he says. That’s how he saved my home village.”

So, he traveled around Jillbird helping people without pay? No wonder they thought he was a hero.

Wouldn’t that cause problems, though? Dimitris was an adventurer. An *S-Rank* adventurer. The pinnacle of all adventurers. If someone of his caliber was helping people for free, wouldn’t that diminish the other adventurers?

Let’s say a village helped by Dimitris hired a D Rank. Would they be satisfied with their services? Would they be able to stomach paying thousands of gold for someone a fraction of Dimitris’s strength? Even if it was a fair price, I wouldn’t be surprised if they felt ripped off.

And this wasn’t even taking into account local authorities.

“Is that okay?”

“What is?”

“That kind of reward system would bother the other adventurers.”

“Oh, that.”

Fran asked the question for me before I could say anything. For her, price determined the value of your abilities.

Still, Fran also understood the value of helping someone for free. She didn’t collect a single cent from the Black Cat village despite everything she did there. Collecting rewards wasn’t a hill she would die on.

“To start, Master Dimitris only became an adventurer out of convenience. In fact, he once tried to quit when he hit A Rank.”

“How come?”

“He just got annoyed with it all. Invitations from nobles, squabbles with the guild. Not to mention the reward problem you brought up. Being a member of the guild was holding him back. The guild stopped him, though.”

I’m sure the guild would stop any A Rank from quitting.

Dimitris then made three demands for him to stay on as an adventurer.

He would be allowed to determine his own rewards. The Adventurers’ Guild would help Dimitris’s students become adventurers. He would be allowed free entry to any haunt he pleased.

Dimitris was asking for the moon. Even an idiot could understand that he was expecting them to reject his offer. But if they did accept, all the better for him.

Well, the guild accepted.

He was on the brink of becoming S Rank at the time, so they did all they could to stop him from leaving.

It caused a lot of problems at the beginning, but tales of the Dimitris clause soon spread all over the southern kingdoms. By now, people were used to it.

“He got some complaints from the other adventurers, but he’s real stubborn. And intense. He probably knocked some sense into them. Literally.”

Stubborn and intense.

Even when Colbert had established that Dimitris wasn’t a bad guy, I still wasn’t thrilled about meeting him.

“How do I make friends with him? What’s his favorite food?”

“I don’t know… Everything is considered training for the master, so he probably has a lot of herb salads and medicated baths. Honestly, I got interested in cooking because I got sick of eating all that terrible food.”

“I can’t just make something tasty for him?”

“Probably not. Unless you can make something nutritious that can make him stronger.”

“Uh-huh.”

I’d feed Fran that kind of food if it existed. But I guessed we could make him something that was as nutritious as it was delicious. I wasn’t expecting much from that approach, though.

“What about his hobbies?”

“Training. Not that Master would ever admit it. But for him training is life and life is training. He actually says that a lot. I don’t think he’s got any other interests. If I had to pick anything else, then it would be fighting strong opponents…though that would technically fall under training as well.”

A man who wasn’t interested in anything other than his own improvement sounded like trouble. Colbert wouldn’t have appreciated me saying this, but Dimitris sounded a lot like Eiworth just then.

“He might like it if you challenged him to spar with you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. He’s been having trouble looking for sparring partners lately. He’ll gladly take you on as long as you’re not overly weak. You should be fine, Fran.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you better be ready. He’s one of humanity’s most powerful fighters. You won’t last a minute against him if you don’t go all out.”

“He he. Just the way I like it.”

Aaaand that flipped Fran’s switch. A battle-crazed smile was on her face.

I couldn’t stop her if I tried. A sparring match with an S Rank was like a platinum ticket for Fran.

Don’t push yourself too hard, Fran.

I won’t.

But her face said she definitely would. I knew it!

Maybe Dimitris was actually a kindly old man who loved his grandkids and his heart would melt at the sight of Fran.

Anyway, let’s just focus on the food stall at hand.

Hm.

The days passed like a whirlwind.

We spent our time prepping ingredients, making test batches, and ordering containers. We went on selling curry a few days after that.

There was an endless line every day. Our stall was surprisingly popular.

The signpost said *Curry Pioneer*.

The reputation we earned last year.

The adventurers’ information network.

The Chefs' Guild's bold marketing.

The merchant's network.

Io's fame.

All these factors combined to draw in crowds far beyond the guild's reckoning. The guild attendant for our stall started sweating when he saw the lines of customers and called in for sales reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Fran was looking conflicted. While she was happy that curry was gaining popularity, she was sad to see entire pots of curry empty before her eyes. But she eventually got over it and happily served the customers. Jet and I were the only ones who could see her excitement, though.

And on the last day of the cooking contest…

"Get your Pioneer Curry!"

"Curry soup with lots of meat! Two hundred gold a cup!"

"Get it while it's hot!"

A massive line had formed in front of the Black Tail.

With over three hundred people, this was the longest line we'd had by far. Today was our last day, and there were plenty of repeat customers getting their last meal.

I can't believe it's selling at this price.

Because it's good!

Two hundred gold for a cup of soup was on the pricier side. You could stay a night at a cheap inn with that kind of money. For reference, Io always sold her soup at ten gold. Ours was twenty times more expensive!

But even then we weren't making a huge profit. We had the guild supply all our preferred spices and ingredients. Just researching the new recipe took a considerable amount of money, too.

We used specialty magic vegetables, name-brand ingredients, rare spices. And we *only* charged two hundred gold a portion for it.

We sourced our own monster meat, so that was effectively free. The price would've gone up to three hundred gold if we'd had to buy it.

I was expecting to do all right, but the actual response had been staggering.

"There's no end to this line..."

"It's crazier than last time."

"Black Lightning Princess tricked us..."

Oh, don't be such a bad sport, Lydia! You guys were the ones who jumped at the opportunity when Fran said you'd get free meals as payment!

The Crimson Maidens—our sales assistants from last year—had quickly returned to our assistance. Actually, they had first come as paying customers and were then hired on the spot to be attendants.

No trickery or force required. We just didn't tell them that they would get their meal until *after* finishing the job. I thought it was fair enough. Why pay someone before they finish their work?

As for this year's menu, we had curry soup with steaming vegetables and chunky meat. It was sold in a thick paper cup with bread as a lid.

Imagine a slightly smaller bread roll cut in half and then pressed on top of a cup.

This prevented the curry from spilling, and the customer would get a side of bread to go with their curry.

Like before, we had three spice levels. Regular, extra spicy, and Dragonfire. All had Fran and Jet's seal of approval.

Dragonfire was mostly for adventurers. Like last year, talk was spreading about how you weren't a real adventurer unless you could take on the spice. I thought Colbert had spread that around as a clever bit of marketing, but the source of the story had been adventurers who passed out having Dragonfire last year.

I just hoped this wouldn't become a Bulbolan tradition.

I apologized to all adventurers who couldn't handle spicy foods.

Fran, who had gone to conquer all the other food stalls, said that there were few worthy opponents of curry. The only one that could match us was Phelms's Dragonhead curry soup.

I took Fran's word for it. Phelms was good. He'd already made a spice mix of his own.

Now that I thought about it, Phelms had actually beaten me. I was the originator of curry and was working without budgetary limits. Phelms, on the other hand, had caught up to me within a year while still being profitable.

Damn, he was good! I needed to up my game! For Fran's sake!

Suddenly, Fran was shaken. She wasn't distressed, but something had caught her off guard. It almost felt like she was getting ready to fight.

Ever so slightly, she shifted her weight. Ever so slightly, she reached for my hilt, narrowing her eyes. And she did all this reflexively.

I couldn't fault her for it.

"So this is that curry thing we've been hearing about? Smells good, huh, Boss?"

"Looks good, too."

A man and a woman were next in line, and they looked violent. The woman had red hair. She was radiating so much aggression that you could mistake her for picking a fight with you if you came across her on the streets.

The three adventurers who had been our sales attendants were completely frozen.

The woman scanned the Crimson Maidens—Lidya, Maya, Judith—as if assessing their worth. But she soon lost interest in them.

Then she turned to Fran.

"..."

“…”

What was up with this lady? For a moment, I was reminded of the first time we met the Beast King.

The pressure she emitted was vicious, almost animalistic. Her innocent eyes and sarcastic smile only made her look more like a predator. And she was just as strong as she suggested. Strong enough to remind me of the Beast King.

Her demeanor reminded me of Mea, primarily because they were both women.

But the fact that I was thinking of the Beast King only highlighted how dangerous I thought she was.

Fran stared back at the woman.

“…”

“…”

They weren’t exactly trying to intimidate each other. However, the act of these two sizing each other up was enough to upset civilians.

They’d only locked eyes for a moment, but immediately an unrest could be felt.

People rushing sales attendants for no good reason, random gasps from a sudden chill down their spines. They couldn’t help but give in to the tension.

Though they didn’t know what was going on, their instincts told them this was a bad place to be.

Meanwhile, the adventurers in the crowd had gone silent when they were faced with Fran and the woman’s strength. Fortunately, the showdown only lasted a few seconds.

“…Thanks.”

“Hm.”

The woman took her curry and left the stall. Fran and the woman were like a couple of thugs keeping each other in check.

Chaos would’ve broken out if they had actually clashed.

…Who was that lady? An adventurer?

She’s strong.

You can say that again.

We would need to look into her later. Shouldn’t be too hard.

Despite the slight disturbance, the rest of the curry was sold without a hitch.

After eating their free lunch, the Crimson Maidens recovered their spirits.

“Nice work.”

“We were so busy!”

“I’m exhausted…”

And so we all returned to the Chefs’ Guild where an afterparty was being held.

It was really more like a social gathering for cooks and merchants. There was some nobility mixed in, but they all talked to the chefs without putting on airs. Nobles who cared too much about status probably wouldn’t have bothered to come.

Despite having had lunch, Fran still ate like she was starved. In fact, Fran, Colbert, Lidya, Maya, and Judith all had multiple plates under their belts.

Being prepared by celebrity chefs, they were all delicious.

Fran also asked me to submit a dish. Grilled fish with curry powder. I was going for a fish curry kind of vibe. Meat curry was all the rage right now, but this should clue them in that seafood curry was just as tasty.

The chefs had a passionate discussion after tasting my dish.

I knew that we would have a variety of seafood curry waiting for us next time we visited Bulbola.

“It’s been a while, Fran.”

“Phelms.”

“Your menu is as excellent as ever.”

“Thanks. You too.”

Phelms of the Dragonhead came to greet us, looking youthful as ever. Despite him being several times older than Fran, they got along pretty well. Mainly because of his wealth of experience, kindness, and expertise as a cook.

Phelms was quite something for being able to get so many words out of her.

“Congratulations on winning, Phelms.”

“Oh, it was all thanks to this new curry dish.”

Colbert joined the conversation and started talking about the food stall.

“I heard some nobles offered to employ you. Are you going to be a royal cook soon?”

“Ha ha! Not anytime soon, no. I like having lots of people eat my food, and I just know they’d have me doing non-cooking related work to boot.”

“Right. I bet they’d get you to do their fighting for them if they hired you. Might as well.”

For most contestants, winning the contest and being employed by a noble would be a dream come true. But Phelms had rejected all offers.

The former A Rank could still fight and make an excellent scout. But he insisted on being a restaurateur instead.

And after all he had been through, fame and fortune were of no further use.

“I heard you had a particularly powerful customer today. How did that go?”

“The red-haired woman.”

“Yes. I haven’t met someone I didn’t want to scrap with in a long time. You were the last, I recall.”

“She was strong.”

“Indeed.”

Fran and Phelms agreed, wiping away any doubt.

“I was on break. I didn’t get to see her.”

“She was a tall woman with red, disheveled hair. She stood out among the crowd because of her odd dress. Her reddish-brown eyes really glared at me.”

Phelms remembered a lot of the details. Impressive. The only thing I remembered from the encounter was the red hair and strength.

“She is more of a gangster than a savage. Someone who has honed her strength through instinct and intellect.”

He made a good point. The woman’s actions had been deliberate.

She wasn’t excited at the prospect of finding a tough opponent. Rather, she came in with an intimidating aura to see how Fran would react. The woman had been testing her.

She did have the scent of a blood knight, but maybe she just wanted to gauge Fran’s strength. The way she quietly left during our encounter was very surprising.

“The man with her was very much the same.”

“...There was a guy?”

Fran had tunnel vision on the redhead. The man just faded into the background in comparison.

“Yes. Blond hair, slicked back. A head taller than the woman, thick boned and muscled. He was covering it with his clothes, but he had the body of a warrior, I’m sure.”

“Huh.”

“He was grinning most of the time. A corner of his lips always curled up in a smile. Probably popular with ladies of the night.”

“Was he strong?”

“Quite, though not as strong as the woman. But the way he carried himself while she was putting out those harsh vibes should give you a clue as to how strong he is. He’ll be a dangerous opponent in battle.”

“Oho.” Fran folded her arms and nodded, attempting to recall the man. Phelms’s judgment had renewed her interest in him.

But she came up dry.

Fran could forget someone after having talked to them several times. If the man didn't leave an impression on her, there was no way she would remember.

Do you know who he's talking about?

Yeah. I remember the face too, so I'll tell you if we see him again.

Hm. Thanks.

However, neither Phelms nor Colbert knew who the woman was.

"Nothing, Colbert?"

"Afraid not. I haven't seen her, but it sounds like she's pretty hard to miss. Can't think of any adventurer who matches the description."

And if Colbert didn't know who she was, she wasn't operating out of Bulbola.

"She isn't from anywhere near here, either. We would've heard word about a woman of her strength by now if she were."

"I see."

"Well, she's probably from out of town. 'Tis the season. Bulbola's the gateway for foreigners heading to Ulmutt."

Tourists who visited Bulbola might as well go to Ulmutt to watch the tournament while they were at it. On the flip side, tournament contestants who had come to Granzell might as well look around Bulbola, too.

"A lot of foreign adventurers get into scuffles with famous adventurers."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Adventurers will be adventurers.

"I've had guys say hi to me, you know. And I'm a no-name abroad!"

"Aah, but perhaps Steelclaw Colbert is finally gaining fame?"

“Aww shucks, I dunno…”

“What were they like?”

“There was this plain-looking lady. Covered herself up, but I could tell she was someone in our line of work.”

The woman had initially seemed like a regular civilian to Colbert. But her movements told him that she had experience.

“She was definitely a scout or something. Strong, too. Enough to give me trouble if we threw down.”

“Wow.”

“Well, fame aside, the fact that I was actually marked must mean—”

“That people were coming to check out me and Fran. We did win last time.”

“Hm. True.”

So the woman was a tournament contestant? We might be in for a fight.

Can’t wait.

And there she went again. The imminent tournament really had Fran in an excitable mood.

ASIDE: A CERTAIN TRIO

“LADY SIBYL, I told you not to cause a scene!”

“Truly, I wasn’t expecting to.”

“This is not home! This place is so peaceful that there are people who die without ever fighting a monster!”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. Anti-monster training is not mandatory here. And you just unleashed your aura in front of all those people…”

“Hey, I wasn’t trying to scare them. Back me up, Biscott.”

“No, Ma’am. Boss just had a stare-off with a girl at the food stall.”

“And how… Were you even there for that…? I took my eyes off you for one second…!”

“You said you wanted to look into something. How did that go?”

“I had lunch with a renowned adventurer.”

“Oh? What’s he like?”

“His name is Steelclaw Colbert, B Rank. We had a chat.”

“What do you think of him?”

“Well… He was very friendly and honest. I believe he actually enjoys taking on quests.”

“And these adventurers are supposed to be greedy, treacherous, cowardly, stupid, and weak. Was that everything?”

“A ridiculous piece of propaganda. If that were truly the case, how has Granzell managed to be so prosperous? I’d love to show our idiot superiors this city. Maybe then they’d see things as they really are.”

“That bad?”

“Market size, variety of goods. Our capital doesn’t even come close to competing with them. The average food stall serves dishes that you’d see in noble houses. The effect adventurers have on society cannot be dismissed. I’d love to give everyone who hasn’t even seen an adventurer a reality check.”

“They can’t help themselves. They’re just taking the government’s word for it.”

“Wow, Biscott. You’re not as dumb as you look!”

“…*Thanks*.”

“The problem is that even our knights and soldiers are beginning to believe our own propaganda. It was originally meant for southern citizens.”

“‘Our great empire is powerful enough to rule the continent. Foolish nations who depend on parasitic adventurers are no

match for us!’ Oh, Duke of the South. How the donkey brays.”

“But it is difficult to doubt his words if you’ve been hearing it your whole life. It was originally deployed twenty years ago for a recruitment campaign, but now all the southerners believe it.”

“Our superiority complex towards Granzell accelerated and the southern duke can barely restrain his forces… I hate to admit it, but this is all playing out the way he planned.”

“But if the duke starts a war, who knows how many lives will be lost? That is why we need to gauge the adventurers’ strength.”

“But if they just send us out—”

“Biscott!”

“Y-yes, Ma’am?”

“Why don’t you remind us our oath?”

“Ma’am! We swear to wield our red blades to protect the people! We will not be invaded, but neither will we invade! We swear to crush only monsters and evil!”

“Exactly. Our job is to protect the people from monsters and bandits. We will have nothing to do with invasion. Of course, things would be different if Granzell or Belioth were to invade us. Just don’t get it twisted.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“The only exception being the Goldician Obligation.”

“But the Sixth Order—the Vermillion Knights have been acting suspiciously as of late. They might be working with the Duke of the South.”

“Bastards! We crushed them once already. Haven’t they learned their lesson?”

“You only got their captain, Lady Sibyl. His replacement failed to learn.”

“The new guy doesn’t have much to his name yet, and they operate mostly on the southern front. Can’t exactly refuse any of the duke’s requests.”

“Pitiful. The red knights bending to the whims of the people in power.”

“The Vermillion Knights were handily defeated by the necromancer. They must want to regain their reputation.”

“Us aside, are the others behaving themselves? We might have to clamp down on the orders to strengthen them.”

“Crimson Flag and Scarlet Eyes should be fine. Madder Rain just had a changing of the guard, but they are stable. It’s business as usual with Blood Death, but they have no intention of leaving the country.”

“So it’s just those punks in Vermillion. We’ll deal with them in time.”

“Indeed. Their captain is nothing compared to you.”

“It’s all so sad. As much of a scumbag as the previous captain was, at least he was a first-rate fighter.”

“Not many can match you in combat.”

“Part of the reason we’re on this trip. So… How was the adventurer you met?”

“Quite strong by my measure. I’m not sure if I can beat him in a fight.”

“You’re serious, Cricca?”

“Yep. Biscott might have a chance, but it won’t be easy.”

“Oh? Then he’s pretty good. And you say he’s B Rank?”

“Yep. There are still A and S Ranks above that, though I haven’t met any yet.”

“I hear As and former A Ranks are a dime a dozen in Granzell… Of course! The beastgirl from the stall! What about her?”

“She sure got you worked up, Boss. Never thought a girl selling food could be that strong! Would’ve been better if she hadn’t balked, though.”

“Oh, but she was excellent. I would’ve loved to tussle with her.”

“You speak highly of her, Lady Sibyl.”

“Of course! She’s stronger than anyone in Vermillion! She has to be the A Rank we’ve been hearing about.”

“Makes sense. Adventurers are a merit-based profession. There’s been a decent number of people who are stronger than me since we landed.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Well, Cricca?”

“…Unfortunately, she isn’t. The young beastgirl at the food stall is definitely the one they call Black Lightning Princess. She *is* powerful… But she’s only a B Rank.”

“…And she’s that strong?”

“From how you speak of her, I believe she is much stronger than Colbert. But yes, she is a B Rank.”

“S-seriously…? Oh yeah! The old guy? What about him?”

“The owner of the soup shop. He was plenty strong, too. About as intimidating as the Black Lightning Princess. Can’t believe a guy like him would run a soup kitchen.”

“Soup shop… Are you talking about the Dragonhead?”

“That’s it! That’s the one! Right, Boss?”

“I don’t know if it’s true, but apparently they use real dragon meat there.”

“Then he must be Phelms the Dragon Hunter. He is a former A Rank.”

“Former?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re telling me that an *actual* A Rank would be stronger than the Black Lightning Princess and the Dragon Hunter? You’re kidding.”

“Ha ha ha! I can’t wait to meet an actual A Rank!”

“I-I’m getting a bit nervous here. They call this place impoverished back home, but it’s infested with powerful freaks…”

“Can you *please* not cause any trouble? PLEASE!”

“We won’t, Cricca! We won’t!”

“I’m not sure if we’ll make it home in one piece…”

Chapter 3:
An Encounter at the Haunt

BEEN A WHILE since we've been here, too.

"Hm! So much meat!"

"Woof, woof!"

You guys sure have a sharp memory about that.

After the cooking contest, we took a quest from Bulbola's Adventurers' Guild.

We actually wanted to hurry along to Ulmutt to finish the Belioth quest, but we couldn't let this slip by.

An expedition to Crystal Cage where something strange had been happening over the last few days.

A female Black Cat had been overhunting monsters in the haunt. Apparently, she was also killing monsters that other adventurers were already engaged with; a clear violation of etiquette. Worse: her spells came dangerously close to hitting other adventurers. Her antics hadn't hurt anyone so far, but she had to be stopped.

At first, Fran was the primary suspect. The incident started around the same time as her arrival.

But Gammod the guildmaster and other adventurers who knew Fran from the contest were certain it wasn't her. Others had their doubts, citing the cooking contest ingredients as motive for her poaching.

And honestly, Fran was the only Black Cat who could kill steal a high-rank adventurer's prey. Maybe it was a cat beastman in black gear. Fran's fame had boosted all the other cat tribes to being Black Cats.

We also had another goal in mind. An acquaintance of ours had entered Crystal Cage. We needed to find him and talk to him.

There were lots of edible monsters there, which made it the main hunting ground for Bulbola's low-rank adventurers. We spent

some time hunting swamp pigs there, too.

But this wasn't a hunting expedition, so—

"There! Meat!"

"Bark!"

I mean…of course we were going to grab meat on the side! We collected our quarry after Fran quickly dispatched it.

The creature we just took down was called a big leg, a bird monster which looked kind of like a dodo. As its name suggested, it had incredibly thick legs. It was also much faster and aggressive compared to its Terran counterpart.

But being an F Threat, it was no match for Fran.

Fran's sword and Jet's claw sliced across its neck, cleanly decapitating it. They didn't want to waste any of its meat. They really made their best ideas and decisions when they were hungry. Starvation was a motivator for them.

Ease off on the hunting, guys. We're here to investigate.

"Hm…"

"Woof…"

Fra and Jet immediately looked dejected. Not being able to hunt in a place with plenty of meat was killing them.

But we were here to clear Fran of her poaching allegations. We couldn't risk turning them into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Anyway, let's look for other adventurers. Maybe they've seen our culprit.

"Okay. Can you do it, Jet?"

"Arf, arf!"

Jet barked as if saying, "I've got this!" and began sniffing the ground. He picked a direction not ten seconds later.

"Bark!"

"That way."

Let's hop to it.

We concealed ourselves so we wouldn’t disturb the other adventurers’ hunt.

A few minutes later, we spotted some figures in the forest.

The adventurers were slowly walking in the woods, taking care as they searched for their quarry.

They were trying really hard to stay hidden, but they just looked like they were hiking to me.

Fran didn’t think they were hiding, either. She approached them and said, “Hey.”

“Whoa!”

“Yeek!”

“Waah!”

The three young men screamed as the unknown voice called out to them from behind.

They couldn’t sense Fran coming up behind them despite her walking regularly. I guess the forest helped hide her a bit, but their Detection Skill was clearly lacking!

I Identified them despite it being bad manners.

The young men were genuine rookies. Their levels and Skills were at the bare minimum. They probably didn’t meet the minimum of this forest! Still, adventurers had to take responsibility for all the choices they made.

“Wh-wh-wh-whaaaaa!”

“Nooooo!”

“Wh-who’s there?!”

Unlike his companions, the one with green hair actually managed to string together a sentence. He was bigger than the other two, his hair slicked back in a rowdy style.

“I’m Fran. You guys adventurers?”

“O-of course we are! C-can’t you tell?!”

“Hm?”

To Fran, their abilities were barely above the average civilian. She tilted her head. But telling them the truth would hurt their egos and stall the conversation.

Just nod, Fran.

“Okay.”

“G-good. A-are you an adventurer, too?”

“Hm. I’m here to investigate the forest.”

“Th-this place is too dangerous for you! It’s nowhere a kid should be hanging around!”

Apparently they hadn’t heard of Fran.

Despite the devastating irony of the situation, they did seem to be concerned about her. They were such rubes that I couldn’t help but like them a little bit. Not that I could speak for Fran!

“Hm. You can’t take this haunt yet, either. You barely have your detection and stealth together.”

“Wh-what! How dare you! I’ll have you know I’m the strongest guy in my village.”

Typical. He killed a few goblins and now thought he was a hotshot adventurer. Probably didn’t know the importance of doing your homework, either.

“Uh-huh.” Fran leaned slightly and circled around the three men. She wasn’t going that fast, but they definitely lost track of her.

“Huh? Wh-where’d she go?”

“She’s gone!”

“Wh-what? Huh?”

“Over here.”

“WAAAAH!”

All of them screamed at Fran’s voice.

They were hilarious, but definitely not ready for this haunt. The local monsters would hear them before they could start their

hunt. To that point, some big legs had heard the commotion and were heading towards us.

“When did you…?!”

“How did she do that?”

“She teleported!”

“No. I just moved around you.”

Suddenly, big legs came out of the bushes.

Kukkee!

“Crap! Three big legs…!”

“Let’s get out of here!”

“It’s too late!”

They at least knew that they couldn’t take three big legs at once. They were the easiest thing to hunt here, too. What were they thinking? The only way they had a chance was if they got lucky and found a solitary big leg.

But at least they didn’t ditch Fran in their panic.

“Come on! We’ve got to get out of here!”

One of them reached out to grab Fran’s hand when they saw her standing still. She dodged and stepped forward, leaving the men stunned a second time at her speed.

Before they could realize what was happening, Fran was already attacking the big legs.

“Ha!”

Kukkee—?

She killed all three of them in a flash. Their heads were off before they knew what was going on, blood gushing from their severed necks before the heads hit the ground.

The men let out confused gasps when they saw the strange sight.

“Huh?”

“Huuh?”



“Huuuh?!”

Did they do that on purpose? Their reactions were perfect. Fran answered them with a smug grin and puffed out her chest.

“This forest is dangerous if you can’t take these guys down easily.”

They were now speechless. They should be able to tell us more if Fran properly introduced herself.

Fran, show them your adventurer card.

“Hm. Here.”

“Y-you…! You’re a B Rank?!”

“Hey, she’s that Black Cat!”

“The one we’ve been hearing about! So it IS true!”

They finally recognized her for who she was. Even newbies had heard of Fran by now.

“Seen any other Black Cats in the area?”

“No, Ma’am!”

“Anyone suspicious?”

Both the Black Cat and our acquaintance counted as suspicious. Info about either of them would be nice.

“No one suspicious, either!”

They had apparently just reached Bulbola and only knew the rumors going around in the pubs the night before. They wouldn’t know what to look for. But they did give us an interesting tidbit.

Earlier, they heard a loud rumbling come from deeper within the haunt. It sounded like thunder, and it felt like the very air was shaking.

That was probably the thunderbird that made its nest in the heart of the haunt. It must’ve been fighting something. The sounds of a thunderbird’s thunder spells could be heard for miles.

But there shouldn’t be anyone inside.

Maybe they’re hiding.

Could be.

You needed guild permits to go deeper within a haunt. We would know if someone was in there.

