Reincarnated as a Sword



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17
NOVEL

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Dias
Sibyl
Teacher
Fran
Hiltoria
"First up is
the strongest B Rank!
The strongest girl!
The strongest Black Cat!
Black Lightning
Princess Fran!"
"Her opponent has also
stepped into the arena!
Dimitris Style successor
and A-Rank adventurer!
Give it up for
Hiltoria of the
Piercing Fist!"


“Oooh!”
“One extra-large curry! You can eat all you want today!”

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17

written by

Yuu Tanaka

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Llo

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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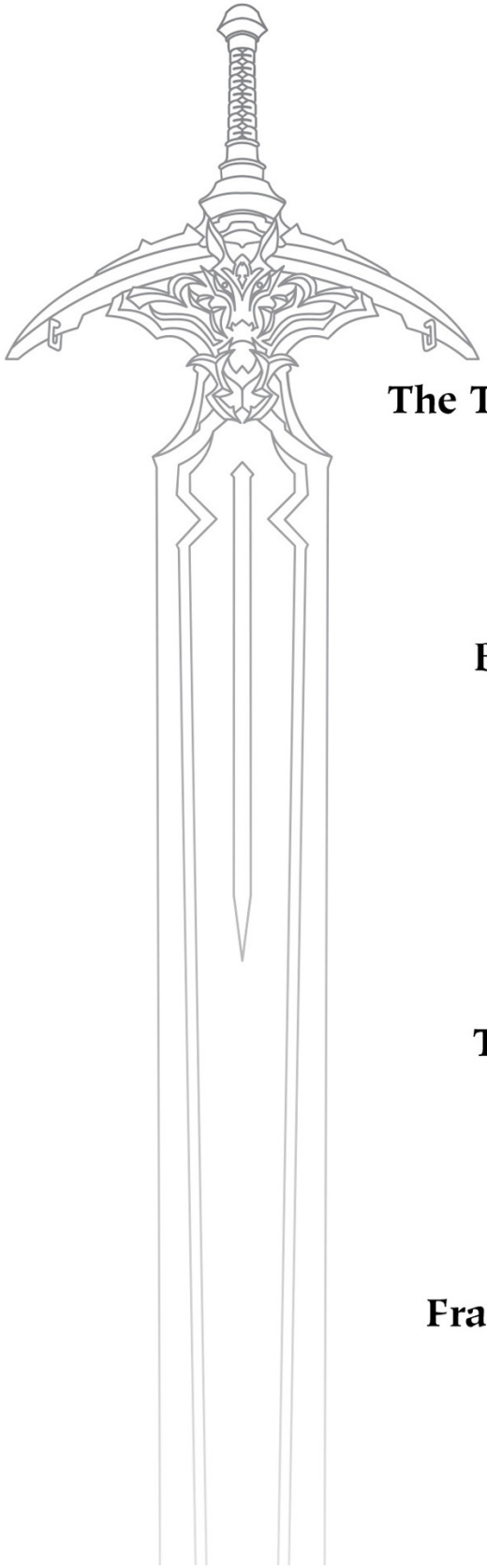
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Prologue

IT WAS ONE day after the Ulmutt qualifiers, and Fran stood before the coliseum. Top competitors should have their match schedules delivered to them, but she couldn't wait any longer to find out.

The matches are already announced, but… Didn't think we'd go up against an acquaintance.

…Who?

I don't blame you for not remembering him.

Sixty-four names were written on the giant wooden board. The names were split into two brackets of thirty-two which would ultimately meet in the middle.

Fran's name was the first on the chart.

As the previous year's third-place finisher, she was given the A Seed treatment.

At the bottom of Fran's bracket was the B Seed, Dias. Hiltoria was in the middle of the opposite bracket as a C Seed, while Phelms was on the opposite corner as a D Seed.

The seed selection was based on the competitors' previous placement. Their fame and accomplishments didn't count. This was why Fran was above Dias and Hilt (both A Ranks) despite being B Rank.

Being an A Seed sure felt good. It meant being the tournament favorite.

Fran felt the same way as she read the list with stars in her eyes.

Teacher, my name's first!

People will be watching you. We can't give them a bad show.

Hm! I'll do my best.

If things went smoothly, we would face Dias in the semifinals and either Hilt or Phelms in the finals.

Our first opponent is Dufaux.

I told her a little bit about him, since Fran seemed to be drawing a complete blank. Dufaux was one of the rookie adventurers of Bulbola. She'd actually sparred with him before.

Hm… Who?

And she was still completely lost!

Remember back in Bulbola when Gammod asked you to train some newbies?

The dwarven guildmaster had asked us to put the rookies in their place. We'd taken the same boat to the Beastman Nation with Riddick, Naria, and Miguel and trained during the trip.

Fran remembered those three, but the rest of the rookies might as well have been neglected footnotes.

He was an Illusion Blade who was the strongest of them.

…I guess?

Fran couldn't remember no matter how well I described him. As strong as Dufaux was, he was only strong for a *rookie*.

And our next likely match is—Mordred.

Fran nodded excitedly when she saw his name. She remembered Mordred. Not surprising. The B-Rank adventurer had taken on the bodyguard quest with her when we sailed for the Beastman Nation.

He was a strong and competent adventurer excelling both in combat and command. Good at spotting enemies, too. He used his spear and Steel Magic skillfully in a fight. His unique fighting style left a deep impression on her.

Mordred's first match is against Naria.

Naria!

As I said, Naria had studied under Fran for a short period of time. The rookie archer had somehow managed to qualify. Projectiles were at a disadvantage, given the arena's less than spacious size, causing most mages and archers to be eliminated in the preliminary battle royale. Naria must have really grown if she'd managed to make it. Fran also looked happy at her progress. She was excited to see how much stronger her student had become.

Still, one year probably wasn't enough time for her to best Mordred. If things went as predicted, he would be our second match.

I wonder who our third match will be?

"Hmm."

There weren't any other names we recognized in our block. All except for one.

Isn't Biscott the guy who was with Sibyl?

"Hm?"

Apparently, Fran didn't remember him. When I looked closer, Sibyl's name was also in this block.

I hadn't thought the (suspected) Raydossian spies would compete in the tournament. Were they not spies after all…or were they simply not thinking things through?

Their brackets were pretty close, too. They might end up fighting each other if they got unlucky.

Assuming Sibyl wins, we'll face her in the quarterfinals.

Hm. Looking forward to it.

Suddenly, the people around us started stirring. The same reaction as when Fran first set foot in the place. Had a famous adventurer just shown up?

We waited until a man eventually made it to the tournament board. Looking at him, I could understand the crowd's surprise. He had the head of an insect. A mantis's head on a human body. It wasn't a face anyone could soon forget.

"Ahem. Excuse me…"

I was expecting a scratchy bug's voice, but he sounded like an ordinary human. In fact, he sounded…*cool*. Like he was voiced by a handsome voice actor. Regal, almost.

He was strong, too. His silenced footfalls, his aura, everything about him screamed first-rate fighter. He didn't carry a weapon, so I thought maybe he fought barehanded, but perhaps he had retractable scythes in his arms.

If nothing else, Fran was excited to meet him. He was at least as strong as Colbert.

"Who's that?"

"Beats me. No insectoid halfling adventurers in Ulmutt last I checked."

"Must be from out of town. He looks tough, though."

"Yeah?"

"His movements are clean."

The Ulmutt adventurers didn't recognize him, either.He was from either another town or another country.

We couldn't let our guard down if powerful unknowns like him were competing in the tournament.

As we watched the mantis man check out the announcement board, his head suddenly turned to face Fran.

And his head literally turned. Like it was on a swivel. His body remained perfectly still. It looked like something straight out of a horror movie. *The Menacing Mantis Man!* Of all the mantis things he could have inherited, why did this have to be the one?

I readied myself to use telekinesis, but the mantis man unexpectedly asked, "Are you Fran the Black Lightning Princess?"

"Hm."

"I knew it! Thank you for helping my friends in the capital!"

The capital? So that means—

Is he acquainted with Erianthe?

Erianthe, the guildmaster of Granzell's capital, was a spider halfling. She was also acquainted with the insectoid-halfling mercenary band Feeler and Shell.

The mercenary band was unique in that it consisted solely of… Well, you get the idea.

"…Do you know Erianthe?"

"That I do!"

I knew it.

Mantis man sounded happy when Fran mentioned Erianthe. His face didn't betray any emotions, however, so the only thing we had to go on was the tone of his voice.

"I am Knighthart, captain of Feeler and Shell. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Knighthart put his right hand on his chest and bowed. A true gentleman.

"You're the captain?"

"Yes… Although the position was forced upon me since no one else wanted it."

Even so, I could tell that Knighthart's presence commanded respect. His humility and the other members' lack of command skills aside, he seemed fit for the position.

"I heard you were lovely, but you are far more beautiful than I imagined."

"Hm?"

"I apologize. I didn't mean to be so forward."

Knighthart was such a gentleman that I didn't sense any malice in his words.



"I thank you again for helping my friends. Please let me know if I can be of assistance. I owe you that much, at least. It is also my reason for being in this line of work. I simply love helping damsels in distress!"

Why was this mantis such a catch?!

"I'd say we're even. They helped me out, too."

"Aah, but I know *you* saved their lives. I truly am grateful for that."

"Okay."

"Even so, I won't hold back if we happen to cross paths in the tournament."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

Fran gave Knighthart a confident smile. She was getting excited just thinking how strong he could be.

The insectoid-halfling mercenaries we'd met at the capital were all strong. It followed that the captain must be stronger than the others. No wonder Fran's battle thirst was kicking in.

But Knighthart faced both Phelms and Elza in his block. He would have to get through both of them to fight Fran.

I wondered if he could do it.

"…Are the others here, too?"

"Robin and the rest are still helping Erianthe at the capital. But I think they'll be moving to a new warzone soon."

"I thought you were the captain."

"You're curious what I am doing here?"

"Hm."

"I am looking for new members. Among other things."

Knighthart's plan was to perform well at the tournament to act as a beacon for the other insectoid halflings.

Feeler and Shell was a mercenary band of only insectoid halflings, but they weren't being exclusive for its own sake. They wanted to help each other since insectoid halflings were seen as freaks by society.

They might get some harsh comments if their insect features weren't too pronounced; and that was fine. But with cases like Knighthart, halflings could face traumatic persecution.

It was these halflings that the band wanted to provide a safe haven for.

It was why Feeler and Shell recruited only insectoid halflings—foregoing humans, elves, dwarves, and all the other races.

But there weren't that many insectoid halflings with strong insectoid genes. It was unlikely that Knighthart could add to their ranks no matter how well he did.

"I'm looking to draw the other halflings out of the woodwork. I'm sure they will take notice if I perform well at the tournament."

At least Knighthart's looks would definitely get people talking. It increased the odds of word spreading about Feeler and Shell.

"I see."

"If you run into any insectoid halflings in your journey, please tell them about us."

"Sure. And if you run into any Black Cats, tell them about how to evolve."

"Very well. We shall aid each other in our endeavors."

Knighthart knew about the Black Cats' condition. He was also already aware of their evolution requirements.

The information probably came in handy for the mercenary band.

"Oh. There is one other thing I must tell you."

"Hm?"

"There seem to be people who are sniffing around for you. I don't know the exact details of who they are, but I do not think they are adventurers."

"Are they info gathering for the tournament?"

"Perhaps, but the tournament season attracts all kinds of ne'er do wells to Ulmutt. You may have inadvertently caused someone to bear a grudge against you. Such is the price of fame, I suppose. Regardless, do be careful."

"All right. Thanks for telling me."

"Think nothing of it. 'Til we meet again."

"Hm."

Knighthart bowed again before leaving.

So, there are people sniffing around for you.

Enemies?

I don't know. Maybe they're just looking into famous adventurers.

Jet was still keeping watch on Sibyl and the others. I would have to stay on guard instead.

Chapter 1:
The Tournament Begins

HOW YOU FEELING, Fran?

"Hm. Perfect."

It was a few days after we looked at the tournament schedule. Fran was walking down a dim hallway.

Great. What about you, Jet? Feeling all charged up after filling yourself with curry?

"Woof!"

A cheerful bark echoed from the shadows.

Jet had returned to our side this morning. Sibyl and her crew would be easier to watch since they were competing. Besides, the Adventurers' Guild would pick up the slack since Fran needed Jet with her for the tournament.

Fran nodded with her usual expression. As excited as she was, she wasn't overcome. She would be as composed as usual so she could perform as expected.

She kept her cool even after we got out of the hallway and heard the roaring of the crowd.

You're not nervous?

Huh? No.

Last year's tournament had helped her to get used to the noise. She was so calm that I felt bad for her opponent.

Fran was far too resilient.

On the other side of the arena was her opponent, looking mighty pale at this point.

He scanned the audience restlessly, muttering to himself. The nerves were definitely getting to him.

"C-calm down. J-j-just relax…"

This was Dufaux the Illusion Blade, Fran's first opponent.

He was still an Illusion Blade, but he had leveled up since last we saw him. His stats and Skills were much better.

However, he was not used to fighting in front of a large crowd. He was visibly shaking from the thousands of eyes watching him.

But seeing Fran seemed to have triggered something inside him.

The face of the young man nervously scanning the seats turned into that of a warrior. His pale countenance remained, however.

"Y-you're here!" His voice cracked sharply as he spoke. Maybe his paleness was a result of having to fight Fran instead of having to fight in front of a large crowd.

Maybe he remembered how Fran had given him an awful time during their last encounter. Now he had to face her again in his first real match.

No wonder he was afraid.

His fear of Fran seemed to have snapped the stage fright right out of him, but I wasn't sure if he was better for it.

"It's been a while! Y-you won't beat me the way you did last time!"

Fran, just nod for now.

"Hm."

I didn't have the heart to see Dufaux's spirit break further by Fran asking, "Who are you?"

Once the two contestants stood at the ready, a booming voice filled the arena.

"We are gathered here today for another year of Ulmutt's battle tournament! And our A Seed will be making her appearance in the first match of the day!"

I hadn't heard the commentator's voice in a year. His words were as fast as ever, introducing interesting competitors at lightning speed.

"Last year, she caused a huge upset by defeating some tournament favorites and placing third! The youngest ever beastgirl to place returns to Ulmutt this year! No longer a dark horse, but as the top seed! Give it up for adventurer Fran the Black Lightning Princess!"

The crowd erupted with applause after Fran's introduction. It almost sounded like they were welcoming an idol.

Fran had gotten a lot more popular than I expected.

It had only been a year since Fran last competed, and it looked like a lot of people remembered her feats.

She was also something of a legend among beastmen as an evolved Black Cat. In a sense, she really was an idol.

The crowd was filled with support and expectation.

"I don't know about you, but I can't wait to see what she has in store for us this year!"

Fran remained calm since she was used to the crowd, but Dufaux looked visibly dismayed. He was suddenly reminded that he would be fighting in front of thousands of people.

"In the other corner, making his Ulmuttian tournament debut, is D Rank Dufaux! He's still a young lad, but underestimate him at your own risk! His blade made quick work of his competition in the qualifiers and got him out without a scratch!"

The audience began murmuring among themselves. D Ranks didn't get out of qualifiers often. He was pretty young, too.

But, highlighting the difference in popularity, only some cheered for Dufaux.

Come on, guys! You're being rude! Applauding both competitors is basic manners!

But he was up against Fran, after all; she was younger and higher ranked. There wasn't much Dufaux could do against the rising star of the adventurers.

But Dufaux looked so nervous that he probably wasn't even aware of this. He was shaking as he struggled to draw his sword. This was his first match. In front of an insanely huge crowd. Against the terrifying Black Lightning Princess.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

Honestly, I wanted to give him a pat on the back for not passing out. His nerves completely flew over Fran's head, though.

"What's wrong?"

"I-it's nothing!"

"Uh-huh."

Being unacquainted with the word 'nervous,' Fran couldn't understand why his movements were so stiff.

She followed his lead and drew her sword. Dufaux flinched. He was clearly afraid of me.

The memory of me slicing through his arms and legs must still have been fresh in his mind. He'd probably start freaking out if he saw Jet's face.

As much as I would've liked to see that, I felt bad enough for him that I stopped myself from calling Jet out.

Fran and Dufaux stood at opposite sides of the arena; one with calm on her face and the other with fear on his. The mere sight of it was enough to tell you who was going to win.

"FIGHT!"

And so the match commenced.

"Raaah!"

Dufaux charged at the ring of the bell, putting all of his weight into a horizontal strike. As expected, he used his Skills as an Illusion Blade to conceal his sword.

An Illusion Blade had many Skills to confuse his enemies by cloaking his weapons. Though not damaging by themselves, they could help Dufaux land a fatal blow in one strike.

From what I remember, he could change the length of his sword and could make his longsword look like a greatsword, among other things.

Now, Dufaux could turn his sword fully invisible, making it look like he was fighting with his bare hands.

"Uoooh!"

He waved his seemingly empty right hand across. This was where his sword had been just a moment ago. Even if his sword was invisible, the audience could tell that it would strike true.

But Fran didn't even look like she was trying to avoid it. She merely swayed to the side as if she was avoiding a thrust attack.

Everyone thought that the Black Lightning Princess would take a hit. But Dufaux only groaned in frustration.

"You saw through that…?!"

"Not bad. But I can tell."

Dufaux's invisible sword wasn't in his right hand. He had quietly switched his sword over to his left hand and made a thrusting attack with it.

The sword was perfectly invisible, so he must have put a lot of work into it. There was only the faintest of outlines, not something you could see if it was your first time facing Dufaux.

Unfortunately, Dufaux was up against Fran. She had seen the invisible sword trick before and recognized its movements. She knew that he was going for a stab.

"Impossible—Aargh!"

Fran's fist slammed into Dufaux's side, leaving a dent in his gut. He immediately lost his footing and crumpled to the ground.

"You've gotten better, but you can't beat me yet."

"Dammit…"

"I can read you because you don't fake with your eyes. Your feet are predictable, too."

"…"

Fran finally remembered Dufaux after seeing the illusion blade.

But I don't think he heard her. He'd passed out by this point.

"Utter domination in under five seconds! I hope you didn't get out of your seat because you would've missed the whole match! The Black Lightning Princess is out for blood this year!"

Fran turned her back on the echoing commentary and returned to the northern hallway.

We won.

"Hm!"

It was all over in a second, but Fran was satisfied. Regardless of how the fight went, she was simply happy to win a tournament match.

Let's eat something nice tonight to celebrate.

"Curry?"

Sure. I'll make you one with menchi-katsu *and a big sunny side up.*

"I want pork *katsu*, too!"

Okay, okay. I'll give you extra-large servings of everything.

"Whoa."

"Bark, bark!"

Jet popped out of the shadows between Fran's legs as she was clapping. The wolf wanted in on the curry action, too.

Fran looked like she would have trouble walking with a wolf between her legs, though.

All right! I'll get some for you, too; just go back inside!

"Arf."

As we were making our way out, a man stood in the middle of the hallway. He looked to be in his forties and unathletic. His eyes were hazy with an oily sheen. I shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but his looks suggested that he wasn't all that clean on the inside either.

He was clearly waiting for Fran. This might get messy.

As expected, the man immediately approached Fran when he saw her and started yapping.

"Are you the Black Lightning Princess?"

"Hm."

"Hmph. You really are just a child—"

Fran nodded but didn't bother stopping. The man chased her, taken aback that she had just kept walking.

"W-wait!"

"No. I have a match to get to."

The next match would be between Mordred and Naria. Fran wanted to scout out whatever information she could.

And she wasn't about to stop for some weirdo who hadn't even introduced himself.

Fran would've been a little bit considerate if the man had been strong. But he was a run-of-the-mill shrimp who couldn't handle himself in a fight.

I knew because I'd Identified him. He had combat Skills, sure, but his stats were awful.

He had intimidation and negotiation Skills, so he was probably good at threatening and making deals with his opponents. Probably a stereotypical power-abusing noble.

None of that would work on Fran.

"Get back here! I am—"

Fran sped up and left the man in the dust before he could say anything. She ran up the wall to maintain her speed as she turned a corner, scaring several pedestrians before finally making it to the VIP area. I think she was wall running for a good five seconds.

That was uncalled for, Fran.

"Hm?"

Never mind. Wonder who that guy was?

He'd been deliberately waiting for her. Maybe he was some kind of messenger?

"Don't care. The match is more important."

Won't argue with you there.

We couldn't just pretend that we didn't see him, but the guy's timing was just terrible. We might hear him out if someone filed a complaint about Fran. If they still insisted on being a bother, we would whip out the medal we got from the Beastman Nation. Fran and I weren't opposed to pulling rank to solve our problems!

Looks like the match is about to start.

"Hm. We made it."

The people in the VIP area murmured when Fran entered the seats. Despite being VIPs, this was their first time seeing her up close.

But no one tried to strike up a conversation with her. They were all well-mannered.

One person even gave up his seat for her.

"You can have my seat. Checking out your next opponent, aren't you?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. My daughter's a fan of yours. She'll be so jealous when I tell her you got my seat."

"Thanks."

The bards really had a lot of influence on the world.

The match started just as Fran was sitting down. Mordred made the first move in the arena below.

He wore his typical blue armor and black cloak. The sunburnt adventurer looked as dandy as ever with his vermillion hair up in a bun. His rugged looks only added to his appeal of being the man all the boys wanted to be.

On the other side was Naria, an archer. The girl looked no different from the last time Fran saw her, but her presence was more pronounced. She must've trained really hard.

She was pelting Mordred with arrows while backing away as he closed in on her.

Mordred faced the hail of arrows, each powerful enough to kill a goblin in a single strike.

Naria's hand was already nocking another arrow into her bowstring, launching them one after another. What's more, the aura arrows her Bow Arts produced had a slightly different trajectory from her regular arrows.

Her speed and Bow Arts must have been how she got through the qualifying battle royale. She'd always had abilities which allowed her to attack through her allies' sides and faces. But now, her increase in speed and power really made her artillery something to be reckoned with.

Fran was nodding in satisfaction at seeing her short-term student's progress.

"Naria's been working."

She has.

Naria must've continued her hard training even after she crossed over to the Beastman Nation. The fruits of her labor were clearly visible.

But it wasn't enough to beat Mordred.

"Spear Art: Spiral Guard."

"What?! You can do that?"

Mordred deflected the hail of arrows by spinning his spear in his hands. Using the move didn't slow him down one bit, allowing him to continue his charge. The battle was now in Mordred's optimal range.

Naria knew about Mordred. Both from their crossing to the Beastman Nation and from the fact that he was quite the famous B Rank.

She knew that she didn't have a chance to defeat him at close range.

But Naria held her ground. She feinted a retreat before leaning in to leap at him.

"Haaa!"

"Oh?!"

Mordred's spear stopped when Naria suddenly threw away her bow and arrow. He was caught off guard as she stepped into his spear's dead spot, attacking him from the inside.

And it was a good choice on Naria's part. Spears were difficult to use at point-blank range. A dagger was in her hand; she'd taken

Fran's teaching to heart.

"Taaah!"

Naria planted her dagger in Mordred's stomach, all the way to the hilt.

Or so it seemed.

"Steel Magic…"

Mordred used his Steel Magic just as the point of the dagger made contact, melting the blade. The only thing pressing against Mordred now was the handle of Naria's dagger.

"Not bad."

"Ugh…"

Mordred, having regained control of his spear, struck the back of Naria's head with its hilt, knocking her out cold.

Guess we're fighting Mordred.

"Hm. He's clever."

Yeah. I couldn't tell when he started casting his spell.

He probably had an incantation at the ready for when things got too close. Not only was he well prepared, he was also good at hiding his casting and slowing down the pace of battle.

"Clever" was just the right word to describe him.

"…I have to go."

Fran? What's wrong?

Fran got up and started walking.

It was a shame that she didn't want to keep watching the tournament after getting a seat for herself. But Fran kept on walking… though not toward the exit.

A few minutes later, we reached a room where a girl was sitting, dejected and hanging her head.

Fran approached and said, "That was a good match."

"Lady Fran, you're here!"

"Hm."

We entered Naria's waiting room.

The waiting room locations weren't something you could easily learn, but the staff gave Fran directions when she asked. They were so enthusiastic in telling her that I worried for the competitors' privacy.

But I guess Fran was an exception. Rank, popularity, and status were so influential here that they'd make black into white if she wanted it to be. I couldn't imagine this happening back on Earth.

Of course, we weren't about to abuse our power to that extent.

Other familiar faces were gathered in Naria's room. All were Fran's former students on the boat. Miguel the greatsword user and Riddick the lancer were both cheering Naria up. Apparently, they'd both been knocked out in their qualifiers.

"This tournament is filled with monsters, honestly…"

"Everyone's out to prove who the strongest in all the land is, after all. You've got famous adventurers and unknowns coming out of the woodwork."

"That's what the swordsman who beat me felt like. All I saw was this woman with red hair and next thing I know I'm lying on the ground. How have we never heard of her before?"

Riddick and Miguel both sighed along with Naria. But a woman with red hair?

"Did you catch her name, Miguel?"

"Huh? I dunno…I'm not sure. All I know is that she had red hair and carried a sword. Seemed kind of full of herself. But I don't think I actually saw her *use* the sword, though."

That was probably Sibyl. And now we knew that she might use a sword.

Fran enjoyed fighting tough opponents, but she got even more fired up when she was up against another swordsman. She smiled, looking forward to clashing with Sibyl.

"I'm going back to spectate."

"Thank you for coming to see us!"

"Hm. What are you guys gonna do now?"

"We'll meet up with Dufaux and check out the dungeons, I guess… Then we'll train hard for another year."

"I see. Good luck."

"Thank you, Ma'am!"

Naria was down but not out. She knew that her strategy had worked against Mordred, albeit briefly. I thought she'd fought bravely,

too. And if her dagger had been enchanted, it might have actually stood a chance against Mordred's Steel Magic.

If nothing else, she would've had more opportunities to fight back. Maybe people would say she was only delaying the inevitable, that she was only fighting to stay in the ring. But I thought it could've led to big opportunities for Naria. If she could've worked out a finishing move, those few seconds might have been enough to turn the tides of battle.

In simple terms, she'd put up a good fight and didn't feel like her training was for nothing. She was already smiling by the time she left the room. It was the same smile Fran wore when she wanted to work something out in training.

Good luck out there.

"Hm?"

I was just wishing your students the best. They've got potential.

"Hm. Naria's working hard. She'll get through next time."

I concur.

As we were making our way back to our seat, a man approached us. He didn't look very happy.

"Hey, you!" he shouted loudly with discontent. It was the same fuming fatty Fran had left behind earlier.

Fran's mood immediately plummeted even though her face didn't show it. Whatever he had to say couldn't be good. I could only pray that Fran wouldn't just punch him in his face.

“How dare you ignore me! The gall! How can a child like you be strong in the first place? The adventurers circulate such worthless rumors!”

“…”

“Hmph. In any case, I bring you glad tidings!”

“Hm?”

“My king wishes to employ you as a knight for our country. This is the first time in our country’s history that a lowly adventurer is granted knighthood!”

So, he was a messenger from another country. This was a weird invitation, though. If he really wanted Fran to be a knight, why be so rude?

Did he not actually want her to be a knight? Why was he was picking a fight?

“There will be a test, of course! You’ll have to do a task for me first. Accomplish it, and you will be a knight for our glorious country __”

“Save it. I don’t want to be a knight.”

“Wh-what? Did I hear you correctly? I said you have a chance to be a *knight*, adventurer! You should be groveling at my feet in gratitude!”

“Are you an idiot? I don’t want anything to do with a country that has fools like you in it. I’d rather die.”

“Y-you *mangy* beast of an adventurer…!”

"Better than a pig dressed up as a noble."

"Y-y-you little bitch!"

I didn't know what the man was up to, but he'd only succeeded in making an enemy out of Fran. Fran glared at him menacingly after he somehow disrespected beastmen and adventurers at the same time.

Fran! Stop! You need to hold back!

"E-eeegh!" The man was shaking in terror after facing a moment of Fran's unadulterated rage. His knees buckled and he fell on his haunches. A mysterious stain began to spread on the floor…

You've done it now.

Serves him right.

The man cowered and babbled as he continued to piss himself. And now the fear made him talk more. This dog's bark was definitely worse than his bite.

"Y-you beast! D-d-do you know who I am?! I am Baron Emmert! A high noble of the Chalus kingdom! A-and you have the gall to *glare* at me?! B-b-bow down this instant and lick my heels or I'll kill you!"

Let's shut him up.

"Hm."

I put up a soundproof barrier with a wind spell. We didn't have to worry about him going anywhere with his legs swept from under him.

The problem was that he wasn't lying. Apparently, he really was a baron of Chalus. We couldn't kill him, and I wasn't sure we could

just knock him out either. Fran might end up on someone's hit list.

The baron who'd pissed his pants continued to complain, ignorant of the wind barrier around us, until a figure came running down the hallway. It was a man about thirty years old.

A look of despair came upon his face when he saw Baron Emmert.

"B-Baron Emmert…!"

Crap, was he a friend of his? This might get annoying if he caused a scene here… I readied myself for the worst, but then something unexpected happened.

"O-our deepest apologies, Black Lightning Princess!"

The baron's associate got on all fours.

Baron Emmert had threatened Fran and then wet himself at a mere dirty look from her…now, his peer was grinding his head against the floor, begging for mercy.

"I am Relien Chart. A count of the kingdom of Chalus!"

Another noble…? What is this Chalus kingdom, anyway?

Chalus is a small kingdom located on the southern coast of Granzell. It produces various ores, but most of it is exported and traded for food.

P.A. to the rescue!

So, it's a small kingdom with not a lot of firepower?

Yes. Chalus has trouble producing its own food due to the lack of flat lands and its high salt content. Importing food puts a significant

strain on its national budget.

You can't eat rocks, I guess. It must have been looked down on by its food-producing neighbors.

Do you think they're involved in some kind of conspiracy?

I do not have enough information to determine that.

Figures…

As I was listening to P.A., Count Chart continued his apology.

"I apologize for the incredible rudeness of this idiot! I don't know what he said to you, but his words do not represent our country's sentiments! They are all his personal…*opinions*!"

He's cutting Emmert off at the knees…

"So, he has nothing to do with your country?"

"H-he isn't influential enough to even be here, really! We think of him as scum back home."

"So why is he here?"

"W-well… I-I suppose our new king made an error of judgment. I don't even need this man as an aide."

So, he got sent on a mission to recruit Fran despite not usually having an important office in Chalus. Had he bribed the king or something? The count said they had a new king, so maybe Chalus was going through some hard policy changes.

Count Chart knew how foolish Baron Emmert could be. He was more than ready to throw hiscompanion under the bus. It almost felt

like Emmert had been brought along precisely because of how awful of a person he was. He made the perfect fall guy.

In fact, Emmert was currently under the status Swollen Desire. It probably made it easier to blame him for *everything* wrong that happened on this trip. He would shoulder the responsibility in precisely these situations. Though Chart couldn't take back what Emmert said, he could at least save his own life by putting the blame on him.

But he hadn't been expecting Emmert to pull a stunt like this.

"He said that the king wanted me to be a knight."

"Oh! That's something of a…figure of speech. Perhaps Baron Emmert came on a bit too strong."

"Hm?"

"It is true that our king has taken an interest in you! It is also true that he is thinking about knighting you! But we have no intention of forcing you to be a knight for us! We had every intention of accepting your refusal!"

That last part was a lie.

But he was telling the truth when he said he wasn't going to force her to be a knight. The original plan must've been to keep negotiating with Fran as long as they were here. And now that plan had gone up in smoke with Baron Emmert jumping the gun.

They didn't look like they were part of a secret conspiracy. At least, I didn't think so. They were just a couple of pushy nobles looking for recruits. However…

I thought it was about time we pulled out the heavy artillery.

Fran, it's time.

Time for what?

The medal you got from the Beastman Nation.

Ooh, of course.

The medal was specifically made for situations like this. It was time we got some use out of it!

Fran took the shining gold medal out of Pocket Dimension and held it up in the air with a victory pose.

I told her what she needed to say.

"Do you see this medal?"

"Th-that's…!" Count Chart backed away fearfully.

That was exactly the reaction I'd wanted! Good job!

He recognized the Golden Beast Fang for what it was and grew paler than before.

"It seems you do."

"Y-y-yes!"

His head was completely stuck to the floor now. He seemed to be trying to dig a hole with it.

His overreaction was starting to make me cringe, though. It wasn't like Fran was Beastman Nation leader or anything.

Then again, Chalus probably didn't want to antagonize the Beastman Nation in the slightest given their difference in size. And

one of Chalus's nobility had just been incredibly rude to Fran to say the least… No wonder Count Chart was on the floor.

If this wasn't enough to send the message, nothing was.

"I'm leaving now."

"Yes! We apologize for getting in your way!"

Count Chart had his forehead still plastered to the floor when Fran left him. Baron Emmert was still complaining when we took off the soundproof barrier, but now he was the Count's problem to deal with. He'd better, if he was smart!

They won't be bothering us anymore.

"Hm."

Still, I think we should report this to the guild. They might be able to handle it in a formal way.

Fran would probably get more invitations like that as she got more famous… Such was the price of fame, and I was not happy about it.

We muddled our way back to the VIP area and made it in time for the next match.

The next match is between Biscott and one of Dimitris's students. Sibyl also has a match today.

"Looking forward to it."

Biscott was the big man who had been with Sibyl. He was a fierce warrior in his own right. He was tall, bulky, and muscular. I imagined him to be quite a power fighter.

Biscott entered the arena with a powerful aura. I think he was probably a blood knight, too. He was grinning as he scratched his slicked-back blond hair. His face was like that of a teenager who was up to no good despite being over the age of twenty.

I Identified Biscott from the stands, but it wasn't working properly. He probably had some disrupting gear on him.

"Big shield."

Is he a shielder? It feels enchanted.

"Hm. Looks hard."

Biscott's was equipped with a large tower shield; big enough to cover even his gigantic body. It looked incredibly thick, too.

He was armed with a hammer. Its handle was two meters long and it had a gigantic metal head hanging at the end.

Block with the shield, finish the opponent off with one good swing of the hammer. It was the standard strategy for a shielder, except his gear was oversized. It didn't look like a regular human could even lift his equipment. But here was Biscott wielding these heavy arms like they were standard issue. It was a testament to his raw strength.

It was also something that even an elite adventurer couldn't do without specializing. Such equipment would fare great against monsters, but what about humans? Especially one who was a fast and agile martial artist.

I'm really interested in seeing how he handles this fight.

"Hm."

I guess Dimitris's student will be wearing gauntlets…

"He's strong."

He has to be if Dimitris allows him to compete.

His name was Zelt. A man with short black hair and a tough-looking face. If I was being honest, he looked like a gorilla.

He was strong, too. He'd have made a good match for Colbert in his sealed state. In fact, Zelt was also sealed.

He was currently undertaking the Dimitris Style initiation exam. Thirty years old, he was about the same level as Colbert and was similarly experienced.

Let's see how this fight goes down.

"Hm."

"Woof."

The two contestants bowed to each other in the arena.

"Let's have a clean fight."

"Sure! Can't wait to see what those fists of yours can deal out."

Zelt was the first to initiate his offense.

"Here I come, Shielder!"

"Hey, you're pretty quick!"

As expected, Zelt leveraged his superior speed against Biscott. He struck against a blind spot to throw Biscott off balance.

The offense was beautiful to behold.

Sorry for judging you so quickly, Zelt. I thought you were going to be a rough and rowdy power fighter. But your fighting style and

even your speech are classy!

"Sei! Haaa!"

"You're like a cockroach, you're so persistent!"

"I don't think I'm as fast as a cockroach."

"Are cockroaches that fast here?"

The two combatants held a conversation as they moved at high speed. I couldn't tell if they were trying to throw each other off or if they were just actually having a chat.

But Biscott's guard wouldn't crack under Zelt's continued pressure. He blocked all the attacks and proved to be very fast despite his size. The few stray hits that landed didn't even faze him.

"Did a mosquito just bite me?"

"You're tougher than you look!"

"You gotta hit harder than that to knock me down!"

"Way ahead of you!"

Zelt sped up even further. His fast footwork caused his shape to blur in the distance, and his fists were practically impossible for the average person to see.

Zelt's gauntlets clashed with Biscott's greatshield, producing a string of shrill metallic clangs. The volume of the ringing showed the intensity of the attack.

Sometimes, a dull clang would sound instead when Biscott's armor was hit. Zelt was no longer watching and waiting; he was going for the knockout. But it still wasn't enough.

"Oof! D-didn't feel nothin'!"

"I'd tell you to stop acting tough, but I don't think you are. You took all those hits and you're still standing."

"Toughness is all I've got! This body won't go down just from a few punches!"

"Your parents must have been monsters!"

"Too bad I've never seen their faces!"

Now it was Biscott's turn. He set his feet to the ground and pushed with his shield. But Zelt easily dodged the shield bash and resumed his offense.

"I'm sorry to hear that!"

"Don't be! I've got friends! Never felt lonely in my life!"

The battle continued as the two's conversation took a dark turn. Did Biscott grow up in the slums? I guess that wasn't exactly uncommon in this world…

"Haaa!"

"Come on! You can do better than that!"

Something had changed amidst the metallic ringing we had grown accustomed to. Zelt was attacking less frequently now. Upon closer inspection, red liquid was seeping through the cracks of his gauntlets.

Biscott wasn't just sitting there and taking his attacks; he was actively counterattacking with his shield, damaging Zelt's fists. His bashes were potent enough to penetrate his sturdy gauntlets.

Zelt's expression twisted in vexation. He wasn't expecting Biscott to counter so perfectly. Biscott couldn't even see him because of his gigantic shield.

This was not a difference in brute force, but strategy.

Biscott had been provoking Zelt so he would increase the speed of his attacks. The faster he was, the easier it was for him to crush his fists with his shield.

I hadn't expected Biscott to be such a tactician because of his musclehead looks. Zelt probably felt the same way. He was more frustrated at himself for underestimating his opponent than he was at Biscott for outplaying him.

Zelt's fists were now badly damaged while Biscott was looking as fresh as when the match started.

The battle was in Biscott's favor now. The crowd had also started cheering for the dark horse.

"…I'm sorry."

"What for? You want me to go easy on you or something?"

"No. For underestimating you."

"Oh…that. Hell, I didn't come up with this tactic. Someone taught me to use Fist Killer every now and again."

Zelt smiled wryly as Biscott revealed that he wasn't the one who thought of the tactic. But his expression soon stiffened as he braced his bloodied fists.

"I-I see. Still, I think you deserve to be proud of yourself for pulling it off."

"Really? Thanks. So…do you wanna keep fighting or what?"

"Of course. My next match no longer matters now. I'm going to have to give it my all to defeat you."

Zelt's aura changed.

His cheerful demeanor shifted into battle mode. His gorilla face grimaced as he exuded his bloodlust. He was serious about giving it his all.

Biscott was also deepening his concentration.

The atmosphere between the two combatants intensified. The audience felt it and slowly went silent.

When they did, Zelt initiated his attack.

The audience probably couldn't tell what happened…but we could.

Zelt put all of his power into this forward acceleration. The floor of the arena cracked and Zelt appeared right next to Biscott.

Biscott was looking for his opponent when he disappeared. He couldn't keep up with Zelt's speed.

"Where did you…?!"

"Haaaa!"

"Gah!"

Zelt maintained his speed and ran Biscott over with a hooking lariat. He hit Biscott's side, shattering his metal armor.

Biscott flew away as he took an impact strong enough to rupture a hole in the side of his stomach.

"Gaaah! *Koff*…! That hurt!"

"That wasn't enough!"

Biscott landed and skidded, somehow managing to stay on his feet. He was coughing up a lot of blood, a clear sign that his insides were heavily damaged. The pain alone should have been enough to incapacitate a man, but Biscott was still standing. His endurance was inhuman.

As a shielder, he was probably used to being on the front lines as a target for his enemies.

"Heh. Broke your arm?"

Zelt chuckled back, "And it would seem that your organs are quite the mess."

"Dunno. Can't see 'em."

Both wore confident smiles, but both were significantly injured.

Zelt's right gauntlet was shattered, the fist underneath crushed. There were even shards of metal stuck inside. It didn't look like he could use it to attack anymore.

Meanwhile, the skin under Biscott's shattered armor was turning a nasty shade of purple. Some of his ribs were definitely broken. The fact that he was coughing blood meant that whatever injury he had wasn't going to heal quickly.

Neither of them could fight for much longer.

The next interaction would determine the winner.

"Looks like the match is almost over, old man."

"What? I may look old, but I am only thirty. I'm not that old yet."

"Ha! Yeah, you are!"

"I don't think I'm *that* much older than you."

"I'm younger than I look."

The two continued their banter while concentrating their mana. Somehow, they got along quite well.

Fran, and everyone in the audience, waited for the two combatants to strike with bated breath.

"Here goes."

"Bring it!"

Zelt was on offense. Biscott on defense. Both staked their tournament lives on their preferred fighting style.

"Haaa! Sei! Doraaa!"

"Not bad for a guy with broken fists…! Ugh!"

Red blood burst as Zelt focused his energy.

Zelt's bones went through his skin as he punched Biscott's shield with his broken fist, but there was no stopping him. He was putting his all into this one strike.

Biscott's shield began to buckle with a dull ring. A large dent formed on its surface as Biscott's face winced. He was feeling the shockwave of Zelt's fist. He hadn't been expecting a frontal attack. What's more, Zelt managed to pull off a feint to render Biscott's Fist Killer ineffective.

"Deyaaa!"

"Tch!"

Zelt is actually breaking Biscott's shield!

Cracks started appearing in Biscott's greatshield before its lower half exploded.

Wow!

Woof!

Zelt's left arm twisted as his fist turned a purplish red. Little wonder, since he was still punching the hard shield.

But his attack didn't end there.