However, there have been cases of incautious adventurers running into thunderbirds by chance. We would have to see who was actually engaged with it if this was the case.

“Thanks. Here. Your payment.”

“Bwuh? N-no, we can’t possibly!”

“Don’t worry about it. You guys were a decent distraction.” Fran tossed a big leg to the young men as she was leaving.

She said it was payment, but she was really trying to get them to leave. They would probably be reluctant to go home empty-handed if she asked. So she deftly gave them a big leg as a hint to pack it up… Fran was growing up!

The young men hustled together to carry their prize back to Bulbola. They said they’d get it butchered at the guild, but they’d probably get a free scolding to go along with it.

Well, they deserved it for being so reckless.

What now? Do we go straight to the depths?

“Hm. Keep an eye out for people, too.”

More intel can’t hurt.

“Woof!”

Jet’s nose led us to more adventurers, but we didn’t learn anything new.

No Black Cats or suspicious persons had been spotted. Many attested to hearing explosive blasts of thunder.

But we didn’t come out empty-handed.

The adventurers had been surprisingly friendly. They recognized Fran as being a renowned chef, and most of them were curry fans. Her results in the Ulmutt tournament also were memorable.

I thought we’d get a frosty reception, since she was under suspicion of poaching… But most adventurers didn’t think she was

the culprit.

Some couldn’t help but be jealous and look down on her, but most extended their heartfelt support.

Fran was happy to see the fruits of her efforts in both Bulbola and Ulmutt. I was ecstatic!

We went deeper, about halfway through the dungeon. Then we found an adventurer with the information we wanted.

“A Black Cat is fighting a thunderbird?”

“Yeah. I could tell it wasn’t you because of her height.”

Apparently, it really *was* another Black Cat. I initially thought someone had spotted another beastman and cried Black Cat just to sully Fran’s name.

The Black Cat tribe had only recently discovered their evolution conditions and had far less powerful fighters compared to other races. We’d never heard about a Black Cat who could take on a thunderbird.

But the adventurer who reported the sighting was a Red Dog. As a fellow beastman—and one with a delicate nose—his account was reliable.

Fran parted ways with the adventurer, excited.

Come on, Teacher! Hurry!

Hold on! We don’t know what this Black Cat is like!

For Fran, all Black Cats were friends. But this was someone who trespassed into a haunt and did whatever she wanted.

She sounded like bad news.

I hate to say it, but she might end up being hostile.

…Hm.

Fran looked dejected but didn’t argue. She knew deep down it might be true. I felt sorry for her, but we needed to stay sharp.

Let’s conceal ourselves and head in quietly.

Hm!

Woof!

Fran used her stealth Skills while Jet hid in the shadows. We delved deeper into the forest, concealing our presence as much as we could.

The monsters were getting stronger now and weren't one-hit kills anymore. We needed to be careful as we looked for the Black Cat.

Hrm?

Hang on. It's a gullinkambi.

We ran into a golden rooster called the gullinkambi. Despite its gigantic size, it moved extremely fast. It could also call for backup with its crows, quickly surrounding any potential threats who lingered.

Individually, it wasn't as strong as the apis or gullinbursti, both of which also lived in the middle depth of the haunt. But the gullinkambi had the most casualties under its belt. Adventurers who underestimated the monster usually got surrounded by a whole brood.

It looks scared.

Like it's on the lookout for something.

The giant chicken looked restless, leaving itself open to ambush.

I'll silence the noise with wind magic. Jet, you bind it while Fran goes in for the kill.

All right.

Bark!

The battle was over in an instant. Jet locked the creature's movement down with Shadow Bind and Fran quickly decapitated it. We'd been taking a lot of heads since coming to this haunt.

We collected the golden rooster and scanned the area.

Doesn't look like its friends are around.

"Hm. It was acting funny, though."

Yeah. There still might be others. Stay sharp.

Fran took down whatever monsters she found along the way as she ran through the forest. All seemed restless—distracted by something.

The vegetation eventually changed, making way for bigger trees. They owed their giant size to the crystal tree in the center of the haunt. Instead of stealing nutrients from its surroundings, the crystal tree shared its mana.

Now, we stopped.

We could sense the presence of a powerful creature. We would be spotted if we kept going.

I recognized its aura immediately.

A thunderbird.

Is it angry?

Woof…

Fury was mixed into the thunderbird's aura. It felt a lot like the thunderbird that fought Forlund.

The monsters we ran into must've been afraid of its anger.

We observed the giant bird's presence around the crystal tree and noticed that it was looking for something. It was difficult to explain, but whatever the thunderbird was emitting was caressing our bodies.

Whatever you do, don't move.

Hm…!

Woof.

There was no way for us to defeat this monster.

The thunderbird was a B Threat. But even if we had experience dealing with B Threats in the past, the creature's fury made it far more dangerous. Thunderbirds hunted in flocks, so there might be more nearby. The fact that it could also use familiars meant that it was hardly ever alone in battle.

We remained still and tracked down the thunderbird's location. A pale blue light then flashed between the crystal tree's

transparent branches. It looked like a flash of lightning rumbling behind a storm cloud.

That must have been it. Then the thunderbird unleashed more bolts of lightning.

KUOOOON!

It's so loud.

It's intimidating its opponent.

Arf.

It roared in a show of force to whatever it was fighting. If it hadn't been serious before, it was ready to go now.

We kept a quiet watch near the entrance of the depths. The thunderbird made its move.

Kuoooo!

Flashes of light refracted through the crystal tree as thunder shook the air. There was something in the breeze. A small figure running through it.

Someone's here!

Yeah. That must be what the thunderbird is after. Did you notice them, Jet?

Wuff.

I didn't notice them, either.

Neither did I.

Even if the thunderbird hadn't been overwhelming the battlefield with its presence, we still wouldn't have been able to detect the intruder. Their stealth abilities were top notch.

Or was it the black robe they were wearing?

It not only concealed their presence but also blocked Identify. I couldn't tell their gender or race.

The thunderbird let out one lightning bolt after another, each powerful enough to vaporize a D Threat. But the black figure dodged them all and playfully threw something at the monster.

A throwing weapon shaped like a kunai—strong enough to deal significant damage to the thunderbird. It sensed this and got out of the way.

The bird's voltage increased after its opponent dodged its lightning bolts and made a counterattack.

Kukkaaaaa!

The thunderbird flew from the crystal tree's branches and rained lightning down on its surroundings.

Just when I thought the robed figure was done for, they managed to deflect the thunderbird's magic. Electricity didn't work on them.

If this was another feature of the robe, it was a truly powerful piece of equipment.

Since its thunder was of no use, the thunderbird changed its approach.

It dove on the robed figure at fearsome speed. Its twenty-meter wingspan showed no signs of slowing. Simply being grazed by its beak would be enough to rip a man to shreds.

But the robed figure was no ordinary man.

They used something that looked like Air Hop to dodge the charge.

And the thunderbird's charge wasn't just a glorified tackle. Much like Fran's Flashing Thunderclap, itð®could turn impossible corners on a dime. It could also ignore inertia by momentarily turning its body into lightning.

Even if you evaded its first attack, the thunderbird could still get you on the rebound.

It was a difficult attack to evade even for high ranks, but the robed figure not only dodged the attack, they followed up with an attack of their own.

We watched as they drew their longsword to strike the thunderbird as it passed.

They got it!

But it barely did any damage!

Thunderbird feathers were tough and enhanced with mana. Though the stranger had landed a solid hit, it wasn't enough to break the bird's balance and it was already beginning to heal.

The robed figure continued to showcase their amazing acrobatics, but they couldn't keep up this superhuman movement forever.

"Hm!"

They got blown away!

Wind pressure finally got them as they tried to delay their dodge until the last moment. The thunderbird wasted no time and seized the opening. A string of explosions detonated as a rain of magic projectiles fell upon the robed figure. The crystal tree looked beautiful as it was illuminated by mana.

As I watched the spectacle unfold, the robed figure fell to the ground.

Are they all right?

We couldn't question them about the incident if they died now…

Fran, we have to distract the thunderbird!

Hm!

Fran nodded happily. She must've been dying to get in on the fight. She flew to the aid of the trespasser, facing down a very angry thunderbird.

"Haaa!"

Kukke?

Fran slashed at the bird's neck—but to no effect.

It dodged?!

The thunderbird must've been tipped off by the burst of mana Fran used to accelerate herself. Now I understood the thunderbird's power.

It was big and strong—that much was obvious. But I didn't think it would be faster than us. Maybe Fran lacked its top speed,

but I was convinced she would have the upper hand in maneuverability.

But the difference in maneuverability might not be as great as I hoped.

We traded blows with the thunderbird, recognizing how strong we both were. Thunder magic had no effect on us. We dodged each other's attacks. Our high-speed battle just ended up being a dance.

But it wasn't all for nothing.

I got more of its feathers!

Bark, bark!

Jet and I had been attacking the thunderbird as Fran distracted it.

I used telekinesis to pluck out its feathers. They were valuable, but I wasn't really looking for loot. I just wanted to break its concentration.

I hoped that plucking its feathers during this pitched battle would distract it. Meanwhile, Jet was casting spells from the shadows to disrupt the enemy's line of sight.

Our plan was to support Fran as much as we could. Landing a powerful hit would be difficult against a foe this quick.

But the tides of battle remained unchanged.

Damn this thunderbird! It was really persistent for a monster!

Maybe it was waiting for backup to arrive. Our odds got worse the more this dragged on.

Fran, we'll have to get serious to do some damage.

Hm!

You too, Jet.

Woof!

This wasn't an opponent we could beat half-heartedly. Although Fran was awakened and ready to hit it with everything she had, I was still conserving mana. Fran herself was holding

back so as not to exhaust herself. Jet was also in a conservative stance.

Time to go all out!

Fran had a crazy grin on her face as she shifted gears and started charging mana.

But then something strange happened near the base of the crystal tree.

A powerful burst of mana. And then the robed figure disappeared!

…They teleported!

I didn't know whether it was a Skill or equipment, but they got out of there the second they regained consciousness.

Fran recognized it and immediately adjusted.

She feinted a powerful spell cast and jumped back.

Pull away, Teacher.

Got it.

Our main objective was to investigate the haunt, not hunt down a thunderbird. The robed figure might escape if we didn't give chase.

Good thinking, Fran.

The bird's not the mission.

That's right.

Before, Fran would've focused on fighting the thunderbird. Now, she stayed on task, abandoning a fight with a powerful opponent. She was so mature!

Kukeee!

"I'll catch you some other time."

See ya.

We quickly retreated with a long-distance teleport. The thunderbird shouldn't give chase once we were off its turf.

Fran slumped her shoulders and sighed.

“Phew. That thunderbird was tough.”

You can say that again. No wonder it’s called the lord of this haunt.

“We’ll look for Robes now. Jet.”

“Bark!”

We searched around the crystal tree for twenty minutes.

The thunderbird’s menacing aura eventually faded, allowing the surrounding monsters to come out of hiding. That was when we found our target.

There! Don’t let them get away!

Hm. Good job, Jet.

“Woof, woof!”

Jet’s nose delivered as always. He could sniff anyone out once he had their scent. An excellent hunting hound.

The robed figure was sitting on a tree stump, oblivious to our presence. We concealed ourselves and approached silently.

We could see now that they weren’t gravely injured. The robe was in one piece, too. Impressive considering all the punishment it took.

But we couldn’t sit to observe them for very long.

“...I know you’re sniffing around, meow!”

Hm!

There goes our cover.

I didn’t know when they noticed, but we had played right into their hands. The robed figure had completely baited us.

They—*she*—looked at us and shouted.

I didn’t know whether we should show ourselves, but she wasn’t going to wait for us.

“Master told me to beat up anyone fishy, meow!”

Damn it! Teleport!

I teleported away in time to see the spot where we'd just been standing get struck by lightning.

Not keen on talking out our problems, eh?!

She wasn't out to kill us, but the spell would've hurt. It would've done more than knock us out.

"Meow? A kid? You're pretty slick!"

What was with this *meow* thing? I didn't know the robed woman's race, but she was probably from a cat tribe. I'd never met any cat beastman who peppered their sentences with *meow*, though.

"Who are you?"

"That's my line, meow!"

"I'm an adventurer. I'm looking for someone trespassing in the haunt."

"Uh-huh?"

I could tell that the woman squinted her eyes beneath her robes.

Fran noticed too and increased her caution.

"...Why are you here?"

"Training, meow! I heard there were some tough monsters, so I came to beat them up, meow!"

"You need a guild permit to be here."

"Didn't see any fences or guards around, meow! Maybe the guild oughta keep a better watch of the place if they wanted to keep people out, meow! Why do I need their permission anyway?"

"It's to keep weak adventurers from getting killed by strong monsters."

"Nya ha ha! Then it's got nothing to do with me, meow! I'm the strongest cat around!"

"You ran."

"Th-that was a tactical retreat, meow! Besides, it's not like I'm causing anyone trouble!" So the catgirl insisted, but it wasn't that

simple.

“The monsters escaped when you enraged the thunderbird.”

“So?”

The robed woman wasn’t an adventurer. She didn’t know the ins and outs of hunting. Maybe she was a martial arts drifter. She didn’t seem to be lying about the whole training thing.

Changes to the ecosystem would inevitably affect the adventurers’ hunt. It would be easy if it only meant not being able to find their target monster, but people might die if they found more powerful monsters in place of their usual quarry.

But all of this was too complicated for Fran to explain on the fly.

She just said, “You’re making trouble for adventurers,” and left it at that.

A more astute person would pick up on what she meant. The ever-silent Forlund, for example.

But the robed woman was dense. She only got annoyed and spat back, “I don’t care about adventurers, meow!”

“No excuse. This is guild territory.”

“Shut up about the guild, meow! I already told you I don’t care, you guild lapdog!”

“I’m not a dog. I’m a cat.”

“It’s a figure of speech, meow!”

Although the robed woman wasn’t immediately hostile, I could feel her desire to fight rise within her. She was someone who trespassed into a haunt to train, after all. She must have been a blood knight.

She was itching to throw down after seeing how strong Fran was. Fran wasn’t about to decline, either. Both of them still had the fumes of the thunderbird running through their veins.

Seeing as they were both blood knights, their argument would soon be settled by trading blows instead of words.

“…You’re a fighter, too. Let’s settle this the only way we know how, meow. I’ll do whatever you say if you win, meow.”

“…Been waiting for you to say that.”

Well, no stopping them now.

She’s good, Fran. Don’t let your guard down.

“I won’t lose.”

“Neither will I, meow!”

Fran and the woman raised their weapons and stared each other down.

The woman held a strange-looking sword, pale blue from its hilt all the way down to the tip. Definitely enchanted. It gave off traces of Frost Magic, but the sword probably had something which hid its true potential. Its mana was weak enough to lull its opponents into a false sense of security.

“I’ll go first, meow!”

“Hmph!”

The woman leapt behind us in a display of spectacular speed and struck. She must’ve used Air Hop to make sudden changes in her jump trajectory. Fran used this trick a lot, but our opponent was much more comfortable with it.

Fran easily dodged it.

“Nya ha ha! Not bad, meow!”

“You too!”

They were impressed with each other’s movement.

Now they took turns keeping each other in check. Their movement and attacks were getting more intense by the moment.

“Meow! I’ve never seen anyone faster than me before!”

“Why do you keep saying meow, meow?”

You just said it too, Fran!

So cute!

“What’s up with that?”

“It’s a habit, meow! I can’t fix it, meow!”

“A habit?”

“I was forced to say it in the past and meow I can’t stop!”

Despite attacking each other at full speed and strength, they were able to hold a conversation. That soon came to a halt once they shifted into high gear.

The two roared as they struck each other.

“Haaaa!”

“Meow meow meow!”

They kept on clashing until the balance was finally broken.

“Meow meow!”

“Tsh!”

Fran deflected the woman’s vertical slash and sliced her robe on the riposte.

The woman panicked and stepped away. Fran didn’t give chase—couldn’t—because of how shocked she was.

“A Black Cat?”

“Meow?! Meoooow! My ID Blocker Robe!”

Black Cat ears peeked out from beneath the ruined hood. The woman was a Black Cat, like the rumors said.



But Fran wasn't expecting her to truly be a Black Cat.

Despite its stupid name, the ID Blocker Robe was a highly effective piece of kit. Even if we could deduce that the woman was from a cat tribe, we still couldn't be sure.

She had a similar figure to Fran but was much taller. Despite the similarities, she had a completely different temperament. And there were other differences—she was just much more cat-like, probably owing to her almond eyes and fangs peeking out from behind her lips.

Her hair was longer than Fran's and was done up in a ponytail. Maybe now wasn't the best time to make this observation...but she looked cute.

She wore a white dress, leather armor underneath her robes. It had strange tribal-looking embroideries on it. They kind of reminded me of Ainu tribal patterns I saw in videogames and comic books.

Now I could get a partial Identify on her. Her robe's abilities had weakened after it was damaged. Her data was still hidden, but I could at least see what her robe did, her Skills, and her name.

The robe was ridiculously good. Identity Protection, Conceal Presence, Conceal Race, Self-Repair, and many other powerful Skills.

No wonder we couldn't place her as a Black Cat. We hadn't heard any news about a Black Cat this strong before.

Fran quickly shook off her surprise and happily brandished me again.

"Urgh! You got me at swordplay. I'll give you that much, meow!"

"Heh."

"You look so smug, meow! This is the first time I've had a shrimp of my own tribe beat me, meow!"

"I'm not a shrimp."

"Yeah, well, you're not a grown-up either, meow!"

“I’m *thirteen*.”

“Nya ha ha! Well, I’m *twenty-four*, meow! I’m a super hot and sexy adult!”

“Adult?”

Fran’s eyes scanned the woman’s body. She quizzically tilted her head.

“Wh-what are you looking at?! I’m just a bit modest, meow! That’s all! I’ll fill out soon, meow!” the woman screeched, blushing as she covered her chest.

Fran wasn’t really trying to make fun of her. It was just that all the women she had been around were…*well-endowed*. She’d kind of made measurements her criterion for adulthood.

Personally, I liked them on the slender side!

“A-anyway, you’re pretty good, meow. What’s your name?”

“Fran.”

“I’m Kuhne, meow!”

“Kuhnemeow?”

“No! Kuhne! Meow!” Kuhne childishly stomped the ground. I had a really hard time believing she was an adult. Junior high school, more like.

“I’ve been swinging a sword for over twenty years, meow! And my training’s been super tough! You must be some kind of prodigy to beat me, meow.”

“Twenty years? You were still a kid then.”

“That’s right, meow! I got bought by some secret society and was raised to be an assassin, meow! Those were tough times.”

Despite her tragic past, Kuhne’s mood sapped all the darkness out of it. But the tragedy wasn’t lost on Fran.

“…You were a slave?”

“Mmm-hmm, meow. I’ve been a slave all my life, meow.” Kuhne answered simply.

She’s been born to illegal slaves, which made her one too. By the time she was four, she’d undergone the rigor of training to be an assassin—a process with very low survival rates. Only one in a hundred made it through. The secret society that bought her told her to change the way she talked, as her adorable speech would make it easier for her to get close to her targets in the guise of a sex slave. But that secret society was eventually defeated by *another* secret society, leading to her being trafficked to another country.

Kuhne had continued training as a fighter under her new owners. Despite her status as a slave, however, those owners didn’t try to restrain her movements. They gave her the freedom to go where she pleased. Maybe they’d bought her to effectively free her from slavery?

She *was* still a slave, though, and the fact that they went out of their way to arm her raised some eyebrows.

“...Don’t you want to be free?” Fran looked sullen as she listened to Kuhne talk so frankly about her upbringing. Kuhne sounded like she held a great deal of respect for her current owner. To Fran, whose prized freedom above all else, this was unthinkable.

“My master lets me do whatever I want, meow! They’re my master so they can cover me, meow! I’m really grateful to them! They’re the reason I want to get stronger, meow! I won’t go losing to a runt from my own tribe, meow!” Kuhne shouted and readied herself. “Sword fight’s over, meow! Time to get some magic in the mix!”

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that.” Fran readied herself, too.

Kuhne held such different values that words weren’t going to help. Both felt that it would be better for their fists to do the talking.

“Let’s dance, meow!”

“Hm!”

Kuhne dashed quickly while casting her spell. She must’ve been preparing it for a while.

“Eat this, meow! Fire Javelin!”

“Hrmp.”

The multicast spell brought a hail of ten flaming spears down on Fran. She quickly dodged the attack, but a follow-up was already on the way. Kuhne had read where Fran was going to dodge.

“Nya ha ha! How do you like that, meow! I’m super good at flame spells because I keep using them to drive away the cold, meow!”

Essence of Falsehood was silent. Truth. She really hated the cold and had naturally acquired flame magic just from trying to keep herself warm. She was a true genius!

“Ha!” Fran canceled out Kuhne’s flame spell with a flame spell of her own.

“Mroooow! N-no cast?!”

“Heh.”

“Urgghhh! Stop looking so smug!”

Fran cast another spell as Kuhne groaned in frustration.

Fire Javelin. She must have been trying to show Kuhne that she could beat her at magic after defeating her in swordplay. But a surprise was waiting for Fran.

“Moon Shield, meow!”

Fran’s flame spell was blocked by a domed shield. Worse: it reflected the spell right back at her.

“Hm!” Fran barely managed to avoid the attack. “What was that?”

“Heh. Beats me, meow.”

“How about this?”

“Useless, meow! Moon Shield!”

Now, Fran’s thunder spell came back at her. Fran cut it down with me.

Though she was unhurt, Fran was frustrated. It was Kuhne's turn to act smug.

"Nya ha ha! Useless, useless, useless, meow!"

"Hrm."

Careful, Fran. That's Moonlight Magic. It might be able to reflect physical attacks, too.

Hm.

Royce, the Beast King's aide, had used moonlight magic once at the tournament. It had spells which could reflect as well as nullify attacks.

I had it in my Skill list but hadn't leveled it up. Its trickery was effective but difficult to use. I had other spells I wanted to prioritize.

"That all you got, meow?"

"Ugh."

Kuhne turned her backside towards us and shook it as she put up another moonlight shield.

Fran pushed her frustration away and pounced.

"Meow? D-do you admit defeat, meow?"

"You said we could throw magic into the mix. I'm just using it with my sword."

"Meow! I forgot about that!"

"Tsh!"

"Ugh!"

A fierce battle of swords and spells commenced. Their high-speed movement and spell casting caused a lot of stray projectiles. The terrain was an absolute mess. It would take someone incredibly powerful to break these two up.

Fran definitely had the advantage with swordplay, but Kuhne's moonlight magic was messing with our timing.

Unable to settle the match, both sides were beginning to feel the fatigue. Then a slight change came over Kuhne.

“Meow! No…I can’t lose to a kid like this! Not like this, meow! I’m supposed to be the strongest!”

At first, I couldn’t make out what she was mumbling…but soon she was full-on shouting.

“I won’t lose, meow! I’ll become the strongest and have master praise me! Meow, meow, meow!”

“Hm!”

Kuhne’s aura changed. It wasn’t just her mood, either. Her mana was getting stronger, faster. Had her desire to win awakened her latent power?

“Meoooow!”

Her movement was frantic now, with a sharpness that surprised even Fran.

I could tell what Kuhne was after. It wasn’t good!

This is… Fran! She’s coming! Block it!

“Hm!”

Kuhne, who had been safely out of reach, was now right in front of Fran. Her sword clanged against me.

“Fast!”

“Unya!”

Above!

Kuhne fell like a shooting star from overhead. Fran somehow managed to dodge the attack and kicked her away.

“Gyaaa!”

Kuhne flew as she screamed like a wet cat. Well…I guess she *was* a cat. She spun in the air and landed but wore an expression of shock.

“I-impossible, meow… I can’t believe you avoided that on your first try… How about this, meow! Triple Moonlight!”

Seen it! Fran, behind!

“Hm!”

Their swords clashed again, sending sparks flying through the air. As their blades locked, a surprised Kuhne stared at an expressionless Fran. Then they both jumped back to take some distance.

“You blocked that too, meow? Who are you…? Urk!” Kuhne groaned, holding her right leg. Her body was having a hard time keeping up with her ferocious speed.

Her *teleportation* was actually a moonlight spell. She used the reflective properties of moonlight to hurl herself at great speed. As its name suggested, Triple Moonlight was a triple jump to get the drop on her opponent. She hadn’t perfected it, but she had enough instinct to pull it off.

Though dangerous the first time, it was manageable once you knew what to expect.

…? Teacher?

Yes—?

“Meow… In that case!”

Crap! It’ll have to wait, Fran!

Kuhne returned her sword to its sheath. Had she given up on swordplay?

No. She was just getting ready to unleash her sword’s power.

Fran, it’s an ice sword! She’s going to use cold as a blade!

Just then, the battlefield shifted. But it was neither us nor Kuhne.

A wicked wave of mana had descended.

“Meow!”

“Hm!”

Kuhne and Fran both looked up at the same time.

“Gu hi hi hi! Looks like I caught two tasty girls in my net!”

A small, black figure hovered in the air. Its skin was bloodless and pale, and it had stitches all over it like a jigsaw puzzle. Its face was unsettling to behold.

Its eyes were of different shapes; the skin surrounding its right eye was like black leather. Its face was split down the middle, each side of its nose and mouth the wrong shape. It looked like someone had pieced together a face from different people.

Even its hair was different beneath its hood. Silver on the right, red on the left.

The robe it wore was black with gold embroidery. Quite fashionable in its details as opposed to the usual mage fare. The fabric was thin like a camisole, and the flared skirt gave the figure an air of elegance…even cuteness. But the white legs peeking out of the skirt were riddled with scars.

Although its head was covered by the robe, it had horn-like protrusions coming out of its head—no, they were ears. Like a black cat's.

I couldn't discern its gender or intentions, but one thing was clear enough…

An undead!

Yeah. And that emblem on its chest? It's a Black Bone.

"Gi hi hi! Such supple flesh!"

Despite its pretty dress, its voice was distorted and gruff—maybe that was par for the course for the undead. The creature radiated insanity.

This was most likely our real enemy. Definitely.

"What have we here? Two Black Cats! Now which one's my target?"

Target? Was this thing after Fran or Kuhne?

"One of ya's got a job from Belioth, so fess up! I know you want to! Hell, if you give me that letter, I'll even let you walk out of here alive!"

This thing was after the Belioth letter!

It seemed fuzzy on the details, though. Maybe it was just tasked with stealing enemy documents.

Fran and Kuhne remained silent. Kuhne simply looked confused while Fran wasn’t one to give up secrets easily.



“Fine! We’ll do this the hard way!”

The undead stared at Fran and Kuhne before letting out a wild howl.

“AAAAH! I can’t wait any longer! I’ll just kill ya both and take the letter from the corpses! I lied about letting you walk, anyway! Gya ha ha!”

It dove from the sky.

Fran and Kuhne looked at each other and then took opposite approaches. Kuhne held her ground while Fran jumped away.

“Hya ha ha! You first!”

“Not a chance! Meow!”

The undead locked on to Kuhne and brandished an odd-looking great scythe.

The scythe looked like a patchwork of different weapons put together. A broken sword here, a spear tip there, an axehead thrown into the mix. But the patchwork weapon wasn’t to be taken lightly. It eclipsed the average enchanted sword.

The undead rushed Kuhne with its makeshift scythe and accelerated. It was enough to shred the average person to smithereens.

But Kuhne was ready with her moonlight magic.

The scythe glanced off the dim moonlight shield.

“The hell is this?!” The undead lost its balance. The moonlight spell was strong enough to reflect its attack.