"I have you now!"

He thrust out his crumpled right arm with a screwing jab. Charged with mana, he planted his right fist into Biscott's stomach…

What?!

Something weird's going on.

Biscott's shield barely managed to block Zelt's fist, as if he had read its trajectory. Though halved, the shield was still big enough to be useful. Biscott had excellent reflexes, but what Zelt did next was even crazier.

He had leaned forward so that his upper body was *floating*, and he still delivered a telephone punch despite his broken posture. Was he so focused on winning that he overcommitted? No, a martial artist as experienced as Zelt wouldn't make such a rookie-level mistake.

Did Biscott do something? That seemed the most likely explanation, but I couldn't see what he did. Was it an illusion spell or

a telekinetic skill? The possibilities were endless.

"Uraaah!"

"Gaha!"

His attack deflected, Zelt didn't have time to avoid Biscott's shield bash. He was flung away as he ate the counterattack from what was left of the broken shield. Zelt was thrown high in the sky before his beefy body finally landed outside the arena.

And so, the victor was decided.

Biscott had come from behind after Zelt's utter domination in the first half of the match. They were both strong, but in the end, Biscott's defense proved to be superior.

The audience erupted with applause.

He's one tough nut to crack.

"Hm!"

Fran was probably thinking about what it would be like to fight him. She was watching him with a motivated look on her face.

Sibyl's match was next, but we couldn't really gather anything out of it. The whole thing was over in five seconds.

At least we know she uses a sword.

"And speed."

Light armor, no shield. You're probably right.

We had high expectations for her next match. She would be up against Colbert, after all. No matter who won, we would get some decent scouting out of it.

After that, we made our way to the Adventurers' Guild to file a report about the Chalusian messengers.

Fran explained the situation to a receptionist since Dias and Elza weren't around. Then the receptionist said something surprising…

"Chalus again?"

"…Again?"

"Yes. Chalusians have been causing a lot of trouble lately."

Apparently, they had been harassing the other competitors, too. They were indiscriminately extending invitations to everyone who was famous.

The receptionist let out a tired sigh. "They have been a real bother…"

"Can't you just keep them out?"

"We can't. Every country wants powerful adventurers working for them. They're not really doing anything illegal."

The guild couldn't really kick them out of town for mildly inconveniencing competitors. At worst, they were only guilty of being rude and pushy.

"But it's kind of weird."

"Weird?"

"Yes. Their demeanor and conditions are so bad that it almost feels like they don't *want* anyone to sign on with them."

Baron Emmert was apparently the rule instead of the exception. The Chalusians would anger adventurers, then get on all fours to beg

for mercy and apologize.

It's hard to stay angry at nobility when they're groveling. The sheer comedy of it was enough for most people to let them off the hook. At the end of the day, the Chalusians' negotiations with adventurers were fruitless, only resulting in irritating their prospects.

"They're so misbehaved for being their country's representatives. It would be a different story if they were messengers of some local nobility, but they're government officials. The whole thing is strange."

"So you don't think they're Chalusians?"

Were they trying to besmirch the kingdom of Chalus…? But our lie detector Skill said that they were legitimate.

"…Is it some kind of conspiracy?"

"I don't know. I don't even know the purpose of them doing this! But they're certainly keeping us busy. Security has had to be increased. We can't have the competitors beating up these nobles…"

They might be dumb jerks, but they were still nobles.

As I sympathized with the receptionist, she looked Fran straight in the eye. "Lady Fran, *please* just ignore them if they pester you again. I'm begging you here! *Please*!"

I guessed that she had heard how…*intense* Fran could be when handling unwanted solicitation. The receptionist looked like she was about to get on all fours, too.

"Okay."

"Really? I'm trusting you here!"

"Hm."

"Please stay out of trouble!"

Come on, lady, don't cry! I would do my best to stop Fran if she got out of hand. I felt genuinely sorry for the girl.

But what was Chalus up to?

Side ???

"Urgh…!"

"Hee hee hee. Is something the matter? You look like you're about to pop a blood vessel."

"Al Azif is missing! Do you know where he went?"

"I suppose he's out for lunch."

"He's undead. He doesn't eat! He just wants to go out and kill people!"

"I know. But you don't expect me to stop him, do you?"

"Does he not know how serious the situation is?! The Black Bones will be labeled as failures if the current plan is unsuccessful!"

"Calm down."

"And the place is swarming with high-rank adventurers!"

"He'll be fine. He's very good at stealth."

"Go and get him right now!"

"Fine. But you know how it is. I am carrying out my part of the plan, and I don't have many pawns I can move."

"I know. But you're in a better spot than we are."

"A member of the Black Bones would be immediately spotted if he sortied, after all."

"Indeed. I can't believe that Al Azif! And after I made it clear that he was not to move around!"

"A lot of strong people are in the city right now."

"That is the problem with that blood knight cannibal!"

"People might get suspicious if these strong people started disappearing one by one."

"We can't risk being exposed! In fact, this may very well affect *your* plans."

"We have a number of adventurers that can be turned into pawns this time of year. We just need to be careful."

"All right."

"But I would much prefer it if you could avoid making a scene."

"I know. I'm putting a lot of effort into lying low."

"Are you sure? Your country has a tendency to underestimate adventurers. You'll pay for it if you keep doing that."

"Shut up! Just hurry up and look for Al Azif!"

"All right, all right. I heard you the first time. I have a match to get to, so I'll be taking my leave. Try not to freak out and reveal our hand."

"Leave before I kill you!"

"Hee hee hee!"

*

On the second day of the tournament, the C and D brackets would be having their first matches.

"Hilt's here."

"Woof."

We were watching the fights from the VIP area again. Fran told Jet to sit in front of her so she could hug him from behind. She put her chin on his head while enjoying his fluffiness.

Let's see what kind of matches we have in store for us today.

"Hm."

A tall girl with dark green hair pulled into a side ponytail entered the arena. She wore a tube top around her chest with a short-sleeved dress armor on top and shorts on the bottom. She also wore knee-high socks on her legs—equipment clearly made for agility.

The girl looked beautiful and healthy with her exposed midriff… but her blood-caked knuckle dusters told a different story.

Identify only confirmed her strength. She was worthy of being an A Rank and Dimitris's successor.

Name: Hiltoria

Age: 23

Race: Human

Class: Battle Fist

Level: 61/99

Life: 682, Magic: 582,

Strength: 410, Agility: 589

Skills: Sensitive Sole 4, Intimidate 6, Brute Strength 6, Martial Arts 3, Martial Mastery 3, Danger Sense 5, Advanced Punch Arts 4, Advanced Punch Mastery 6, Punch Arts 10, Punch Mastery 10, Breath Control: Harden 8, Brute Force 10, Instruct 6, Blink 10, Flash Step 3, Abnormal Status Resistance 5, Abnormal Mental Status Resistance 5, Provoke 4, Throw 4, Dimitris Combat Arts 10, Dimitris Combat Mastery 10, Physical Barrier 6, Magic Resistance 6, Mana Sense 5, Mana Thruster 8, Sleep Resistance 5, Orc Killer, Kobold Killer, Gourmet, Split Thinking, Spirit Control

Unique Skill: Spirit Rampage, Food Storage

Class Skill: Manawrap Fist

Titles: Orc Killer, Kobold Killer, Giant Slayer, Dimitris Style Successor, Brutalizer, Destroyer of Monsters, A-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Piercing Conch Fists, Sky Silkworm Tights, Sky Silkworm Chemise, Water Dragon Bone Boots, Bracelet of Mana Control, Pendant of Recovery

Those were powerful stats, and she had the skills to go along with them. Her maxed-out Dimitris Style meant that she could use the same abilities as the S Rank Dimitris.

She could probably use the ultimate arts, too.

Maybe she didn't have the same output as the old man, but she was not to be trifled with.

She felt stronger than Colbert; and we had fought him in his unsealed state.

It would be nice if we could see some Dimitris arts today.

"…No way."

"Woof."

Chance of Hiltoria using Dimitris Style Combat Arts is at two percent.

Fran, Jet, and even P.A. were skeptical. Honestly, I felt the same way.

Hilt was up against a big man with an axe. The adventurer also had a mean mug to go along with the brutal weapon. I bet people made way for him in town.

But he wasn't very strong. He was *weak*, in fact. He was even weaker than the girls in the Crimson Maidens.

The qualifiers were randomized, which meant that someone of questionable ability could actually advance into the tournament if they lucked out and landed in a pool full of weaklings.

That said, he might not have been so lucky after all, considering he would get booted right out in the first match.

And the match went about as predicted. Hilt used a restrained jab which immediately knocked her competition out cold. When the hit

connected with axe man's chin, he crumpled without any other response. We didn't even see an ounce of Hilt's true ability.

Axe man really should've tried harder!

W-well, she'll be up against proper opponents next time. We just have to be patient.

"Hm…"

We kept on watching the tournament. Another of our acquaintances was up.

"Radule."

For once, Fran remembered a name! Radule was an old mage living in Ulmutt; Fran had had tea with him once. He was a C Rank, but he was once in a party with Aurel and was as good as a B Rank.

We hadn't gotten to see him in action last year because he got knocked out by Cruise—an unexpected result. The younger adventurer's speed likely didn't allow him to use any of his big attacks.

The former court mage might have powerful magicks, but he was showing his age.

I wondered how he would do this year.

I watched his match with some concern, but Old Radule turned out to be very strong. The old mage could use land, storm, and ocean spells, but his methods were strange.

Instead of opting for powerful spells, he used a combination of simple incantations.

He would knock his opponents off balance with a land spell, draw their attention with a flashy ocean spell, and finally attack them

with an invisible storm spell.

His shielder opponent was helpless under the assault of Radule's Instant Cast spells.

He had a tough time fighting Cruise because of his speed. But he's dominating this slow opponent.

"He's good."

"Woof, woof!"

Fran's eyes shone with admiration. While not the flashiest of matches, it showcased Radule's skill and experience. He was like a magic version of Mordred.

D Bracket finally came. A lot of our acquaintances were in this bracket. First up was Elza. Despite his muscular body, 190-centimeter height, and red afro, his femme makeup and facial features gave him an androgynous look. The sheer force of his presence and his gigantic mace made him look like a figure out of a child's nightmare.

He was strong, too. He took his opponent's hits with a smile, then won in just a few strikes. Unlike Biscott, who specialized in defense, Elza just brute forced his way through with his superior strength—a dangerous style in its own right.

After Elza was the battle dancer Charlotte. She danced around the arena, striking the opponent with her metal hoops. A tricky sort of fighting style, she dominated with her movement and ended the round by catching her opponent's spear with her metal hoops and knocking him out.

They were both strong, but the next combatant stole the show. It was time for mantis man Knighthart to shine.

Despite being barehanded, he managed to slice through his opponent's steel sword. The crowd gasped with pain when the side of his palm struck the blade, but they erupted with awe when it emerged unscathed.

Name: Knighthart

Age: 57

Race: Mantis Halfling

Class: Dual Striker

Level: 66/99

Life: 897, Magic: 214, Strength: 588, Agility: 612

Skills: Strange Food 3, Sensitive Sole 4, Assassinate 4, Stealth 4, Singing 3, Observation 4, Danger Sense 8, Bow Arts 4, Bow Mastery 6, Reveal Weakness 4, Royal Etiquette 2, Calculate 5,

Presence Sense 6, Conceal Presence 5, Sword Arts 5, Sword Mastery 5, Advanced Punch Arts 3, Advanced Punch Mastery 3, Martial Arts 10, Martial Mastery 10, Breath Control: Harden 4, Negotiate 10, Brute Force 3, Overseer 7, Instruct 4, Blink 10, Flash Step 8, Hush 6, Abnormal Status Resistance 7, Mental Status Resistance 3, Dual Blade Mastery 10, Farsight 4, Exhaustion Regeneration 6, Magic Resistance

2, Mana Sense 3, Darkvision, Enhanced Kick, Kick Up, Spirit Control, Pain Immunity, Fortitude, Agility Up (Medium)

Unique Skill: Skanda

Class Skill: Sickle Blade Mastery, Dual Strike, Insect Form

Titles: Giant Slayer, King of the Battlefield, Thousand Slayer, Dual Swordsman, Defeat Survivor, Hundred Slayer, Insect Bond

Equipment: Silver Dragon Dual Blades, Silver Dragon Scale Gloves, Cerberus Clothes, Orihalcon Light Armor, Cerberus Combat Boots, Bracelet of Spirit Control, Anklet of Super Life Recovery

He turned out to be pretty strong when I Identified him. He was a lot older than he looked, too. His handsome voice made it sound like he was in his twenties, but he was a veteran of many battlefields.

With some unfamiliar Skills at his disposal, I couldn't wait to see him in action.

Phelms could probably get Knighthart to go all out. The former A Rank had fought us for third place in last year's tournament, after all.

Phelms's tricky strategy was difficult to deal with. He bound his opponent, restricting his movement to take the win. The only thing the audience saw was Phelms's victim suddenly standing still.

We'd used brute force and big moves to clutch our victory against him, but I wasn't sure if it would work again. Granted that

Fran, Jet, and I were much stronger now, so we would probably have the upper hand in a tournament setting.

But if we ran into him in a forest and he was out to kill us? I didn't know. Phelms's invisible strings were a dangerous threat.

Doesn't look like we can win easily this year…

"Hm! Just the way I like it."

"Woof!"

Fran and Jet looked happy, the intense matches stirring their competitive blood.

First, we'll have to beat Mordred!

"Yeah."

"Woof."

The next day, Fran took the stage with a determined expression on her face.

"Today marks the second round of matches for the Ulmutt battle tournament! And we're about to kick off with a red-hot card! First up is B-Rank Mordred! A veteran adventurer with his trusty spear and Steel Magic!"

Mordred waved his hand to the cheering crowd.

But his eyes were locked on Fran.

She looked back at him, burning with fighting spirit. The air was already electric, and the match hadn't even begun yet.

I'll start, Teacher.

I know. I won't interfere until you ask me to or you're about to lose. That goes the same for you, Jet.

Woof!

The tournament was an occasion for Fran to test her strength. Like last year, I would only help her if things got bleak.

"On the other side of the arena we have the thirteen-year-old who won her first match in a few short seconds! Keep a close eye on her because she's too fast for the human eye to keep up with! The Black Lightning Princess herself! Fraaaaan!"

Fran and Mordred smiled confidently at each other from their corners of the arena.

"Been a while."

"Yeah. Not much time has passed, but you seem to be a lot stronger."

"You too."

Like Fran said, Mordred was much stronger than before. Though he hadn't acquired new abilities, he had leveled up overall.

Name: Mordred

Age: 43

Race: Human

Class: Trick Mage Lancer

Level: 47/99

Life: 423, Magic: 418, Strength: 217, Agility: 237

Skills: Conceal 5, Speedcast 5, Stealth 3, Evasion 3, Flame Magic 2, Martial Mastery 2, Danger Sense 4, Fear Resistance 4, Gathering 3, Overseer 4, Shooting 4, Blink 7, Swim 2, Petrify Resistance 2, Spear Art 10, Spear Mastery 10, Advanced Spear Art 3, Advanced Spear Mastery 4, Elemental Blade 5, Heat Resistant 6, Chase 2, Earth Magic 8, Throw 3, Poison Resistance 5, Fire Magic 10, Mana Sense 5, Paralyze Resistance 1, Steel Magic 6, Set Trap 5, Spirit Manipulation, Sahagin Killer, Eagle Eye, Sense of Direction, Split Thinking, Mana Manipulation

Class Skill: Trickery

Titles: Sahagin Killer, Near Death

Survivor, Giant Killer, Fire Mage, Surpasser of Human Limits

Equipment: Adamantite Alloy Spear,

Mithril Alloy Light Armor, Enchanted Steel Gauntlets, Aquatic Dragon Leather Cloak, Cannonball Turtle Boots, Bracelet of Abnormal Status

Resistance, Ring of Magic Staff, Boundary Stone

Mordred had Skills we had never seen before. His Class Skill, Trickery, seemed pretty strong.

"Can't let the youngsters get a leg up on me. I took a break to go around the haunts."

"Yeah? Which ones?"

Fran's eyes immediately shone when Mordred said the word *haunt*.

He gave a wry smile, amused at her behavior before their match.

"I'll tell you if you can beat me."

"Hm! You're on!"

Fran nodded and used Awaken. Mordred wasn't someone she could beat in her normal form.

"I'm taking this match."

"You look pumped."

Mordred readied his spear after sensing the mana exuding from Fran. The tension heightened as both fighters clashed with their will to fight.

"Both are B Ranks! Will youth and exuberance defeat age and experience?! You don't wanna miss this match!"

The round started quietly. Fran used her quick footwork to navigate around the arena while readying me. Mordred could be seen preparing to defend.

Having found an opening, she was ready to start her offense—but she hesitated since the opening wasn't big enough. Sensing her hesitation, Mordred initiated instead.

"I'll make the first move if you won't." Mordred leaped forward, killing Fran's momentum before it could begin.

"Tsh!"

He swung his spear to the side, expertly using a slight feint with his eyes. It was a sharp attack, but Fran was expecting it. She used me to block the swipe and followed the momentum to get behind him.

Or that was the plan, at least.

"Huh?"

Whoa!

Mordred's spear suddenly bent. Adamantite alloy wasn't something that could be scratched, let alone warp. But now his spear was bending like rubber.

It's steel magic!

"Urk!"

I didn't see Mordred incanting a spell, but he had activated it at some point.

The spear curved around me, its point striking toward Fran's head. She ducked, but Mordred was already following up.

"Hmph!"

"Urgh!"

Having retained some of its solidity, his spear twisted around me like a rope, pulling me toward him. Though the tug wasn't brutally forceful, it was calculated to break Fran's balance.

Meanwhile, Mordred's armor had turned into a porcupine.

If Fran hung on to me, she would get skewered. Let go, and her attack power would falter. Both outcomes were in Mordred's favor.

This was what he was aiming for. He'd pretended to get a feel for Fran's approach while he was preparing a steel spell.

Clever.

Fran completely fell for it, but she was ready to adapt. "Haaaa!"

"Hurk?!"

Fran used her free left hand to punch Mordred even if it meant going through his spikes. He wasn't expecting a fist to the face, especially from such a disadvantaged position.

Blood gushed from Fran's fist as the spikes left behind wounds, but she didn't flinch and reared up for another punch. Mordred groaned as he retreated a few meters away. He knew he would be in a world of hurt if he took the hit.

He was still holding his spear, but his balance had been thrown off. Free to begin her offense, Fran charged.

She swiped the air with her bloodied left hand, splashing blood across Mordred's face, blinding him.

He quickly used his cape to wipe it off and retreated again. Fran also slowed down. She hadn't expected Mordred to handle her blood so readily.

They were now close to their original positions when the match started.

"That was reckless."

"Really? You were ready for it."

"I've run into some who weaponize their blood."

Fran's on-the-fly adjustment turned out to not be so outlandish, after all.

"But fighting you head on really puts me at a disadvantage. Looks like I'll have to go all out to have a chance at winning," she said.

"Not so fast!"

Mordred took something out of his waist pouch. A potion…and it looked familiar. This was the trump card he'd used during our last quest together. A potion to enhance steel magic.

I didn't know the details behind the rule, but recovery items were prohibited in the tournament while magic potions were allowed.

For example, enhancement and poison potions could be used. Probably because there were enough people who relied on them to make them a legitimate strategy.

This wasn't a tournament to determine who was the strongest and cleanest fighter in a restricted sparring match, but one to determine the strongest in an all-out brawl.

Fran cast a spell to prevent Mordred from using the potion, but he defended just in time. The Boundary Stone. A disposable item which let you put up a barrier on the fly—no surprise that he was carrying one.

Mordred was now free to finish his enhancement potion. The effects were so pronounced that things looked like they were about to get messy.

Fran had been hanging in there so far, but it was clear that Mordred had the advantage. She knew she was in the palm of his hand.

"I just came up with this move. It's my best yet." Mordred took his pouch from his waist and turned it upside down. Ten metal balls the size of softballs fell to the floor with a clack.

They were made of mana-enchanted alloy, allowing them to be controlled by magic.

Mordred readied his spear as the spheres rolled on the ground.

"Trickery."

He uttered his Class Skill. A reddish-black light emanated from his body—mana of the steel element.

Was he using Elemental Blade on his whole body? Was there something else at work I wasn't seeing?

"Vulcanus Order!"

He activated his spell, catching Fran off guard. I had seen this before. This was the spell he'd used to control a giant anchor to bind the kraken and the seadragon. The high-level steel spell allowed him to control all metal objects in a certain radius.

Last time, he'd needed a lot of time to cast it. Now, he mentioned only its name. He didn't have Instant Cast or No Cast when I Identified him before the match.

Was this an effect of Trickery? That was the only thing I could think of.

We watched as the metal spheres started dancing wildly. They were fast, but probably nowhere near their top speed. Even so, getting hit by them in this state would be enough to break bone.

Metal spheres dancing to the tune of Vulcanus Order. This was Mordred's new trump card.

"Haaaa!"

"I'm ready for your thunder magic!"

Fran cast a thunder spell before he could attack.

Five of the spheres spread in front of Mordred like a shield, dissipating the electricity.

The mana surrounding each sphere was acting like a barrier.

"Crush!"

"Not happening."

And so the tables turned again.

Mordred moved his hand lightly, launching the spheres toward Fran. They all moved differently. Some in a straight line, some in a curve…but they were all tracking her.

Fran swiped at the metal spheres, but Mordred was expecting that. The spheres deformed when I made contact, their texture turning to something like gelatin.



It was like Mordred's spear from earlier. They attached themselves to my blade and stuck. The extra weight didn't bother Fran, but she couldn't cut through them.

But that wasn't the only thing the spheres did.

"Huh?"

Fran was startled when I suddenly started moving on my own.

That wasn't me!

No. Mordred's metal spheres were pulling me along.

My blade hit more of the metal spheres, adding to the weight.

And I felt something strange, too. It was like I was being forced to use Transmogrify. Mordred was probably trying to use his steel magic on me through his spheres.

Though he failed to control me directly, it was distracting enough to break Fran's focus.

We should be more careful against steel mages next time.

Fran continued to dodge attacks even though she couldn't use me the way she wanted, but she was running out of space.

She would be yanked in the other direction as she was running and get grazed by the spheres. Though she'd been getting away with some light scratches, she knew that she would be in danger if this kept up.

I'll just have to beat him first!

Fran lowered her body and leaned forward. She started charging toward Mordred, but the metal spheres continued cutting her off. She

put up a barrier as a last line of defense.

Just as she thought she was out of the spheres' area of attack, it happened.

"Aargh!"

Fran!

She lost her balance and looked like she was about to fall. Her right leg had been swallowed up by the ground as if it were sinking. She put her hand out and turned her body to stop herself from falling, but her right foot was a mess. It was badly burned; parts of her skin were a crisp.

Mordred had set up lava pitfalls around the arena to trip her up.

The damage wasn't as bad as it could've been thanks to Fran covering herself with mana. If a weaker monster or human had gotten its foot stuck in the trap, it would've been burnt to nothing.

She quickly healed herself, but Mordred was making his next move.

"Magma Field!"

Mordred thrust his hands into the arena and channeled his mana into it. The ground turned red hot with Mordred at its center.

The temperature climbed so quickly that Fran barely had time to escape into the air.

The heat circle expanded until it covered the entire arena. The stone carvings around the arena were melted and the inside of the barrier turned into a sea of lava. The white smoke arising from the magma was hot enough to leave second-degree burns.

Against that hellish landscape, Mordred stood coolly on top of the lava.

"Lightning Bolt!"

"Defend!"

"Hm."

The metal spheres blocked Fran's lightning spell. As powerful as they were on offense, they were no slouches on defense.

The spheres revolved around Mordred. Destroying them would take a lot of firepower.

Mordred looked at Fran. Was he going to chase her to the air and cut off her mobility? That wouldn't be too much of a problem.

"Flashing Thunderclap!"

Fran used her own trump card.

As long as she had Air Hop and Flashing Thunderclap, she could fight in the air as well as she could on the ground. If anything, she was faster because of the lack of obstacles.

Fran circled the air over the arena, anticipating Mordred's next move. From this position, she would be able to charge at lightning speed to attack him as soon as she saw an opening.

But Mordred foresaw her plan.

"I know you're way too fast for me to catch."

"Hm?"

"Which is why I'm going to hit you first!"

Knowing that he didn't have a chance against Fran at full speed, Mordred decided to face her head on. He didn't use Magma Field to force Fran to the air. He used it as preparation for another attack.

"Volcanic…"

Mordred raised his lazy arms and spun his wrists. For the *tokusatsu* fans out there, it kind of looked like the Shin Godzilla pose.

The magma surrounding him bubbled as if anticipating his command.

"Geyser!"

Mordred's spell launched the lava covering the arena. A violent wave of lava rushed toward us; a red-hot wall from which there was no escape.

Fran would be engulfed by the lava at this rate.

Fran?

I can still do this!

I could've just teleported us away, but Fran wanted to solve this problem on her own.

"Urgh… Yaaah!"

What she did was simple. She set up a powerful barrier, making sure to reinforce the front of it, and charged full speed into the lava.

The faster she was, the less time she was in contact with the lava.

It wasn't really a problem for Fran with how strong she was.

…At least, it wouldn't have been if Mordred wasn't actively obstructing her.

"Urk!"

The metal spheres!

They hit hard enough that it knocked her off course.

Mordred had predicted her trajectory and sent his spheres after her. Being of the same magic type, it was difficult to sense the spheres within the lava. The lava even made physically seeing them difficult.

If Fran tarried in the lava, her barrier would be toast in a few seconds. If she continued her charge, the metal spheres would get her.

Either way, she was at a disadvantage.

Mordred had complete control of the field. This was how a veteran fought.

What would she do now? If she wanted to, I could teleport us out of here or Dimension Shift us through.

Fran tried using Pocket Dimension, but it didn't go well. She couldn't store the lava because Mordred had ownership of it.

As I nervously watched on, Fran took another step forward. But just as before, Mordred's spheres came at her on a straight collision course. Was she just going to take the hit?

Fran dove headfirst into the sea of lava again. But as soon as she did, the metal spheres started attacking. It happened so quickly

and so quietly that I didn't notice them until they made contact with her barrier.

Still, Fran used her barrier to deflect the attack.

She did this by changing the shape of her force shield. She did it so suddenly that I thought she'd gotten lucky. There shouldn't have been time for her to do that…but Fran continued to deflect every incoming attack.

She perfectly adjusted her barrier so the spheres would either whizz harmlessly by her or glance off.

She was clearly seeing the metal spheres' movement.

But how?

I gave it a go for myself, but the presence of the lava was too much of an obstacle.

Mordred was also very good at masking his mana and its flow. He probably had a lot of practice from hunting down mana-sensitive monsters.

It felt like there was already a spell activating under your feet by the time you felt an incantation coming. I certainly couldn't keep up with anticipating all of Mordred's attacks.

As much as I wanted to ask her how she was doing it, I couldn't risk breaking her concentration. It would have to wait until later.

Finally, Fran broke through the wall of lava. The air surrounding Mordred was clear of molten rock.

"Haaa!"

Fran immediately struck Mordred down. He responded with an art of his own.

"Uooh! Rising Impulse!" He thrust his spear upwards releasing an anti-air shockwave attack.

He was planning to use this move to halt Fran's momentum so he could defend himself with his spheres, but Fran kicked the air with Air Hop, bringing her sword down on his head with unstoppable force. She blocked the shockwave with a smartly applied barrier and twisted her body out of the spear's way. The spearhead nicked her left flank, but it wasn't fatal.

She swung me through the metal spheres shielding Mordred.

He immediately reacted and attached five of his spheres to me. I must have looked like a weird metal club instead of a sword.

My blade was completely covered. Mordred should've felt like he had total control of Fran's offense because of it. But he didn't look pleased.

Fran had attacked the metal spheres with me on purpose.

Not once did she attempt to weave her way through them. I was now being pulled downwards, and Fran could barely stand up straight because of the interference.

Not knowing what Fran was up to, Mordred launched another attack.

"Quick Pierce!"

A swift stab came at Fran's head. But Fran had been waiting for this moment.

"Taaaah!" Fran thrust me out into Mordred. But my blade was clear of his metal spheres.

"A trap?!"

Fran had used Pocket Dimension.

She stored me for a moment and immediately took me out again. Because the metal spheres belonged to Mordred, they fell off when I entered her inventory.

Mordred had no time to defend himself with his spheres, spear, or armor.

"Raaah!"

"Urf… Gah!"

As Mordred's attack grazed Fran's left cheek, her sword went through his side. She ran her lightning through it, burning him from the inside. Smoke came out of Mordred's body as he fell to the floor.

He was unconscious. Fran had won.

However…

Fran! Use Pocket Dimension again!

"Hm!"

With Mordred out cold, the lava was now coming in to engulf him.

Fortunately, with it no longer being under his ownership, we were able to store the lava in our Pocket Dimension.

"I was afraid we were going to have a fiery flood on our hands, but the lava has completely disappeared from the arena! I couldn't

see what was going on in there…but it looks like we have a *winner*! Our earth mages and healers have their work cut out for them after this match!"

As the commentator shouted from his booth, I saw several people rushing the arena.

Earth mages to fix the arena and healers to heal the injured.

Fran refused their assistance. She wanted to hurry back to her seat so she could continue watching the tournament. Besides, she had me to heal her up.

She did her best to get to her seat before the next match started, but she was slower. Her mana and stamina had been exhausted on top of her using Flashing Thunderclap. She had taken a significant amount of damage and lost a lot of blood. Even if she looked okay, she *wasn't*.

I wanted her to go back to the hotel to sleep, but we needed information about our next opponent. She could get a full day's rest tomorrow. Now, she would have to contain her excitement as she watched the tournament.

As Fran quietly made her way, I asked her something that had been bothering me during the Mordred fight.

Can I ask you something?

"What?"

How did you sense Mordred's metal spheres inside the lava? That must've been difficult to do given how he masked their mana.

"They felt…*crackly*."

Crackly?

"Hm."

That didn't really explain anything… Was it her animal instincts, or was there something else?

Care to elaborate further?

"Hm. There was a little bit of crackle left from when I hit the spheres with my spell."

I see.

She must have been talking about her lightning spell.

Apparently, traces of her spell remained on the spheres after she hit them with lightning. Something like static electricity.

Fran used her enhanced senses during Flashing Thunderclap to sense the faint traces of lightning mana. The Black Sky Tigers' high affinity for thunder magic must also have had something to do with it.

Maybe I could do it too, if I tried hard enough.

But hey! You managed to win even without me!

"Hm."

Last year, she'd needed me to use Physical Immunity to help in the battle against B-Rank Colbert.

Now, she'd taken a win by herself. Fran had truly grown.

…But she didn't look satisfied with herself.

You're not happy about it?

"Hm…I got lucky toward the end."

You were up against a veteran. He's used to controlling the pace of battle.

"I know. I'm still mad. I was too full of myself. I'll do better next time."

Although she was able to outwit him in the end, Mordred had had absolute control of the match. He wasn't just clever—he'd used Fran's love of battle to his advantage.

In a way, every move up to Volcanic Geyser was part of Mordred's plan. He had probably run a few simulations, preparing different responses depending on Fran's actions.

Despite winning, she wasn't *satisfied* with her victory.

"He was good."

Yeah.

Flashing Thunderclap, Sword God Form, Dimension Magic, Sword King Arts. The match could've been over in a few seconds if she had used all her powers. But that would've been brute forcing it. It had no guarantee of working against a veteran with the same level of strength as her. No matter what, the next match wouldn't be easy.

And I knew just the opponent I was thinking of.

Dias is going to be worse.

"Hm."

We still didn't have a way of dealing with him, but fighting Mordred was an important experience. We needed to learn as much as we could from this victory.

Chapter 2:
Calm and Chaos

RETURNING TO OUR seats after the match with Mordred, we found a ruckus near the front row.

"Terribly sorry!"

"Maybe you wouldn't need to apologize if you hadn't been such a jerk!"

Someone was arguing with an adventurer. It seemed like the adventurer was being the lout, but the guard was yelling at the one who was on his knees.

Must have been another Chalusian messenger. Like the guild mentioned, they really were going out of their way to make a scene.

The Chalusian didn't seem to be sorry despite the guard's stern warning. His apology was a lie. He had every intention of soliciting adventurers after this.

Fran, try not to get involved.

Got it.

I wondered what the Chalusians were really after. They were a major source of grief to the guards. They might even get banned before the tournament was over.

The next match still hadn't started by the time we got back to our seat, the arena still being ruined by Mordred's lava. But everything else was ready. The arena looked a lot better.

Good job, earth mages!

I thought they might have a decent chance of winning if they actually competed in the tournament.

And so the second match of the day began…

"It's over."

"Mercenary Biscott has taken his opponent out with a well-placed shield bash!"

Biscott won in a matter of seconds. Faster than his first match.

At least Zelt gave us a lot to work with.

But the match we were waiting for was two matches away. After an unimpressive battle between two unassuming contestants, the time had finally come for us to glue our eyes to the arena.

Also aware of this, Fran put her food away and stopped ruffling Jet's fur. She sat up straight and quietly watched the arena.

The card was now Sibyl versus Colbert.

"And here comes B-Rank adventurer Steel Claw Colbert! Although no longer a student of Dimitris, he's still a powerful contender! Will he demolish his opponent in mere seconds again?!"

The commentator refrained from saying that Colbert got kicked out of Dimitris's school. I was really interested in seeing how he would fight without the Dimitris Style.

"He'll be up against the red-haired mercenary Sibyl! Like Colbert, she also demolished her first opponent in a matter of seconds! Let's see how she does with someone stronger!"

The commentator and spectators placed Sibyl below Colbert. But I suppose that was to be expected from an unknown mercenary.

It sure didn't feel that way for the combatants, though. Sibyl had a playful grin while Colbert stared at her with a stiff look.

When you're as strong as him, you would know how strong she actually was. The concentration of mana in his body was proof of his caution.

"Is he going to go all out from the start?"

Probably.

"Sibyl's like me."

Meaning that Sibyl would begin by watching and waiting. *Let's see what happens.*

"Begin!"

And so the battle between Colbert and Sibyl commenced.

It was much like the match between Fran and Mordred—Colbert moved while Sibyl stood still. He was dancing around with his footwork, trying to find a gap in her defenses to end the match in one fell swoop. Bearing the weight of the tension and not attacking was Colbert's strong suit.

Meanwhile, Sibyl wasn't biting and seemed amused at his movements. Considering how much she enjoyed fighting, it was just like her.

In Fran's case, Mordred had taken advantage of her habit and used it against her. On the flip side, this strategy might work against a fellow blood knight.

Colbert was making a circuit around the arena, slowly closing in on Sibyl.

"So you're a martial artist?"

"I'm used to fighting swordsmen. Don't let your guard down just because I'm unarmed."

"Is that so! I'm looking forward to fighting you!"

They both smiled as they exchanged pleasantries but their distance between each other approached zero.

And then the match truly began.

"I'll blow you away!"

"Not so fast!" Sibyl initiated before Colbert could attack.

Her downward strike left a small crater in the middle of the arena. This was the real starting bell.

Colbert was only two levels higher compared to last time, but he had a lot more Skills now. He must have been training hard to compensate for the loss of Dimitris Style.

Sibyl was unidentifiable, much like Biscott. Maybe I could get a better peek if Colbert broke whatever device was jamming Identify.

Colbert and Sibyl continued to trade small blows. Sibyl was mostly attacking while Colbert looked to punish her with counterattacks.

His defense looked much better. He was able to dodge and block Sibyl's quick sword slashes.

Sibyl's attacks looked wild. While she incorporated feints into her offense, her style was very straightforward. A good style to have against monsters, but easy to read against another human.

"Uraaah!"

"Gah! So much power!"

"Ha ha ha! Power's the only thing I have!"

"And so resilient!"

"I guess I have that, too!"

Usually, Colbert would have made quick work out of a berserker like Sibyl. He even managed to land some hits after blocking some of her sword swings. His style controlled brute strength through agility.

But Sibyl's toughness was shocking.

Colbert landed the perfect hook at the perfect angle to her stomach, but she didn't even let out a groan. The same went for the punch he delivered to her face.

She shrugged off the jab to her nose and rushed in, bringing her sword down in front of her.

Colbert's punches were powerful enough to explode a goblin in one hit…but Sibyl's healing and momentum outranked his damage. There was a good chance she had Pain Immunity, too, on top of Shockwave Resistance and a slew of endurance Skills.

I hadn't expected Sibyl to be such a power fighter.

But Colbert was able to recover from the shock of her violent fighting style.

If his hits didn't hurt, he would hit her until they *did*. He could also attempt landing a powerful attack on her weak point since she was taking his hits head on.

Colbert shifted gears and placed strike after strike onto Sibyl's midriff. He would tenderize her with body blows, slowing her attacks enough so he could finish her off… That was the plan, at least.

But Sibyl's toughness was even greater than he thought. I couldn't believe it and could only watch in disbelief.

Sibyl continued moving like before despite all the blows to her abdomen. Her animalistic smile persisted, pressuring Colbert to come at her.

Now, Colbert was beginning to slow down. I thought he was getting exhausted, but that wasn't quite the case.

"Ha ha! I've seen that before!"

"Whoa! That was close!"

"Come on!"

"No way!"

Sibyl's attacks intensified as if she was reading Colbert like a book. She used her sword to strike him at difficult angles, anticipating his dodges and even countering his counterattacks. Sibyl had somehow gotten used to Colbert's movements during the battle. A terrifying display of instinct and adaptability.

Finally, Sibyl's sword grazed Colbert's body. He immediately crumpled from the destructive force of the impact.

"Urgh!"

"Ha ha! Got you!"

"I'm not down yet!"

"You can still fight from that position? Impressive!"

Colbert kicked at Sibyl as she rushed in for the kill. His left arm was wounded, but he managed to stop the bleeding by contracting his muscles.

But it was going to be difficult to use that arm from here on out. Meanwhile, Sibyl was still looking healthy and effective.

"She's good."

That toughness…I don't think you could get that just from stats.

You think she has some Skills, too?

Probably…

But it didn't look like a barrier of any kind. There weren't any movements of mana around her. And Physical Immunity didn't explain the bruising Colbert's punches left behind.

It seemed Colbert had noticed it, too.

"I don't know what trick you're using…but it must be some kind of damage immunity… No, Reduction? Anyway, weaker hits aren't going to hurt you."

"Good eye. You've figured me out… But what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll just hit you so hard you won't be able to reduce it!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Correct!" Sibyl admitted her weak point. She actually did! She wasn't lying, so she must have had some damage

reduction Skills.

Colbert slowly approached her as she laughed. No stances, just plain walking…but inside, he was amassing a great amount of mana.

He was circulating the mana he focused around his solar plexus through his whole body. He repeated this process until his body was filled with mana.

A minute went by. There were only five meters of space left between the combatants. But Colbert continued his slow stride.

"Shiiiiyaaa!"

Sibyl launched herself at Colbert and slashed at him. She was excited, dying to know what he was going to do. It was a bad habit all blood knights had.

The next moment, Sibyl disappeared. A loud bang went off in the arena.

In her place was Colbert, standing still after unleashing a straight punch.

Did you see that?

Hm! Mana came out of his feet and back to make him move really fast.

Colbert used the sudden burst of mana to accelerate himself.

Although his top speed was lower than Fran's, his acceleration gave the impression that he was faster. To most of the audience, it must have looked like he'd teleported.

His attack was also difficult to predict because there was little to no wind-up. Sudden motion from absolute stillness. He didn't use his

muscles to accelerate, catching even Sibyl off guard. It never felt like he was going to attack.

More impressive was the fact that he was able to suppress his bloodlust. He couldn't have done it without a great degree of mental control.

Sibyl was sent hurling across the arena. But just as we thought she was going to be knocked out, an unlikely thing happened.

"Uraaagh!"

She let out an animalistic roar, abruptly stopping herself in mid-air. It wasn't Air Hop, nor was it Mana Thruster. Her momentum dissipated instantly, and she was now floating in the air. It looked a lot like my telekinesis.

"Urghh… Daaah!"

Sibyl started puking blood. Her internal organs were probably a mess. Her breathing was ragged, and she seemed out of breath. How was she still breathing?

But Sibyl didn't stop moving as she extended her left hand. There were twenty meters of distance between the combatants, but—

"Ooof!"

Now it was Colbert's turn to be blasted. I thought it looked a lot like telekinesis. Then it turned out that it *was* Telekinesis. Sibyl was pretty good at using it, too.

As Colbert was flung in the air, she hurtled toward him. While lacking the initial burst of speed of Telekinetic Catapult, she was still using telekinesis to launch herself.

Still, that took a large toll on a human body. She was moving so fast from all the mana she put into it.

"Raaaaah! Crush!"

"Tsch!"

Colbert pivoted with Mana Thruster to dodge Sibyl's sword slash in the air. But it wasn't enough.

His body was still screaming with pain from his own attack. Sibyl grabbed his right arm as he failed to put enough distance between them.

"Gotcha!"

"Let me go!"

"Request denied! Raaaagh!" Sibyl's lips curled into an evil grin and smacked her head hard into Colbert's.

A simple headbutt. That's all it was.

She brought her head down on Colbert's cranium with all the force she could muster.

A gruesome crack sounded as Colbert fell to the ground. He fell in the arena with the thud and grace of a sandbag.

"Huff… Not bad… You put up a good fight…" Sibyl smiled happily, blood still trailing down her lips.

"And it's over with a skull-smashing sound of a headbutt! Will Colbert ever recover?! Healers, you better see to it that he does!"

Healers immediately rushed the stage. I only hoped that they could get to Colbert in time.

He wasn't moving at all.

"…I'm going to see him."

Good idea.