Now, Fran slipped in with a spell of her own.

“Flare Explode!”

“Gaaah!”

Multiple explosions enveloped the undead. Kuhne let out an elated cry.

“Nice, meow!”

“Hm!”

The two were now working together to face their new enemy.

Same race, both blood knights; competitors, but no hard feelings. They hadn't been looking to kill each other in their duel earlier. They weren't holding back—but they would've stopped short of death. Accidents happened, but it was part of the silent agreement between fighters.

Meanwhile, the undead clearly wanted to kill—and consume—the pair. Its aura was a mixture of murder, hunger, and malice. It was clear to both Fran and Kuhne that they needed to take it out.

"Graaaah!"

The flames covering the undead faded with a swing of its great scythe.

It was uninjured by the direct explosion. Its robes must have been made of powerful stuff. What was up with everyone having good gear today? I guess Fran was included on that list...but *still*!

"You're pretty good! The strong ones always make for better eating! I've been letting these chump adventurers go for the last few days. I'm starved!"

The undead sounded crazy, but something caught my interest.

It had been lurking in the haunt for a few days now...and yet it was letting adventurers go. Maybe this was the Black Cat we were looking for. Its hood certainly looked the part from a distance.

"Kuhne, how long have you been here?"

"Meow? I just got here today?"

"...Did you kill or steal from any adventurers?"

"I would never, meow!"

Kuhne wasn't the Black Cat from the rumors.

Fran looked at the undead and shouted, "Hey! Were you doing bad things while posing as a Black Cat?"

“Ho ho ho! You noticed? Damn straight! My target’s a Black Cat, after all. If I posed as one of you and made trouble, you’d be bound to come check things out! Bastards said I couldn’t just up and attack the city. Real killjoys!”

It sounded like a really dumb plan, bound for failure. But you know what? We fell for it!

“I’ll just eat both of you now that you’re here! I’ll pick that stupid letter from your carcasses! I just hope you’ll put up a decent fight before you die! Fight, and make Al Azif work for its meal!”

The undead—Al Azif—kicked into the air and lunged towards Fran. She was ready to block, but it wasn’t the right answer.

Fran! You need to dodge this one!

“Hm!”

Fran reacted to my voice and immediately jumped back. A huge crater appeared where she’d just been. But the scythe hadn’t touched it.

An invisible blade. I think it has timespace element on it, too. Defending against it’s gonna be tough.

I see!

“Shaaaa! Die!”

“Not happening!”

“Die! Die! Die! Die!”

Al Azif swung its scythe, but Fran kept dodging. Though invisible, my and Fran’s sensory Skills could detect the blade. We could even see through when Al Azif changed its shape.

“You’re pretty good, kitty! Great! Go and run around some more!”

“Hmph!”

“Kya ha ha! You’re wasting your time!”

Fran cast a thunder spell, but Al Azif deflected it with its bare hand. Its body was enveloped with such thick mana that it was acting like armor.

“Got you, meow!”

“No you don’t!”

“Meooow!”

Kuhne used a moonlight spell to hide herself and ambush Al Azif, but it blocked her attack with its scythe without turning around. The counterstrike was powerful enough to knock Kuhne away despite its scythe hanging from its back at a weird angle.

Now, Al Azif turned again, swinging its scythe. The invisible attack struck everything around it. Fran managed to duck under it, but Kuhne failed to block. Timespace attacks were difficult to guard against.

“Meowch!”

“Kihyahya! You won’t survive with that shitty sword!”

“Ugh… That’s a dangerous move, meow.”

“Hyahyahya! Now where will I cut you next?”

Kuhne groaned in frustration as she poured a potion on her arm. Not only was she hurting from the attack, she was also annoyed that Fran successfully dodged it.

Al Azif let out a dirty laugh as it looked at Kuhne.

And then Fran made her move.

She’d been waiting for Kuhne to distract it. Fran jumped at its blind spot and stabbed.

“Gi shi shi! Not bad! But it’s no use!”

“Hrm. Its wounds disappeared.”

Instant Regeneration.

Al Azif used its impressive healing capabilities as it swung its deadly scythe. It fought a lot like a monster.

“Ka ha ha! Now I’ll be taking your life!”

“You’re not having it, meow!”

“Hm!”

Fran and Kuhne cast their spells at the same time. They hadn’t arranged it, but their timing was perfect. Being from the same tribe made innate coordination easier.

But both spells were easily dispersed. Al Azif didn't even bother blocking. Its powerful mana barrier simply dissipated them.

"Sha sha sha! You won't get me with those weak spells!"

"We knew that already, meow!"

"Wha—"

Just as Al Azif was celebrating its victory, a single line appeared on its head. Then countless more cuts appeared on the rest of its body, dismembering its limbs.

"I call it Moonlight Summer Rain. Meow."

Kuhne had set up Moonlight shields around Al Azif which she used to propel herself around it. She averaged ten cuts per second. This must have been a variation of Triple Moonlight. Kuhne's concentration in being able to set all of this up in the heat of battle was impressive.

But Al Azif's regeneration was freakish. Its wounds healed so quickly that the gashes looked like cuts.

"Meow! That's cheating!"

"All's fair in love and war! Raaah!"

"Meow!"

Kuhne managed to avoid Al Azif's great scythe as it was coming down, but her arm was still cut open. Kuhne wasn't slow, either. She could feel the mana like we did, but Al Azif extended its invisible blade at the last second, making it difficult to dodge.

"Ku he he. That's good. Such a rich aroma!"

It licked Kuhne's blood from its scythe, intoxicated. Kuhne looked disgusted as her tail shivered.

"G-gross, meow!"

"Uhi hi! More! More blood!" Al Azif let out a maniacal howl as it charged towards Kuhne. But Fran cut from the side, blocking the scythe that was swinging at her.

"Kuhne!"

"Meow!"

Kuhne kicked Al Azif away. Not enough to hurt it, but enough to gain distance.

“You two work pretty good together for having just met! Let’s go faster! See how far you can go!”

Al Azif readied its scythe like before. But now it was paying attention to both Fran and Kuhne.

And then, carnage. All three combatants clashed with steel and spells.

Al Azif was taking the most damage but looked the most unharmed. It was hard to tell whether it was hurt with its patchwork construction.

Meanwhile, Kuhne looked like she was having a hard time keeping up. Wounds were beginning to show on her skin, a sign that her regeneration wasn’t healing her in time. But she stayed in the fight, refusing to lose to both Al Azif and Fran.

Aggravation was overtaking all of them.

Kuhne was getting more and more hurt. Al Azif wasn’t landing its powerful attacks. Finally, Fran was getting anxious at Kuhne’s slow recovery.

Annoyance and impatience were building.

They all had trump cards to play which would guarantee them victory. But no one wanted to be the first one to play it. They were all waiting each other out.

It was a game of chicken played in the midst of a hurricane of slashes.

And the undead was the first to flinch. Understandable, considering it was outnumbered.

“Your life is mine! Devouring Scythe!”

At first glance, it looked like Al Azif was recklesslythrowing its scythe. But that was only part of the move.

Fran, that scythe’s going to keep tracking you! You have to dodge it with your life!

“Hm!”

I tried slowing it down with telekinesis but to no avail. The scythe was intangible thanks to being imbued with the timespace element and ignored all of our attacks. Unfortunately for us, we couldn't ignore any of its attacks.

The scythe followed Fran wherever she went like it had a will of its own.

You can't get clipped by it, either! The curse will consume your body!

...Okay.

Al Azif tried disrupting Fran's dodge attempts by pelting her with fireballs, but she dodged them all at the last second with clever uses of teleportation and mana thruster. Eventually, Fran managed to stay out of the scythe's way. It felt like an eternity, but the attack didn't even last a minute.

Finally, the scythe returned to Al Azif's hand as if giving up.

"Tsk! You're kidding me! How did that not even graze you?!" Al Azif clicked its tongue and glared at Fran. But she wasn't all that interested in the undead's death glare.

That was close...

...Hey.

What's up?

Fran looked pensive as she talked to me. Like she sensed that something was wrong.

How did you know about Al Azif's attacks?

Huh?

This is the first time we've fought it. But you know everything about that scythe? How come?

Well...

Why? Well, because we had—

Huh?

Fought before...? No. No, we hadn't. This was our first encounter with Al Azif. And yet I knew. I knew how it was going to attack before even seeing it.

While I was being perplexed, Fran added, *It was the same thing with Kuhne. It was like you knew.*

Th-that's…

She's right. I didn't know all of Kuhne's attacks…but I knew *some* of them. The frost sword which used an invisible blade made out from cold. The high-speed Triple Moonlight. I knew they were coming before she used them on us.

Why?

Fran had noticed this strangeness before I did.

Apparently, I did something similar in the battle in Belioth.

Wh-where?

Back when we fought Zelyse, you said that he had used the crystal weapons before.

But he had…

I had never seen it before.

Obviously, we didn't have time for Q&A then. I didn't think it was strange for me to know this information. However, Fran's absolute trust in me backfired since she didn't raise any questions about it. I had P.A. after all, so it made perfect sense to her that P.A. would fill in the blanks of my knowledge.

But Fran couldn't just let it slide after seeing it happen again and again.

How did you know, Teacher?

I… I…

Teacher?

I thought back to what happened to Belioth. I knew it was a crystal weapon. Remembered fighting it, it using Thief God's Favor on me, having something important stolen—

Teacher! What's wrong?

Fran hadn't thought that the question would unsettle me so much. She was just wondering out loud. But her questioning opened a real can of worms for me.

Now Fran looked worried, like a lost child with nothing to hold on to. She looked like she was about to cry, the same look she had when she learned that I was on the verge of becoming a sword.

Mental instability detected. Please calm down.

P-P.A... What's happening to me...?

Inspecting surface-level memories—

P.A. carried on, but we didn't have the luxury to hear the rest of what she said.

"Come on! What's the matter?!"

"Hm!"

Al Azif was back on the offensive against Fran after Kuhne managed to dodge all of its attacks.

"Mwa ha ha! What's this? You got slow all of a sudden!"

"Urk!"

Fran couldn't avoid the supersonic great scythe. Deep gashes appeared in her arm and stomach as blood sprayed everywhere.

"Now do me a favor...and die!"

Even as the situation grew more dire, I still couldn't sort out my thoughts.

I got unsettled by the fact that I knew Al Azif's attacks. Was it just Mana Sense? Did I know from the start? How did I know? Whose memories were these? They were mine. They were mine but—

Teacher!

I heard Fran cry out.

Yes, I had to fight now. But my panic only grew as my shattered mind remained in pieces.

Fight! Fight, dammit! I kept telling myself, but I didn't know what to do.

I used some spells and barriers, but they didn't do much. The spells were easily avoided while Al Azif's scythe tore through my

poorly put together barrier. I cast a flame spell as I panicked, but its scythe easily nullified it.

I was watching the battle unfold as a spectator. I felt disconnected from my actions.

It felt gross, like my body was no longer mine.

I wasn't the only one afraid, either. Fran looked like she was about to cry. Pools of tears were threatening to spill from her eyes.

Whatever was happening to me clearly unsettled her.

Urgh... Jet! Jet, can you hear me?! Sorry, but you need to take care of Fran!

"Woof!"

Jet leapt in response.

Al Azif let out a cry of surprise at his sudden appearance.

"Grrr!"

"Shit! A familiar?! Just what I needed!"

Jet and Al Azif began fighting. Jet's main strategy had been to use hit-and-run with his dark spells. He would creep in the shadows, locking his opponents down from a distance, only attacking with his fangs at close range every now and again.

But now Jet took Al Azif head-on with his claws and teeth.

Although Jet was cut by the scythe cloaked in a red aura, he didn't run away. He was tanking for us. He made himself gigantic to become an easier target, taking the heat off me and Fran.

He fired some of his shadow spells, but Al Azif had a high resistance to them. It didn't even bother defending.

Wounded as he was, Jet carried on battling the undead and its giant scythe.

And still, I couldn't pull my thoughts and emotions together. It frustrated me. Jet's fur was soaked in his own blood. The red aura around Al Azif's scythe disrupted Jet's powerful regenerative abilities.

...I've seen this, too.

Again…memories that didn’t belong to me. No, they were mine, all right. They were mine, but not *mine*. So why did it all feel familiar?

I felt dazed. What was happening to me…?

“Meow, meow! What’s gotten into you, meow?!”

Kuhne joined the fray, noticing Fran’s disorientation, but she couldn’t stop Al Azif. Its movements were getting better. Some kind of special ability? For once I didn’t know. But knowing that I didn’t know only confused me more.

“Mroooow!”

A deep gash appeared in Kuhne’s body after she defended Fran.

The tip of the scythe had found her stomach, impaling her right through to her back. Kuhne coughed up blood as she moaned in pain. She held the scythe so that it wouldn’t go any deeper, but the wound was grave.

“Let go of her!”

“Shut it! Out of my way!”

Fran moved to save her, but Al Azif kicked her away. This no longer felt like the undead we were fighting before.

Fran’s emotional distress was slowing her down while Al Azif was getting even faster.

“Kuhne!”

“Urgh… Meow.”

Fran let out a painful cry. Although she had been fighting Kuhne before, battling together had given her a sense of camaraderie.

“Grrrr!” Jet jumped into action again, but Al Azif flickered and disappeared. It reappeared ten meters in the distance—it had teleported.

“Ku ha ha ha! Now I’ll suck you dry!”

“Urgh…”

Kuhne could no longer meow as she lay dying on the ground. The scythe had drained her mana and health. If this kept up, Kuhne would…

But just as despair descended on the battlefield, a new combatant entered.

“Mwa ha ha ha! I thought I sensed some powerful mana here, but I wasn’t expecting you, Fran!”

“Jean!”

A man in purple robes decked out with skull accessories appeared—the picture of a perfect creep.

But this was the other person we were looking for. Despite his sketchy appearance, this was the heroic necromancer, Jean du Vix. We were looking for him to relay some information, but I didn’t think he’d be coming to our rescue instead!

No longer having to seek him out was nice, but his backup was greatly appreciated.

“You need to help Kuhne!”

“Kuhne? Aah, the girl. Very well!” Jean gave an almost irresponsible nod and immediately got down to business. He might have appeared nonchalant, but he was very reliable.

“Arms of the dead, take hold! Summon Hollow Hands!”

“Huh? You bastard!”

Jean cast his curse, and a hundred transparent arms came out of the ground to attack Al Azif. It managed to teleport away, but ghostly hands were already waiting for it at its new location. They grabbed hold immediately.

The hands were weak enough that Al Azif could quickly dispose of them. But the sheer number of spectral limbs overwhelmed it. It couldn’t eliminate them quickly enough to break free.

Before Al Azif could teleport away again, the countless arms grabbed Kuhne and flung her at Jean’s feet.

“Kuhne! Heal! Heal, Heal!”

“Meow… You saved me, meow.”

Kuhne was in critical condition, but we made it just in time. Fran’s heal spam closed her wounds. Kuhne’s face was pale from all the blood she lost, but she was out of the danger zone.

Al Azif sounded angry as we took Kuhne back from it.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Who the hell are you?!”

“Mwa ha ha! I am obliged to tell you my name now that you have asked! I am Jean du Vix! Master of the undead born in the nether!”

“O-oh. That so?”

Even Al Azif was caught off guard by Jean’s excitement. Maybe the undead wasn’t as scary as we thought.

“Hang on. Jean du Vix? Crazy necromancer wearing crazy clothes…! You’re *that* Jean du Vix!”

“Oh? You’ve heard of me?”

“Ha! Everyone in Raydoss knows about you! Killing you takes top priority!”

Jean was notorious on the battlefield for his fights against Raydoss. He’d earned the ire of the empire, and they’d devised many schemes to specifically take him out.

That was what we came to warn him about.

“Jean! Their boss is after you!”

“Oh? The emblem on your chest. I believe that makes you part of Raydoss’s Black Bones. I’ve heard stories about your order infiltrating Granzell. To think that Raydoss would send its secret agents to target me! I am flattered!”

I hadn’t thought Jean would be scared, but I hadn’t thought he’d be happy, either.

“They have a secret weapon called Nameless made to fight you.”

Jean only got more excited upon hearing Fran’s information. “Mwa ha ha! I can’t afford to lose if I’m fighting against an undead! In any case, let us deal with this undead weapon before us now!”

“Undead weapon?”

“Indeed. The true identity of the undead you see before you is the scythe! That is where its soul lies! It is a variation of the Living Mail. The humanoid only serves as a decoy!”

“Tsk. Saw right through me, eh?”

No wonder it wasn’t taking any lasting damage. Al Azif’s real self was the scythe!

In some sense it was similar to an Intelligent Weapon, except it was actually an undead.

“An undead…not a discarded Godsword?”

“What the hell did you just call me? I’m no discarded Godsword! I’m no reject! I’ll make you regret that!”

“Fran, Jet…protect the girl. I shall deal with this thing.”

“…Hm. Thanks.”

“Think nothing of it. You seem a bit off today.”

Jean cast his gaze at me. The necromancer had Soulsight, an ability which allowed him to see the shape of souls. Although he seemed to be looking at Fran, he was actually peering at me.

Your soul is wavering ever so slightly. It is hard to tell. No…it’s more shallow than your soul. Your memories and mind? Something is muddling it.

W-wow. He’d diagnosed me with just a look!

P.A. chimed in, sounding like she’d happened upon a revelation.

Taking Jean du Vix’s diagnosis into account. Rerunning diagnostics.

P.A… Did you figure something out?

Anomalous memories identified within Teacher.

It sounded like she’d figured out what was wrong with me.

Wh-what do you mean?

There is a 96% possibility of your memories becoming entangled with the other Teacher’s memories during the synchronization process.

You did not notice the discrepancies because 99.9% of the content was the same.

The other Teacher! Of course!

Wait, that didn't really square things off, though. I'd encountered Zelyse and noticed his crystal weapon before we synced up.

Although you only talked to each other once, both of you were already connected by the time you reached the lake.

And this lake connection was so faint that even you didn't notice it?

Yes. Romeo, Theraclede, Zelyse, Lene. When all of the relevant actors converged around the lake, it is possible that a faint connection was established. As a result, part of the other Teacher's memories flowed into you.

And P.A. didn't notice anything wrong because the other me was still *me*.

Screening and isolating foreign memories. 348 seconds remaining.

P.A. could finally deal with the problem now that she knew what was wrong. It would take a little bit over five minutes—not long at all, but an eternity considering the situation we were in.

Thanks, Jean. You saved us.

Think nothing of it.

Jean grinned at us before approaching Al Azif.

For all his quirks, he was actually kind of cool. Did my heart just skip a beat?

"Well then. Your seed of immortality has already been broken. I can give you painless release if you allow me to defeat you peacefully."

"Idiot! You knowing what I really am s'not that much of a handicap! How about I just kill you quietly instead? I've got a burning grudge against shithead magi like you! I'll make you suffer with every cut!"

Jean and Al Azif trash-talked each other. Though I guess Jean had no intention of provoking him. In any case, they would start exchanging blows once they were finished exchanging words.

“Hya ha ha ha! Die! Gouging Blade!”

Al Azif swung its scythe vertically and increased the length of its blade. Simple, but effective enough to catch someone off guard.

But Jean evaded the extending scythe like an experienced fighter. He looked like a specialist in agility as he made small adjustments to avoid the blade.

He continued his advance, spear in hand—one he just pulled out of his item bag. The spear had a strange shape to it and was made out of bone. The impression it made mirrored Al Azif’s true self.



“Mwa ha ha! Very good! Time to move!” He thrust the spear powerfully, though lacking the finesse of his dodges.

“Gaah! I thought you were supposed to be backline!”

Al Azif was surprised at Jean’s agility. It didn’t expect a seedy necromancer dressed in robes would be proficient and fast with a spear.

Surprised as I was, that appeared to be all Jean did.

Though Jean’s bone spear stabbed Al Azif’s puppet, he wasn’t doing any real damage to its real self. It looked like he was making lots of wasted attacks.

Or so I thought…

“Hurk! Wha—?”

“You must be connected to that puppet you control. A necromancer can easily exploit that link to transfer curses!”

“What?! That’s not something an average necromancer can do!”

“Mwa ha ha! What’s the matter? You’re slowing down!”

“Shut up!”

What made Al Azif terrifying was its instant regeneration, enabling it to keep attacking while tanking hits—a tactic born out of the fact that its undead body was merely bait.

But Jean’s spear damaged the scythe via attacking the undead. It could no longer afford to tank hits like before.

As a sword, I knew the feeling. Al Azif had probably never experienced pain before. We didn’t have a nervous system, after all. But now, Jean’s magic had finally hurt it.

The foreign sensation must have been bewildering.

I didn’t think it was afraid, but it was definitely caught off guard.

The battle continued one-sided. Jean pressed his offense while Al Azif desperately tried to dodge. The battle kept going heavily in Jean’s favor as he landed hit upon hit, slowing down the undead.

I never thought Jean would be so deft with a spear, though. I didn't remember him using a spear last time...

"Mwa ha ha ha! I feel so light!"

"Urk! Gah! You little shit!"

Jean's spear moved in a flash. Al Azif put up its great scythe to defend itself, but the spear slipped right past and opened a hole in the undead. Although the spear art itself was of a low level, Jean's stats were more than enough to bolster his speed.

Al Azif was beginning to panic.

The undead immediately recovered, but the damage to its real self was done.

"Jean's so strong..."

Fran whispered with a hint of frustration. She felt vexed that Jean was so expertly handling the opponent who had given her so much trouble.

Fran, P.A.'s figured out what's wrong with me. Just wait a little bit more.

Will you be okay?

I'll be fine.

Hm!

Fran wiped away her tears and got back to taking care of Kuhne. She kept on healing her while protecting her from stray attacks. Fran's face was a stern mask, hiding her frustration at not being able to fight.

But Kuhne looked at her and took it the wrong way.

"I-is it that bad, meow?!"

"Hm?"

"Huh? I'm not gonna die, meow?"

Kuhne thought that her wounds were worse than they looked. But she was puzzled when Fran gave her an equally puzzled look.

"You'll be all right, Kuhne."

“A-are you sure, meow? Thank goodness, meow! So why were you crying, meow?”

“Reasons.”

“You can’t do that in a fight, meow! You can’t let your mind falter, meow, even if you feel mad or scared. You must maintain the optimal mental state at all times, meow.”

“…Hm.”

It wasn’t just about remaining calm. Kuhne acknowledged that everyone faced their battles differently. Losing one’s optimal state of mind was dangerous.

A tough pill to swallow for Fran, especially given that she was only worried about me. But she quietly nodded. She must have felt the same way.

Sorry, Fran. I didn’t think I’d end up like this.

But I should’ve kept fighting for us. I can still fight even if you’re feeling sick.

Fran’s grip on me tightened.

I won’t lose it like this again.

I could sense Fran’s resolve as she carried on watching the battle between Jean and Al Azif.

Jean’s movements had gotten much smoother compared to before. Had he taken classes in spear mastery or something? I thought that he was much better than Krad, an Alessan adventurer who specialized in spears.

Even now he was deftly handling Al Azif’s scythe, hitting the undead’s arm with the butt of his spear.

At this rate, the battle could end before I even recovered. But then Al Azif showed that it wasn’t going to be such a pushover.

“…Aaaaaah! Fuck, fuckety, fuck! This has gone on long enough! I don’t care about toying with you bastards anymore! I’m going to kill all of you!”

“I won’t let that happen! Undead Domination!”

“It’s useless!”

“Ungh!”

Jean had been weakening Al Azif’s undead so that he could control it himself. An obvious strategy for a class heavily reliant on minions. In Jean’s case, he could take control of an opponent’s minion by force.

Jean did well to wait until Al Azif broke his composure before using his trump card. But the purple mana coming out of his hand was easily deflected by the undead.

“Ku ka ka ka! You’ll need a grand spell to control me! You lack power, necromancer!”

Jean was an elite among necromancers, and this was the outcome? It was a testament to how powerful Nameless, Al Azif’s master, was.

“Raaaagh! That’s it! I don’t care about the mission anymore! Time to go all out and kill you! Kill! Kill! Kill! All! Of! You! Feast on my blood and come forth! Patchwork Bodies!”

Al Azif shouted and its great scythe let out a metallic ring along with a burst of mana. Three gigantic magic circles appeared in the air.

Massive undead monstrosities crawled out of each of them.

One was a bipedal ogre holding a club made of bone. Another was a giant lion with a reddish-brown mane. The other was a woman…no, a centipede lamia.

All three emitted powerful mana.

They were clearly undead by their appearance. They were radiating undead mana, sure, but they really looked the part.

The undead were patchwork creations much like Al Azif.

Each was pieced together out of monster and human parts. Al Azif’s humanoid puppet was probably also made in this way.

But unlike Al Azif’s puppet—which was controlled by the scythe—the three undead were capable of fighting by themselves.

Al Azif wasn’t finished. The great scythe let out another metallic ring before splitting into three parts.

Each part of the fractured blade slithered behind an undead's back and embedded themselves in their necks.

They stood still, accepting the metal into their bodies. The blades went as far as they could go before snapping, burying themselves completely within the undead.

"That's all I've got! All the power, mana, corpses, everything! This is all your damn fault! I'll make you pay!"

Al Azif used a lot of power to power up its minions. Even though it regenerated its blade, its mana was significantly lower. The great scythe was weaker, but the three undead more than made up for it.

"I see. I suppose it's time to stop fooling around."

"Meow! That guy's been owning it so far, but this looks bad, meow!"

Jean wouldn't be able to hold them all off on his own…

Memory adjustment completing in five, four, three—

Perfect timing!

Adjustment complete. Memories compartmentalized and absorbed into P.A. to be used at her discretion.

So, you'll let me know when I need to know?

Yes. Furthermore, the memories will no longer disrupt you.

I could also utilize the memories without being jarred by them? Regardless, I had P.A.'s reassurance that it was going to be okay.

Anything on those three undead?

Yes. Though minimal, we have information regarding each of them.

The other me had fought them too. The details were different, though, so the information wasn't going to be perfect. Still, it was better than nothing.

I relayed the information P.A. gave me to the others.

Fran, we're taking the guy with the club. He'll come at us with brute physical force.

Got it.

Jean! Take care of the lion. It has the ability to summon minions.

Teacher, you've returned! Very well. I am well versed in squadron fights. I shall not lose!

Famous last words… But I was sure he would be all right.

Jet, you take on Al Azif! It's weaker now but stay sharp.

"Woof!"

Finally, I got Fran to tell Kuhne what to do.

"Kuhne, can you take the centipede lady? She's weak to frost magic."

"Sure, meow! It's finally time for me to shine! Hang on… Did I *tell* you about my sword's powers, meow?"

Crap! I'd forgotten that I only knew about Kuhne's ice sword from the other me's memories! Wh-what should I do?

As I was trying to figure a way out of it, Fran said:

"I just looked at it. It's ice-colored."

"Oh yeah, meow!"

Uhh, that was it? Well, Kuhne seemed to have bought it. Not the brightest bulb, but I wasn't going to argue.

"I don't know what you're planning over there, but I hope you're ready! These guys will turn you into mincemeat! Get 'em, Patchworks!"

"*Ooooh!*"

The undead called patchworks charged towards us. Fran and the others moved out, each picking their designated targets.

"You're up against me."

"Guoooo!"

Fran readied me and glared at the undead. The club-wielding ogre roared in defiance.

Chapter 4:
Patchwork Bodies

LET'S GO, TEACHER!

Yeah!

Fran dashed towards the undead, lashing out with her sword rather than spells.

First, she would trade jabs with him to get a read.