Fran quickly got up to go to the infirmary, running through the corridors to get to where she needed to be. Upon entering, we found Colbert with a bandage wrapped around his head.

"You okay?"

"Oh…hey, Fran."

He was certainly…*responsive*. It looked like the healers had gotten to him in time to heal him from Sibyl's devastating headbutt.

He suffered from a collapsed skull and multiple fractures. Things did not look good at the outset. But now, he just looked dejected.

"I lost."

"Hm. I saw."

"Ugh. My fault for not beating her with my trump card. I thought I could throw her out of bounds even if I couldn't knock her out…"

"That straight rush was really good."

"You think so? I developed it after getting expelled from Dimitris School…"

"But?"

"…Still needs work."

The Dimitris style was developed around Mana Thruster. It used spirit to hit things from a distance and enhance the body, among

other things. But Colbert could no longer use it after being expelled. The moves he relied on were no longer available.

Still, he kept the Skills which he had acquired during his training like Mana Thruster, and he used them to replicate his old fighting style.

"I used Mana Thruster to quickly close in on monsters during my quests. They're not very good at detecting movement, after all."

"Hm."

Normally, Mana Thruster was used to accelerate toward an opponent by letting out a burst of mana from one's back. It wasn't something monsters could notice from observing muscular movements.

"So, then I got an idea. What if I could use Mana Thruster to eliminate the initial signs of an attack?"

"And that's what you came up with?"

"Yeah. But the initial charge takes too long. It won't hit unless I'm up against someone who's willing to wait for me to launch the attack. It's going to take a while before I can use it in a real fight. And the overall damage isn't great."

"You nearly knocked Sibyl out."

"I just punched her really fast. The perfect version would have me unleash my mana into a target."

"I see."

A blindingly fast attack from perfect stillness which would obliterate an enemy's vital organs. That was what Colbert was after.

"If I could do that… I might actually have a chance against you."

Colbert had developed this to counteract the Physical Immunity we'd beaten him with last year.

"The Dimitris style specializes in spirit manipulation. The advantage is that you can use spirit no matter your position and weapon…but your Skill actually nullifies the effects of spirit. The strength of the style is no longer a strength. Can't speak for the master and Miss Hilt, of course."

Spirit and mana were practically the same with some subtle differences. Spirit was mana which you used in and on your body. Mana was everything outside the body.

Fran and I didn't really know what the actual difference was… but the Dimitris style was one where you could manifest spirit outside your body.

It allowed you to use your fists from afar where you would usually have to get close. I guess it was kind of like fighting with fists made of spirit?

But Physical Immunity granted us protection against spirit. If it didn't, we wouldn't have been able to nullify Colbert's attacks last year.

"That's why I wanted to use mana instead of spirit…"

At that range, Physical Immunity wouldn't save us from a mana-based attack. But Colbert conceded that his attack was as yet incomplete. He had used all his mana to accelerate with Mana Thruster.

"I'll show you firsthand when it's done."

"Hm. Looking forward to it."

"It's gonna be—"

BLAM!

Just as Colbert smiled and nodded, the door to the infirmary burst open. Hilt barreled in, dread on her face. Her eyes sharply scanned the infirmary.

"Colbert!"

"Whoa! M-Miss Hilt?"

"Oh. You're all right."

I thought she was upset at him for losing, but she only had concern on her face. She was visibly relieved when she saw Colbert laughing it up with Fran.

"Fran the Black Lightning Princess… What are you doing here?"

"I came to visit."

"I see. Thank you."

"Why?"

"H-huh? Well…he might have been expelled, but he still used to be one of us! I just wanted to see how he was doing!"

"Uh-huh."

Hilt was flustered. And blushing. Very easy to understand. I was getting diabetes just being in the room.

Colbert, however, seemed completely oblivious.

"I'm sorry for causing you to worry, Miss."

"Um… Y-yes! You should be! How could you lose to a no-name mercenary?! You lack training!"

"Hah. That's harsh."

"I-I wouldn't mind training you myself, you know."

That sounded like she was inviting him back to the Dimitris School in a roundabout way.

But it flew completely over Colbert's dense (though cracked) skull.

"I've been *expelled*. I can't just come crawling back begging to be taken in again."

"Ugh!" Hilt looked frustrated. At Colbert for being unable to read between the lines and at herself for being unable to voice her honest feelings.

Honestly, Colbert was oblivious for not noticing her obvious advances. But I guess you don't really question your assumptions unless someone else points them out to you. These assumptions gave me a lot of trouble in the old video games I used to play.

Colbert probably thought of Hilt as his master's strict heiress. There was no way she could be in love with him.

"In any case! I'm going to beat you, Fran!" Hilt said before storming out of the room. Her eyes were quite hostile as she glared.

Fran was the reason Colbert got expelled and the opponent she would have to defeat so she could be together with the man she loved. Hilt would probably just get more intense once we were in the arena.

“Sorry about Miss Hilt.”

We wouldn’t hold back, but I wished them all the best.

I also wished Colbert would explode.

“Teacher? Are you shaking?”



N-no, not at all. I'm not absolutely shivering with jealousy or anything like that.

"Uh-huh."

A-anyway, let's head back to our seats. We might make it in time for the next match.

"Okay."

The match might have been close to being over depending on how it went, but we made it back in time.

In the arena was a B-Rank adventurer named Abbav and a student of Dimitris.

Abbav appeared to be some kind of spellsword. He used a scimitar at close range and poison and water spells at distance.

According to the commentator, he was a student of Eiworth. No wonder he had the harassment-heavy fighting style that he did. He had the awful personality of his master, to match.

"Hee hee hee! What's wrong? You look like you're having trouble standing up."

"Damn it! The poison…"

"Hee hee! You look like an absolute loser! Aah, I live for moments like this!"

Abbav poked at his opponent, heavily weakened by his poison.

As weak as Abbav's pokes were, he was definitely strong. He was just toying with his opponent.

As terrible as his personality is, his movements are top notch. And he's Eiworth's student…

So, he might use poison potions.

Yeah. There's more than poison magic to be wary of. We'll have to figure out a way to restrict his item bag usage.

I won't fail again.

Mordred had used a Barrier Stone to intercept Fran last time.

Abbav had the upper hand all the way to the end in an overwhelming victory.

As Fran sat in silence over his nasty provocations, someone approached her.

"Good match, Fran."

"Mordred? You can walk around already?"

"More or less."

Mordred, Fran's last opponent, had come to see her. He could move despite his steps being unsteady. But he had a smile on his face instead of anger or resentment.

"Sorry about that last bit."

"The lava? At least you got out of it in one piece."

"Because I used a skill to increase my steel resistance before the match started. That spell would've kept going even if I got knocked out. Meaning you might have gotten hurt even after I'd lost the match. Bad manners on my part," Mordred said, bowing his head deeply. Now here was a true gentleman.

"I forgive you."

"Thanks."

"In exchange, I wanna ask you about some stuff."

"Ask away. I'll answer as best I can."

"It's about our last match."

Fran asked Mordred about pace setting, an inquiry which he gave precise answers to. He was clearly enjoying himself as he taught her; he would make a good teacher or dad.

It wasn't every day that Fran got to talk to a veteran, so this was a great opportunity. She could review her intense match with the same one she had the intense match with.

The conversation carried on for almost an hour, and they moved on from discussing their own match to analyzing other matches.

"What would you have done against Abbav?"

"First, I'd keep my distance since I don't know much about him. Then I'd try to create an opening using steel magic."

"I see."

"If I felt more confident, I would try to get closer. That's what you want to do since you're using a sword. Get the jump on them before they can try any tricks."

Coming from Mordred, a master of trickery, the advice carried a lot of weight.

"I think that guy could actually cast his poison spells faster than he let on."

"How can you tell?"

"There was one spell that came out faster than usual. He probably got surprised by his opponent charging. I don't think that was a coincidence."

"He's trying to trick the other competitors into thinking his casting speed isn't great?"

"Probably."

Hearing Mordred's analysis was a lot of fun. But eventually one of Mordred's men came to fetch him. He'd been there during the protection quest of the boat, too, though Fran had completely forgotten about him.

The man was very respectful toward Fran despite her beating Mordred. He sure knew how to teach them.

"Is it time already?"

"Yessir."

Apparently, Mordred had an errand to run.

"I'll be off, then. That was a fruitful discussion. I'll tell you about the haunt next time we run into each other."

"Hm. I had fun, too. Thanks."

"No problem."

Now alone, Fran had Jet pop out so she could pet him. But someone else soon approached.

"Lady Fran."

"Hm? Kaitley, Nilfe."

"H-hello…"

"Woof!"

Kaitley, Aurel's granddaughter and adventurer hopeful, and Nilfe, Dimitris's shy and reserved granddaughter.

The nobles had a section all of their own, but they'd probably come to the VIP area after spotting Fran. I had sensed their presence a few minutes earlier, but they didn't want to disturb Fran while she was talking to Mordred. Or maybe they were just afraid of him.

The VIP area was made specifically for those related to competitors and their sponsors. The regular seats were free seating, the VIP area for VIPs, and the noble area was by invite only. That was the gist of it. Invitees got special treatment for also being VIPs, so they were able to move to this section, too.

"That was Sir Mordred you were talking to just now."

"Hm."

"You seemed to get along very well with each other."

"Hm. Because we're fellow adventurers?"

Fran tilted her head, questioning herself. She didn't quite know what to make of Mordred. She didn't know him well enough to consider him a friend. He wasn't exactly a rival, making him more of an adventuring comrade-in-arms.

"But you just fought earlier. Were there no hard feelings?"

"Why would there be?"

"Perhaps he would be upset about his loss…"

"It's just a match."

Honestly, it was because Fran was nonchalant and Mordred was respectful toward his opponents. There were definitely people who would get mad after losing a match.

But Kaitley, ever Fran's student, took her word at face value and thought everybody behaved that way. She seemed relieved, and so did Nilfe.

"I-I see. So, it was *only a match*…"

"Adventurers are amazing."

"Hm. We don't hate each other just from winning or losing."

The two then remembered why they came here in the first place.

"Of course! Congratulations on your victory, Lady Fran!"

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"It was an amazing victory!" Kaitley excitedly talked about Fran and Mordred's match. "I couldn't really tell what was going on after a certain point, though…"

"But it was still great."

"That's right!"

Apparently, people couldn't see into the barrier once Mordred's lava filled the arena. But the spectators still had a lot of fun, regardless.

"It was like a glass mug being filled with orange lava. I had never seen anything like it before. Who knew lava could be so beautiful?"

"It was so pretty."

Lava wasn't something you saw every day. Thanks to the barrier blocking out the heat, Kaitley and Nilfe had been treated to the bright and beautiful spectacle of it all.

Fortunately, the match had ended in just a few minutes. The audience could've gotten bored watching a sphere of orange goo.

"Are you hurt?"

"No more than usual."

"I-I see… I'll have to get ready if I'm going to be an adventurer, too."

"You can do it."

"Thank you!"

Kaitley only became more enthusiastic instead of afraid. I don't know if it was because of Fran or if she was just born that way. You certainly had to be built different if seeing all that danger only got you pumped up.

She might just become a great adventurer in the future.

Fran ended up watching the next match with Kaitley and Nilfe. The girls listened intently as she provided analysis and commentary. Nilfe looked very interested, nodding from time to time. Fran wasn't very good at commentating, but the girls were taking it in well enough.

"It's unfortunate that your friend Charlotte lost."

"Hm. But she still did better than last year."

Elza versus Charlotte was the highlight of the day. It was the same card and same result as last year.

The difference was that Charlotte managed to hang in there longer than last year thanks to her improved movement. But she still lacked the offense to break through Elza's defense and was thrown out of the arena by the big man.

"Good luck on your next match, Lady Fran. We'll be cheering for you! You're guaranteed a top placing if you win your next match. You might get invitations from other countries at that point!"

"Invitations? Like from Chalus?"

"Have they tried soliciting you?"

"Hm."

"Goodness! Grandfather is positively swamped because of those people! They won't stop no matter how much we warn them, so we've sent a letter of protest to their government."

A sternly worded letter of protest? That sounded serious.

"They simply won't keep their word."

"Wow. Do you think they'll come bother me again?"

"Probably… They're so persistent that some adventurers have gotten physical with them. But the guild can't protect them because they're still nobles."

"Even if it's their fault?"

"Solicitation isn't technically a crime. And again, they are *nobles*…"

Making the person who lost his temper the bad guy. Was that what the Chalusians were after? To disqualify tournament favorites? Or maybe they wanted to have leverage over them?

"Please be careful, Lady Fran."

"All right."

Staying out of their way seemed to be our best option.

Two days after our match with Mordred…

Fran happily made her way to the coliseum in the morning. As usual, she bought and equipped some meat skewers in both hands.

She had eaten breakfast at the hotel, of course. In fact, the first thing she did upon waking was take a lot of food out of Pocket Dimension.

But so what? For Fran, a skewer was preferable to a cookie.

"Munch, munch."

"Nom, nom."

Meanwhile, Jet was gnawing on a giant bone previously used for broth. It had been courteously given to us by a lady working in a soup kitchen.

He held the meter-long bone in his mouth and simply enjoyed chewing on it. He looked a bit silly, kind of like a dog which had found

a particularly long branch and was walking back to its owner with it in hand.

Fran also received some soup for free after praising the soup shop the other day; the increase in customers had been instant. Fran and Jet instantly slurped up the warm broth.

The soup had some chunky add-ins, too.

"Munch… Hrm."

What is it, Fran?

"There."

Fran suddenly stopped and stared at a familiar-looking man in the distance.

"He's from that country that's annoying everyone."

Baron Emmert of Chalus. Not someone worth remembering.

"What do we do?"

Hmm.

He was clearly waiting for someone, possibly Fran.

Let's keep going. If he sees us, we'll teleport out of here.

"Got it."

Though I think you can slip right past him if you just conceal your presence.

We blended into the crowd, walking right by Baron Emmert and what looked to be his manservant.

As expected, they were none the wiser.

"Is the Black Cat not here yet?"

"She should be…"

"Keep your eyes open!"

So they *were* looking for her. I guessed we knew how to deal with them now, though. They'd be out of the city in a few days, anyway.

Thirty minutes after that…

"She's no stranger to starting the day's events! Give a thunderous welcome for Black Lightning Princess Fran!"

We went unharassed in the waiting room and now entered the arena to face our next opponent.

The big man's metal armor was dull, robbed of its original sheen. In his hand he carried a tower shield that towered over himself. Biscott—the suspected Raydossian spy.

His defenses would be tough to crack.

How do you want to do this, Fran?

…By myself.

All right.

Are you sure…?

Is something wrong?

I mean…I almost lost against Mordred.

Her last match was still bugging her. She didn't feel like she had won, but I thought she'd benefited greatly from the experience.

I couldn't tell Fran, of course, but it wasn't about winning or losing. It would be great if we could win the whole thing, but losing

was still a win as long as she learned something from it.

This is just a sparring match, after all. Not a life and death situation. You should fight the way you want to. Besides, you've never gone up against a shielder before, have you?

Hm.

It was true, Fran had never fought a high-level shielder before. This was something she wanted to experience for herself. That's why I wanted her to fight on her own without the pressure of ending the fight before it could begin.

Just promise me you'll be careful.

"Hm."

Considering our next match, hiding a few tricks up our sleeve wasn't a bad thing.

"Hey. Last I saw you we were in a dungeon."

"Hm."

Biscott grinned. He wasn't trying to intimidate Fran through banter; rather, he seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself. But then he enjoyed the heat of combat, too…

He appeared to be completely healed from his match with Zelt. His broken shield had been replaced. And this shield looked better than his last one.

"Oh, this? Just a dungeon drop. Guy sold it to me for cheap when I said I was competing."

The shield didn't have any special features except for its robust defense. But in the hands of an expert shielder, it only made it more

dangerous.

"How's about you show me how strong adventurers are?"

"You too. I hope that shield isn't just for show."

Their bloodlust clashed with each other and the match began.

Fran made the first move, awakening herself and rushing in for a slash.

"Haaaa!"

"Tsch!"

Biscott was visibly perturbed by her speed—even he couldn't keep up. He shoved his shield to the side to deflect our attack. His armor was tough and sturdy but not enough to render us ineffective.

There was now a deep wound in Biscott's side.

Fran's attack had gouged both metal and flesh, creating a gap from which blood gushed forth. She'd probably ripped right into his guts.

It looked fatal.

But I got my hopes up far too soon.

"That's it? You can do better than that! Come on! I'm still standing! You'll need to cut deeper than that to take me down!"

He didn't flinch no matter what Fran did. Blood continued to gush and he made no effort to staunch the flow. Still he continued to move.

He must have had some sort of regeneration Skill. This must have been the secret behind his toughness in his match against Zelt.

Unlike Sibyl's damage nullification, Biscott was content to literally tough it out with his body. He winced from time to time, a sign that he might not have Pain Immunity, after all, but that was it.

Despite having taken a fatal blow, he endured.

"I fight giant monsters for a living! These wounds are a tea party compared to them!"

No wonder he was so tough. Biscott was used to taking a beating from large beasts. Fran remained unharmed so far, but she wasn't gaining any traction. She simply couldn't get past him.

His armor was battered and his body broken and bloodied. Though he looked like a dead man, the fire of battle still burned in Biscott's eyes.

"I got bitten and swallowed by an earth dragon once. That's a million times worse than this!"

"Earth dragon?"

"Yeah! One time me and the knights… Never mind! Anyway, it's time for me to get serious. Get ready!"

"Sounds good to me!"

Knights? As in, Raydossian Knights? Biscott was beginning to confirm our suspicions for us. But the match was what mattered right now.

"Haaa!"

"Tch! You're getting even faster…!"

Fran shifted gears to finish Biscott off. She was using Awaken, Physical Body Manipulation, and a slew of supporting spells to

increase her speed, but still no Flashing Thunderclap.

The fact that she could move so fast without using a life-draining skill was a sign of her growth.

However, Biscott was able to react to Fran's increase in speed.

"Guard Shift!"

"Urgh!"

He blocked her killing blows with his shield and took her non-lethal attacks with his body. Fran backed away and launched a thunder spell at him, but even this he took head on without any sign of paralysis.

Biscott was *not* cracking.

"Swing!"

"Too slow!"

"You're the one that's too damn fast! I'll get you next time!"

"Not happening."

"Won't know until you try! Come at me!"

Despite being attacked more often and harder than before, Biscott remained as sturdy as he was when the match began.

He would even go for fast counterattacks—odd for a man his size.

Sibyl and Biscott were both incredibly hardy. Were all Raydossian fighters like this?

Biscott felt like he was on the level of Mordred or Colbert despite having a different fighting style. If anything, he might have actually

been *more* dangerous than them. Still, Fran continued to hold the upper hand. Biscott's attacks simply weren't landing.

But I could see why he was so effective against monsters. He had top-notch expertise with the shield and superhuman toughness. His aggressive personality roused his allies on.

On the other hand, his offense wasn't quite as good as his defense. It wouldn't usually pose a problem against monsters since he had enough power in his counter hits to capitalize on his defense. One swing of his mace would be enough to crush most of his enemies.

And it could also be an effective threat against humans. Fran had to do her best to dodge his attacks.

But his best just wasn't enough.

Sure, there were monsters that were faster than Fran. But very few had the quality of movement and offense that she had. Biscott had no experience fighting against such an opponent. As perfect as his timing was, none of his counters could land.

"Tch! There!"

"Whoa."

"I have you now!"

"Urgh!"

Biscott got very close to hitting her. However, Fran now had to block more of his attacks than before. She couldn't get away from them all in time.

As they traded blows, faint mana emanated from Biscott. Not a spell, so it had to be some kind of skill. It didn't feel like he was going

to attack, but I couldn't tell what he was doing.

Fran then tilted her head, looking confused.

Fran?

Something feels off.

She felt an awkwardness in moving her body. Was it the skill just now?

Timespace mana detected. Fran's perception has been accelerated.

Her perception? Just her perception?

Yes.

Only having your perception accelerated without the rest of your body was dangerous. It throws off your timing, making you think you've moved when you really haven't. For a speed fighter like Fran, the difference in milliseconds was the difference between life and death.

This must have been the reason behind Zelt's awkward movement at the end of Biscott's previous match.

I could tell Fran what the problem was so that she could fix it with timespace magic. But she really wanted to fight on her own. I wouldn't interrupt her, and the best I could do was watch to see if she could figure this out before she was defeated.

"Tsh!"

"Hah! Too easy!"

Her slash was perfectly blocked by Biscott's shield. Messing with Fran's perception was only one part of his plan. It resulted in her thinking that she had already made the attack when her body was still lagging behind. Her attacks were much easier to read now. All Biscott had to do was follow her eyes and he could anticipate where her next attack would go. The difference was slight, but for a master shielder like Biscott, it was all he needed to create a perfect defense.

Although this ability of his was subtle, it was a huge pain to deal with. Biscott continued blocking, causing Fran to stumble forward. It was the same thing he'd done with Zelt. He had finally *created* an opening.

"Spiral Bash!"

He unleashed a shield attack at her, a sharp thrust from the outside.