Fran was ready to fight now that she was no longer panicking about my state of mind. Still, we needed to know whether I had made a full recovery.

Let's see if I can Identify—yes!

The ogre with the reddish-black skin was called Patchwork One. Although he could disrupt Identify, he was weak enough that my Heavensight went right through.

As expected, a power type. Close to 1000 Strength with Advanced Hammer Mastery. He also had other useful Skills like Instant Regeneration, Blink, and Evasion at respectable levels. He even had a Unique Skill.

"Oaaaaaargh!"

Number One charged while holding his club overhead. The undead was wielding a club made from the spine of a giant creature with an ogre's skull at the end of it.

Despite his intimidating appearance, Fran kept her cool and advanced.

"I won't lose this time!"

She slipped past the bone club and cut through Number One as she passed.

Despite his powerful barrier and thick muscles, she took his arm clean off. But Number One showed no signs of pain as he healed through his injury.

His lack of pain sensors aside, Number One's regenerative abilities rivaled that of his master, Al Azif. He even took on the same strategy of dishing out hits while taking them.

If anything, Number One was much more dangerous due to his enhanced speed and toughness. No wonder it cost Al Azif so much power to summon him.

Now Fran initiated her offensive.

She ducked forward so much that it looked like she was about to hit the ground and curved around Number One. She still had the upper hand when it came to maneuverability. The ogre's frame just couldn't keep up with Fran's movement.

Fran then aimed for Number One's leg and slashed. It would quickly heal, but all she needed was to throw it momentarily off balance.

But Number One dealt with Fran's attack in an unexpected way.

"Urk!"

How is he doing acrobatics with that kind of size?!

Using his club like a vaulting pole, he launched himself into the air. Number One landed nimbly on the ground like a monkey and readied his club like nothing ever happened.

"...Grr!"

"...Hrm."

The face of the patchwork ogre grinned as if acknowledging Fran as a worthy enemy.

Fran and Number One stopped and stared each other down. Though he couldn't speak, he seemed to have retained his mind. He was pleased at being able to fight a powerful opponent.

He had a mad smile, much like Fran did when she was in the middle of a sparring match. His pieced-together face looked intimidating as it grinned.

Meanwhile, Fran was focusing deeply. Forgetting about her confusion, regrets, and fears. She focused solely on the enemy in front of her.

“Yaaaah!”

“Grr!”

How about this!

As Fran hurled herself into melee range, I pelted the ogre with thunder and flame spells.

They were weak spells—just enough to get myself warmed up—but I wasn’t expecting them to do absolutely *nothing*. Number One’s barrier was a lot tougher than we thought.

Still, we had the momentum and therefore the upper hand.

Fran, keep him occupied! It’s time we hit him with something big!

Hm!

Fran circled closely to Number One, determined to distract him. When we were in his blind spot, I fired a flame spell right into his back.

“Gwaaah!”

I put a lot more mana into that spell. Even with his regenerative abilities, there was still a gaping hole burned into his back. He healed quickly, but I knew he’d go down once we burned through his mana supply. This was a tried-and-true method for dealing with powerful undead.

Another way would be to find the core…

Core location hidden.

Welp.

Number One’s primary weak point was hidden with powerful concealment spells. It was going to be difficult to find while engaged in an intense battle.

Well, looks like we’re in for a long fight.

All right.

Jean and the others were also fighting tooth and nail. We couldn’t afford to lose!

“Mwa ha ha ha! Your summoning speed is impressive, but it will not be enough to protect you!”

“Grooooar!”

Jean and Patchwork Two had distanced themselves from each other to let their minions do the fighting.

The lion was called Number Two, and apparently, it fought by summoning masses of undead. Ironic for it to be a backline fighter, considering its fierce appearance. Its body was carved with countless magic circles, which it used to quickly summon its minions.

But Jean wasn’t about to be outdone when it came to summoning speed. His bone spear also worked as a staff, and he had no problems filling the ranks of his skeleton army. He would even step forward to beat down Number Two’s zombies when opportunity struck.

As a result of the master fighting along with his skeletons, Jean’s army was slowly pushing back Number Two’s zombie horde.

“Undead Boost! Onward, my skeletons!”

Klik klak klik!

A bluish-purple light enveloped Jean’s skeletons, increasing their attack power and accelerating their slaughter of the enemy zombies.

Kuhne’s fight with Patchwork Three was more intense than Jean’s.

“Meow meow meow meow!”

“Oooorgh!”

Both combatants cried out as they circled around the battlefield clashing with each other. Kuhne was on the defensive, but her frost sword was definitely doing damage.

The centipede woman—Patchwork Three—was a swarm of venom. She fired countless poison bullets while attacking with a spear made of hardened ichor. Her centipede body also allowed her to constrict and strike at Kuhne with deadly force.

But Kuhne's hit-and-run approach ensured that she remained out of reach. She was drawing Number Three away from Fran and the others to keep them out of harm's way—an excellent tactical decision.

Number Three left ruin in her wake, gouging out the terrain and felling thick trees as she moved.

Kuhne managed to avoid her strikes while attacking her giant body with her sword. No mean feat.

"Meow! Triple Moonlight, meow!"

"Ooooh!"

The tide of battle would be in Kuhne's favor as time went on. Her frost sword was slowly freezing Number Three's body.

This was just as effective in the other timeline. Number Three had no resistance to frost, and her frozen body parts let off a chilly mist.

Undead had no way of increasing their body temperature. If Number Three couldn't thaw her frozen body parts, she would be done for. As her flesh and joints slowly froze, Number Three's movements became visibly slower.

Jet was also fighting hard against Al Azif. Even if it had gotten slower, a direct hit from its great scythe could still prove fatal.

But Jet carried on at close range, careful not to bring Al Azif into our battle zones. With the undead occupied, it couldn't provide support for its minions.

It also prevented it from escaping. Al Azif had a teleport, and he might just abandon his minions to get away.

But teleportation was impossible with Jet keeping up the pressure. Teleportation—especially the instant kind—was difficult to pull off if you couldn't focus. Having Shadow Warp himself, Jet knew its weaknesses.

"Out of the way, you stupid dog! Graaah!"

"Woof!"

“Don’t bark at me! Aaaargh! How did you clip me?! What’s with those teeth?!”

“Woof, woof!”

Al Azif was getting visibly frustrated. Jet was actually dealing damage to its real self on top of interrupting it.

Jet had a Skill called Dimension Fang. It allowed him to go right through an opponent’s defenses to deal direct damage. Furthermore, Jet’s jaws were strong enough to break orihalcon without the use of a Skill.

With Skills, even Al Azif’s hardened body wasn’t escaping unscathed. Judging by his immense annoyance, this might have been the first time that Al Azif’s body had been hurt.

“I’ll kill you! Devouring Scythe!”

“Woof!”

“Di—”

“Bark!”

“Gwaaah!”

Jet had been preparing his own teleport as he was disrupting his opponent. He warped away, evading the tracking scythe completely before reappearing from the shadows for a counterattack.

He knocked Al Azif to the ground with his tail, knocking the wind out of the undead.

Jet very much had the advantage.

As I watched our allies fight, something strange started happening with Number One.

“Oooooh!”

Eh? Fran…there’s a lot of mana coming out of this guy!

“His eyes are glowing.”

Despite the apparent stalemate, Number One was slowly getting weaker. He must have been using his trump card now.

It might be an evil eye Skill, could be a weak point. Don't let your guard down.

Hm!

Reddish-black mana covered Number One's body, making him more menacing than before. He was definitely stronger. *Way* stronger.

"Woooorgh!"

"Argh!"

And faster!

Now powered up, Number One was surprisingly quick. His charge was almost twice as fast. His strength was probably boosted too. An upgrade in both speed and strength would increase the force of the impact.

Fran's arm broke by merely getting grazed by his bone club.

The boulder behind us broke into pieces. A direct hit might have been able to kill a dragon.

A quick healing spell fixed Fran right up, but this was the first time we'd taken a real hit in this fight. And his damage output wasn't the only thing that got enhanced.

"Hrm. He dodged it."

He can see exactly what we're doing.

Fran had circled around to stab him in the back, but Number One spun like a ballroom dancer to get out of the way. His movements were so fine that it allowed him to attack right after.

Fran was already awakened and using Flashing Thunderclap. She was also enhanced with Skills and spells to the point of superhuman speed. If she were up against a civilian, they would literally appear to be in slow motion.

Number One couldn't keep up with Fran's speed before—but now he saw right through her.

Was it the glowing eye? It appeared to be an extended physical enhancement instead of a Sight Skill. It was tough to deal

with, regardless. I tried popping a flashbang to blind him, but it had no effect.

Forget weak points. This thing had none.

His entire body was enhanced along with his eyes. It almost felt like he was saying, “I’ll crush you with sheer strength! The finesse is just a bonus.” Straightforward, but he was powered up to the point that it made him incredibly dangerous.

Number One roared before switching into full-on offense. Fran met the giant head-on.

As I supported Fran, I used Split Thinking to watch over our allies just in case they needed backup. Jean and Number Two’s battle had moved into a new phase.

“Grooooar!”

“I see! So you’ve seen through my trick!”

Number Two roared as Jean’s movements slowed down. His expertise with the spear now dropped to the level of a beginner. He was no longer the Jean who had wielded the spear with blinding speeds just a few seconds ago.

Both the speed and quality of his spear abilities fell. Jean’s stabs now solely relied on brute force. It wouldn’t be enough to defeat the zombies.

The zombies noticed the opening and ignored the skeletons to go straight for the necromancer. Meanwhile, Number Two transferred its energy to its minions—a significant amount, considering how much mana it lost.

“This does not look good!”

The zombies’ mana destabilized and they exploded, taking the surrounding skeletons with them.

The explosion was powerful enough that even we could feel the blast.

When the smoke cleared, I saw Jean’s battered form, his robe gone. While he could still fight, he’d taken quite a bit of damage.

He only survived because of the bone armor he was wearing underneath. The armor was burnt up and on the brink of

breaking.

But Jean was surprisingly calm.

“Yes, I see. Undead Sympathy. An interesting Skill. Even my minions couldn’t avoid its effects. But you did well. Rest easy now.”

He caressed the half-broken armor as he analyzed Number Two’s abilities. The armor dissipated into light, disappearing. The bone armor had turned out to be one of Jean’s minions.

Its abilities were Spear Mastery and Spear Art. That was what enabled Jean to be an expert with the spear. An undead with spear expertise had assisted him like power armor.

Number Two noticed this and dealt with it accordingly.

Undead Sympathy was a Skill which linked your mana to another undead in order to control it. You would share all the pain and sensations with the target, making it a tricky Skill to use. However, if an undead were to use it on another undead, pain would be a moot point and the effect would be amplified due to them being the same race. That’s how Number Two put a stop to Jean’s minion.

Number Two’s mouth twisted upon seeing Jean lose his spear and armor, his offense and defense.

It was smiling. It knew it had the upper hand. Unlike Number One’s berserker smile, Number Two’s grin had a malicious look to it.

“Grrr!”

“I see, I see. You know what pleasure is despite being an animal. Very interesting!”

“G-grr?”

But Jean was Jean. Even now his eyes sparkled with curiosity. He really was a mad scientist.

Fearful, Number Two took a step back but soon caught itself and glared at Jean. It was furious that Jean showed no signs of terror despite being at a disadvantage.

Still, Number Two’s behavior only fed Jean’s curiosity.

“Oh, you’re threatening me! How very human!”

“Grooooar!”

Number Two knew that it would further lose its composure if it kept listening to Jean. It ignored him and summoned more zombies, determined to crush him by numbers now that he had lost all means of attacking.

Number Two slowly stalked forward, confident that it could take the necromancer. It leapt, instantly closing the distance. I could almost hear it let out a dirty snicker.

Jean was alone without a single skeleton under his control. He was also badly hurt. Meanwhile, Number Two only had a small dent to its mana along with minor injuries; not to mention it was once again protected by ten zombie minions. The undead knew it had the advantage.

But Jean’s smile remained.

“Mwa ha ha! It appears I have caused a misunderstanding!”

“G-groar?”

“I am a necromancer, as you can see. I was only using a spear to try out my latest minion’s abilities!”

Jean shouted while spreading his arms open.

“I apologize for having misled you! I shall now show you my true power.”

“Rooooar!”

“It is futile.”

“Gah? Graaah!”

Number Two roared, sending its zombie horde after Jean to stop him laughing. But the zombies shuffled slowly, nothing like the blitzing horde the lion had controlled before. They had been reduced to garden variety.

“You’re not the only one who can take over their opponent’s creatures.”

Jean had slowed the horde’s movement with an undead control spell.

“G-grrr!”

“What’s the matter? Can’t you just attack me with your fearsome teeth and claws? Or are they simple decorations? You hesitate to attack an unarmed necromancer?”

Jean held his hands out, inviting Number Two to pounce.

“Grr…”

Provoked, Number Two could only growl. Confusion, anger, panic, and paranoia were brewing in its mind. This might be Number Two’s chance to take Jean down, but it felt like a trap. Then again…perhaps Jean was bluffing in order to buy time.

“Grrr… Raaaagh!”

“Mwa ha ha! That’s the spirit!”

Finally, Number Two jumped. It moved with lion-like agility, but Jean had indeed set up a trap.

“Apologies! I lied about being unarmed!”

“Gaargh…”

The belt around Jean’s waist suddenly moved. Made of leather, it was part of a dead animal…legitimate material for undead.

The belt undead snapped towards Number Two’s front legs like a snake.

“I am very fortunate that this remained undetected by another undead. The concealment Skill has worked perfectly.”

I hadn’t noticed the undead around Jean’s waist either. It must have had a lot of points invested in stealth and defense. It looked like any other belt, but it was truly a powerful undead. The perfect last resort.

“Well done, Ray! Come, Remy!”

Jean must’ve been ready to summon at any point in the battle. A magic circle appeared between him and Number Two.

Bzzzzzz!

A loud hum sounded as a bee the size of a large dog flew out of the circle. The bee zombie was also wearing bone armor. It

looked like any other bee monster, but the fact that it was named *and* one of Jean's summons meant that it was anything but ordinary.

What it did next was stunning.

The bee didn't attack Number Two, instead flying over it to attack the monsters behind it. It grabbed one of the zombies with its six legs and stabbed its head with its thick stinger. But it was injecting it with mana instead of venom.

Reddish-purple mana began flowing into the zombie. It only took a few seconds.

Now, the eyes of the zombie Remy attacked were glowing with the same reddish-purple glow.

The next moment, the zombie exploded.

"Gaaaah!"

"Yes! This is how you deal with undead! You exploit their naturally unstable mana!"

The explosion blew Number Two away, and it was powerful enough to force Jean to take cover.

Number Two had done something similar to its zombies earlier. Now Remy was using the latent mana in the zombies to make them explode. With the opponent's mana as fuel, Remy only needed to use a little bit of its mana to ignite it.

"Gaaaaah!"

Bzzzzz!

Number Two roared in pain as Jean laughed. Remy was on its back now, about to inject its mana into the lion. Number Two feared joining its minions.

Number Two focused on Remy to prevent the fatal sting. Remy's ability was powerful, but its stats weren't that high. It would be difficult for it to pierce through Number Two's defenses if it concentrated hard enough.

But Remy had done its job perfectly.

“You have shown your intellect by your myriad of tactics, but you have also shown that you can feel fear. Very interesting.”

“Gah?”

Number Two had been so preoccupied with Remy that it gave Jean all the time he needed to prepare his final attack. It was the perfect bait.

“You’ve done well, Remy. We have won thanks to you.”

Number Two looked puzzled at Jean’s words but then realized what had happened. In a panic, it fled before collapsing.

“I’ve been devising methods of dealing with powerful undead ever since my defeat at the sky isle. Like Remy and this device!”

“G-gah…”

“Nether Lord’s Cradle! Activate!”

Jean’s skull necklace shone brightly and began emitting a strange sound.

Oooooooh—

It sounded like singing, but also like groans of pain. Unsettling to say the least. But it sounded…*familiar*. It was the same tune as Jean’s old staff, Nether Lord’s Blessing.

In exchange for its user’s life force, the staff was able to force powerful undead to move on.

“Yes! It’s working!”

But Jean didn’t look like he was in pain. The skull pendant took the toll of Nether Lord’s Blessing for him.

Struck by Nether Lord’s Cradle, Number Two was no longer able to move.

“Not quite what I was expecting…but good enough! Don’t worry. This won’t hurt.”

“Graah…” Number Two resisted, twisting its body to flee, but to no avail.

And now, a benediction to send undead to the afterlife. “Go in peace! Ascension!”

“Gaaaah!” Number Two roared—but not in pain. In joy.

As the haunt echoed with Number Two’s joyful roar, its body crumbled into ash.

“May you rest in peace, miserable soul.”

Kuhne continued her intense battle with Patchwork Three.

She was still desperately swinging her ice sword, but the centipede woman kept pursuing her with seemingly limitless stamina.

“Meoooow! Cold! Cold cold cold cold. Meow!”

But the battle was still in Kuhne’s favor.

The centipede half of Number Three was covered in ice and visibly slower. Kuhne shouldn’t need to run for much longer.

She still needed to watch out for the poison shots, though. Even so, the bullets couldn’t pierce through Kuhne’s barrier. Number Three was running out of options.

But Kuhne’s panic came from the fact that she could feel the cold as well.

Normally, an enchanted weapon shouldn’t affect its user with its attack. A flame sword wouldn’t leave burn marks like a wind sword wouldn’t leave cuts.

But this sword was different. Either it didn’t identify Kuhne as its user or it was far too powerful for Kuhne to control.

In any case, Kuhne was getting cold to the point that you could see her breath and the color began draining from her lips. Black Cats weren’t great against cold, as I’d learned through my time with Fran. In fact, they were quite weak against it.

“Urggh. It hurts to breathe and I’m not warming up, meow!” Kuhne cupped her hands and tried breathing hot air on them, but it was no use. The whole scene looked kind of silly, but she really was in trouble.

Number Three was still moving. In fact, she was beginning to catch up with Kuhne because the Black Cat was slowing down. The cold was getting to Kuhne more than Number Three.

Number Three also had one more trick up her sleeve.

“Aaaaaah!”

“Eek! She just cut herself in half, meow!”

Number Three used her poison spear to cut off her centipede half. This wasn’t one of her abilities. She just made the conscious decision to amputate herself.

The patchwork woman’s torso fell on the ground, twitching as blood flowed out of it.

She was wide open, but Kuhne never got the chance to attack her.

The centipede half had exploded, creating a rain of acid and poison.

“Me-yuck! Gross!”

As Kuhne shielded herself with moonlight magic, Number Three crawled on her arms like a cockroach.

“Aaaaargh!”

“I-it grew back, meow!”

Kuhne shouted, watching as Number Three’s stump regenerated a new centipede body. The way her legs scuttled was gross enough to send shivers down any chilopodiphobe’s spine.

In only a few seconds, Number Three was back on her feet.

Before, she was over ten meters in length. Even now she was still a good four meters long. But she was much faster after shaking off the frost.

I worried that we might need to step in.

But Kuhne was a lot more competent than I thought.

“All right, meow. I’m probably gonna cry since it hurts so bad, but this is better than dying, meow!”

“Aaaaah!”

“Shut up, centipede lady! I’m breaking my body in half because of you, meow! You can make it up to me by dying, meow!”

Well… Technically speaking, she was already dead.

Kuhne straightened her face and readied her sword before backing away from Number Three.

Was her trump card going to take time?

Number Three seemed to have the same idea, and she advanced on Kuhne to stop her. She could now move at her original breakneck speed.

But Kuhne dodged her charge while continuing her incantation. Her trump card was going to be a spell, not her sword.

High-speed movement while casting a spell was vital to spellblades like Kuhne and Fran. She easily dodged Number Three's poison attacks and completed her incantation.

"Meow! Moonlight Magic! Moon Diver, meow!"

Pale white moonlight enveloped Kuhne's body.

But Kuhne wasn't the only one affected by the spell. An ominous red light illuminated Number Three.

"Meow meow meow!"

Kuhne vanished.

"Aah?"

No, she was moving so fast that she looked like she vanished.

She was fast to begin with, but now she was as fast as Fran when she got serious. This alone made her difficult to avoid, but Number Three was hindered. Rather, she was getting sluggish. It was like the flow of time had slowed for her.

This was likely the case. I didn't know everything that moonlight magic could do, but Moon Diver accelerated its user's speed while slowing down the enemy.

It was much like using Quick and Slow at the same time. I thought timespace magic might have something to do with moonlight magic, but this might just have been an expression of the moon's phases.

“Mew mew mew mew!”

Kuhne ran around attacking Number Three so fast she left behind afterimages.

About five seconds later, the light surrounding her and Number Three disappeared…

“Aah…? Gaaah…!”

“I win, meow!”

Kuhne held her hands high in the air, celebrating her victory, leaving Number Three to fall to the ground in pieces.

“Hah! I knew I was the strongest—Mrooow! I’m so sore! Ow ow ow meow!”

Well, soreness was better than deadness.

“Ooooh!”

Fran continued evading Number One as his attacks left craters behind, felling trees in the vicinity. The mere shockwaves of his club were enough to knock Fran off balance, and the act of regaining her footing became a game of cat and mouse.

But blocking wasn’t the right answer, either. Each blow took a huge chunk of my durability and left Fran’s arm numb.

On the flip side, Number One immediately healed through all our attacks. And things were only getting worse as time went on.

Can you feel it, Fran? His mana keeps on increasing.

Hm. He’s absorbing mana from his surroundings.

Yeah. And this haunt has plenty of mana.

Number One would keep getting stronger the more we fought.

This was the effect of the Unique Skill Shinraki.

According to my other self, this powerful Skill could be acquired by ogrekin who had gone through special mutations.

Number One had been constantly draining his surroundings of mana. But unlike Mana Steal, Fran and I weren’t affected by it.

Shinraki only absorbed mana from the environment. But as long as the supply of mana was plentiful, it was several times more powerful than Mana Steal.

Considering how rich the haunt was in mana, it gave Number One an unfair advantage.

But it wasn't without weaknesses.

He's been acting weird since he started doing this.

He's losing his use of reason.

Number One no longer fought like a berserker as he got stronger. The light of reason was fading from his eyes.

The longer he used Shinraki, the more he became one with nature. The more he became one with nature, the less he could use his intellect.

Reminds me of Urslars.

You're right.

Friendly Fire Urslars, S-Rank adventurer. A lonesome man possessed by Mad Ogre Form, a Skill which caused him to run amok on the battlefield.

Shinraki was a lot like Mad Ogre Form. The only difference being Urslars would go on a rampage the moment the Skill activated whereas Shinraki made you lose yourself over time.

But their enhancements were much alike, which would make it difficult for us to keep up...

At least he just started using it. We can still win this.

He will get stronger, though.

If Number One kept absorbing the surrounding mana, he might just end up as strong as Urslars. Indeed, he might even go beyond Mad Ogre Form.

Even though our weapon Skills were better, Number One was already outclassing us in strength, even in speed.

On top of his enhanced eye and body, there was something else we had to look out for.

"Gaah!"

Crap! Greater Heal!

Fran's body flew through the air, bent as if she had been hit by something.

She *had* been hit by something. An invisible fist.

Not only was Number One covered in an armor of mana, he was also able to control it like his own arm. It was also concealed well enough that we could barely detect it.

But Number One was currently spreading his powerful mana, overwhelming our sensors and making it more difficult to detect other mana sources.

He was clearly doing this on purpose.

Even if his intellect was going, Number One's battle instinct was still there. This was also a lot like Urslars in his rampage state. The mana fist also reminded me of a Skill we had encountered once.

It's like the move Colbert used.

Asura, I think it's called.

As Fran said, this move was exactly like the attack Colbert used on us in the tournament. It compressed mana to make four additional arms.

These mana arms—No, these spirit *arms are trouble.*

If I remembered correctly, mana was something external to the body while spirit was something you used on or in your body. Number One was using spirit.

Not only is he getting faster, he's gaining more arms…

Hm. He keeps attacking where I can't see him.

He was strong. Strong enough to stand up to us even after the experience we gained in Belioth. This world kept serving us powerful opponents as we got stronger.

But we weren't out of ideas yet.

Fran and I were ready for the possibility of fighting an equal.

We'll have to do it, Teacher.

…Yeah. Looks like it.

Hm!

As we discussed our plan, Number One launched another spirit fist at Fran. But this was bait. He was trying to draw our attention to the attack by leaving it exposed.

There would be another concealed spirit fist soon.

Once it knocked us down, Number One could close in and smash Fran with his hammer.

So far, we didn't quite know whether to block or avoid the fist.

But now, Fran didn't move.

Number One looked surprised at Fran's seeming resignation. There was no way she didn't see the bait. And yet she paid it no mind.

But it was too late to change the spirit fist's course now. Still confused, Number One watched as the spirit fist made contact with Fran's face.

Number One gulped. His lost humanity seemed to return to him. He hadn't thought that the attack would hit. But more surprises were in store for him.

Because not only did Fran not flinch when she took the hit, she also blocked Number One's club like it was nothing.

"Gah?"

The bone club bounced off, knocking Number One off balance.

Fran wasted no time in exploiting the opportunity and followed up with a flurry of cuts. While not enough to defeat him, it took a good chunk of his mana.

Number One backed away to regain his composure and sent two more spirit fists after Fran to push her back.

I could see them with my sensory Skills at full blast. But Fran didn't notice them at all. Instead, she calmly advanced.

Number One thought he would definitely get her now.

But Fran looked calm as the fists bounced away from her body. She even managed to deflect the one that was heavily charged.

Shocked, Number One launched another spirit punch.

Fran ignored it, and it was unclear if she even saw it. The spirit fist collided with her side. And for a third time, Number One's attack seemed to have no effect on Fran.

Almost like she was immune to it.

If it's the same as Colbert's Asura, then we just have to use the same strategy we used on him!

Hm!

In fact, she *was* immune to it.

Physical Immunity. As its name suggested, it nullified the effects of physical attacks. It was so powerful that it was almost a cheat Skill.

However, as powerful as this Skill was, it was difficult to use.

Its biggest drawback being its large mana cost.

Physical Immunity was usually found in high-level slimes and gaseous monsters. It was part of their innate physical form.

Because we lacked these monsters' physiology, we had to use a lot of mana to make up for it. And I mean *a lot*. Taking a few random hits was enough to burn through half our mana.

Number One's attacks left my mana at a measly thirty percent.

For Fran, whose strategy involved a lot of magic and quick strikes, a Skill that took chunks off her mana with each hit was a hard sell. If it came to defense, she might as well teleport away.

But this Skill allowed us to get closer to Number One...to observe him.

With the Skill covering our defenses, we could actually focus on finding his core.

Our initial plan of chipping away at him went out the window when Number One started soaking up the local mana. We couldn't

win the battle of attrition against a heavily juiced-up version of him.

So we might as well sacrifice some of our mana in the hopes of ending the battle quickly.

...Found it!

I found a part of Number One's body where mana was faintly focused. Though concealed, I could feel it from here. This was *definitely* the core. But I would run it by P.A. just to be safe.

P.A.! Is this it?

Yes. Four percent chance of it being a dummy.

There's the seal of approval!

We got it, Fran!

Hm! Run defense, Teacher.

You got it! Knock him out!

Number One backed away cautiously. Despite his eroded reason, he could tell that Fran was about to use her trump card.

"Grrrr..."

The whirlwind of attacks stopped as Fran and Number One came to a showdown.

"..."

"..."

They focused their mana and charged.

Number One chose to attack rather than run, his instincts sensing the danger of Fran's attack. If he was going to die, he might as well die honorably.