Normally, it would be difficult to react to this. It was too fast for the naked eye, a killer blow utilizing a sudden change of pace.

But Biscott's blow failed to land.

"What?!"

"I've seen that before."

Fran had fought with shield users before. Dullahans, fiends, she had enough experience to anticipate what could come next.

She had also fought with Skywall Zefield, an A-Rank adventurer who was a master of the shield.

In an ironic twist of fate, Biscott used the same shield art Zefield did. Having seen the move before, she easily dodged out of the way.

She also didn't seem bothered by her perception lag. Fran was used to being accelerated by timespace magic and soon adjusted her movements to match her perception. She even baited Biscott into attacking by acting like she had been thrown off balance. She knew that he wouldn't be able to resist hitting her with a big move if he saw his plan working.

Fran usually struggled due to the difference in experience between her and her opponents…but this time, she had the upper hand!

Biscott winced in acknowledgement that he'd been bested. He now noticed that he had fallen for Fran's trap.

In fact, she'd laid her trap even earlier than he expected. Even before her perception acceleration, she had purposely blocked some of Biscott's attacks to provoke him into using his big move. She wanted him to feel like he had her on the ropes.

Honestly, I wasn't sure if it would work.

Biscott had used the same trick on Zelt. But he did say that his friend came up with the strategy, so that would explain why he didn't recognize the same trick being used on him.

For better or worse, he was an expert in fighting monsters—not *people*.

"Got you."

"Bring it!"

Biscott lost his footing after whiffing Spiral Bash. Still, he was confident that he would be able to tank whatever damage Fran threw

at him. I thought she was going to activate Flashing Thunderclap and hit him with either a Skycutter or Pressurized Quickdraw.

"Haaa!" Fran rushed in.

Biscott braced himself.

However—

"Just kidding."

"Wha?"

She grinned as his nerves came to a head. Fran wasn't about to brute force her way through Biscott's defense.

"Uhhh? M-my feet…!"

She used land magic, changing the shape of the arena. She created a downwards slope from herself to Biscott, then froze the ground beneath Biscott's feet.

It was the worst position he could be in since he was digging in his heels, bracing for impact. He looked like a beginner ice skater, flapping his arms as his feet struggled to regain balance.

And now Fran charged at him head on.

She used Mana Thruster to accelerate herself, striking him from the air. He managed to put his shield up to guard against her, but this was still part of her plan.

"Damn it!"

"Bye-bye."

Fran pushed him, his feet sliding on the ice. He frantically cast multiple wind spells to stop himself, but it was to no avail. He slid out

of the arena, a look of despair on his face.

"Aaaaand it's over! What a cold finish! I sure didn't see that coming! The Black Lightning Princess wins with brain instead of brawn!"

I didn't think Fran would've even gone for this kind of thing. And if I didn't see it coming, there was no way Biscott could.

The match ended in a near-complete victory for Fran. She managed to conceal her trump cards and powerful attacks, and the match ended in a relatively short time. She used a lot of resources but kept damage to a minimum. She was a real nightmare for Biscott.

That was a cool plan, Fran.

Hm. I thought I'd do something similar to Mordred.

You'll need more practice to make it your own…but I'm proud of you for going for that idea!

Really?

Yeah! Beating your opponent to a pulp isn't the only way to win a fight.

Hm!

The match with Mordred had had a more profound effect on Fran than I thought. Just when I thought she would go all out, she went subtle. This wasn't something she could immediately integrate, but the fact that she was going for more than brute force meant that her fighting style was expanding.

Her plan today was a little slapdash, but she would get the hang of this cunning fighting style one day. I was really looking forward to

what lay ahead for us.

"…You got me."

"Heh heh." Fran looked absolutely smug when Biscott approached her. She was really pleased that her subtle tactic got her the win.

"I'll warn you. Sibyl's a lot stronger than me."

"I'll still win."

"Yeah? You'll hear me cackling if she kills you in two seconds," Biscott said as he turned around to leave.

Still, our next match had yet to be decided. Sibyl still needed to win for her to fight Fran.

But Biscott seemed pretty sure of the result…

We'll have to see who we're up against next.

Hm.

The winner of the next match would fight Fran in the quarterfinals.

Five minutes later…

"Sibyl won."

Figures.

Sibyl was up against a big man with a big mace (apparently a fan of Elza). He was proud of his powerful mace, but Sibyl took it head on. She didn't budge, cut him down, and the fight was over in under a minute.

The fact that she took the brunt of the giant mace without even flinching…

Quick pokes would probably be a waste of time. Fran would need to give it her all to stand a chance. Even then, I didn't know if she could win.

"…She's strong."

Yeah.

The matches of the day continued until only Abbav, disciple of Eiworth, and Dias, guildmaster of Ulmutt, were left in B Block.

The match could go either way. If I remembered correctly, Dias and Eiworth used to be in the same party. While the student probably wasn't greater than the master, the match was still worth watching.

Next was Hilt versus Radule.

Another match with opposite fighting styles.

Radule, who peppered his enemies with a variety of magicks. Hiltoria, a martial artist who brute forced her way to victory.

What would become of these two?

If we were talking about raw strength, magic, and speed, Hilt was guaranteed the win. But that wasn't enough to determine the victor in a fight. Experience and tactics amounted to a lot in this tournament, and Radule had plenty of both.

"Old Radule is a master of three elements and a master mage. Will he be able to use his spells to lock down his opponent again? Or will A-Rank adventurer Hiltoria of the piercing fist break the bones of

the old mage before he can begin? Your guess is as good as mine, folks!"

The commentator ended his commentary by beginning the fight.

Hilt and Radule immediately moved.

"Haaa!"

"Hngh!"

Hilt charged forward while Radule jumped backward. They looked to be going at about the same speed.

Radule must have used a spell to increase his speed before the match started. Probably Wind Foot…obviously a wind spell. It increased your speed by covering your feet with…well…*wind*.

"Wow."

Radule's pretty good.

The way he moved around the arena was like a figure skater. Was it because of Wind Foot? I'd thought he would float like a hovercraft at best, but this level of control was difficult to achieve. The best we could do was release a blast of pressurized wind under our feet to maintain forward momentum.

As he maintained this difficult technique, he was already preparing his next attack. The feat was nothing short of amazing. Radule might have been the only contestant who had this fine control over his magicks.

Regardless, Hilt pressed on, covering the distance with her sharp movement.

"Earth Control!"

"What?!"

Radule released a big blast of mana. Hilt sensed it and immediately put her guard up. But her body was cast high into the air.

Radule had taken her feet out from under her by using a land spell to create the slightest of steps in the ground. Hilt managed to spin in the air to land safely, but she was still off balance.

"Did you catch that?"

He covered a large area with mana to conceal his spell instead of outright hiding it, making it harder to detect shifts of mana in the smaller spell. Subtle!

"He's good."

Radule had used a land spell called Earth Control. A fighter of Hilt's level would be able to detect changes in the flow of mana…but Radule wasn't your ordinary mage.

Radule had cast Earth Control over the whole arena, only to make a small step a few centimeters high. To Hilt, it must have felt like he was going to attack from all directions. But a small change was all he wanted, barely noticeable to the naked eye. It was quite a dirty trick.

The only drawback being that it took a lot of mana.

But Radule thought it was mana well spent if it meant delaying Hilt's actions for even a moment.

"Here!"

"Pfft!"

Earth Control turned Hilt's landing zone into a puddle of mud. She winced as mud got on her face.

Losing your footing meant losing your balance, no matter how high your stats were. Radule took advantage of the opportunity and bet it all on a single attack.

"I won't make the same mistake I made last year! Opponents like you need to be taken out as fast as possible! High Wave!"

"This is why you can't let your guard down around seniors!"

Radule was famous for using weaker spells, but that didn't mean big spells were out of his reach. He just didn't use them because of their high mana price tag.

But when push came to shove, he had no qualms about whipping out the big guns. He used an ocean spell to create a giant wave—one big enough to capsize a ship out at sea. In this restricted arena, it would be more than enough to carry his opponent outside of the ring.

The wall of water came closer to Hilt. Everyone watching knew she would be engulfed and carried away by the wave.

But she defied our expectations.

"Raaah!"

"Gah!"

Hilt unleashed a blast of mana, ripping through the wave and blowing Radule away. While he wasn't thrown out of the ring, the old mage landed the ground without moving.

So much power in no time flat. Hilt's Mana Thruster is much better than Colbert's. That's going to make her a problem.

"Hm."

The wave absorbed most of the impact, but it was still enough to knock Radule out. He simply couldn't overcome his old age.

"Wow! Just when we thought old Radule would put her away, Hiltoria answers with a knockout blow through the waters! She isn't the successor of the Unmoving for nothing! How much power is she packing?!"

Though it looked like Radule was giving her trouble, Hilt wasn't even close to fighting at full strength. She wasn't like Fran and the others, who enjoyed battle for its own sake; she simply wanted to keep her strong cards close to her chest.

She would need them in her fight against Fran.

"Hrm."

She's staring at you.

Hilt was looking in our direction. She had somehow managed to pick out Fran from the crowd.

Fran obliged and glared right back at her in a preliminary staring contest.

Both of them could tell how much they wanted to fight each other even at this distance. Eventually, Fran broke off and left without a smile.

"…Now I'm really looking forward to this."

There's someone else we'll have to beat first.

"I know."

I didn't even know whether Hilt would make it to the finals. Her semifinal round was still waiting for her.

Next is Cricca versus Bavaros.

Both names were foreign to me. Cricca was a mercenary, Bavaros an adventurer.

I wasn't expecting much from a battle between two no-names, but Fran let out a startled gasp when the match started.

"Is she reading him?"

Probably. I wonder if it's some kind of observation Skill.

The woman called Cricca used a strange strategy revolving around…observation and perception Skills?

She perfectly dodged every attack and punished her opponent with her bow and rapier.

Bavaros, despite his rough and tough name, was actually a thin-framed mage fighter. He was quick on his feet, using a combination of wind spells and his short spear to great effect.

I mean, Fran would've been able to dodge his attacks…but that was because of how strong she was. And Cricca didn't have half the strength that she did.

The audience probably just thought she was fast, but it almost felt like she had eyes on the back of her head. Her reads were

immaculate. You would have to have perfect comprehension of your surroundings to make the movements Cricca was making.

Not a single attack landed until the end. As a scout, her abilities were nothing short of impressive. On the flip side, her attack power wasn't quite as good. Even against a lightly armored opponent like Bavaros, she needed to land a significant number of hits.

And there was another reason why we had our eyes on her. A reason unrelated to her unique fighting style.

No wonder she hangs out with Sibyl.

Yeah. It's her, right, Jet?

Woof!

Jet told us that Cricca was one of Sibyl's henchmen.

At their level, they probably knew they were being watched. And yet they chose to stay and compete despite knowing their cover had been blown. Maybe they had an exit plan ready…

We'll let Dias and the others worry about what to do with them.

Dias definitely knew what I was already intuiting. Taking our own action now might disrupt the guild's plans.

Looking at it this way, a lot of Raydossian fighters are specialists.

I see.

Biscott the wall. Cricca the scout. Sibyl the destroyer. Sibyl was no slouch defensively, either, but she seemed to excel at offense.

While each had their weaknesses, they made for a balanced party where each member could shine. They were never meant to fight individually.

"Here comes Knighthart."

And Elza.

Our acquaintances would be going up against each other. Knighthart the mantis versus Elza the femme warrior.

"Wow, what a hunk!"

"…Thank you?"

Knighthart reflexively shook Elza's hand when he put it out. Pre-match handshakes were quite rare in this tournament. This one had likely only happened because of Elza's overly friendly nature and Knighthart's good manners.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised because you sounded serious."

"Oh! And what a voice to go with that face. I could hold you in my arms all day."

"H-ha ha. Let's have a good one."

Even the hardened veteran Knighthart seemed thrown off by Elza. Mind you, Elza was being serious when he called Knighthart a hunk. He must have had low standards. Not to discriminate against insectoids or anything…but there were limits to these things, you know?

The match started after the handshake.

"Here goes!"

Elza with his mace, Knighthart with dual blades.

Elza wasn't just tough—he was also a masochist who liked getting hurt. He even had the Skill to prove it. I really wanted to see how Knighthart dealt with it.

"Spiral Thrust!"

"Huh—"

But one strike and it was all over.

Knighthart closed the gap between him and Elza and pushed his sword into his stomach. Blood sprayed out of Elza's back.

"Aah… Simply amazing…"

Why did he have a dreamy look on his face as he was being finished off?! Elza fell to the ground and stopped moving.

The match was over.

It all happened so fast that the people murmured in confusion.

"Did you catch that?"

Barely. It's too far to know for sure. I might have gotten a better look if I were in Elza's spot.

"Hm…"

Knighthart had probably done his research on Elza's fighting style and abilities beforehand. In fact, he most likely did some digging into his personality, too. As a result, he came to the conclusion that the best strategy was to finish him off with a single powerful hit.

He was so fast. His Unique Skill, Skanda, probably had something to do with it…

Knighthart might have been even faster than Fran in Flashing Thunderclap. Top that speed off with the raw strength unique to insectoids and you had a piercing attack that could go through Elza's defenses.

Elza had gotten up after being healed, and now Knighthart was doing his best to exit quietly. He didn't seem powerful at that moment, but today's match definitely made him a favorite to win the tournament.

…I wanna fight him.

I know, but you might not get the chance to.

Hilt was in the other block, and there was still one more match after this.

The winner of today's final match would face Knighthart. As expected, Phelms took that spot without a problem.

"Knighthart versus Phelms!"

I really *don't know who's gonna win that.*

Fran's eyes shone with excitement as she imagined what the fight would be like. As much as she wanted to fight them, she still enjoyed having them clash in her head. I knew how she felt. I did it, too.

The semifinals were next. The Cradle of Time would be in effect. The artifact gifted from the Beast King would reverse time to keep

contestants from dying. On the flip side, ring outs were no longer in effect. Everyone was free to go all out.

We'll have to beat Sibyl before we can fight those two.

"Hm!"

Chapter 3:
Battles with Greats

"AND WE ARE back with the semifinals! The hero of the Black Cat tribe has emerged victorious in every round so far! Can she do it again?! Black Lightning Princess Fran!"

Fran slowly entered the arena as the commentator's voice coaxed the crowd into uproarious applause.

And all she'd done so far was walk slowly into view.

"She may be small, but she'll have no trouble blowing your lights out! Let's see how she'll fight today!"

The voltage of the audience was peaking with the coming of the quarterfinals. Their cheers shook the earth.

"In the opposite corner we have the red mercenary, Sibyl! This newcomer has proven herself by demolishing powerful opponents to get here!"

But the two were deaf to the roar of the crowd.

Fran and Sibyl stared each other down from their sides of the arena.

"We meet again."

"Hm."

"I watched you fight Biscott. That's not all you have, is it?"

"You'll see soon enough."

"Heh heh. Right you are!"

"The dark horse of yesteryear versus the dark horse of this year! Who will emerge victorious?!"

That was the truth—it really was a battle between dark horses.

Fran unleashed her powers before the match started.

"Flashing Thunderclap!"

"Oooh. So, you really *are* an evolved Black Cat."

Sibyl smiled happily as black lightning sparked around Fran. She had looked her up beforehand. Given how famous Fran was, it should have been easy enough to find out.

She probably had a decent guess on how strong Fran was, too.

"Now, show me what an elite adventurer is made of!"

"Sure."

The two readied their swords, waiting for the match to start.

"Begin!"

"Cheeeya!"

"Hm!"

Sibyl stepped forward.

This was unexpected. So far, she had started every match by watching and waiting. But it seemed she was finally getting serious.

She rushed in at great speed, pointing her sword at Fran's neck.

As unexpected as this was, we hadn't discounted with the possibility altogether.

Multilayered Air Shield!

I was also starting out at full power. I set up multiple wind barriers to throw off Sibyl's attack.

"No Cast?!"

"Hmph!"

Fran swung her sword into Sibyl's exposed side, slicing deep into her—

"Ku ha ha ha! That was nothing!"

"Hrm."

But she didn't even leave a cut on her skin. Sibyl hadn't put up a barrier. Instead, it just felt like I was hitting a big tire with a steel pipe. I felt…*blunt*.

The black lightning imbued into the attack didn't hurt Sibyl, either.

Teacher.

I can't tell yet!

Sibyl's damage was being reduced by some kind of Skill. Physical Resistance and Thunder Resistance, maybe? Was it possible that she had the perfect combination of resistances to withstand Fran's attacks?

"Draah!"

Instead of making an opening for us to press our offensive, Sibyl started swinging at us. Fast, but not sharp enough to catch Fran.

Fran dodged her slash using as little movement as possible and launched a low kick into Sibyl's inner thigh.

But she still wasn't flinching.

Then I'll look for her weakness!

"Hm!"

An intense clash of swords and metal erupted. But Fran and Sibyl came out of it unharmed. Fran dodged everything while Sibyl had simply not taken any damage.

No, despite Fran peppering her with attacks from her head down to her toes, Sibyl shed not a single drop of blood. We even went for her eyes but to no avail.

Fiend Crusher Revelation, Venomfang, all of the Elemental Blades. None of them worked.

"Decent aim, but it's useless!"

Then how about magic?!

I let Fran do the dodging as I unleashed a hail of spells at Sibyl, still relentless in her offense.

Flame, storm, land, water, thunder, frost, steel, sand, poison, dark, light, timespace. I cast every spell I had that would do damage.

I even used every elemental control Skill I had that wasn't strictly magical. Flame control, water control, ground control, poison control, wind control, all of it.

But Sibyl didn't even bother dodging them. She took all of them head on and emerged unharmed. There was a high likelihood that we were dealing with a damage reduction Skill instead of resistances. I found it hard to believe that she would have resistances for everything that I threw at her.

"You'll have to do better than that to hurt me!"

"How about this!"

Sibyl kept on advancing as attacks bounced off her body.

Fran crouched under a horizontal swing and shifted me to the side of her waist. She used herself as a fulcrum, loading her sheath with wind before releasing me at Sibyl's neck.

Ordinarily, this Pressurized Quickdraw would be enough to end the match. But Sibyl was anything but ordinary.

I'd thought she had above-average damage reduction. I wasn't expecting the attack to be nullified completely.

Physical Immunity? But why didn't black lightning work?

Not to mention, Colbert actually did a pretty good job at hurting her. His ultimate attack, especially.

There was no way that Pressurized Quickdraw was lacking in damage. In fact, it should have been doing more damage because I had more attack power than before.

But why wasn't Sibyl taking damage?

How is she doing this?!

"Good, that was a good attack! But not enough to beat me! Anyway, I hope you're ready because I'm finally warmed up!" Sibyl shouted. Her pressure immediately intensified as red mana burst out of her body. The pressure she emanated rivaled that of powerful foes we had encountered in the past.

As if to prove that her overwhelming mana wasn't just for show,

Sibyl's speed increased by several factors.

"Shaaah!"

"Urgh…!"

Sibyl had gotten used to Fran's movement, but hesitation was slowing Fran down.

She started pressuring Fran, who was still faster than her. Was there no way to defeat her? Fran's dodges were getting slower as she lost confidence in her own offense.

It was a matter of time before she ate a big hit.

Fran, we have to attack. Just dodging her won't get us out of this stalemate.

…All right.

Sibyl saw Fran put some distance between her using Air Hop and stopped. She knew that we were about to use our trump card.

"Ku ha ha ha! You're no longer hesitating! Good! I'll take whatever you can dish out! Come on!"

She was still laughing despite the circumstances. We'd put a stop to that laughter soon enough!

"Huff…"

If Sibyl was going to wait for us, we would gladly take advantage of it.

Fran started concentrating harder than ever before. She focused on circulating her mana to unite herself and myself before unleashing a powerful attack.

It felt strange; like I was an extension of her body. As a sword, it was euphoric; like I was the most powerful sword ever forged. I was shaking with elation even before she swung me.

I knew this feeling. It was how I felt when Fran used me in Sword God Form.

"Haaa…"

As Fran held me overhead, all the force of her mana behind her, Sibyl only gave an animalistic smile and braced for impact.

She wanted to feel the absolute force of it with nothing in the way.

Fran stepped forward and quietly closed the gap between them.

"Huff…"

"Eh!"

Sibyl didn't react. Either because she couldn't or didn't want to. She only looked at Fran.

"Skycutter."

She brought her sword down on Sibyl, so fast as to leave sound behind.

"Hm!"

What?!

"Amazing! But you're not even close!"

That's impossible! How is Sibyl still in one piece?!

I had left a mark on her, however. A ten-centimeter-long cut across her shoulder. She was drawing blood for the first time.

But…was that it? Was that *all* that Fran's fully charged, Flashing Thunderclap-enhanced Skycutter could do?

There was a bit of divine element in that attack, too!

Really?

Fran hadn't noticed it herself. But having acquired Divine Manipulation, I felt it.

Beyond Skycutter was Sword God Form. It wasn't out of the question that Fran could now imbue her Skycutter with divine element if she tried hard enough.

But Sibyl looked unperturbed. Not only that…the divine element-imbued cut was already beginning to heal.

Impenetrable defense combined with instantaneous regeneration. As if these two weren't enough to make Sibyl an absolute menace, she didn't flinch despite Fran's high-speed attack. Surely the impact should've pushed her a couple inches?

Yet Sibyl remained unmoved from her spot. I could only assume that she had perfectly absorbed even the force of Fran's attack.

But I had seen this stance before. Fran herself had been like this when she used Physical Immunity last year.

Is it Physical Immunity, after all?

But divine element would have the power to penetrate ordinary Skills. Physical Immunity shouldn't grant you divine immunity. So why was the cut so shallow? Would it not have cut at all if not for divine element?

And even if she did have resistance Skills, it still didn't explain how she nullified all of our spells.

Teacher, can you draw out divine element?

…Are you sure?

It sucks, but I need your power.

You got it! I'll give it a shot.

Fran had also conceded that cracking through Sibyl's defenses was going to be difficult on her own. Divine element would be key here.

I used Divine Manipulation to convert my mana into divine element. It was difficult, but I wasn't about to give up.

I thought I should be able to do it. I just needed to remember what Sword God Form felt like. What that earlier Skycutter felt like.

Suddenly, an overwhelming presence came over me, spilling over into great power. The divine element. My entire body was now covered with a thin layer of it.

Got it…! It's nowhere near Sword God Form, though.

It'll do.

Fran made her move again. She held me high in the air and inserted me into her pressurized sheath.

"Teyaaa!"

Pressurized Quickdraw this time. But the amount of mana put into it rivaled Skycutter.

"Bwa ha ha! Still too soft!"

She cut Sibyl's cheek, though much shallower than Skycutter. Sibyl couldn't perfectly defend against divine element.

"Taaaah!"

Fran continued her attack. Though not with her sword.

She launched her fist into Sibyl's body. But her fist was now wrapped with my strap.

"Urgh…"

Huh?

Sibyl was visibly hurt by Fran's fist, though its damage was much lower than her sword. Her lung collapsed. She started coughing up blood and put a hand to her chest. She probably wasn't hurt as much as inconvenienced by the sudden shift in her organs.

"Knew it. Fists work better than swords on you."

"Heh…so you've finally noticed."

Sibyl's defenses weren't evenly distributed between types of attack. She was nearly invincible when faced with swords, but strikes were a different story. Was that why she took so much damage when fighting Colbert? Maybe she was weak to piercing damage, too.

It didn't make Sibyl any less tough, but at least we now knew she wasn't invincible.

Both slashes and strikes were also made more effective with divine element.

Then we'll cut, strike, and beat her down.

Hm!

I'll focus on keeping divine element up.

Thanks.

Sword God Form would only be used as a last resort. We would be at a severe disadvantage if we couldn't finish Sibyl off even after using it.

Sibyl seemed genuinely pleased that we were finally able to hurt her.

"Ha ha ha ha! NOW it's a real fight!"

"Hm!"

A battle to the death commenced. Fran and Sibyl's exchange of blows intensified.

"Taaah!"

"Oraaah!"

Fran sped around Sibyl with Flashing Thunderclap, putting her entire strength into every strike, cutting Sibyl open and sending shockwaves into her organs.

Sibyl showed no signs of slowing down, swinging her sword as her flesh regenerated. If anything, she seemed to be getting faster because of her excitement.

The audience had fallen silent. Reduced to gasping as they watched the high-speed battle unfold. They couldn't tell what was going on, but they knew how intense it was.

But despite the intensity, neither side had taken significant damage. Our deep cuts into Sibyl soon regenerated. Fran managed to

chop off one of her fingers after relentless hacking and slashing, but it soon grew back. An instant regeneration ability, for sure.

Meanwhile, Fran was dodging all of Sibyl's attacks. We tried turning on Physical Immunity but the cost was too great. Spells that enabled attacks to phase through her like Dimension Shift were more efficient. Most of the damage Fran had taken was from being in Flashing Thunderclap. Fortunately, Life Magic—an ability we'd picked up in Belioth—was mitigating most of it.

Both sides used telekinesis, but the clashes didn't amount to much.

We seemed to be at a stalemate, but we were on the losing side. Our resources were being drained while Sibyl didn't seem to need that much mana to sustain her strange abilities. The longer this battle went on, the worse off we would be.

We needed to end this, *fast*.

But there was a reason why we were still engaged in this scrap. We were going for Sibyl's eyes. An attack shrouded in divine element should be able to penetrate her eyes. From there, Fran could drive her sword right into her brain. I don't care how tough you are, you still die from that.

Seeming to have noticed this, Sibyl only dodged attacks aimed at her face. Her animalistic instincts gave her an acute sense of danger.

We need to stop her in her tracks!

Thread form?

She's formidable. I don't think my thread form can hold her down.

The mana lost when we took a hit from her with Physical Immunity running was considerable. In fact, it was more than what we'd lost when Colbert hit us with his ultimate attack last year. And that was just from a stray hit.

Sibyl's sword was focused on durability, not attack power. The brutal strength that she brought to the table was all her own. I didn't think that my threads could hold down a woman of such strength.

So what now?

It's time for the ambush we've been setting up for.

I see.

Fran pulled her arm to her side as if she was preparing herself for another thrust.

Sibyl, taking it as a sign that she was preparing another big attack, grinned. Fran had her complete attention.

But Sibyl really needed to watch her step.

Now, Jet!

"Grooooar!"

"Wha?!"

Jet had been ready for an ambush since the match started. Very few people could actually avoid this on their first try. Sibyl reacted before Jet clamped his jaws on her feet, but she couldn't pull away in time.

"Why is it so *big*?!"

She probably learned of Jet's existence, but she had only seen him in his shrunken form. He didn't walk through town at his maximum size; no outings with him being any bigger, either. I'd hoped that she wouldn't learn about his size-changing trick, and I was pleased to be right.

Jet's head alone was currently over five meters long, and Sibyl's legs had been caught in the edge of his maw. Despite this, his fangs didn't seem to hurt her, either.

But with both legs locked tight in his mouth, Sibyl could no longer move.

"You little—!"

"Black Lightning Strike!"

Sibyl was about to get Jet off of her, but Fran was faster. She warped in front of her eyes and delivered a thrust charged with black lightning.

"Kuoooh!"

Sibyl struggled, shifting my tip from her eye into her mouth. But that was good enough.

We'll fry her right from the inside! And have a little poison on the side! And Mordred's magma, too!

But it seemed I celebrated too early.

"Mgaah!"

"Hm!"

Fran's eyes widened. As did mine.

Sibyl bit into my tip, stopping the stab in its tracks. She basically performed a sword catch with her teeth. Her reaction speed and determination were impressive, to say nothing of her jaw strength.

But the real surprise was yet to come.

CLANG!

Whaaa?

"Hrm!"

Sibyl bit into my blade and broke it to pieces. This wasn't a matter of having strong teeth. She shouldn't have been able to just bite into my mana-conducting blade. It was impossible.

But the reality of my broken blade, the bit of my blade left in Sibyl's teeth, was impossible to deny.

Crunch!

And she didn't just stop at biting it off.

"Munch, munch. That's pretty good. That's a tasty sword you've got there. Mm. Does it have poison powers, too?"

She was chewing on me, eating me, and the poison, too.

Sibyl was crunching on my blade like it was a piece of hard candy and swallowing the filings. It definitely wasn't a performance.

"Ha ha ha! Enchanted swords really do taste different!"

Sibyl was recovering her mana, no doubt from eating me. Meanwhile, the poison (a drop of which was enough to kill a grown man) had no effect on her.

"Now, get off me!"

"Arf!"

Sibyl leaned into Jet's nose and bit into it, ripping chunks of flesh off of him and swallowing them.

"You're tasty, too! And strong! You've got *delicious* dark mana in you!" she shouted, her mana growing every time she ate. I hadn't known she had this kind of ability.

"Shall I eat you whole?"

"Ruff…"

Jet, back off!



Jet howled with fear. The sight of Sibyl eating his flesh before his eyes scared him. His tail was tucked between his legs.

It was all too understandable. The sight of a beautiful woman using her teeth to rip into live flesh was awful. Fran, Jet, and I were all stunned at Sibyl's grotesque appetite.

She's…crazy. She ate *me and Jet! Who does that kind of thing?!*

Are you okay?

I've healed and there's nothing wrong with me… But I still can't believe it.

I'd never expected anyone could just snack on me like that.

"What about you, Jet?"

"Arf…"

Jet and I were mostly all right thanks to our regeneration. But the psychological damage was immense. Jet was still pawing his nose, the feeling of having it ripped off still fresh on his mind.

What are her powers? It can't just be Strange Food. Does it have something to do with her defenses?

Analysis of Sibyl complete.

P.A.! You're done?

Yes.

P.A. in the nick of time! It sounded like she had caught something with her ever-observant eye.

My analysis indicates that Sibyl seems to possess twenty-seven resistance Skills.

Twenty-seven resistance Skills? Are you serious?

Yes. All of them are high level. She also possesses Agony Immunity and Regeneration. These make up her defensive abilities.

Who knew that the first theory I threw away would end up being the right one?

So it wasn't that she had a single powerful damage reduction skill. It was that she had a *ridiculous* number of individual resistances.

Was that even possible? The people of this world had shown me how to acquire resistance Skills. It was not pretty.

Simply put, you had to take a lot of the related damage for a prolonged period of time. Still, no one actually had that many resistance Skills all at once *and* at high levels; even among high rank adventurers.

The reason was simple. No one wanted to put themselves through that much pain. To increase a resistance's skill level, you need to be hit with ever more powerful attacks.

So how much time and pain did Sibyl have to go through to get her resistance levels so high?

She would have had to endure decades of torture, unending from morning to night. Was that even possible? I guess the only thing that would happen was that offensive Skills would become more difficult to acquire the higher her resistances got.

The only thing we need to figure out now is how to break through it.

I listened to P.A.'s explanation as Fran and Sibyl resumed their battle.

Her resistance toward striking attacks is lower than her other resistances. Attacks imbued with divine element also reduce her other resistances.

Do we just keep attacking her until her mana runs out and she can't keep her resistances up?

Resistance Skills were passive Skills, but they consumed a lot of mana if the user took a huge hit. If we kept up our offense, our attacks would eventually drain Sibyl of her mana.

But P.A. shot that tactic down.

No. Something is cutting down her mana expenditure every time her resistances trigger. Sibyl also seems to possess some kind of manatek within her body.

Manatek.

Details unknown. Perhaps the manatek inside her is the source of her immense mana. It may be enabling her to use powerful Skills in succession.

Like the way Fran uses me for mana.

Yes. If the current situation persists, there is a 59% chance of us running out of mana first.

Those were not good odds…

What do you think we should do?

There are four possible ways of dealing with the situation.

Four?

Good job, P.A.! She's so reliable!

First, a full-powered attack using everything at our disposal. Unleash Potential, Sword God Form, Divine Manipulation, Mage. An attack using all of these should be able to defeat Sibyl even with her resistance Skills. 88% chance of success.

I'd…really rather not use Unleash Potential.

Even if we won, we would advance to the semifinals in shambles. We might even die.

Would the Cradle of Time cancel that out? No, it would prioritize Sibyl and Fran wouldn't get her time reverted. It was too much of a risk.

Second, teleport Sibyl somewhere far away. Due to the events of last year, the rules of the tournament have been modified so that staying outside of the barrier for more than three minutes would get you disqualified.

And we had Fran teleporting out of the arena to thank for that rule change. If we warped Sibyl outside of town, she probably wouldn't be able to make it back in three minutes.

But still…

Fran wouldn't be satisfied with that victory. And neither would the spectators. We'd get booed out of the arena even if we won. An honest loss would be preferable.

The three-minute rule made it difficult to, say, flood the entirety of the arena or suck all of the air out of it while we remained outside.

Three minutes probably wasn't enough to suffocate Sibyl. The strategy might backfire, and we could end up getting disqualified instead.

I didn't think Mordred's lava would be effective against Sibyl's abnormal resistances, either.

Third, level up abilities which could go through her resistances. Though we do not know what her resistances are precisely, we do have 52 EP to spare.

What do you suggest?

Elements which we have yet to unlock attack abilities for. For example, Sibyl does not have moonlight and necromancy resistances. We could also exploit her lower-leveled resistances.

Straightforward but clumsy… It was pretty much a dice roll since we didn't know what her precise Skill make-up was.

But at least it was simple.

What's our last option?

Fourth, use Chaos God's Grace.

Uhh… Doesn't that just give you resistance to chaos or something? I was never clear on what it did…

I feel the presence of chaos within Sibyl. It must be one of her sources of power.

Seriously? So she's related to the dungeon somehow? Or does she just have something that's related to Chaos God's Grace?

Details unknown. However, channeling the power of Chaos God's Grace offensively might be key to depleting her energy.

Is that even possible?

Yes. Grace is not a fixed ability, but one that holds great potential depending on the user. First, bring the grace to mind.

I focused my mind on Chaos God's Grace. I still didn't know what I was looking for, though.

…Hrm.

Deeper. Focus on your very core.

Deeper…

I tried going deeper into myself.

It was scary.

There were things inside of me. Fenrir, the Evil One. Memories of me losing my mind back in the Beastman Nation. I didn't know if it was because of Mad Ogre Form, but something bad might happen again if I unleashed the things sealed inside me.

But P.A. was there to reassure me with a calming voice.

Worry not. I am with you.

Despite sounding as monotone as ever, there was a strange kindness to it.

Right…

Her voice led me deeper into myself. Deeper and deeper…until I happened upon a warmth inside me.

Is this it…?

Yes.

This felt very similar to the power the Goddess of Chaos emitted. This must have been her grace.

It was so soft and warm that I couldn't imagine the Goddess of Chaos as its source.

I brought the power forth with my mind, and immediately I felt a surge of power.

Ugh!

I shall help you maintain control. Visualize how you wish to transfer this power to Fran.

…How?

Use this grace and change it to an attack that can kill chaos.

I unleashed the Chaos God's Grace, enveloping myself in its power. I was doing my best to keep it from overwhelming me.

"Teacher?"

I'm back, Fran.

Fran looked confused at the sudden surge of divine element, but that confusion soon gave way to confidence. She knew that a new power had awakened in me. Meanwhile, a slight grimace was forming on Sibyl's face.

"Hah! What's that? You got *really* powerful all of a sudden!"

Instincts as sharp as ever, she recognized in me a new threat and backed away ever so slightly.

It was slight, but this might have been the first time that Sibyl was going on the defensive. She noticed this, too, and was furious

because of it. She started glaring at Fran.

Use this power to cut her up.

"Hm. I'm taking you down."

"Hah hah! I'd like to see you try!" Sibyl shouted as she smiled. It felt like we were facing down a dragon.

Let's go, Teacher.

Yeah!

Fran stepped forward, not flinching at the pressure which felt like it could cut through skin.

She readied me, sheathed with chaos killing power, and charged at Sibyl.

"Haaa!"

"Come on!"

She lowered herself, making it look like she was going for Sibyl's legs, before changing the trajectory of her swing toward her face.

Fran's speed and sharpness hadn't changed. But I had.

I released the terrible power of the grace, planting myself into Sibyl's head, but I didn't slice through her.

"Tch!"

Sibyl shifted her weight to avoid me. She hadn't shown such evasive capabilities before, but she was full of surprises.

But my blade found itself cutting through her left shoulder.

Before, this attack would have ended with a shallow cut.

But things were different now.

"Impossible!"

"Yes!"

Yeah!

Sibyl's left arm flew to the air, blood gushing out of her stump. It was the first time she had been badly hurt in this tournament.

Her bloody shoulder was already starting to regenerate another arm for her, but it was much slower this time.

"What…is that sword?!"

Keep going!

"Hm! Taaah!"

"Damn it!"

Sibyl was on the run for the first time in the match. She stopped attacking. Her evasive maneuvers were animalistic, dodging our attacks by a hair. She didn't look like she was in pain, so her movements remained sharp despite accumulating damage.

But even she couldn't avoid our attacks now that Fran and I were moving at top speed.

There!

"Ssh!"

"What? Teleportation!"

We finally started teleporting, dealing more and more damage to Sibyl. A single powerful hit was no longer needed, only more unrecoverable wounds. It was finally time to put on the pressure!

How about this!

"And these spells…!"

I visualized putting Chaos God's Grace into my magic and fired a thunder spell. It didn't do much damage, but it wasn't completely ineffective. It disrupted Sibyl's movements just enough for Fran to cut across her body.

Would we be able to take her down now?

Fran made a huge leap forward.

And it was the right choice.

"Raaaaah!"

Sibyl roared as red mana poured out of her. No, it wasn't just mana. It was her blood combined with mana.

The blood and mana mixture shone brightly as it gushed out. It looked almost divine as it sparkled in the air, but danger sense warned me not to go near the spectacle.

Sibyl's body was changing. Her muscles ballooned in size, her teeth turning to fangs and fingernails to claws. Her eyes looked almost reptilian.

She looked familiar…like a drake halfling. Was she not a pureblood human, after all?

In any case, it didn't look good.

"Chase!" Sibyl shouted, sending her writhing blood after Fran. Her blood looked alive, squirming like an amoeba. It was not something we wanted to touch.

Fran, don't get hit by that!

"Hm!"

Fran dodged her first attack, letting Sibyl's blood splatter on the arena floor. Bits of it started melting like it was being digested by a slime.

Did only Sibyl's blood have this property?

Now, it snapped at Fran, extending toward her like a whip. Fortunately, my divine-element-imbued self could cut through it just fine.

But my durability took a huge hit. We couldn't keep this up for long.

Just when I thought we had won, Sibyl had pulled out her trump card!

We have to finish this, Fran. We're not going to last if we keep clashing with this weird attack of hers.

Got it.

Fran nodded and made a huge swing with me. I used Dimension Shift and Physical Immunity to give her time to prepare.

Sibyl stopped, but she hadn't given up. She gathered her spilled blood around her to form a barrier. She knew that Fran wanted to end this match and readied herself accordingly for a counterattack.

"…"

"…"

Fran and Sibyl stared at each other in silence, both knowing that the end was near. The audience sat in silence and watched the two

combatants.

The coliseum was silent. So silent that we could hear the faint hustle and bustle of the outside world.

Within that strange silence, Fran and I made our move. She lowered her body as if preparing herself to lunge. It was a feint.

Teacher.

You got it!

I readied an illusion spell, one to make a noise in the distance. That was it.

A plain and honest feint. A specialist like Dias would consider this the cheapest of all illusions.

But Sibyl reacted to our trick.

She was distracted, if only for a moment. But that single moment, lasting less than a second, was all we needed.

We exploited that small hesitation and teleported.

Sibyl immediately reacted as we warped in behind her. Her reflexes were inhuman.

She sent the blood over Fran, drowning her.

But the teleportation was also a feint.

"Black Lightning Strike!"

"Wha!"

After teleporting behind her, Fran used Black Lightning Strike to teleport over Sibyl's head.

We'd finally outrun Sibyl's reflexes!

But she still managed to react in the nick of time!

Blood poured over her head, shielding her from what was to come.

But we were still faster!

"Taaah!"

Doryaaa!

Fran unleashed Skycutter, cutting Sibyl in half. She managed to pull her head away in time, but she was still cut down from her left shoulder, down to her heart, down to her groin.

"Gaah…"

Sibyl had lost control of her blood, and it splashed down on the arena. She fell into the pool soon after.

Did we win?

Fran was still on high alert. The Cradle of Time had yet to activate. Sibyl was still alive.

"Aargh…"

Sibyl was trying to pull something. Her left arm moved despite being detached from her head. She was using her blood to move it.

Was she still planning to fight?

Fran!

"Hm!"

Fran and I moved as Sibyl's left hand was about to unleash her mana—

"Tch."

But she stopped.

She returned to her human form and groaned with frustration.

"You got me…"

Cradle of Time activated, enveloping Sibyl with its light.

SIDE SIBYL

I DON'T LIKE BRAGGING about how miserable my life has been. But I'm pretty sure there are very few people who have it as hard as I do.

Do I even count as a person? Hah. That's what the useless nobles back home would say about me.

I was born several decades ago. Although I barely have any memories of what happened since.

I was born on an island in the sky. A secret Raydossian research facility.

Inhuman experiments were conducted there, and I was one of their products. In fact, I was one of the *successes*.

A chimera. A monster in human form. A creature made from fusing multiple monsters together to create an ultimate monster. What a stupid plan. Others have tried and had their creations run rampant in their own countries. But in their pride, the scientists of the sky isles thought their experiments would turn out differently.

The monsters went crazy because they were *monsters*! A human chimera would *never* do such a thing!

Yes, their idea was as crazy as themselves.

The Production of Superhumans.

As silly as the title of their research was, they did their best to make it come true. The fools went through hundreds of test subjects before finally creating me.

Before I was made, they tried infusing human blood with monster blood, embedding crystals into hearts, and other insane experiments.

I was the only success to come out of it. And because I was the only success, I was also treated as a failure.