"Uooooh!"

"Sword God Form!"

Number One's whole body was covered in mana, a tactic only employable by undead who could ignore torn muscles and ripped organs. He was now stronger than any living thing could be. In terms of raw stats, he exceeded those of an S-Rank adventurer. The ensuing attack would be just as deadly.

Number One was so overcharged with mana that cracks formed in his bone club as he swung it. He was also using some weapon arts that increased the force of the impact, amplifying the damage potential.

A mere graze would be fatal. This swing was powerful enough to break through the thick walls of the Granzell palace like they were made of cardboard.

And after making this attack Number One would likely die.

He was putting all of his mana—including the mana he had acquired from Shinraki—into this attack. Fitting for an undead whose reason for existence was to fulfill his master's every command.

A smile crept onto Number One's face. There were emotions in him still.

As if to say, "How do you like that? Impressive, isn't it? I won!"

His grin was cocky like that of a petulant child.

Maybe it had nothing to do with his master. Maybe he just wanted to go out with the loudest bang he could make. His smile had a purity that you wouldn't expect from a patchwork undead.

Faced with such a lethal and destructive blow, Fran smiled back.

Or perhaps it was the sword god who was guiding her weapon who smiled, saying, "You have done well in crafting such a blow. Excellent. Very good."

As the sword god expressed his recognition, I was quietly drawn out.

In an instant, the trajectory of Number One's club changed slightly. Almost like it was dodging Fran.

It was all quite simple.

Fran's sword merely touched the side of the opponent's weapon, throwing off the angle ever so slightly. Simple physics.

...But doing this at incredibly high speeds was only made possible by the sword god.

Fran absorbed the shock, keeping her weapon—keeping me—on the path right into Number One's neck. Then she pulled me out and stabbed Number One's chest.

Not only was the divine element lethal for undead, the sword god amplified the damage done to Number One's weak spot.

WHUMP!

The bone club hit the empty ground.

The earth shattered from the terrible impact. The force was so great that it turned boulders into rubble and sent us flying into the air.

Meanwhile, Number One's decapitated body crumpled and turned to dust. His head hung in the air for a few seconds before disappearing.

Fran landed on the ruined ground and watched.

"...Phew. We did it."

Yeah.

I wondered if Number One knew how he lost.

When he lost his head, he looked like he was having the time of his life.

Even though he was undead—maybe *because* he was undead—he maintained the dignity of a warrior. He was honored to be cut down by the sword god himself.

On the flip side, Fran looked disappointed.

We had to use Sword God Form again.

Can't be helped. He was a tough enemy.

Hm...

We weren't powerful enough to defeat Number One because he was such a strong warrior.

Although Sword God Form was one of Fran's Skills, she still didn't think of it as her own strength. A fair point, considering she only put in half the effort.

Either way, she felt that she had to borrow the power of a god since our opponent was strong.

We're not out of the woods yet. We'll leave the postmortem for later.

"Hm."

As Fran and the others won their fights, Jet's battle was also reaching its conclusion.

"Grr!"

"Stop!"

"Munch, munch, munch!"

"You're actually eating me...? You monster!"

"Woof!"

Jet was chewing on a piece of Al Azif he had ripped off. Predator Assimilation allowed him to draw power from it. Also, it was *very* tasty.

I'm guessing it had the texture of a rawhide chew treat.

Now weakened, Al Azif was having a very hard time dealing with Jet.

Jet's fangs tore right through its metal body, and the undead puppet couldn't hurt Jet either. Poison and undead magic weren't effective against him, and the wolf instantly recovered from any cuts.

Al Azif now felt the unfair advantage Number One had over us.

"Woof, woof!"

"D-don't look at me like that!"

Jet was sizing up the puppet like a snack.

"I can't fail now...! Not until I can show those bastards what we're made of! We are not a failure!"

Al Azif shouted, throwing itself headlong at Jet.

But only its puppet self. Meanwhile, the great scythe was looking like it was trying to escape.

Jet chased after the great scythe, but the puppet stood in his way.

“Aaaaah!”

“W-woof?”

The puppet expanded like a balloon. And not just its body, either.

Its mana was also swelling, tearing through the puppet’s patchwork seams with a bright red glow.

A loud explosion followed. A ball of flame—twenty meters wide with black smoke rising from its center—ravaged the field. It was as powerful as multiple blasts of a flame spell.

An undead self-destruct. We wouldn’t have come out of it unscathed if we had been caught in the blast.

The explosion of Al Azif’s puppet was far stronger than Number Two’s zombies. It was also different from the poisonous Number Three. It was as if its explosive power was multiplied because of its lack of poison and acid.

Jet was definitely caught in the blast.

Jean and Kuhne let out cries of anguish, and Al Azif probably thought he had finished off the wolf as he continued his escape.

“Fran, Jet is…!”

“The big wolf is in trouble, meow!”

“He he heh! Finally got that dumb mutt off my tail!”

But Fran and I weren’t worried. If anything, we’d expected this to happen.

“He’s fine.” Fran whispered with a smug look on her face.

Then Al Azif screamed.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Grrr!” Jet leapt out of the black smoke and bit the great scythe.

“Big wolf! You’re okay, meow!”

“That explosion didn’t give Jet trouble.” Fran was right, but it was still pretty bad. Even Jet would’ve been mortally injured if he had taken the full brunt of the explosion.

If... But Jet’s whole body was covered in a black aura.

Dark Embrace was a powerful shadow spell. The black aura would cover the user’s body, enhancing their attack and defense. Jet wore it like armor.

Usually, it could only be applied to his torso, face, or limbs, but Jet had trained so that it would cover his entire body.

The shadow aura shifted, gathering around his head.

“Grrr!”

“Not again! The *mission*...!”

“Grooooar!”

“S-stop—”

Clang!

Before Al Azif could finish his sentence, Jet reverted to his gigantic size and bit down on the strange blade, breaking it into pieces.

Worldcutter Fang. Jet’s ultimate technique which reinforced his bite force with Dark Embrace.

The hardened metal of an enchanted weapon broke like a child chomping on a lollypop.

Al Azif’s aura completely faded. No signs of teleportation.

We won.

Yeah, we did it.

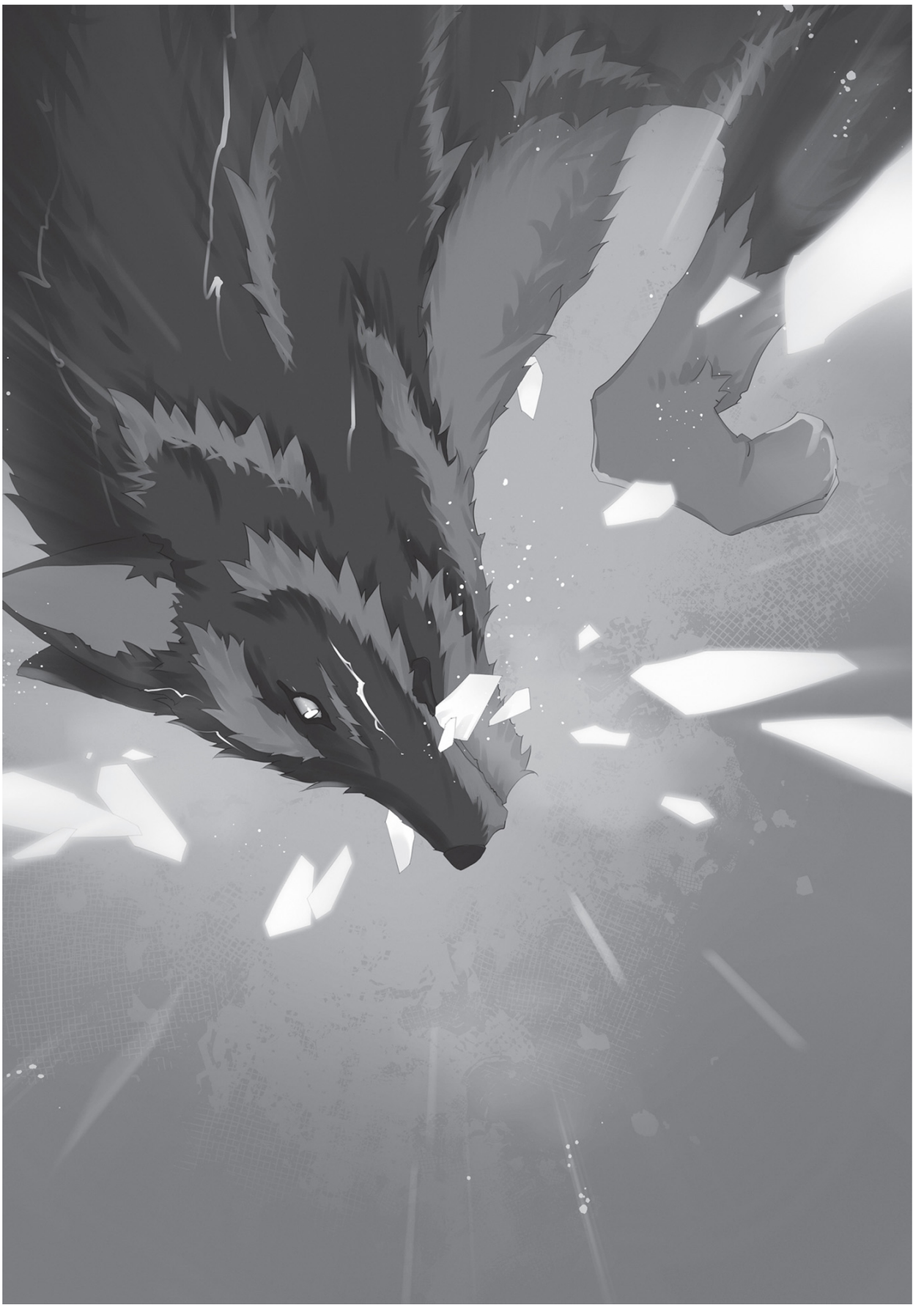
“Nom nom.”

Jet chewed on the remains of Al Azif.

While munching on a great scythe might seem painful, Jet enjoyed his new chew toy. He was bigger than a tree, after all.

“Th-the big wolf’s even bigger meow! A big, bad wolf, meow!”

“I didn’t think you could achieve such sizes, Jet! And you are much stronger than before! Excellent, my friend! I might be able to make you even stronger if you were to become my minion…”



“Big wolf! I’ll give you all the wolf nip you want if you join me, meow!”

“Become my minion and I’ll throw in a masterwork coffin!”

“…Wuff.”

Hey! Don’t just invite Jet to your party! Jean’s not even particularly convincing.

But Jean and Kuhne were still amped up for just having fought a battle to the death. I thought they would be exhausted, but I was clearly wrong.

Fran was probably the most fatigued of them all. Number One had been the toughest opponent today, after all. Kuhne and Jean would probably object if I said it out loud, so I didn’t. But Fran definitely fought the hardest of them all!

“Meow, speaking of such things, thanks for the assist, magus! You saved us, meow!”

“Mwa ha ha! Don’t mention it! We must all help each other in times of need!”

“You’re a weirdo but you’re super nice, meow! You really can’t judge a book by its cover! I thought for sure you would’ve done some perverse experiments, meow!”

“Mwa ha ha! You flatter me!”

“I wasn’t trying to, meow! You really are a creep, meow!”

I couldn’t tell whether they got along with each other. But the decibels definitely increased as these two talked. I didn’t know which one was worse, the unnecessary meows or the mwa ha has.

“Who are you anyway, meow?! You just showed up out of nowhere, meow!”

“Mwa ha ha! Very well! If you so insist on learning of my identity, I shall tell you!”

“I don’t really care, meow!”

“No need to be shy!”

“I’m not, meow!”

“I am Jean du Vix! Observer of death and the abyss! Explorer of the nether!”

“Listen to me, meow!”

Very loud.

These two probably shouldn’t be in the same party for a myriad of reasons.

“And who might you be, girl who has so graciously humored me?”

“My name’s Kuhne, meow! I’m a traveling fighter, meow!”

“Kuhne! An excellent name!”

“Kuhne’s the name my master gave me, meow! You might be a creep but you’ve got taste, meow!”

Kuhne immediately abandoned her suspicion of Jean upon him complimenting her name. She might just have been easy to please, but I guess that’s why she was so attached to her master. For the moment, she looked genuinely happy.

But Jean would compliment you on your name no matter what it was. That’s what he did with me. Not that *Teacher* was a weird name or anything. Because it’s a great name. Fran gave it to me! People who are weirded out by it simply don’t get it! You can take that to the bank!

Teacher, why are you shaking?

N-no reason. Jean and Kuhne are just kind of loud.

…They’re very loud.

At least Fran shared my sentiments.

Anyway, we’d managed to meet up with Jean. That was one of our objectives achieved.

“Jean, I have something to tell you.”

“Regarding the assassin?”

“Hm.”

Jean had received the message about Nameless that we sent through the guild. It wasn’t the full story, which was why we were

looking for him to begin with.

But this wasn't a place we could stay for very long, especially with Kuhne still around.

"I'll tell you the details later."

"Thank you! At least I won't be leaving empty-handed!"

"You were looking for something?"

"Cockatrices! I've heard reports of sightings in the haunt. Not that I've had any luck."

The haunt's ecosystem had been disrupted over the last few days. It might have hindered Jean's search.

"Although Al Azif wasn't quite what I was looking for, it really was quite an interesting specimen… A shame that it's gone."

"Is it really gone?" Fran asked.

Al Azif was an undead weapon, so it would be able to recover as long as a fragment remained. Though its presence had disappeared, being careful couldn't hurt.

But Al Azif was still around…just not in the way I was expecting.

The specimen on this battlefield has been eliminated. However, according to the other Teacher's memories, there are multiple Al Azifs.

…Really?

Yes. Three have been confirmed, at the very least.

Being made with undead magic, having multiple copies of Al Azif wasn't out of the question…

Where did the other me fight Al Azif?

Eighty-two percent of the other Teacher's memories are located in Belioth, specifically Lake Vivian.

I was still confused about the whole thing, but most of my memories were centered around the lake. I guess that made sense, considering I only got my other self's memories through it.

The remaining memories were a jumble of episodes in Granzell and information regarding Zelyse.

Did the other me meet Kuhne and Al Azif at Lake Vivian?

Yes. However, most of the memories are combat related and we do not know what they were doing at the lake.

Kuhne was probably training like she was in our world. But the different choices Fran and I made had a sizable impact on the world. As a result of the butterfly effect, it wouldn't be unthinkable for Kuhne to show up during the Lake Vivian incident.

We fought Kuhne, right?

Yes. But it wasn't a serious fight.

A sparring match, then.

I could see that. As blood knights, Fran and Kuhne would probably have fought over there, too. In fact, I couldn't see a future where the two *didn't* fight each other during their first encounter.

Al Azif was even easier to explain. He was one of Raydoss's Black Bones, after all. Perhaps he was with Nameless at the time.

So the remaining Al Azifs might be around here somewhere…

Yes.

Al Azif was causing trouble in the guise of a Black Cat to lure Fran here. It sounded like it wanted the letter from Belioth. Raydoss had their spies everywhere, so they probably had some posted in Belioth, too.

If the letter was important enough for them to steal at any cost, the odds were high that they would have reinforcements hiding nearby.

This was not the time to lounge around. We were all exhausted from fighting Al Azif. An ambush might finish us off.

Jean, there's a chance that there are more of those undead weapons around! We have to get out of here!

Oh? Well, that can't be good… Hang on.

Jean grinned happily and clasped the skull on his pendant. He closed his eyes as if thinking before letting out a faint pulse of mana.

The subtlety of his mana meant that most monsters were oblivious to it. But it was covering a large swath of ground.

“Hmm. At the very least there are no undead weapons currently in the haunt.”

“You can tell for certain?”

“Indeed. While I can only detect the mana of undead I am attuned to, there’s no way I would forget the opponent we just faced.”

I agree with Jean. My search has revealed no undead weapons nearby.

That was quick.

I knew that P.A. could use part of my powers, but I wondered if I could use them as effectively. I certainly couldn’t utilize Mana Manipulation and Mana Control anywhere near as well.

Maybe the difference was closer now after all my training. I did get stronger, after all…

It is possible that Al Azif is using fragments of the discarded Godsword Fanatix. I am able to seek out its mana due to it being recorded from Cannibalize.

Huh? Fanatix?

Yes. Al Azif was created out of Fanatix’s remnants.

Seriously?! No wonder Al Azif’s laugh sounded exactly like Fanatix! He sometimes referred to himself as “we,” too.

Are you sure we can let him be? What if we get a repeat of what happened in the capital?

Unknown. However, it has lost part of its power as Fanatix. At most, it can only give some of its Skills to its minions.

Which is what he used when he powered up the patchworks.

Which meant the worst possible outcome of an invincible army of undead all wielding Al Azifs was already averted. We should be in the clear if both Jean and P.A. said that Al Azif wasn’t in the vicinity.

I decided it was time to wrap up our second and final objective.

“What are you going to do now, Kuhne?”

“Huh? Train, of course, meow! I’ll keep traveling the world to fight tougher opponents, meow!”

“Oh, that sounds fun.”

“Uh-huh! It’s super fun, meow!”

Fran, stop looking excited!

But Fran soon remembered why she asked the question. “Are you going to keep training here?”

“No, meow. I’m tired so I’m calling it for today, meow.”

“And tomorrow?”

“I’ll be back, of course, meow!”

This catgirl really didn’t know that she was trespassing. Maybe she just didn’t care.

“This place is regulated by the Adventurers’ Guild. You can’t go to the depths.”

“I don’t care, meow. I’m not an adventurer so the rules don’t apply to me, meow!”

Fran furrowed her brow and groaned. She wasn’t so much angry as she was thinking about how to best reason with Kuhne.

Then Jean intervened.

“I take it that Kuhne has been trespassing into forbidden territory?”

“Yeah.”

“I *haven’t*, meow! I don’t follow guild rules, meow!”

Kuhne sounded like she had a grudge against the guild. While not really hostile, she was doing her best to ignore its authority. We weren’t going to convince her simply by telling her the guild said so.

So Jean took a different approach.

“Haunts technically belong to the government. They’re the ones who asked the guild to regulate it. These regulations apply not only to adventurers but everyone in the land. They are laws, really. And if you break the law, you’ll get arrested.”

“Th-the government, meow? What? The Adventurers’ Guild is connected to the government, meow? And they’ll arrest me, meow?”

“But of course.”

“I thought the guild was just gonna chew my ears off, meow!”

“Not after what you’ve done, I’m afraid. And if you run, the guild will put a bounty on your head. You’ll be an internationally wanted criminal!”

Just like Zelyse.

“Meoooow! I can’t be a criminal, meow! My master will get mad, meow! International? I didn’t know the Adventurers’ Guild was that powerful, meow!”

Kuhne really knew nothing about the Adventurers’ Guild. Apparently, she thought of them as nothing more than a society of thugs.

“I didn’t know the guild had branches all over the world!”

“…”

“…”

Fran and Jean looked stunned at Kuhne’s lack of common knowledge. The fact that she’d made the pair look simultaneously exasperated was a feat in itself.

The Adventurers’ Guild was a worldwide organization. No matter what people thought of them, everyone knew they existed. Even Fran, who’d hardly had an ordinary upbringing, knew about the guild—though she understood it only as a worldwide organization where you could be an adventurer.

How was Kuhne raised, that she didn’t know about such a basic thing? Even if she was a former slave, her current master sounded…*decent* enough.

A look of suspicion came over Fran and Jean's faces. Then Fran thought of something else.

"Do you know how to evolve?"

"Meow! No, meow!"

Kuhne still hadn't evolved. Even if she was at max level, she hadn't cleared the evolution requirements. And yet she was crazy strong. She really was talented.

"I've been wondering about that, meow! Are you evolved, Fran?"

I forgot that Fran had been keeping Stealth Evolution on. I turned it off to show her.

Kuhne was immediately floored.

"Meow meow! You *are* evolved, meow! I can't believe it! H-how did you do it, meow?! C-could you tell me? I-I'll pay you for it, meow! I'll lick your boots until they're shiny if you want, meow! Just please tell me!"

Please don't get on your knees like you'd actually do such a thing!

But now it was clear that Kuhne had absolutely zero to do with the Adventurers' Guild. The guild was telling every Black Cat adventurer they came across about the evolution requirements.

"The Adventurers' Guild will tell you."

"R-really, meow?! The guild is amazing, meow!"

"And Fran was the first to know about these requirements. She proved that she was able to evolve and spread the knowledge to adventurers and other nations."

"Meow! That's amazing, meow!"

"Heheh." Fran looked very smug as Kuhne praised her, but Jean was still suspicious.

It seemed Kuhne was catching on to his doubts, because she quickly started weaving excuses. "Y-you know, I'm feeling a bit tired, meow. And this haunt isn't really the one for me after all, meow! So goodbye! Meow!"

Breaking into a sprint, she disappeared into the trees with a speed she hadn't exhibited in the heat of battle.

"Ah…"

Fran and Jean didn't give chase. They outnumbered her, but they were still exhausted from the fight. And Kuhne might actually best them if things got rough.

Besides, we knew from fighting together that Kuhne wasn't a *bad* person. She was just an invincible, ignorant, battle-addicted Black Cat. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Do you know who she is, Fran?"

"No. We just met."

"Hmm… Well, let's report her to the guild. She might get mistaken for you if we let her be."

"Hm…"

Fran regretted not telling Kuhne the evolution requirements directly. Still, the requirements were so widespread by now that you could walk into a random bar and find out. Kuhne would manage.

People actually thought Al Azif was the Black Cat in question.

"Really? Not Kuhne?"

Kuhne just got to the haunt today.

People had been spotting an unknown Black Cat for a few days now. Al Azif must have been the source of the rumors.

It was dressing up as a Black Cat to cause all sorts of trouble.

"Mwa ha ha! I see! Yes, I suppose you could mistake it as a Black Cat from afar! It was definitely using some illusion magic as well!"

It's not really something to laugh about.

"Apologies. Then I shall return with you to corroborate your story. We found the intruder and it wasn't Fran."

You will? Thanks!

Jean might be a bit odd, but he was still a respected B Rank.

His word carried weight. If he could testify that Fran wasn't involved, it would clear her name instantly.

"Thanks, Jean."

"Think nothing of it. Besides, you still need to tell me about this Nameless character."

"Of course."

"Excellent! Then you'll tell me everything you know and then what you don't know!"

We can't know what we don't know, Jean.

"Mwa ha ha!"

Nice guy…but *weird*.

Chapter 5:
Ulmutt, Again

TWO WEEKS AFTER we participated in the cooking contest at Bulbola…

Looks like we made it.

“Great job, Jet.”

“Woof!”

We had now arrived at Ulmutt.

A lot’s happened over the last two weeks.

“Hm.”

The battle at Crystal Cage had been a difficult one.

We’d fought a thunderbird, then Kuhne, and to top it all off, Al Azif, a member of the Black Bones. We’d managed to win thanks to Kuhne and Jean, but we might have lost if we had been by ourselves. Maybe we wouldn’t have died, but we probably would’ve needed to run away.

But Fran was pumped after the fight.

She had run away from a thunderbird (even if it was to chase Kuhne) and relied on Sword God Form to defeat Number One. And seeing another Black Cat’s strength up close had fed the fire of her motivation.

…I’m disappointed with myself, Fran said, looking downcast. She was still feeling the frustration of that time. *The thunderbird…*

The battle with the thunderbird was still eating at her. Maybe she considered it a rival as a creature who also used thunder magic. She didn’t get to fight it properly since she had to disengage almost as soon as she joined the battle.

Fran…

I really wanted to know what it tasted like.

What?

I bet it would've made great karaage...

I-I see.

Turns out she was just regretting the missed meals.

We got some feathers out of the encounter...

The battle hadn't been a complete wash. I managed to pluck some of the thunderbird's feathers in the commotion.

Fran was completely uninterested since they weren't edible.

We sold them to Gammod at a high price. The material could be used in armor, but it was also used in luxury sleeping goods. Thunderbird pillows collected zero static electricity. An interesting feature, but not one I'd pay a million gold for. I just don't understand the bourgeois...

We still had a few left over, so I could modify some of our sleeping gear with it.

Not that Fran cared anything about it. She was a girl who could sleep in any environment.

But we ran into a little bit of trouble just as we were departing for Ulmutt.

This trouble came courtesy of some corrupt trade associations which Fran destroyed last year.

Namely, the Isla Trade Association, an affiliate of the Tormeo Trade Association—owned by Brook, second son of the local viscount who had tried to stage a coup.

Both associations had been dissolved, but former staff continued lurking in Bulbola and nursing a grudge against Fran. When they heard she was in town, they hired assassins to kill her.

We quickly dealt with the assassins and caught the people involved. I think it only took us half a day to find them.

They tried to run, but there was no hiding from Jet's nose.

They were also connected to Raydoss and were involved in leaking Granzellian information. And news about Fran was part of it. They admitted to selling information to a mysterious patchwork

woman about Fran's love for her tribe and how she was likely to come to Bulbola for the annual cooking contest.

So, our stay in Bulbola was extended due to the follow-up enquiries. We might have been a bit loud when we took care of the assassins.

We ended up leaving Bulbola ten days behind schedule.

Stuff happened along the way but that's a story for another time.

Now we were faced with a sizable challenge...

"Fran, Teacher. Good to see you."

"Hm."

It's been a while.

As soon as we reached the city, we visited Dias, guildmaster of Ulmutt. We were acquainted and Fran was already a B Rank. Seeing the local guildmaster was basic etiquette at this point. He might also know where Dimitris was.

But we weren't too enthused about meeting him this time. Kind of wished he was out of town, really. Not that he could be, considering he had a tournament to run.

"You seem quiet today. Something wrong?"

"Hm..."

Dias knew Fran enough to realize that she was even less talkative than usual today. I had to pick up the slack.

We're looking for an adventurer named Dimitris. You know where he is?

"Dimitris? He hasn't arrived in Ulmutt yet. He usually comes in just as the tournament is about to start."

"Oh..."

"Really, Fran, are you all right? You didn't have to visit if you're feeling sick." Dias cast a worried look on Fran.

She felt guilty about not being straight with him regarding what she wanted to tell him. With a look of determination, she started, "We need to talk about Theraclede..."

“…Do we?”

We couldn’t hide the truth about Theraclede from Dias for long.

Dias was nursing a grudge towards Theraclede who had killed Kiara, a Black Cat who had been one of Dias’s old friends.

And Fran couldn’t kill Theraclede despite having multiple chances to.

Dias would never have found out if we had kept quiet.

But Fran had chosen to let Theraclede live after seeing him. It was a tough decision, and Dias had the right to know.

He hadn’t let go of his grudge. His entire mood shifted at the mere mention of Theraclede’s name.

“I found him.”

“Really?”

Fran’s tail puffed up at Dias’s bloodlust.

“Hm. And I let him go.”

“Oh. You did…?”

Dias’s smile was terrifying, hiding a whirlpool of dark emotions.

I was amazed that Fran could stand up to it.

“May I ask why?”

“Hm.”

And so Fran began. How she spotted Theraclede. How she jumped on the chance to kill him. How she eventually let him go.

She didn’t tell him everything, especially not his current whereabouts—Dias might just leave to go kill him. Winalene’s condition wasn’t really something she could talk about casually, either.

“So he helped you on a big quest and you let him go as payment? Did Romeo have anything to do with it? Tug at your heart?”

“It’s not quite that…but that’s the gist of it.” Fran didn’t perfectly understand her feelings on the matter.

“I see… So? Are you telling me to let Theraclede go, too?” Dias stared at Fran. While his eyes didn’t betray his emotions, I certainly felt the pressure.

This was not the time for lies or deception.

But Fran’s answer threw Dias off.

“Why would I do that?”

“Huh? I thought that’s what you came here to tell me.”

“No.”

I was thinking the exact same thing Dias was, but apparently it wasn’t the case.

“I made *my* decision to let Theraclede go. It has nothing to do with you.”

“…Huh.”

“I *want* you to give up on killing him, of course. But that’s up to you to decide.”

Dias was slightly perplexed by how straight Fran was being. She had become something like a granddaughter to him; one whom he couldn’t help but dote on. He was surprised by how much she had grown up since they last met.

But in that case, you two might end up fighting. Are you okay with that?

“No, but it can’t be helped. It doesn’t change what Theraclede has done.” Now it was Fran’s turn to look Dias dead in the eye. “So I can’t stop you from going after Theraclede. But…”

“But?”

“You can’t stop me from protecting him, either.”

“Fran…”

“I’m sorry.”

Dias was stunned. Fran bowed deeply, ready for him to decry her as a traitor.

But it was now her turn to be stunned.

“…You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Hm?”

Fran gazed at Dias, who now had a strangely calm look on his face. She’d been ready for him to shout at her. All she could do now was tilt her head quizzically.

“Kiara’s last wish was to not waste your time on avenging her. If anything, I’m the one who needs an earful for refusing to do that.”

“Dias…”

“But I still need time to digest this news. I’m sorry, but could you leave for today?”

“Hm…”

Dias looked down, nothing more to add. Fran and I could do nothing but quietly leave the room.

“…Sorry about this.” Dias whispered weakly as Fran opened the door.

I wondered what Dias was going to do. But despite our anxieties, we needed to keep walking.

After leaving Dias, we headed to the dungeon.

Lumina needed to know about Theraclede, too. She wasn’t as angry as Dias when we broke the news, but that didn’t mean it didn’t bother her.

But it looked like we had made a slight miscalculation.

Because Lumina wasn’t alone when we reached the dungeon depths.

“What are you doing here, Aurel?”

“That’s a way to say *hello*!”

Aurel, the face of Ulmutt, was having tea with Lumina. As an evolved beastman himself, he did his best to accommodate Fran.

“You made it here by yourself?”

“That’s right. I’m still an evolved former adventurer, you know. I have no problem making it to the depths now that the difficulty level’s been dropped.”

Lumina was still in her weakened state after helping Fran evolve. The dungeon shouldn’t be a problem for Aurel.

After explaining the Theraclede situation to Dias, it was actually convenient to have both Lumina and Aurel in the same place. Dias was the only one who seemed like he might get furious over it.

Fran told them what she had told Dias earlier. I was worried about how they would react, but Lumina and Aurel looked gently at Fran.

“I see… But this is for the best. You have a bright future ahead of you, Fran. You have no need of the past weighing you down.”

“I agree.”

“Thanks.”

“Kiara would be happy if she could see you mature like this.”

Lumina smiled, but then she let out an annoyed sigh. “But I see Dias is still childish as ever.”

“Hm? But he’s an old man.”

“Fran, no matter how old a man gets, he remains a child,” Lumina said with a distant look in her eyes. She must have experienced the same long ago.

“Men do not mature no matter how much they grow up. Ever! You’ll do well to remember this.”

“Hm.”

Stop! Don’t taint Fran with your weird prejudices! Still, I found it hard to deny the allegations. I wasn’t an upstanding adult myself.

Lumina continued her lecture on men.

“There may be some who look mature on the outside. But don’t be fooled. They’re all the same on the inside. In fact, the

more they're preoccupied with their maturity, the worse they are."

"Really?"

"D-don't look at me..."

Aurel could do nothing but deflect when Fran turned towards him. Lumina must have been hitting the mark.

There wasn't a single man who could contradict Lumina at this point. Maybe Phelms. If any man had his life together, it would be Phelms!

"Even this old man's still a brat at heart!"

"I can't deny it, Lady Lumina."

"But he's one of the better ones. At least he *knows* he's a child."

"Aww, thanks."

"That wasn't a compliment! Now, you have to be careful around adults who think they're above being childish. They're the worst. Zero self-awareness. Anyone who says they're more mature than the next person is a child!"

This was all very pointed, but I do have to admit that anyone who says stuff like "That guy's really childish," or "I'm not like him, I'm an adult," can't be that mature. I actually worked with people like this in my past life.

They lacked introspection.

"But enough talk about Dias. Did you come to Ulmutt for the tournament, Fran?"

"That's half of it. The other half is to meet Dimitris."

"Oh? The Unmoving Dimitris?"

"Hm. It's for a quest. You know him?"

"I do. He actually managed to reach me once. Even though I knew he couldn't kill me, I still feared for my life."

Lumina had been very strong before she got weakened. Probably stronger than Fran was now.

She was evolved, even if she wasn't a Black Sky Tiger. Not to mention her centuries of experience and her office as dungeon master.

Not many could claim to strike fear into her heart. The S Ranks really were cut from a different cloth.

"Dimitris should be staying at the viscount's estate for the duration of the tournament. I can tell him you want to see him."

"The viscount?"

"You don't remember? He was present at the awards ceremony."

"Hm?"

Ulmutt's viscount was a very unassuming man, and Fran had only met him once. No wonder she forgot.

"Poor guy..." Aurel gave a wry smile and shrugged when he noticed that Fran had completely forgotten about the viscount. He seemed to be close to the man.

"You two are friends?"

"We get along. He does a good job running a town with so many adventurers, and we worked together at the palace, too. He's kind of like a mentor to me."

While there were plenty of nobles who bossed around adventurers and wanted to sideline the guild, the viscount of Ulmutt was a moderate. Not only was he quiet, he was outright modest with adventurers.

He knew that adventurers were necessary for the development of the town.

So not only did he know where he stood, he knew where others stood in the big picture. He might be unassuming, but he definitely knew what he was doing.

"Knowing how modest he is, I doubt the good viscount would refuse a request from you. You're high ranking *and* a prize winner from last year."

"When's Dimitris getting here?"

“Usually, he’ll be in town a few days before the tournament starts. He’s not here yet, though.”

We were already booking an inn for the tournament, so we might as well wait for Dimitris’s arrival. Given how popular he was, we definitely wouldn’t miss his entry into the city.

Let’s take on some quests until then.

“Hm.”

Almost as if he’d overheard me, Aurel made a request of Fran.

“Which reminds me, I have a quest just for you. You in?”

“Depends. What’s it about?”

“I want you to mentor my granddaughter.”

“Mentor?”

ASIDE: A CERTAIN TRIO

“WE GOT IN pretty easy.”

“There are a lot of travelers this time of year. They don’t have time to inspect everyone.”

“Hey, all the better for us.”

“That it is. You have a hotel booked for us, right, Cricca?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So what’s on the agenda? We can’t enter the tournament, right?”

“Of course not! Our plans go up in flames if you get noticed! Lady Sibyl, *please* be on your best behavior!”

“A-all right, all right. Don’t worry, I’m not like Biscott.”

“Hey, no fair, Boss! You said you wanted to sign up for the tournament, too!”

“Please… Don’t cause any trouble, you two…!”

“N-no, of course we won’t.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior, Cricca.”

“Good. According to the adventurers, a Raydossian spy was spotted near Bulbola.”

“Huh? Did we get found out?”

“Seriously?”

“No, it’s not us. Apparently, this spy was a great scythe-wielding undead and it had already been defeated.”

“Damn corpses!”

“Black Bones.”

“Same thing. Their reckless actions may affect us going forward.”

“Do you think the South issued the order?”

“Probably. But the South isn’t the only one messing with Granzell and Belioth. Am I right?”

“Correct. The East is weaving conspiracies around Belioth while the West is busy infiltrating Seedrun. And the subordinates of the North…”

“What? Don’t tell me old North’s gotten his hands dirty, too? He doesn’t seem like the type…”

“No. The old man’s people roam the lands under the pretext of training. Sometimes, they cause trouble in Granzell.”

“Yes. I think it comes down to ignorance with those people. But their lack of planning doesn’t excuse them from their bad behavior.”

“I see. They’re kind of stupid, after all.”

“And the stronger they are, the more attention they’ll draw to themselves. The nerve of some people.”

“…”

“Cricca?”

“You’re massaging your temples. You feeling sick?”

“No, it’s nothing. I just have a bit of a migraine.”

“That doesn’t sound good!”

“You might be overworking yourself. Do try your best to relax.”

“Urghh…”

***

The day after we explained everything to Dias and Lumina…

“It’s almost our turn.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

We were about to enter Ulmutt’s dungeon. Not the eastern dungeon—that was Lumina’s abode—but the western dungeon, designed for beginners. It had already been a beginner dungeon to begin with, but with Lumina’s weakening, it was even easier than before.

Now, even a child could enter as long as they were armed. Starting last year, the guild in Ulmutt had designated the dungeon as newbie training grounds.

Fran was currently lining up with a girl. She was younger than Fran, her silver hair done up in pigtails.

“Lady Fran, are you sure a sword will be enough?”

“Hm. You’re still small, Kaitley. Heavy armor will only get in your way. You’re better off learning how to dodge.”

“I-I see.”

“I can reattach your arm if it gets chopped off. You’ll be fine.”

“I se—wait. *What*?”

“Let’s go.”

“Huh?!”

We'd met her about an hour earlier in Aurel's garden.

"Fran, this here's my Kaitley. Go on, say hello."

"Hello! My name is Kaitley Aurel!"

A White Dog girl was waiting for us by the time we got to his mansion. This was Aurel's granddaughter.

She resembled Aurel, but not too closely. Her eyes were soft, adding to her timid aura. If not for her lineage, I wouldn't have believed that she was Aurel's granddaughter.

The girl bowed, making her pigtails bob with her head. She was exceedingly polite.

"Hm. I'm Fran. Adventurer."

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Lady Fran!" Kaitley straightened her back and looked at Fran with sparkling eyes.

"Lady?"

"Y-yes. Is that too much?"

"...It's fine. I guess."

"Thank you!"

The girl was ten years old. It wasn't out of place for her to call Fran a Lady. It still sounded weird to me, though—like an underclassman at a rich girl's school.

"So...I just show her around a dungeon?"

"That's the idea."

Aurel wanted Fran to walk his granddaughter through a dungeon and fight some monsters along the way.

Kaitley admired adventurers and had recently taken up swordsmanship and the fundamentals of fighting. But her timid disposition had always left her parents feeling she wasn't cut out for adventuring.

Aurel disagreed. For him, an adventurer only needed motivation and caution. Being timid didn't necessarily mean you weren't cut out for the business. Discretion was the better part of valor, and an adventurer who knew when to turn back and live

fared better than a reckless one who would keep pushing until they died.

That left motivation, and Aurel thought his granddaughter was brimming with it.

So, we were to take her through a dungeon and have her fight monsters. If this was enough to discourage her, then she could attend a rich girls' school as was originally planned. If she still wanted to be an adventurer despite the terrors of a dungeon, Aurel would take her under his wing.

That was the plan.

"You don't want me to make her quit, right?"

Because that would be a non-starter for Fran. She had no intention of taking on a quest whose objective was to crush someone's dreams.

Aurel shook his head.

"Of course not. You just need to show her the realities of being an adventurer. Personally, I think you're too young to decide on your dreams at ten, but this is *my* granddaughter."

"Does she have anything going for her?"

"I'm rich, you know. There are bound to be people who target her because of me."

The trade association Aurel founded was doing very well for itself. It was currently run by his son and his wife, making the girl whom Fran was mentoring the daughter of the trade association's head.

And if the only daughter of a successful trade association became an adventurer on her own? She was basically asking to be kidnapped.

If she was serious about becoming an adventurer, she would have to undergo rigorous training from an early age and be prepared to abandon her inheritance.

"That's a lot to ask from a ten-year-old."

"Has she been interested in adventuring for long?"

“No. She knows enough about fighting to defend herself, but she never thought about it as a career. I never heard her wanting to be an adventurer.”

“So, what happened?” Adventuring was Fran’s dream job, but she knew that it wasn’t the norm.

Aurel shrugged and gave her a wry smile. “Ironic that you’re the one asking that… Well, girls her age have their idols. Let’s just say she heard stories about a certain adventurer and started looking up to her.”

“Hm?”

Fran didn’t get it, but I knew then and there that Fran was the object of Kaitley’s admiration. I guess it was all too natural considering how close they were in terms of age. I’d look up to Fran, too, if I were her.

“In any case, I’d like you to handle this job as soon as possible. How about it? I’d take her myself but she’s family. I know I’d just end up spoiling her.”

So Aurel said, but he probably wanted to let Kaitley meet Fran. Even if she ended up quitting, at least she would have this memory for the rest of her life.

“So how about it?”

Can I take it, Teacher?

Sure, if you want to. It’s not a job with long-term ties, anyway.

“Hm, all right. I’ll take it.”

“You will?! Thanks a bunch!”

And with that, Fran picked up the girl who was her mission.

Aurel gave Kaitley a pat on the back, pushing her to Fran.

“Take care of Kaitley for me, Fran. I won’t tell you how to do your job, so it’s all on you now.”

“Sure.”

“I-I’m in your care.”

Kaitley seemed a little pensive after hearing Aurel and Fran talk. She looked pale as she swallowed a lump in her throat.



She did seem cowardly. Her stats were low, too, but I guess they were where a level 10 would be. However...she only had three combat and exploration Skills: Sword Mastery 1, Blink 1, and Heightened Olfactory 1.

Fran could immediately see how weak she was. She knitted her eyebrows when she heard about Kaitlyn's Skill suite.

But she would never tell her to give up. Fran had achieved her own dreams through countless battles, after all.

"First, you don't need the armor. Take it off."

"Huh? What?" Kaitley immediately turned to Aurel for help as she was told to take off the very thing that was supposed to protect her. Aurel didn't help.

"I'm off to work. See you when you're done!"

"Hm. Come on, Kaitley. Take it off."

"A-all right!"

Kaitley was left in her black-and-white checkered blouse and white puffy culottes. Her equipment was so light that she looked like she was going on a picnic.

The dungeon was no picnic.

Fran wasted no time and headed to the western dungeon, dragging a still bewildered Kaitley to the entrance.

We waited a few minutes for our turn and for Kaitley to collect herself. Then, they entered the dungeon.

Fran's coaching began.

"You lead."

"Huh?"

"You won't learn about the dungeon if you're in the back. You lead."

"B-but the traps and monsters..."

"...Are not a big problem in this dungeon. You'll be fine."

Kaitley started flailing once she realized what was going on. She'd probably thought Fran was going to lead, and she would

only need to watch and learn. But Fran had no intention of making it easy for her. Besides, the quest objective was to show her the reality of being an adventurer. Couldn't get more real than having Kaitley take point.

And when Fran said, *I can reattach your arm if it gets chopped off. You'll be fine*, she wasn't trying to be funny. It was a very real possibility.

It's not a real adventure unless you have the threat of grievous bodily harm looming overhead.

Fran was very Spartan in her approach. But to her, she felt that everything she said was appropriate for someone who was serious about being an adventurer.

It goes to show how people really measure others against themselves.

Fran was a hardened battle junkie who got excited at the mere opportunity to fight strong opponents, even if she ended up getting hurt in the process. Meanwhile, Kaitley was an upper-crust girl who had been a student all her life. The difference in their worldviews was palpable.

Anyway, training aside, we needed to do our best to keep Kaitley alive.

"Onwards."

"Y-yes!" Kaitley heeded Fran's words and stepped into the dungeon.

Her footsteps were firmer than I expected. Even if she was afraid of the dungeon, her interest in it was greater.

She looked around the empty stone corridor, satisfying her curiosity while also looking out for traps.

Not that it would be of any use.

Thud.

"Wha—? Ow!"

She stepped on a trigger and activated a trap. Fortunately, it wasn't that bad.

The trap hurled a small pebble at her feet. It was a reminder to beginners to watch out for traps, and all you needed to protect yourself from it was a pair of leather boots. This really was a tutorial dungeon.

Still, Kaitley was frustrated that she fell for it.

“Uuhhmm.”

“Don’t stop. Keep going.”

“Y-yes.”

After rubbing her foot for a moment, Kaitley resumed her apprehensive trek. She remembered that she was still inside a dungeon.

She had floppy dog ears that somehow drooped even lower. Her tail had been wagging excitedly earlier, but now it had stopped. She was very easy to read.

Her light but firm footsteps were gone, replaced with overcautious slowness. Kaitley kept both eyes open for traps, but she was getting nowhere. The adventurers who were behind us earlier were beginning to catch up.

“...Too slow. Go faster.”

“Uhh... Okay.” Kaitley teared up but complied when Fran hurried her along. As scared as she was, she wasn’t complaining. I guess this was the power of admiration.

She eventually cleared the room, setting off traps and making exaggerated evasive maneuvers when she could spot one in advance. But she was barely halfway through the first floor. If this were a game, this would be the tutorial room.

Kaitley was beginning to get tired. Pampered upper-crust girl she might be, but she was still a beastman with some training. This shouldn’t have been enough to wear her out.

But the combination of an unfamiliar environment combined with the fear of traps and monsters were eating away at Kaitley’s mental stamina.

“Hurf...”

Still, Kaitley kept her chin up and kept going. She had no intention of giving up. She knew that anyone who complained at this stage wasn't serious about becoming an adventurer.

"We'll take a break here."

"Yes…"

We waited until we got to a spot where the path widened so as not to inconvenience the other adventurers.

The two sat down, and Kaitley started asking Fran questions to learn more about her.

Although Fran didn't tell her everything about herself, she did talk about her adventures and what she went through. Her accounts were brutal and gruesome, but it only increased the beams of admiration coming out of Kaitley's eyes.

She couldn't imagine the difficulties of battle since she had no combat experience, but she expressed her wonder with spontaneous utterances of "Wow," and "That's so cool."

Fran then got to the point of her battle at Crystal Cage where she fought a thunderbird.

She had been telling all these stories about overcoming impossible odds, so Kaitley was surprised to hear that she ran.

"W-were you not able to defeat the thunderbird?"

"I think I would've won. Probably. Definitely…if I used my trump card."

"So why did you choose to run?"

"I pay a price every time I use my trump card. I was on a quest, too, so the quest took priority. Never forget that."

"But you could've gotten so many materials if you had defeated it, no?"

"Hm. I probably could've leveled up. But what if I ran into a powerful opponent after that? What if I couldn't escape an encounter I *had* to escape? Nothing is guaranteed, so you have to be careful with your resources."

Fran was right. Against a whole flock of B-Threat thunderbirds, Sword God Form and Unleash Potential *might* be enough for us to win.

However, using these Skills would also take a large toll on us. Many of our trump cards came at the cost of our lifespan, you see. And then we might not be able to fight at full power because of our recent battle, or it might affect our performance in the tournament.

For Fran, wasting energy in a needless battle when you're supposed to be on a quest was the mark of a mediocre adventurer.

That said, she would still get overexcited and initiate battles anyway. But such was the professional ideal Fran was working towards.

"When you're on a quest, you have to be more careful than usual. Your failure might affect many people down the line."

"I-I see."

Successfully completing a quest was far more important than gaining levels.

Still, I didn't expect Fran would be giving such legit advice to her junior like this. I was touched.

Kaitley was also touched, albeit in a different manner.

"So this is the mind of a real adventurer!"

"Hm."

"I won't forget anything you've taught me."

She got fired up again after hearing Fran's lecture on the importance of caution. Pulling herself out from the dumps, Kaitley continued her exploration of the dungeon.

She was much more careful than before.

But the dungeon wasn't so easy that all a newbie needed to avoid its traps was a little bit of motivation. Kaitley kept tripping them one after another.

But she neither cried nor complained, continuing ever onwards while wiping the sweat off her chin.

“Th-that’s…!”

“Hm. A monster. A Hiding Rabbit.”

“So *that’s* a monster…”

The hiding rabbit was a G-Threat monster. It occupied the lowest rung of threat levels among any monster we had encountered.

The ugly rabbit was usually an expert at digging up holes and hiding in them, but its movements were much slower in a stone dungeon.

It was weak enough that an ordinary wild dog could beat them. Perfect for the first floor of a newbie dungeon.

There wasn’t an adventurer on earth that could lose to this thing. Its sole purpose in life was to get killed by new adventurers.

“Kill it with your sword.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

Kaitley happily drew her iron sword. She must’ve been excited to finally do some real adventurer work after being harassed by so many traps.

She concentrated and attacked the hiding rabbit.

“Taaah!”

Eeeegh!

“I-I did it!”

Even with her rich upbringing, Kaitley was still someone who aspired to be an adventurer. She didn’t cry about how she couldn’t possibly attack the little rabbit or how she was afraid of blood. She just quickly dispatched the monster.

“Hm. Good job.”

“Thank you!”

Fran gave her a satisfactory nod. Whether or not Kaitley was talented remained to be seen, but at least she had the fundamentals down. She was also very coachable.

Kaitley proceeded to butcher the rabbit under Fran's instruction, storing the meat and crystal in her backpack. Fran wasn't going to spoil her with Pocket Dimension.

Kaitley smiled as she felt the weight of her backpack. It was the look of someone satisfied with a job well done.

But all of this was still the tutorial floor. The real dungeon wouldn't be so easy.

"That's enough for the first floor. Let's keep going."

"U-understood."

"Let's pick up the pace. Hop on."

"Huh?"

Fran crouched and offered her back to Kaitley. Naturally, Kaitley hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"Kaitley?"

"Uhh, but..."

"Hrm."

Fran eventually lost her patience with Kaitley and seemed to have given up on carrying her. But what now?

"Wah!"

"Try not to bite your tongue."

She picked up Kaitley, tucked her under her arm, and started running without waiting for her response.

Kaitley let out a shriek at the sudden acceleration.

"Kyaaaa!"

"You can scream here, but in the lower floors that will only attract monsters."

"Eep..."

Kaitley bit her lip, obedient to Fran's instruction even under unusual circumstances. Her resolution to become an adventurer had not been half-baked.

Fran kept running, pointing out traps to Kaitley along the way.

She would sometimes run on the walls and ceilings to avoid traps, even kicking monsters who stood in the way. But Fran never stopped running.

“Uh… Gwuh… Waah…!”

The ever-changing scenery and shifting gravity had caused Kaitley to lose her sense of balance.

Her eyes spun as she let out a weak yelp.

“Aah…”

She ended with her mouth half agape, a blank look on her face. She hadn’t passed out, but she was barely conscious at this point.

Thirty minutes passed.

Fran had run through the second and third floors and we found ourselves at the entrance of the fourth floor. The middle section of the dungeon started here. You needed to be an F Rank or have an E-Rank chaperone you in order to proceed.

The first to third floors were basically focused on getting beginners used to a dungeon. But this was the real deal. A newbie could actually die if they got careless.

Probably while fighting the monster in front of us right now.

“Th-that’s…”

“Hm. A lesser ogre.”

A brown-skinned monster wearing a straw loincloth and wielding a thin wooden club. It stood at a height of a little less than 150 centimeters. As its name suggested, this was an ogre, but *lesser.*

Lumina had originally wanted to place weakened goblins instead. But the goddess of chaos’s machinations made producing Fiends in a dungeon use more mana.

Lumina’s plot to speed up the evolution of Black Cats failed before it could even start.

So, she placed the weakest possible variation of a lesser ogre in the goblin’s place. It was about as strong as a goblin anyway.

One now stood in the middle of the hallway, staring at us.

“Gugya!”

“Eep!” Kaitley let out a yelp after hearing the creature’s voice.

It must’ve looked like a boogeyman to children. They were about the same height, and it had a nasty-looking face. It was also clearly exhibiting signs of hostility.

Japanese monkeys had a reputation for injuring people. This thing was bigger than a monkey and several times more dangerous.

Fran had been ready to throw down with monsters from day one. It kind of gave me the wrong idea about the children in this world; I thought most of them would be like Fran—kill or be killed.

No, most ordinary children probably reacted a lot like Kaitley.

“It’s weak.”

“R-really?”

“Hm. A newbie should be able to beat it. Good luck.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry. I can heal you as long as you don’t die.”

“Huh? What?”

“Gugyagya!”

The lesser ogre quickly identified Fran and Kaitley as prey. It was so weak that it couldn’t tell how strong Fran was. All it could see was how soft her flesh was.

“Here it comes.”

“Gyagyaoooo!”

“Kyaaaa!”

As soon as Fran stepped back, the lesser ogre lunged at Kaitley.

I say *lunged*, but considering its whole purpose was to provide an appropriate fight for beginners, it actually *sauntered*.

Without any weapon skills, it was effectively just flailing its stick around.

Still, a direct hit would do enough damage to break a few bones if you were unlucky. A hit to the head would leave you with a concussion.

I guess it was like an older grade-schooler waving around a piece of wood.

An armored adult would be able to dispatch it with some ease, and Fran wouldn't even break a sweat.

But for Kaitley, the lesser ogre was terrifying. Not only did it have a mean face, but she felt the fear of being the target of its hostility. Kaitley didn't have time to activate her Sword Mastery and just started flailing her sword recklessly.

"No!"

"Gya!"

The tip of her sword managed to reach the enemy. The lesser ogre yelped in pain and backed away as it felt the blade graze its skin.

A thick red line flowed from the wound. The obvious consequence of not wearing armor.

"Gigigya!"

It touched its wound and licked its own blood. Knowing that it had been hurt, it started furiously hitting the ground with its stick.

"Uhhmm..."

"Gigi..."

Kaitley watched the lesser ogre cautiously. The lesser ogre fixed its attention on her sword.

Several seconds passed as both combatants stared each other down.

Fran watched. She wanted Kaitley to overcome the enemy on her own.

So none of us expected what would happen next.

A red beam came shooting out of the depths and blew the lesser ogre's head to bits. The beam was clearly targeting the

monster.

Fran and I knew there were more adventurers further in, but we hadn't expected them to interfere. Were they the kidnappers Aurel was worried about?

"Get behind me, Kaitley."

"A-all right."

Fran and I readied ourselves and focused on the presence.

Teacher, this aura...

No doubt about it. It's the redheaded woman from before.

The woman who had caused a scene with her standoff at Fran's food stand came out of the darkness.

"Hey. You okay?"

"Umm..."

"You... You're the kid from the food stall."

"Hey, that's the Black Lightning Princess, Boss."

"Right. Right... B Rank, right?"

She seemed genuinely surprised to see us, which was strange considering there was no way she could've missed Fran. Maybe she knew that someone strong was around but just didn't know that it was her.

Was there an adventurer as powerful as her with such weak detection abilities?

The man who was with her didn't seem to recognize Fran, either. He was just as surprised as she was.

Identify told me that their names were Sibyl and Biscott. I didn't know if that was true, however.

They were definitely faking their identities. Their abilities came out as glitchy in some places and their stats and Skills were far too low. They didn't seem to have this disguise ability themselves, though, which meant that their identities probably came courtesy of a magic item.

That meant they had someone supporting them.

“Why did you interfere?”

“Interfere?”

Fran sounded stern as she talked to the woman. She couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Because the kid looked like she was in trouble. Why didn’t *you* help?”

“She’s training.”

“Training…? She needs to brush up on her basics, I think. It’s too soon for her to be in a real fight.”

“That’s not for you to decide.”

“What are you talking about? Look, I *helped*, so why are you giving me the stink eye?”

“You shouldn’t have.”

It was an absolute breach of etiquette, but Sibyl didn’t seem to understand that. She was genuinely confused.

“Ah! L-Lady Sibyl!”

“What, Biscott?”

“I think adventurers are supposed to *ask* each other if they need help in a dungeon…”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pretty sure. That’s what Cricca said…”

They didn’t seem to be adventurers at all. Mercenaries? Knights in disguise? As much as I disliked them, they *had* saved Kaitley.

“I just think it’s too early for that girl to be here. She’s too weak. Look at her. She’s terrified because you dragged her here.”

“She… She didn’t drag me here…” Kaitley said from behind Fran’s back. She sounded upset at being called weak.

“Huh. Really?”

“Hm.”

“Really…”

Sure, Fran had to carry her all the way here, but entering her dungeon had been her idea. Even Fran wouldn't force someone inside a dungeon if they didn't want to.

And you'd run into a lot of problems as an adventurer if you didn't like going into dungeons.

But Kaitley had made up her mind about going inside the dungeon and was only following Fran's lead.

"No offense, but you should go home. Train up, get better armor, then come back. You're still young. No rush," Sibyl said with a kind voice.

If she said this to a civilian outside of a dungeon, it would be commendable. But she was sticking her nose where it didn't belong as far as adventurers were concerned. She came off as condescending, saying all these things without considering Kaitley's resolve.

Kaitley herself looked frustrated. She knew that she wasn't strong enough, but now Sibyl was dismissing even her resolve. The only thing Sibyl succeeded in doing was gaining their ire.

"...Kaitley."

"Y-yes, Lady Fran?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Huh?"

"Do you want to call it?"

Even as Kaitley was clenching her hands, Fran said nothing to console her. She just asked whether she wanted to leave. She was asking her if she wanted to give up.

These were hard words for Kaitley to hear. Her spirit was so broken that she might just say yes.

But Kaitley shook her head and lifted her face. She was looking much better than before.

"...No. I made the decision to come here by myself. Even if you force me to leave, my heart won't leave. I don't know whether I'm ready to be an adventurer. Maybe I should just quit...but I'm the one who'll make that decision."

“Hm.” Fran nodded, satisfied at Kaitley’s answer.

Sibyl was not on the same page. “You’re a child, and a weak one at that… *Can* you be an adventurer?”

“Y-yes! Everyone’s a beginner at some point!” Kaitley answered. She felt like she was being mocked, as if she didn’t deserve to be an adventurer.

But Sibyl didn’t sound like she was making fun of her. She really was just wondering whether a girl of her age and strength could become an adventurer.

“Will the guild accept her?”

“Hm? Of course. Adventurers are free. You’re free to become an adventurer and you’re free to stop being an adventurer.”

Naturally there were guildmasters—like Klimt in Alessa—who prevented children from recklessly signing up and assigned them apprenticeships so they could train.

Man, I missed Donadrond’s training. That was something special.

“Yeah? But let’s say this girl becomes an adventurer. What use would she be? She could go herb gathering, but she can’t protect anyone or exterminate monsters.”

“Urk…” Kaitley groaned but remained silent. Sibyl had hit the mark. But, while not really covering for her, Fran responded.

“So?”

“Who needs a useless adventurer?” Sibyl could say the meanest things without a hint of malice.

Still, Fran responded. “Hm? I don’t get it. There’s no need for adventurers to begin with. The adventurer just needs to want to be an adventurer. Others have nothing to do with it.”

“And that’s enough for you? You’re strong. Don’t you feel that weak adventurers just get in the way?”

“No. That’s on them. You said something about useless adventurers earlier.”

“I did.”

“I don’t get it. You don’t become an adventurer so you can be useful.”

“What? Then what’s the point?”

“To go on adventures. That’s why we’re called *adventurers*.”

Fran was getting annoyed with Sibyl’s idea that adventurers should be useful to society—and if you’re not useful you shouldn’t be an adventurer!

Though Sibyl might have been unaware, she was basically looking down on adventurers.

And Fran didn’t appreciate that. Maybe adventurers were nothing more than a ragtag collection of misfits to most people, but for Fran it was her dream job.

“Is this profession of adventuring actually necessary?”

“I told you, it’s got nothing to do with being useful. Especially not to you. Adventurers are free. We’re just doing what we want to do.”

Fran was getting heated now. Her words were becoming thornier by the minute.

“So you won’t fight to protect the people?”

“We can if we want to. But we don’t have to.”

“Even with all your power?”

“Hm. We might take on a job that helps people. But helping people isn’t the point.”

That said, Fran herself would help anyone in trouble if she came across them.

But this was about the ideal adventurer in Fran’s head. Principled professionals who did what they wanted to instead of what they had to.

Fran’s upbringing as a Black Cat and time as a slave influenced her so that she hated being ordered around. To her, freedom was the ultimate ideal which must never be violated.

And Fran’s ideal adventurer was the personification of freedom.

Meanwhile Sibyl held that the strong had an obligation to protect the weak. She came across as rude, but hers was an ideal rarely held in this world.

This was also why she had a hard time understanding what Fran was saying. The feeling was mutual on Fran's end. Their ideals were polar opposites.

But this wasn't the first time I had heard about Sibyl's ideals.

She reminded me of someone we met on the way to Belioth. Dianne, a self-proclaimed knight who was one of Karna's servants. She also acted like she had never seen an adventurer her entire life. That conversation had taken similar turns, but Sibyl was a moderate compared to her.

"So…adventurers only wield your powers for your own ends?"

"Yeah." Fran casually nodded.

It was an unsavory way of framing it, but that's what it came down to. There were plenty of shady characters in the adventuring business.

But there were also adventurers who wanted to help people with their powers. Amanda used her strength to fulfill her desire and goal of helping children.

Honestly, putting all adventurers into one box was difficult.

They were an individualistic bunch, each bringing their own quirks to the table. Ask ten adventurers the same question and you get ten different answers back. And if there were a thousand different adventurers, there were a thousand different reasons as to why they became adventurers.

Even Fran's "An adventurer's job is to go on adventures" was only her private ideal about the profession.

"You prioritize your own desires over the needs of many… Is that all you adventurers are made of?"

"Hrm."

That did it. Fran's anger was now tinted with bloodlust.

This was bad. If Fran and Sibyl ended up fighting, it would cause a lot of damage to the dungeon. Tensions were beginning

to rise.

But Kaitley broke the ice. Though she was shaking and had a flushed face, her anger overcame her fear.

“You interrupted us…! Asked all these questions! Imposed your beliefs! And now you act like you’re disappointed with us! Who are you?! Who are you *really*?!”

“Huh? No, I…”

“You can’t say?”

“Well, I… We’re undercover, so…”

“You can’t even tell us who you are, and you dare act all high and mighty! You’re being very suspicious!”

“S-suspicious? U-us?”

“Yes! You’re in a dungeon, but you don’t know the etiquette among adventurers! You think that’s not suspicious?”

“Uhhh…”

Badgering other adventurers about their identity was also a breach of etiquette, but Sibyl didn’t seem to know that. Despite acting like a big shot, she didn’t know how to respond to Kaitley’s aggressive approach.

“Also, Lady Fran has saved tons of people! In the Beastman Nation, she tirelessly fought off hundreds of thousands of monsters for three days straight so that her fellow Black Cats could escape!”

Wait, was that really how it went down? Rumors about Fran’s exploits had gotten around, but the scale seemed off.

“In Alessa, she challenged the dungeon boss on her own during a dungeon stampede in order to save the other rookies! She saved many lives in the process!”

Yeah, we beat a daemon back in Alessa…but this version of events was embellished!

Kaitley proceeded to recount Fran’s exploits, each of them more exaggerated than the actual facts.

As bards got wind of a story, they tended to romanticize and exaggerate them for effect. Fran ended up being a kind, if quiet, heroic Black Cat—which wasn't too far from the truth, but it didn't completely fit. This idealized version of Fran was all that Kaitley heard of.

"And that's not all Lady Fran has done!" Kaitley was now off to the races, talking Sibyl down. "She was instrumental in the battle at the capital! She and her friends saved Granzell from the wicked plot of Raydoss!"

"W-wicked?"

"Yes! That despicable kingdom is always trying to invade us and ruin our lives!"

"D-despicable…" Sibyl winced for some reason.

"Have you heard about the sky isle facility? Where Raydoss was carrying out inhuman experiments? The wrath of the gods eventually came down upon them as their experiments backfired and the island became a dungeon infested with undead. But Lady Fran and Lord Jean eventually conquered the dungeon to put the poor souls there to rest!"

"Slaughterhouse Jean?"

"So you're familiar with him, at least. Yes! He has foiled the degenerate empire's plans to invade us many times!"

"Degenerate…"

Kaitley *really* hated Raydoss. She shared the sentiment of many Granzellians, but even I thought this was a bit extreme.

Did she pick it up from Aurel and her parents?

"Raydoss has ruined so many lives… You have no idea."

"I-is that so…?"

"Yes! My uncle lost his life because of a Raydossian plot! I loved him so much. He used to play with me all the time when I was younger… I'll never forgive them."

"…I see."

“They are an awful nation! The fact that no one from Raydoss has ever tried to stop them proves that they are all complicit! Rotten to the core!”

I’d be hateful too if one of my relatives died because of Raydoss. But Kaitley’s hatred of Raydoss was so intense that it kind of put me off. She was using lots of big words, too. I’m not sure if Fran followed her.

A dry smile crept onto Sibyl’s face. She almost looked sad as Kaitley lambasted Raydoss. Why?

Biscott, who had been silent this whole exchange, finally spoke up.

“R-Raydoss isn’t like that! Th-they’re not all bad! Er...so I’ve heard!” he shouted, his face flushed.

“...Why are you covering for them?” Kaitley asked out of genuine wonder. Any Granzellian would.

Her innocent eyes tied Biscott’s tongue into knots.

“Huh? Well...”

“That’s enough, Biscott. Our work has us regularly interact with Raydossians. From our experience, not all of them are bad.”

“...And what would this job of yours be? Information about Raydoss is hard to come by.”

“O-oh, you know. Undercover stuff. Look, I know you have your reasons for wanting to believe all Raydossians are cut from the same cloth, but that simply isn’t true.”

“And you’re going to say that after saying all adventurers are basically the same?”

“Umm...”

Nice. This was what Kaitley was going after. If Sibyl was going to insist that not all Raydossians were bad, then she’d better not say the same about adventurers.

No wonder she went to such extremes badmouthing Raydoss. It seemed odd that the quiet Kaitley would be so aggressive. Still, I think most of what she said came from the heart.

“There are adventurers who commit crime, yes. But there are also adventurers like Lady Fran who do amazing things!”

“I-I see…”

This whole thing reminded me of our encounter with Dianne.

Who were these people? They weren’t adventurers. But they were strong and knowledgeable. Mercenaries? They didn’t have much love for adventurers, either. But that didn’t explain their complete ignorance of them.

It almost seemed like Sibyl and Dianne’s ignorance was born out of never having seen adventurers before.

Try as they might, they simply couldn’t hide their ignorance. Their gaps in common knowledge were too large to ignore.

How do you explain that? I guess children wouldn’t understand what adventurers did, but considering how powerful Sibyl was, it didn’t make sense that she had never run into an adventurer before.

She would have to be born in a place where adventurers didn’t exist.

What place fit that bill? The ever-hostile northern kingdom of Raydoss.

That would explain Biscott’s reaction.

But what were Raydossians doing here…?

Spies were a fact of life, I suppose, but we had been running into a lot of Raydossians lately. Black Bones, Al Azif, even Kuhne might have been a Raydossian…

There might have been more Raydossians in Granzell than we thought. The reverse was probably also true.

But the fact that Al Azif had tried to kill Kuhne told me that not all Raydossians were on the same page. Al Azif was clearly a spy commissioned by the government, but Kuhne seemed like an unaffiliated traveler.

Sibyl and Biscott didn’t seem like spies, either. They were too strong, probably soldiers or knights.

And they didn’t seem cut out for espionage or sabotage. They stood out too much, too easy to spot. They felt more like Raydossian rich kids on holiday than spies.

Maybe they weren’t technically spies…but another sort of agent sent to observe and absorb whatever information they could about Granzell.

So what now?

We could probably blow their cover if we asked the right questions. But they were still agents of a hostile nation. They would try to silence us if we did that, and fighting off Sibyl and Biscott while protecting Kaitley would be difficult.

Also, Kaitley might be targeted in the future if we managed to fend them off. It was best for us to look the other way and pretend we didn’t see anything for now.

“B-Boss, this is getting bad…!”

“R-right. Let’s head out.”

Fortunately, they were also more than happy to retreat. They probably felt we would continue prodding them for information.

“…Let’s go, Kaitley.”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“This is a waste of time.”

“If you say so…”

Kaitley obliged and got out of the way. Sibyl and Biscott wasted no time making their escape.

“S-sorry to have taken up your time!”

“You can say that again.”

“G-g’bye!”

But just because we would let them walk out of the dungeon didn’t mean we were going to leave them be.

Jet, keep an eye on them.

Woof!

Careful. They might have someone on their team who can detect hostiles.

If it weren't for that extra someone, these two would've had their cover blown minutes after they cleared immigration.

I'm counting on you.

Woof!

All we had to do now was report to Dias—which would be awkward, but surely he could separate private matters from work. On second thought, maybe not.

If he wouldn't listen to us, we could go to Aurel and Elza instead.

"What was with those people?!" Kaitley continued to be furious even after the two were long gone.

Fran gave her advice to keep her cool. "Calm down, Kaitley. You might lose your life if you don't."

"R-right!"

"Take your anger and use it on the monsters."

"Understood!"

As someone who had blundered because of rage, Fran was very convincing.

Kaitley calmed herself down and refocused on the dungeon. Her ability to control her emotions would be useful to her as an adventurer.

Ten minutes later, they resumed their dungeon trek.

Another lesser ogre appeared, and a battle ensued.



Against a monster she had faced before, Kaitley's anger overwhelmed her fear. Sibyl's words were still ringing in her ears, and that made the lesser ogre seem like nothing in comparison.

Kaitley didn't hesitate and initiated.

"Taaaah!"

"Gishaaa!"

After a few attacks, Kaitley's sword found its way into the lesser ogre's head.

Stuff started oozing out of its skull as it expired. It was quite grotesque, but Kaitley smiled like a sunflower in bloom.

"I did it!"

"Hm."

"Ehe he! It's all thanks to your training, Lady Fran! I hope I made you proud!"

Hearing Fran herself tell her of her heroic stories cemented Fran's status as an accomplished adventurer in Kaitley's mind. It convinced Kaitley that if Fran said things would be all right, then things would be all right.

For what it's worth, Fran did try to set the record straight on her embellished exploits. This was easier said than done.

"Still, I wonder who those people were. They were very suspicious! Perhaps I should tell grandfather or Lord Dias about them when we return."

"I'll do it."

"Of course! They'll believe you in a heartbeat, Lady Fran! Oh! But what if they've already escaped?"

"Jet's following them."

"I-I see! You're so well prepared!"

This was how most of their conversations went.

Kaitley had started opening up despite her initial shyness. After the encounter with Sibyl, it seemed as if she had finally gotten over her nerves.

She was still reserved and cowardly by nature, but when it came to the things she loved, she would become very talkative. Kind of like a nerd. She couldn't hold herself back now that she was with the Fran she so admired.

Fran could barely get a word in. She attempted to clear up Kaitley's misunderstandings, but…

"You are so modest for not bragging about your achievements, Lady Fran!"

"…"

…That wasn't happening any time soon.

I think Kaitley got the point that she shouldn't believe everything she heard. But that only ended up making her think that Fran was a lot more modest than people thought.

I'd never seen such levels of admiration. It made me feel like saying, "Don't look at me with those sparkly eyes! I'll melt!" But Fran didn't seem to be bothered by it.

We spent another hour beating up monsters and letting Kaitley taste the excitement of opening a treasure chest before returning to the surface.

"That's all for today. Let's head back."

"O-oh. Thank you very much! I learned a lot today!"

"Hm. But it's too early to thank me. You still need to get back in one piece."

"I-I see! The adventure isn't over until you've returned to a safe haven!"

"Hm."

Besides, we weren't going to make our trek back so soon.

"We'll take a short break. You mustn't overextend yourself."

"R-right! I might get careless if I get too tired."

"That's right."

"Okay!" Kaitley smiled happily as Fran acknowledged her. Her tail was wagging like Jet's.

“We’ll eat here.”

“Here?”

“Hm. Take the meat out of your bag.”

“A-all right.”

Eating in the wilds was part of adventuring. Depending on who you asked, it was either the best part or the worst part.

For most beginners, it was the latter. Either they would have to chew on jerky since they didn’t catch anything edible, or their cooking skills were so poor that their meal ended up tasting horrible.

Kaitley cooked the rabbit meat she got from the upper floor and ate it whole. The meat was dry, unseasoned and poorly prepared.

Still, Kaitley ate it happily. She showed a lot of promise. In any case, eating meat you caught for yourself was a new experience for her.

We returned to Aurel’s mansion after a successful expedition in the beginner dungeon.

“Hey, you’re back!”

“Grandfather! Are you finished with work?”

“I sure am.”

Aurel came to greet us himself.

After everything was said and done, he must’ve been worried about his granddaughter. He had a smile like an old mob boss as he patted Kaitley on the head.

“How’d it go? Any grave injuries?”

“No.”

Aurel didn’t bother asking Kaitley whether she got hurt; he knew the makeup of the beginner dungeon. Traps would leave mere bruises and cuts.

What he was most worried about were encounters with monsters deeper in the dungeon.

“She beat three lesser ogres today. She wasn’t hurt in battle.”

“Really? On her first go?”

“Hm. There was something, though…”

“Sounds like a bad something.”

“Kaitley did a good job. You have my word. But we ran into some weirdos.”

“Weirdos?”

Fran knew that she couldn’t outright say she suspected Sibyl and Biscott of being Raydossian spies in front of Kaitley.

She figured out that much from observing her. Aurel sent for maids to fetch Kaitley and changed locations.

“So what happened?”

“I think we ran into some Raydossians.”

“Really? Raydossians?”

“Hm. Maybe.”

“So you have no proof.”

“No. But they were really weird.”

ASIDE: A CERTAIN TRIO

“LADY SIBYL…! I asked you…*begged* you not to cause any trouble!”

“Sorry.”

“Biscott told me about your encounter in the dungeon. I can’t believe you started arguing with the Black Lightning Princess!”

“Yeah, sorry about that. But hey, me and the boss didn’t touch her or anything.”

“You better not have! We’d be on the run by now if you had!”

“R-right.”

“Hmm…”

“Lady Sibyl? You seem upset… Or are you actually sorry for what you did for once?”

“How low of a bar do you hold me to…? Look, never mind. It’s just what she said about our country.”

“Right. Biscott said they were badmouthing it.”

“To say the least. Apparently, we’re *evil*, *wicked*, *degenerate*, and *rotten to the core*.”

“That’s terrible.”

“You think? The dukes of the south and east are the ones constantly messing with Granzell, right? They think all of Raydoss is like them.”

“Our regions have acted on their own ever since our foundation… We don’t really think that what the other regions do has any bearing on us. We don’t even think about what the dukes are doing abroad. It can’t be helped due to the nature of their mission.”

“But that doesn’t matter to the Granzellians. They think the South and the East represent all of Raydoss.”

“And they think we’re a bunch of jerks because of it.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“But was that girl really serious? I thought South and East were laying it thick on Granzell, but…”

“She wasn’t lying at the very least. I think her uncle really died.”

“…You’re right.”

“And I definitely wouldn’t put it past those two.”

“South and East do reek of conspiracies… They both have no love for Granzell, so they could do just about anything.”

“What about the West, Cricca? You came from there. Anything from the duke?”

“He’s… I don’t know. I think there’s a chance of him being involved. But only if it’s profitable. After his failed plot to take over

Phyllius and Seedrun, I doubt he'll try anything on Granzell so soon."

"Right. The old miser only has money on his mind..."

"What about the Duke of the North? I don't really know what he's up to these days."

"They're the most independent part of the country. The Knights of the Northern Expedition take care of the trouble there, so the Red Knights aren't usually needed. But I think the north should be all right."

"Yes. The Duke of the South is of warrior stock; he isn't one to take part in convoluted plots. If he counted you as an enemy, you'd see his army march on the horizon."

"I see."

"What about central Raydoss? We don't hear anything about them, but that doesn't mean they're not doing anything."

"Hmm... Cricca?"

"I think the Chancellor would've told us if they were actually plotting something."

"True. The palace is understaffed at the moment, too."

"Which leaves the jackass in the south and the madman in the east."

"That it does. We'll talk about the dukes' actions once we get home. But please, no more trouble for the rest of the day. What were you doing in the dungeon anyway?"

"Uhh, Boss said she wanted to check out the dungeon, so..."

"Lady Sibyl?"

"I was hoping we could see an adventurer in action. I heard there was a low-level dungeon that even non-adventurers could enter."

"And did you really think you would spot your powerful adventurers in a beginner dungeon?"

"I mean, you never know. In any case, we have to know more about these adventurers, or they'll catch us off guard."

“Well, mission accomplished. I think that’s all we need to do in this town. I’ll make arrangements for us to leave. Get ready.”

“No. Not yet.”

“Why?! This town probably has its eyes on you already!”

“Are we being watched?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it does feel that way. Someone is using their familiar to watch us…but all I know is that it’s using a dark spell to hide itself.”

“And Scout Captain Cricca can’t detect this spy? What kind of monster is this?”

“Must belong to an adventurer. We didn’t learn much from our time in the dungeon, but we learned about the adventurers’ endless variety. I knew then that just watching them wouldn’t be enough.”

“But…”

“As captain of the Knights of the Red Sword, I have decided that we will continue our investigation into adventurers in this town. Our cover hasn’t been completely blown…yet. It’ll work out.”

“No, it won’t! It’s too dangerous. What if they publicized your identity?”

“Then we’ll fight our way out.”

“I knew it. I’ll make plans for an emergency exit, then.”

“Thanks.”

“How are you going to carry out this investigation, anyway? Do you have any plans?”

“Well, the best way to know your opponent is to fight them.”

“They’ll put up wanted posters of you before sundown.”

“No, no. What if I told you there is a perfectly legal way to fight adventurers?”

“You can’t be thinking of entering the tournament… I’ve already explained to you how risky that would be.”

“But it’s our only chance of fighting elite adventurers. I’ve decided. Biscott and I will enter the tournament. Cricca, you run support.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Ugh… Fine.”

“The future of Raydoss hangs on the success of this mission.”

“Are adventurers that powerful?”

“I don’t know. That’s what we’re here to find out.”

“And what about the red seal?”

“I won’t use it in the tournament. They’ll ID me immediately if I do. I’ve used it once to stop Granzell’s advance, after all. But we might need it to make an escape so have it ready to go.”

“Very well.”

“Boss, am I really entering, too?”

“Yeah. For all we know, we don’t know enough. We’ve both been poisoned by Raydoss.”

“P-poisoned…”

“Patriotism doesn’t mean underestimating our enemies. Of course, I’m one to talk…”

“Boss…”

“But you’ve noticed it too, haven’t you, Biscott?”

“Yeah… I was shocked at how riled up I got over Raydoss being insulted.”

“You haven’t completely freed yourself from what they fed you in the facility. It took me a while to notice, too. But I get it. How could they judge a whole country based on the actions of one or two dukes? But…”

“South and East are even worse than we thought.”

“Exactly. That’s why our relations with Granzell grow more tense by the day. Total war might break out in the near future. That is why we must learn about these adventurers. It’s not about

winning or losing. We need to find out just what they're made of. That clear?"

"Crystal."

"And our lookout?"

"Can you get rid of it?"

"I can chase it away. But capturing it would be difficult."

"Then leave it. They'll just send another one after it to take its place. Might as well let it know that we know it's watching us."

"Very well."

"Besides, we're close to accomplishing the chancellor's mission."

"The verification of an S-Rank adventurer's strength."

"Yeah. The Duke of the South's people witnessed it firsthand… But they say he's coming to watch the tournament."

"Well, it's a different S Rank from the one the Duke of the South saw…but an S Rank is coming."

"Good. We'll see how strong he is and, if possible, test his loyalty to Granzell. I hope we can fight, but I'd be satisfied with just watching."

***

We left for the Adventurers' Guild after dropping Kaitley off to report the Sibyl problem.

Adventurers gasped and stirred when Fran entered the guild hall. She had become something of a celebrity in town.

Most of these guys didn't take bard songs as truth, but they had witnessed Fran's prowess in the tournament last year. Fran had managed to gain the admiration of even non-beastman adventurers.

"Frannie? It *is* you!"

"Elza."

The B-Rank adventurer known as Elza came to greet her. The pretty man had a strange aura about him when he was just standing there, but once you heard his voice it removed all doubt.

“Oh goodness, it’s been so long!”

“Hm. You too.”

Just as impactful as ever. I thought I had gotten used to this maiden (male) last year, but I was wrong.

The big man (lady) came shimmying up to us, knees pressed tight together. As I looked for an escape route and found none, Fran greeted him with a smile. Somehow, the two of them were friends.

“You joining the tournament this year?”

“Of course.”

“That’s lovely! Last year’s first and second place can’t make it this year, you know.”

“Really?”

Fran sounded disappointed and Elza nodded, sharing her disappointment.

“Yes! But the quest comes first for adventurers. You know how it is. I’m glad you could make it, though.”

Amanda, who took second place last year, had to keep Raydoss in check, while champion Forlund was probably still in the capital. It could be they were both on anti-Raydoss quests.

We might have a chance of winning this year. The loss of her rivals disappointed Fran, but at least we wouldn’t have to fight them.

The Beast King wasn’t here, either. We probably wouldn’t get a chain of A Ranks like last year. That left Fran with little—if any—actual competition.

Phelms and Colbert were her only real rivals. But strong as they were, she had beaten them once before.

Though, Phelms might not even be here this year. I thought he’d said that Dias asked him to participate as a favor.

The only ones left in town would be Dias and Sibyl. But Dias was a guildmaster and Sibyl was an alleged Raydossian spy. They didn't have the best odds of competing in the tournament. Maybe there were other powerful fighters in our midst, but the chances of them being as strong as last year's A Ranks were slim.

"What brings you in? Did you just miss me?"

"No."

"O-oh..."

"I need to report something to Dias. I was going to see you after that."

"Oh, Fran!"

Fran was a real heartbreaker the way she tore Elza down before building him up. He was squealing with joy as he did his signature squirm.

"GM is upstairs. He's been acting weird since yesterday." Elza said.

That was our fault.

"...Is he angry?" Fran asked pensively. But Elza shook his head with a wry smile.

"Doesn't look like it. He's just, I dunno, spaced out? Loafing around? He's been pacing his office, restless like a caged animal."

"I see."

Not mad, just distraught.

"Was that you? Did you do something to him?"

"Hm."

"...'Kay, then. Well...I'll ask him if he'll see you."

"Thanks."

"Anything for you, Frannie! I'll drag him out here if he insists on holing up in his office!"

"It's okay. You don't have to force him."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Hm."

A few minutes later...

We were on the upper floors of the guild building. Dias had agreed to meet us despite our misgivings.

When Fran entered the room, he had a self-deprecating smile on his face.

He usually looked much younger than his age let on. Today, he was a tired old man. He probably couldn't sleep well last night.

"You sure about this?"

"Not quite, but you said you had a report for me."

"Hm."

"I need some more time if you're going to continue the conversation we had yesterday... But I doubt that's why you're here today."

As a guildmaster, he wasn't about to ignore what could be an emergency.

Sorry for thinking you couldn't keep your biases in check, Dias. You're more of a professional than I thought.

"Shall I leave?"

"No."

Dias would likely issue orders to Elza after we made our report. Might as well save some time.

"I met some strange people in the west dungeon today."

"Strange? Elaborate."

"Hm."

Fran proceeded to tell him everything about Sibyl.

How she had first met her in Bulbola, and how she ran into her again in Ulmutt. How powerful Sibyl was, but how utterly ignorant she was about adventurers. How she seemed distressed when the subject of Raydoss was brought up.

"...They might be Raydossian spies."

The odds are good.

“I see… That does sound quite serious. Do you know where this Sibyl woman is now?”

“She and her group are staying at an inn near the town entrance.”

Jet had let us know after we left the dungeon.

“All right. We’ll put eyes on them immediately.”

“Jet is still watching them. He’ll let us know if they try to leave.”

“Good.”

“Are you going to arrest them?”

“That…would be difficult. It’d be easier if they were chumps, but *you* say they’re strong.”

“Hm.”

From what we felt, Sibyl was probably strong enough to take Fran head-on.

“We might put the town in danger if we provoke them… And the timing of it all is just awful. An incident might put the tournament in jeopardy. We have the guild to think about.”

Canceling the tournament would reflect poorly on the guild. As guildmaster, Dias had the guild’s public perception to worry about.

“So, what? Do we just keep an eye on them?”

“That’s the short of it. We’ll nab them after the tournament is over. We can count on your assistance if it calls for it, yes?”

“Hm. Of course.”

Fran gave Dias a firm nod. It was an opportunity to throw down with Sibyl. She wouldn’t refuse it for the world.

The next day turned out to be quite busy for Fran.

A ton of requests came in for her because of her celebrity status.

The guild immediately rejected any requests from nobles, but some requests couldn't be avoided and others Fran was more than happy to take.

One unavoidable request was an invitation from Elza. Not just for lunch, either. He wanted to know Fran's experience with his skincare products.

Fran had zero interest in dolling herself up. Applying lotion was a bothersome chore. She only used it because I insisted on applying it for her.

So there was no way Fran could give a decent review of the overall experience. Elza could only smile as Fran said "I don't get it" and "It's a pain."

But Fran also apologized about giving it away to the girls at the Magic Academy. Elza instantly forgave her, though. He was happy about his product being a big hit.

In fact, he gave Fran a ton of refills when we were done. For all of Fran's complaints, she had still used up all of the lotion. He really was a nice guy. I felt bad for the misunderstanding, though...

I wouldn't have minded revealing myself to Elza, but there was never a good time for it.

Fran forced out a thank you as she took the extra lotion.

She had initially refused, but she couldn't after seeing how sad Elza looked. Elza was quite a force to be reckoned with if he could make Fran be considerate.

As for the requests that made Fran happy, she got a ton of requests from local restaurants to come and taste their new menu.

Ulmutt had gotten on the curry train a few months after it hit Bulbola. Chefs had started developing their own recipes, using trial and error to make them even better.

Curry was already known when we were here last time, but now Ulmutt was going through an unprecedented curry boom. Every restaurant had their own version of it. Most of the chefs probably prepared it specifically for the tournament.

And now Fran, disciple of the Curry Master, was in town.

Knowing her position in the pantheon of curry, Ulmutt's chefs made requests for her to try their dishes.

Soon Fran had reduced a chef to tears with a scathing review. It resulted in dramatic improvements to the chef's curry.

News of the story spread, and now people were lining up for Fran to taste their food.

All Fran had to do was eat curry, say what was on her mind, and get paid a sack full of cash for it. It was the best job she could ask for.

In fact, you needed a significant amount of money saved up to employ a B Rank like Fran. These were Ulmutt's top restaurants, so even if some of them ended up with duds, they still weren't far off the mark.

We definitely got some weird dishes that weren't to Fran's taste. But she still enjoyed them regardless for their novelty.

Fran was skipping from one tasting *quest* to another. I could count the number of times I had seen her skip on my telekinetic hands.

But it wasn't without problems: the chefs had secretly taken to calling her Curry Princess and Spice Princess. Even Black Lightning Princess, Disciple of the Curry Master.

The problem was that Fran might actually end up liking those nicknames. Black Lightning Princess was fine...but what if she wanted to be called Curry Princess, instead?

I had to pump the brakes on that.

Fortunately, the chefs knew that adventurers probably wouldn't like their proposed nicknames. They tried their best to only call her by the proper one when she was around.

They sometimes slipped, and I had to clamp their mouths shut with my telekinetic hands when it happened. Too violent? Let's say I only put my telekinetic hand over their mouth for a short while.

Fran wound up spending a few days working hard as the arbiter of curry. The Adventurers' Guild then contacted us at the inn we were staying at. Dias wanted to talk.

Wonder what it's about.

"Hm."

Maybe there were developments with the Raydossian spy situation.

The guild had asked Fran not to provoke Sibyl and her companions, and so she complied. We just let Jet observe them for us. So far, they hadn't tried anything weird.

Or maybe Dimitris had finally reached Ulmutt. An introduction wouldn't go amiss. He seemed like a difficult man to approach, and Dias would be doing us a favor by vouching for us.

But Dias summoned us for none of the above.

"It's about Theraclede."

"...All right." Fran stiffened when she saw a serious look on Dias's face for once. She couldn't get a read on him. It was unusual considering the old man was always grinning.

"You said the other day that you own Theraclede's life. Remember that?"

"Hm."

Dias was referring to the time Theraclede bowed down in front of Fran. In exchange for his life, Fran swore to him that she would take Romeo to the orphanage in Bulbola if he died.

Well, that oath was in a weird spot now. Theraclede wasn't dead, and he and Romeo were now living at the Magic Academy. Fran had no plans to collect. Still, the oath had been made, and she included it in her summary of events to Dias.

Fran might not have been aware of this, but the fact that she technically owned Theraclede's life gave Dias the impression that she wasn't going to appreciate any assassination attempts. Still, Dias had received the message loud and clear. We wouldn't be here right now if he hadn't.

"Let's make a bet. You win, and I'll give up on my little revenge plot. No more attempts on Theraclede's life. All I'll be left with is a grudge that I'll carry to my grave. I win and you tell me where Theraclede is. Sound good?"

Dias was smiling, but he looked anguished. I couldn't tell why, though…

"What's the bet?"

"Beat me in the tournament."

"You're allowed to compete?"

"No rule saying I can't."

But you and Fran might never fight each other in the tournament.

Or was Dias going to use his special guildmaster privileges to ensure that they would?

"The matches will be randomized, so there's nothing I can do about that. If either of us loses before we face each other, then that person loses the bet."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'll take it as fate and as a sign to give up."

The bet sounded like it would be in our favor. Why was Dias so confident? Was he just going to lose on purpose? I didn't know.

It wouldn't be difficult for Dias to find Theraclede on his own. All he needed to do was check Fran's guild logs.

So why the bet…?

And if we refuse?

"Then I'll look for Theraclede on my own."

"All right. You're on."

Are you sure, Fran?

"Hm. I know how Dias feels. Having all those pent-up emotions is hard."



If nothing else, Fran was sympathetic.

Dias bowed his head deeply. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

A look of relief came upon his face.

A few days before the fighting tournament…

We were back at the Adventurers’ Guild, but not to meet Dias this time. Colbert was on the couch looking exhausted and overwhelmed.

An old man was sitting next to him. The old man we needed to talk to.

“You made it.”

He tossed a sharp glance at Fran without a shadow of a smile. For an old man, he was well built and menacing.

It was the eyes. They were slanted to begin with, but they gave him a permanent glare.

His hair was white with age, but there was enough to tie it up into a short topknot. An exquisite mustache and beard made him look like a hermit out of a *manga* or a Chinese martial artist.

The only thing preventing him from being a peaceful hermit was the immense aura of violence he radiated.

His height was hard to tell with him sitting down, but I thought he was in the high 170s. He had skin like tree bark, dried up and wrinkly due to old age. But there was muscle under those wrinkles—soft and supple like an athlete who was still training.

Though his body was covered in a loose purple robe with black embroidery, you could still see the strength below.

Colbert stepped forward and said, “This is my master—”

“Not anymore.”

“—Master Dimitris and Miss Hilt. This is Fran, the girl who beat me.”

“So you are.”

“Hm.”

We were now face to face with Dimitris the Unmoving, S-Rank adventurer. As soon as we got word from the guild that he agreed to a meeting, we came running.

And this simple exchange told me that talking to him was not going to be easy.

There was someone else with him. A woman who also had sharp eyes. She sat on the couch opposite Colbert and to the left of Dimitris, almost as if she was his bodyguard.

Colbert had referred to her as “Miss Hilt” earlier. I wondered what their relationship was. She looked pretty strong, too—as strong as Colbert. Her eyes were already scanning Fran, sizing her up.

Either way, our business was with Dimitris.

Fran bowed her head slightly.

“I’m Fran, B-Rank adventurer. Nice to meet you.”

A proper introduction, for once. Probably because Dimitris was her quest objective. Could have been because she could tell just how strong he was, too. But there was nothing but respect in her voice.

The old man reciprocated with a calm nod.

“I am Dimitris, S-Rank adventurer.”

He looked defenseless as he sat on the couch with his arms crossed. But Fran knew that if she tried anything funny, she would be in a world of hurt.

He wasn’t trying to be intimidating—he radiated power just by sitting there.

It was probably on purpose. He knew that if someone was strong enough to gauge his strength, that someone wouldn’t do anything reckless.

And if they were weak? Well, they’d be dead before they hit the floor...even if they had friends.

And Dimitris wouldn’t mind if someone knowingly attacked him. According to what we’d heard, he was quite the blood knight himself.

Colbert made it sound like he was an eccentric, but he was actually milder than I’d expected. At least he didn’t greet Fran with his fists. I hadn’t thought it would be this easy to meet him in the first place.

But if Dimitris was surprisingly mild, Hilt was surprisingly hostile. She was already glaring daggers at Fran. She seemed upset at her for some reason… In any case, she wasn’t friendly.

Fran’s gaze eventually shifted from Dimitris to Hilt.

“I am Hiltoria. An instructor of the Dimitris style and A-Rank adventurer.”

I’d had a feeling she was strong, but A Rank?! She must have been one of Dimitris’s best students. She had to be if she passed the same test Colbert did.

“I am also Dimitris’s heir to the school, since I am his granddaughter. Pleased to meet you.”

She did not seem pleased to meet us.

Hilt was a tall woman with her dark green hair in a side ponytail. She wore the same purple as Dimitris, but her clothes were tighter and highlighted the lines of her body: a short-sleeved tube top which exposed her midriff, and tight leggings. Her leg armor looked more like knee-high socks to me.

Although her gear looked like it was made of fabric, it actually consisted of the finest monster leather. Minimal weight, maximum ease of movement. The brass knuckles on her hand shone menacingly under the light, a dark red crust hardened over the original silver—a blood patina from long years of use.

“…”

“…”

Fran and Hilt locked eyes. It didn’t look like this was going to end peacefully.

“…”

"…"

After a few more moments of silence, Hilt sighed. "I see."

"Hm?" Fran tilted her head, not understanding what Hilt was talking about.

"No wonder you beat Colbert. You're young, but your strength…"

She must've known Colbert for a long time, since they both trained under Dimitris. That would make Fran the one who got her friend expelled.

It was misplaced resentment, sure, but that wasn't something she could get over quickly.

No wonder Hilt glared at her. Even if she understood that Fran did nothing wrong, she still felt conflicted about the whole thing.

"Are you friends with Colbert?"

"You see… Colbert used to be my fiancé. But not since he got expelled."

"I was just one of your suitors, Miss."

Colbert had been the most fitting out of all of Hilt's suitors. Hilt's husband had to be worthy of the Dimitris school since he would be her second-in-command. But Colbert had been disqualified after being expelled.

"Charlie's a stronger and better man than me. He's closer to you in age, too."

"You think so? Let's hope so."

I didn't think that Hilt and Colbert were just *friends*.

Hilt answered Colbert's casual comment with an equally casual shrug. But she clearly didn't look happy about the arrangement.

Did she still have feelings for him…? Did he not notice?

And I'd thought Colbert was hitting it off with Io…

"Will you be competing in the tournament to avenge Colbert?"

“No. I have no intention of becoming a sideshow.”

“Oh.”

I was relieved, but Fran was disappointed. Hilt seemed strong, after all.

Anyway, our business was with Dimitris.

Fran, don’t forget what we came here to do.

“Hm…” Reminded of her quest, Fran turned her attention to Dimitris.

“This man said you wanted to see me. Why?”

“Hm. Here. From the kingdom of Belioth.”

“Oh?”

Fran put the leather pouch on the table. Al Azif almost killed us for this thing.

Dimitris took it and motioned her to proceed.

“They want you to work for them for the Goldician Obligation. Details are inside.”

“I see.”

Dimitris opened the envelope and read the letter inside on the spot. He nodded several times.

Our job was done. Whatever happened next was between Belioth and Dimitris. This quest turned out to be a lot easier than I thought.

But Fran wasn’t done.

“How about it? Will you work for them?” Fran asked. Belioth had promised us a bonus if we could convince Dimitris to get on board.

“Perhaps not. It will be a dull expedition without Winalene around.”

“Please reconsider.”

“Hmm…”

Fran wasn’t desperate, but Dimitris gave it some thought. He then turned to his granddaughter.

“Yes… How about this, Black Lightning Princess? You will be competing in the tournament?”

“Hm. Of course.”

“If you manage to defeat Hilt in the tournament, I will leave for Belioth. How does that sound?”

“Perfect!”

Dimitris made the suggestion without so much as cracking a smile. Fran was all in. She was more interested in fighting Hilt than Belioth’s bonus.

On the flip side, Hilt looked utterly irritated.

“G-Grandfather?”

“Hilt. If you defeat the Black Lightning Princess, I shall retire and leave you as Master of the school.”

“Th-that’s…!”

“I have a wife and children myself. I’m not made of stone, you know. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“So I will be free to choose my own husband?” A light now shone in Hilt’s eyes.

“As Master, you will be free to do as you please. You won’t have to worry about this old man anymore. You could close the school down for all I care. I was just teaching random strays to begin with.”

“Very well. As much as I hate being a spectacle, I cannot refuse a reward as great as this.”

Hilt turned to Fran, glaring at her with a newfound energy. Fran returned the favor.

“I will defeat you.”

“Not if I beat you first.”

This was no longer a stare down—Fran and Hilt were ready to *throw* down.

I could hear murmuring from the lower levels. Fran and Hilt’s clash of spirits was enough to upset the adventurers at the guild.

“But what if we end up not fighting each other, Grandfather?”

“Then the one who places higher wins.”

“Understood.”

“Hm.”

Neither was going to drop out in the opening rounds. We were in it to win it. Still, you could never be too careful with this tournament. Last year, we’d ended up making a wager with the Beast King himself. This year it was Dimitris.

“Uhhh…?” Meanwhile, Colbert was looking utterly confused.

Sorry, buddy. Looks like your fate is going to be in Fran’s hands.

ASIDE: BLACK BONES

“WE’VE LOST CONTACT with one of your selves, Al Azif. What happened?”

“Last I checked it was in Bulbola, charging up a lot of power… Looks like it died.”

“What? But that was one of the stronger Al Azifs.”

“Ku hi hi hi! I know! Uhya hya hya!”

“It’s not funny!”

“But think about how strong the prey must be! Whoever beat me must be worth killing!”

“Hmph. That’s only if you don’t get beaten by them again.”

“Don’t worry about it! I’ll kill them all and consume them! Man, I wonder what they’re like. I can’t wait to see them!”

“Calm yourself! We still have an operation to carry out in this town.”

“I know! But come on. Can’t I snack for a little bit?”

“No! They’ll come after us if they start suspecting us!”

“Come ooon! No one’ll notice a few missing adventurers with all these powerful contestants around!”

“Tch. This is the problem with you. You’re ruled by your gluttony… Look. The disappearance of Ice Man and Charred Man, Lord Nameless letting the high elf live. The reputation of the Black Bones is at an all-time low! The Duke of the South will begin to doubt our powers…”

“Yeah, but it can’t be helped, can it? We lost in the end. That’s how the world works.”

“That is why this operation must be a success! We had to beg the Duke of the West for some favors!”

“Hi hi hi hi! Ever think about what’ll happen to us if we mess this one up?”

“We *won’t*! I, Acid Man, the tenth seat of the Black Bones, will see to it!”

“You’re not the tenth anymore.”

“I guess not with Ice Man and Charred Man gone. They were idiots, but their strength was no joke. I can’t believe they were defeated so quickly…”

“Guess the world’s filled with scary opponents!”

“Quiet! All you have to do is follow my directions!”

“Yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time.”

“We will use the chaos of the fighting tournament to take Dimitris’s life!”

Epilogue

THE TOURNAMENT HAD finally begun. As one of the seeds, Fran wouldn't have to qualify this year. She wanted to, but Dias and the others stopped her from doing it. Think of the other contestants, they said, and she reluctantly complied.

Fran, we're over there.

"But the seats are right here."

You'll cause an uproar if you sit in the regular seats. You need to go to the VIP area so you don't draw attention.

"Fine."

Today, we were watching the qualifiers. We didn't know whether there were strong contestants, but we didn't have anything better to do.

Fran made her way to the VIP section, food stall snacks in her hand. Along the way, we spotted a familiar face who approached us.

"Kaitley."

"Lady Fran!"

Kaitley, adventurer-in-training and Fran's biggest fan, walked up to us with a man who looked like her bodyguard.

"Are you watching the tournament, too?"

"Hm. And you?"

"Of course." Kaitley said happily. But next to her was a girl who wore a look of concern on her face. One hand was holding Kaitley's while the other was gripping the hem of her skirt.

"Who's this?"

"This is Nilfe, Lord Dimitris's granddaughter."

"I-I'm Nilfe..." The girl introduced herself quietly.

If she was Dimitris's granddaughter, did that make her Hilt's sister? Her hair was the exact same shade of green, but there

wasn’t a trace of Hilt’s intimidating spirit in her. She seemed like any other weak and withdrawn girl.

“And this is Michael, Nilfe’s bodyguard.”

“Hello.”

The bald man behind Kaitley and Nilfe inclined his head. His body was ripped and he was well groomed. He seemed to be one of Dimitris’s students.

“Grandfather told me to show her around. He said an adventurer needs to act as a bodyguard and a guide.”

Aurel was completely on board with Kaitley becoming an adventurer. Kaitley had been tasked to be Nilfe’s guide since having someone her own age would make Nilfe more comfortable. But something Kaitley said caught Fran’s attention.

“I see. Then you shouldn’t have introduced us.”

“Huh?”

“Even if it’s an unofficial quest, you shouldn’t freely talk about your client. Even if you know them personally.”

Fran’s instruction hadn’t ended. It was the first time she had mentored someone, so she wanted to be thorough with Kaitley.

Kaitley owned her carelessness when Fran pointed it out to her.

“You’re right… I’m sorry, Nilfe.” Kaitley bowed her head like a newbie who had just botched a mission.

I didn’t think it was a big deal, but Kaitley took Fran’s advice seriously—especially since she respected her a lot.

“It’s too little too late. Nilfe’s the granddaughter of someone famous.”

“Yes…”

“N-no, it’s all right…” Nilfe shook her head. Even at her young age, she knew what was going on.

“Are you guys here to watch the qualifiers?”

“Y-yes…” Nilfe nodded. She had gained an interest in Fran after the respect Kaitley showed for her.

“Let’s go together.”

“Yes!”

“Yes…”

As we walked, Kaitley told Nilfe all about Fran’s adventures. Fran had corrected some of the details, but they were still greatly exaggerated.

Fran didn’t much care, though, so she kept quiet throughout the whole thing.

But Nilfe’s expression changed as Kaitley passionately told her about Fran. Despite the…*creativity* of Kaitley’s accounts, there was a growing respect in Nilfe’s eyes.

“W-wow…”

Trusting Kaitley, Nilfe didn’t think there was an ounce of exaggeration in her stories. She was still young, after all. She leaned in to listen to Kaitley, her small body trembling with excitement.

“She’s *so* cool…”

“Right? Lady Fran is amazing.”

“She is.”

Nilfe’s eyes were now glowing like Kaitley’s. It looked like Fran had gained a new fan.

Kaitley’s legend of Fran didn’t stop when we got to our seats. I wouldn’t be surprised if Nilfe thought Fran was as heroic as Dimitris.

Fran wasn’t looking to get Kaitley to stop, but she did ask her about her recent developments.

“How are things?”

“I’ve been training every day so I can be an adventurer. I’ve been running errands around town, too.”

In Ulmutt, there were jobs apprentices could take even before they were officially registered as an adventurer. These beginner errands came in droves every time the tournament came around.

Kaitley had a lot of fun with it since she could not only earn some coin, but also hear all sorts of rumors, too.

Especially rumors that came from all corners of the kingdom.

“Apparently, there’s been a rise in undead around Ulmutt lately.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know. The merchants think that it’s all the travelers who died trying to get here.”

“I see.”

“Travelers have mercenaries and bodyguards with them, and fights tend to break out between them.”

“Between mercenaries and adventurers?”

“There’s a lot of fighting among mercenaries, too. Grandfather’s been busy with an increase in frauds lately as well.”

Festivals always attract grifters.

“Oh, it’s starting!” Kaitley said as combatants entered the arena.

“Hm.”

The first qualifying round of the tournament was a battle royale.

Groups of five to six would fight each other, and the lone survivor would move on to the next round. Just like last year.

While fights among low-level fighters were boring, there were some strong competitors mixed in there, too. We also wanted to see the groups that had our friends in them.

Our three sales assistants back in Bulbola, the Crimson Maidens, were doing their best. They must have spent this past year training because they were much stronger compared to last year. Their levels and Skills were way up.

Still, they couldn’t make it through the qualifying round.

Their strength as a party lay in their teamwork, especially during dungeon expeditions. But Maya (thief) and Lydia (mage)

weren’t cut out for these tournaments. Being the strongest in their groups, they were immediately targeted and knocked out.

Meanwhile, their leader, Judith, was faced with a difficult matchup—one of Dimitris’s students. Even though he was still in training, he was at least as good as a C Rank. He was also among Hilt’s suitors.

According to Colbert, Hilt was the one who instructed most of the school’s students. Dimitris himself was always focused on his own training and didn’t care much about the survival of his style. Regardless, the fact that there were so many schools all over the land was testament to the number of people who wanted to study under Dimitris.

At first, they were only adventurers who trained the fundamentals of combat under him in between his adventures. But then Dimitris got interested in actually taking on students. His followers multiplied and now there were over a hundred people in his dojo.

Which actually wasn’t a lot considering that included fresh trainees. The training was so unbearably harsh that most applicants dropped out immediately. But I wouldn’t have been surprised if Dimitris’s reputation as an S Rank attracted thousands of applicants to replace those who quit.

The best of his students (the ones who didn’t quit) would be taught by Dimitris himself. His training was Spartan, breaking the spirit of many of his students.

Colbert and Hilt were among those still standing.

But despite Colbert’s ability, he was still only a senior student and not an instructor.

The ability of Hilt and the other instructors was practically guaranteed. So far, only three people had managed to gain the title of Instructor.

I wasn’t surprised. You had to make A Rank with your powers sealed, after all.

“Do you know the one who just lost?”

“Hm. She’s an adventurer from Bulbola.”

Fran had made an audible “Aww” when Judith lost. It didn’t escape Kaitley’s attention.

“I see. That’s unfortunate.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, Nilfe?”

“That was one of Grandpa’s students…” Nilfe hung her head and looked like she was about to cry. But Fran stopped her.

“It has nothing to do with you. It’s all between the fighters.”

“R-really?”

“Hm.”

“…Thank you.” Nilfe gave a smile of relief.

“Hm?”

Fran didn’t understand, but Nilfe must’ve been through a lot. As a relative of someone famous, she was probably the object of undue attention and unjust complaints.

Someone as bold as Dimitris was bound to have enemies. They probably extended their enmity to his granddaughter, too. The way she apologized for Judith’s defeat made it sound like this wasn’t the first time she’d done it.

“Young miss…”

“Thank you, Michael.”

Michael extended a handkerchief for Nilfe to wipe her tears. He was quite the gentleman on top of being strong.

But Fran had her eyes on him. He would steal glances at her, too. He probably bore a grudge the same way Hilt did for Colbert.

While he wasn’t outright hostile, we couldn’t let our guard down. He was clearly scanning Fran for weaknesses. So much for relaxing.

“Lady Fran, that’s one of the contestants who made it to the finals last year!”

“Hm. Charlotte.”

Charlotte also competed this year. While the gap between her and the Crimson Maidens wasn't that big, her style was much more suited to tournaments. She might make it pretty far this year.

No one could touch her as she danced across the battlefield, defeating her foes one at a time. Identify revealed that she was much stronger than she was last year.

She had gained some levels and changed her class. She'd been a Battle Dancer the last time we saw her, but now she was a War Dancer. She now had the Unique Skill Swooning Dance as well as a Skill called Jujitsu.

Last year, she lost to Elza due to a lack of attack power. She probably came prepared this year.

I guessed we should go console the Crimson Maidens. They were quite confident in their abilities this year, so they cried a bit after losing.

We needed to go say hi to Charlotte, too.

I wondered what other fighters we would see this year.

Afterword

THANK YOU for keeping up with this series.

What's that? This is your first time buying this title? I think you should remedy that mistake by getting the whole set. You might as well, now that you have the latest edition!

Hi, it's me, the author who messed up the page count and has to make up for it with an afterword.

Every word in this section is written with a gnashing of teeth.

What? Don't I have stuff to talk about?

Season 2 of the anime?

It's been greenlit, but I still can't talk about the details yet. It'll have to wait until next time.

No, really, I have nothing to talk about!

That's right, I wasted about half a page talking about how I have nothing to talk about.

That's right, I did it.

I'm sure some of you are waiting for season two of the anime. I hope.

Information about the anime will be announced when it's ready, so I ask that you wait a little bit longer.

Now for acknowledgments.

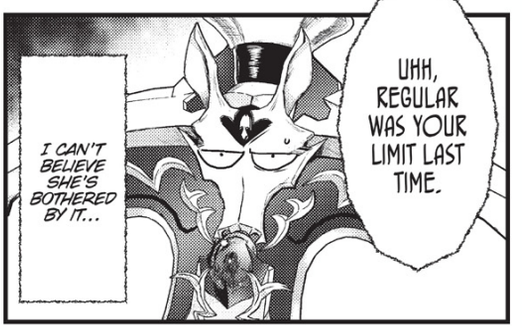
My editor, I-san. I know it's a lot of work working with a self-indulgent person like me, but thank you for your patience in dealing with me.

Llo. I say this every time, but your illustrations are great. Amazing.

Maruyama Tomowo-sensei. Thank you for the spectacular manga. The curry you draw is so mouthwatering that it makes me hungry.

All my friends and family. Everyone involved with the production of this series and all my faithful readers. I can continue writing only thanks to your support. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

READ ME <<<<<<<
RIGHT-TO-LEFT












SHAKE
SHAKE
SHAKE
MUNCH
NOM
HIC
THIS IS SO GOOD.
HIC
YOU OKAY? YOU'RE TEARING UP.
バタ
SLAM
FRAA-AAAN!
SHAKE
STOP!
FRAN, YOU'RE SHAKING! YOU CAN STOP AT ANY TIME!
MUNCH
SHAKE
MUNCH
I CAN'T LET YOUR CURRY GO TO WASTE...
I'M FINE. THIS IS MY TEST AS A WARRIOR ...
HM?!
FREEZE
FREEZE
NO MORE ULTRA SPICY FOR FRAN...
HERE! MILK! COME ON, DRINK UP!
END



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