With me, they didn't try fusing an adult human with monster powers. Before I developed as a fetus in my host's womb, they spliced dragon and slime DNA into me. The power of a dragon and the regenerative capability of a slime.

To accommodate such a birth, a suitable host was created: a special undead. One created by infusing Grudge into a living human, allowing her to retain her intellect and powers even as an undead. I don't know how much of it is true. I only know that I was declared a success, then a failure, and then the whole thing was thrown out and covered up for a long time.

The researchers' hunger for fame and self-justifying ways became so rampant that their reports became less reliable toward the end of the facility's lifecycle. My host was said to be a woman of great repute, but I had no way of knowing for sure. Frankly, I don't care, either. The only thing for certain was that she was an undead capable of giving birth.

And the undead gave birth to the unthinkable: a baby with the genes of man, slime, and dragon.

Could such a thing be considered human?

The baby was also born with none of the powers expected. She had Regeneration and she matured faster than most people…but that was about it.

A few years went by, and I was passed to another research facility after being deemed a failure. This one was researching cryogenics, attempting to find ways of slowing down the aging process by freezing people. They'd had no success thus far but were keen on my Regeneration abilities, probably supposing it would help me survive being frozen.

I faintly remember being put in a tube and having it filled with a viscous liquid. But I don't recall much else from this period of my life. The terrifying faces of the researchers and the kindness of my fellow lab rats in the hellhole are all that's left.

Neither do I know what happened to the sky isle after that. Apparently, it turned into a dungeon ten years after my freezing.

Most of the researchers died, and their research died with them. But a handful of them managed to send their results to the surface. I was among the deliverables.

Still, I was left neglected due to turmoil in the kingdom. I was seen as an ongoing experiment of cryostasis instead of as just another corpse and was left frozen for another ten years.

And even then, I was still treated as a failure. Due to a flaw in the freezing process, I was effectively a living corpse.

In the end, I was discarded. The same researchers who smuggled me out in the name of personal glory were the very same who abandoned me when I was deemed a failure. I required too much upkeep, and as long as I was around, I was proof of their foul play.

Killing me would've put an end to everything, but the young alchemists hesitated. They cut people open while they were alive, but gods forbid they bloody their hands by taking a life. Real idiots.

So, the fools decided to abandon me. But they couldn't do it in just any dump.

They left me in an A Threat haunt, Insects' Feast. The haunt was originally managed by the Adventurers' Guild but had been requisitioned by Raydoss. At the time, it possessed the highest threat level among all haunts.

Simply put, the haunt was a giant crack in the ground. Thirty meters wide, two kilometers long, a hundred meters deep. Swarms of insect monsters made it their nest, waiting for anything from the outside world to fall in so they could consume it.

So, I was abandoned. Left to die.

But I was still a living corpse at this point. One that would find those researchers much later and make them talk.

The first memories I have were of the Insects' Feast.

"Ahh!"

Pain. Excruciating pain all over my body.

That was the first thing I woke to.

I looked down and saw hundreds of bugs eating away at my body.

Why?

I was in a cramped hole with no space to move. I remembered being put in a tube, and then—

"Aaah!"

The pain prevented any further thought.

I don't know how much time passed in the haze of all that pain. Probably a few days.

Somehow, I didn't die. Whatever the insects ate kept growing back.

I eventually got used to the pain. The insects kept swarming over me, pleased to have found a constant supply of food.

Still, I didn't understand. My regeneration couldn't have been that good. I was bleeding profusely, absolutely drenched in my own gore. How was I still alive?

I had so much time to think that I eventually understood my situation.

I had fallen into a rock deep inside the fissure. The liquid I thought was my own blood turned out to be spring water.

Water…

An immense thirst awoke inside me. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink for days.

The thirst revived my body, driving it to drink.

I reached my hand out to the water and scooped it into my mouth. A tiny sip invigorated me. Water had never tasted so sweet…

But it wasn't plain water. This water was special, loaded with mana.

The mana-infused water was probably what enabled my body to constantly regenerate, keeping it topped up with mana while I suffered.

At the time, all I could think of was how grateful I was for water as I lapped as much of it as I could.

With my thirst quenched, hunger now called. Only there was no food.

Except there *was*.

I took one of the beetles that had been feasting on my body and put it in my mouth. Its hard shell cut my gums and I could taste blood in my mouth. Still, I endured the rank, bitter insect meat and swallowed. It was bad. It stank, maybe from acid or poison. Or both.

Pain flared in my stomach. But still I lived. Regenerating again.

I could eat as long as I didn't die. I could die at any moment, either from being eaten by insects or starving to death. It didn't matter which.

So, I continued eating insects…crunching through them one bug at a time.

A few years passed after awakening in the bug nest. I actually didn't *know* how much time had passed, but it was definitely more than a year.

I continued living in the haunt. The outside world was so hellish that I'd rather let the bugs eat me alive.

There were bugs with stingers, bugs with wings, bugs with giant mandibles. Of particular danger were these long and thin insects which crawled out of the bedrock and attacked by spinning really fast. But special mention goes to the bugs that used elements and magic. There were hundreds of them, most of them more adept at their particular element than the average mage.

There were others too, like bugs with poison in their bodies and ones that carried eggs inside. I didn't know about that and thought I was constipated. It was kind of funny, really. The pain would've been enough to double me over, but I had acquired Pain Reduction by this point.

When I saw countless bugs bursting out of my stomach, I cried for the first time in my life. I had never seen anything so disturbing. It was the first time my emotions rose to the surface after being suppressed by countless experiments.

At the time, Timespace bugs gave me the most trouble. Not only could they teleport, but their jaws were imbued with Timespace, giving them the ability to bite through my skin right into my organs.

But they were nothing but a mild nuisance once I developed Timespace Resistance.

Resistances.

Strange powers I acquired as a result of living in this hellscape, of fighting insects day and night. I later understood that I had a natural affinity for acquiring resistances, probably a result of the adaptability of my slime and dragon genes.

My resistances kept leveling up with each attack I took, and I eventually became invincible to most of the insects' attacks. I later learned that the only resistances I hadn't acquired were moonlight and undead (I continue to only have them at low levels to this day). Goes to show you how varied the insects were.

Another thing: I also acquired the power to eat pretty much *anything*.

Strange Food and Glutton. Skills often seen in dragons and slimes. I'd say I was more appreciative of this eating trait than my resistances.

I discovered it completely by accident. One time, the insects were swarming over something, and I noticed that they were licking it. Naturally, I wanted a taste for myself.

It was salty. The rock had salt and other minerals in it. I had only been eating insects until that point, and the discovery of other flavors shook me…*enchanted* me.

People don't usually put salty rocks into their mouths, but for me it was the most exquisite flavor I'd ever tasted. The more I licked it,

the more I wanted it. Without thinking, I bit in.

"Oh, I guess you can eat rocks, too," I thought.

It wasn't like I had strong jaws and teeth, or anything like that. But at some point I had acquired the ability to make things that went into my mouth brittle. I couldn't chew through enchanted swords like candy back then, but it was enough to eat rocks and iron.

My culinary horizons broadened. If I could eat rocks, what about sand? Or soil? I would snack on crystals found inside rocks, and the steel-like carapace of some insects were no longer a problem. Particularly tasty was the rock that had mana water come out of it. That had even more mana than magicite.

So, I continued eating rocks and boulders around the spring.

Every day I would fill my stomach with rocks until I ate through a bit of rock which revealed a large room. At its center was a strange glowing sphere.

The dungeon core.

The haunt had turned out to be a dungeon all along. The dungeon master was a poisonous bug. It was mindless, but it could control the core to make a suitable environment for the insects to nest in. The mana spring had been specifically created to be an insect nursery.

But at the time all I could think was "That looks delicious."

The dungeon core, brimming with power and energy, looked delightful. I bit into it. Ate it. Made it part of my body.

I've been thinking, lately, that my upbringing might have had something to do with it. As much time as I spent asleep in a tube, I was still on the sky isle for a few hours after it turned into a dungeon before I was sent to the surface.

The dungeon core dramatically increased my abilities once I consumed it. Though the monsters spawned by the dungeon disappeared with the elimination of the core, other insects had strayed in from the outside. I was able to easily annihilate all that were left.

But raw power wasn't the only thing I acquired. Something of the core remained in me, allowing me to manipulate other dungeon cores.

I learned this when I used the Red Sword, a Raydossian relic produced by a dungeon core. I lost control. The power it produced was too great for me to handle, causing a great deal of destruction.

My body transformed into that of a giant earth dragon, wreaking havoc wherever I went: the result of a slime's proliferative ability mingling with an earth dragon's genes.

The Red Sword exhausted its mana after a few hours, but a small forest filled with life had been leveled. The destruction would've been more widespread if Biscott and the other knights hadn't held me off.

Though I have better control of it now, I still can't use it that well. The chancellor even put a seal on it for this little trip. I was kind of hurt by that—I was being entrusted with the sword because I was the only one who *could* wield it, after all. But I guess it couldn't be helped. I'd gone crazy with the Red Sword when some Granzellian

knights and mercenaries crossed our borders that one time. I was in drake form at the time, but I couldn't rule out the possibility of witnesses who'd seen the Red Sword. They might have recognized it.

One of them did.

They recognized the sword that killed their comrades and still agreed to cooperate with us. That should tell you what they thought of their so-called comrades…

So, others might recognize it if I were to pull it out right now.

As much as I would love to continue this fight to the death, I simply can't do that. I wonder if Fran will think I'm letting her win? Well…I'm sure she has her own hidden trump cards that she's not willing to reveal.

Our mission was to evaluate the possibility of S-Rank adventurers living in Granzell and their power level. I would say we've accomplished that to a point.

Fran is an A Rank and this is what she's capable of. S Ranks are not to be taken lightly.

I'm fading… Is this is what it's like to die? Interesting…

What? Who's there? Old man…?

Memories of the day when I first met my adopted father played through my mind. Was my life flashing before my eyes?

It happened when I ran out of food and began thinking about leaving the fissure. I ran into a squadron led by a man.

"I was wondering where all the bugs went…but what's a girl doing here?"

It was Apollonias, then captain of the Knights of the Red Sword. He named me Sibyl, plucked me out of the wilderness, and introduced me to the warmth of his family. He was the only man I ever considered my father. I would meet Biscott and Cricca after this.

Experimental Chimeras. Children born with monster DNA using the results of my research. My father took them all in. He also put a stop to the inhuman experiments. This was why the Duke of the South continued to be on bad terms with the Red Sword Knights even after his retirement.

I remember his smile…pure, without guile.

I know. Don't worry… I'll take care of everyone in Raydoss…

Seconds away from death, and here I am fantasizing.

Aah, but I lost…

Well, my opponent was very strong, after all.

You don't have to cry for me, Biscott, Cricca…

I won't lose next time…

*

After her victory, Fran slowly walked back to the waiting room.

Her steps were heavy, her body stiff and swaying.

Are you okay?

"Hm…"

She hadn't taken much damage, having avoided most of Sibyl's sword strikes and absorbing the ones that landed with Physical Immunity.

Sibyl definitely had Split Thinking. She'd had the wherewithal to attack me with telekinesis in the heat of battle. I hadn't had an opportunity to turn the tide with my own telekinetic powers. I'd kept her busy, at least, which kept the heat off Fran.

But Fran had stayed in Flashing Thunderclap for a long time and had used divine element on top of that. Though she wasn't hurt, she was severely exhausted. So much so that she was wincing, even now. Healing didn't get rid of her fatigue… Would a night's sleep be enough?

At least we saw what lay ahead of Skycutter. One day, Fran might reach a point where she could control divine element on her own.

For now, it would still be difficult. Divine element simply took too much out of her. If only there was some way for me to share her burden…

And it wasn't just exhaustion, either. Fran was frowning, unsatisfied with her victory.

What's wrong?

She gave me the win.

Oh.

At the end of the match, Sibyl was clearly attempting to do something before stopping. She wasn't exhausted; it looked like she

didn’t want to reveal her trump card.

If she really was a Raydossian spy, then it couldn’t be helped. But Fran wasn’t willing to accept a gifted victory.

It’s a battle to the death, but remember that this is only a tournament. She probably thought it wasn’t the right place to use her trump card. Even we *have abilities we don’t wanna show off, right?*

I had no intention of using Unleash Potential or Skill Taker in a tournament setting. Honestly, I’d rather lose.

But Fran still wasn’t having it.

“Hm…”

Look, we won with neither of us being able to use our trump cards. Sibyl conceded under those conditions. Just accept it and call it good.

Sibyl was more of a blood knight than Fran was. She should’ve been just as frustrated as Fran, if not more. She might’ve been rolling around in pain from the frustration right about then.

Fran finally smiled, having been convinced.

“Hm.”

More importantly, we need to prepare for our next match.

First, we would watch the next match. Abbav, disciple of Eiworth, versus Dias, guildmaster of Ulmutt. We couldn’t miss this one.

“Phew.”

Having returned to the VIP section, Fran sank into her seat. Her body was heavy.

You could sleep if you're feeling tired, Fran. I'll watch the match for you.

"I'm fine."

Her eyes were bright, despite her exhausted face. Adrenaline was probably still rushing through her veins after her fight to the death with Sibyl. She wasn't sleeping any time soon.

Want anything to eat?

"Curry. And make it spicy."

A difficult meal to have in the bleachers, but I'd allow it. I used a wind spell to keep the smell from spreading around. Fran made a show of reaching into her inventory while I pulled out a large serving of curry for her.

Spicy, though. That was rare of her.

"Hrm. It's starting," Fran said through her mouth full of curry.

This was the second match of the day. She kept a keen eye on the arena while scooping one spoon of curry after another into her mouth.

Dias looked like he was wearing a tailcoat, but it was light armor made of monster hide. His playful smile was gone, and he made his entrance into the arena quietly. Maybe he wanted to carefully observe his opponent's entrance.

Facing Dias was a wispy, willowy man with skin so white he could be mistaken for an undead. This was Abbav, student of the

former A-Rank adventurer and Thieves' Guild secret weapon, Eiworth.

Abbav quietly readied his scimitar and faced Dias. He was grinning despite being faced with a powerful opponent. Was it a show of his confidence?

"Dragon Twist Dias. I've always wanted to fight you, you know."

"Have you? I'm honored, but why?"

"It's not every day I can humiliate someone my degenerate master actually approves of! Hee hee hee! I'm getting chills just thinking about it."

"Wow, you really do look like that idiot. I guess students take after their masters, after all."

"Hee hee hee! I can't wait to crush that smug face of yours! I also have another reason for wanting to fight you!"

"And what is that?"

"Heh heh. You're the *only* one of my master's ex-comrades who I actually have a chance against!" the perverted Abbav shouted, taking test tubes out of his pocket.

"Hee hee hee! Now, take my master's poison and die!"

I Identified Abbav's poisonous potions as Seven Winks. So called because seven winks are all you have left once the poison is in your system.

He smashed the bottles against the floor, instantly creating a cloud of smoke. It looked like the same move Eiworth used.

Abbav was immune to his own poison thanks to having level 8 Poison Resistance. Meanwhile, Dias's resistances weren't as good.

Would he be okay?

Abbav howled, seeing that victory was at hand.

"You're strong, I'll give you that! The greatest illusionist of your time! Too bad your defenses aren't up to snuff. Your evasive maneuvers are nothing against my poisonous gas!"

He was right. Dias could use illusions—Mental Suggestion and Visual Suggestion—to avoid his enemies' attacks. But these were useless against attacks that covered an area of effect.

"Gah!"

Dias coughed up blood and fell to his knees.

Had Abbav actually succeeded in killing this giant?

"Hee hee hee! Hold your breath all you want, this poison can penetrate skin!"

"Urgh…"

"And so, Dragon Twist Dias has fallen to Abbav of the Vile Blade!" Abbav howled to the heavens, but then immediately crumpled, his eyes rolling back into his head.

"You took your eyes off your enemy in a fight? Amateur."

"I-I have no idea what just happened! I think we all saw Sir Dias coughing up blood, but he suddenly appeared right behind Abbav! I guess it was an illusion all along!"

The fallen Dias turned out to be one of his illusions. He'd used Mental Suggestion to trick Abbav, allowing him to approach without him noticing. Dias then struck him right at his weak point.

Did you catch that?

"…A bit?"

I only caught it because we're all the way up here…

But even then, I still missed it the first time. But I knew that Dias wouldn't have fallen that easily to poison and I saw him focusing his attention on the entire arena to conceal something. I still couldn't tell what he did, though. Dias was *very* good at concealing his presence, so when the poisonous gas didn't work, it provided a convenient smokescreen for him.

But how did he guard against the poison? A Skill? An item? I couldn't tell because the gas obscured whatever Dias did.

It's not gonna be easy.

"But we'll win."

Uh-huh.

And so, the second round of the day ended in mere seconds in victory for Dias.

It was Hilt against Cricca next and this, too, ended quickly. There were some decent highlights, though.

Changing gears from the Radule fight, Hilt chose to wait and see.

Cricca clicked her tongue. Her game was to mainly wait for the opponent to attack so she could counterattack.

They stared at each other down in a seeming stalemate. But as time went on, Cricca started to panic.

Hilt was slowly but surely charging up mana. You didn't have to know Dimitris Style to know that this was bad news.

Regardless, Cricca continued watching Hilt, preparing herself to dodge whatever she threw at her.

If this were the qualifiers, doubtless you'd have people in the crowd shouting, "Just fight already!" But the audience watched on with bated breath, feeling the tension Cricca was feeling.

"Haaaa…"

"Ack!"

Hilt unleashed her mana, covering the arena in an instant. But this wasn't her attack…not yet. This was just a distraction.

Mana Sense would be useless in the presence of this wave of mana.

Then Cricca was blown away. Her body was thrown in the air, following a strange arc. That was Hilt's spirit attack.

Unable to detect Hilt's attack within the flood of mana, Cricca was helpless and could only take Hilt's clever hit.

She fell outside the arena and lay motionless. The match was over.

Hilt was strong, but she was tactical, too. This strategy would not have worked against Radule, and it would've seen her being defeated by the old mage. She'd studied Cricca and come up with a way to deal with her specifically.

Fran wasn't the only one still learning and getting stronger.

And so, another powerful opponent made it to the next round.

It's finally time.

"Hm. Phelms versus Knighthart."

We watched as the combatants entered the arena.

They were both favorites to win the tournament, and we considered both to be powerful rivals.

"This will be our final match for the day! Two fighters enter the arena, only one leaves victorious! We have the mercenary Knighthart, overcoming criticisms and achieving spectacular victories thus far! Will his dual blades claim his opponent's life today?! Because he's up against Dragon Hunter Phelms! And he's been making every match so far look so easy! Will his living threads be able to capture his prey?!"

Despite the commentator's best efforts at hyping up the crowd, the audience was noticeably quieter compared to the previous match. The last match had been between two beautiful girls, Hilt and Cricca. This match was between a dandy old man and a mantis man.

However, Fran and I were far more interested in this match. The result was impossible to predict.

Abbav lost to Dias and Cricca to Hilt. They were all strong, to be sure, but the stronger competitor was obvious in those matches.

Meanwhile, both combatants now were as strong as each other.

"Who's going to win?"

"Woof…"

Fran and Jet were looking forward to the match, more for the excitement of it than for analysis. I, or rather P.A., would still analyze

the match, of course.

"I pick Phelms."

"Arf?"

"His threads are strong. You can't run from them in a cramped space."

"Ruff… Woof!"

"You think Knighthart?"

"Arf, arf!"

Jet got up on his hind legs and posed with his front paws. He curled his wrists, making him look like a Japanese *maneki neko*, but I think he was doing his best impression of a praying mantis.

Knighthart had speed on his side. He was among the fastest of the tournament competitors.

But I was with Fran on this one. I thought Phelms would take it.

I didn't have a clear vision of how. His threads just reminded me of how threads worked in the animal world. Even a mantis couldn't escape a spider's web.

But there could always be exceptions.

As we waited for the match to start, a large figure approached us.

"Seat taken, Fran?"

"Elza? Go ahead."

"Thank you."

Elza squeezed into his seat. He had come to watch the one who defeated him, his burning eyes set on Knighthart. Fran tilted her head.

"I thought you didn't like bugs."

I forgot about that. The sight of a dead bug was enough to make this femme powerhouse scream, and a giant bug monster caused him to fly into a berserker rage, attacking friend and foe alike.

But Knighthart was…*fine*? He was more insect than man.

"You mean Sir Knighthart's face?"

"Hm."

"Well, he may look like a bug, but he has the heart of a gentleman. I can see it. The things that I don't like are creepy crawlies whose movements you can't predict. Even when dead they're just… Brrr!"

So, Elza didn't have a problem with insectoids. For him, it was the soul that counted.

As we talked about predictions, the match began.

"Shiiiyaaa!"

"Thread Wall!"

The match started just about as we predicted. Knighthart rushed in with his impressive speed and Phelms started building his base of threads while being cautious of him. Threads spread all over the arena, creating a network of traps not unlike a giant spider web.

Knowing that Phelms would be more dangerous with his web set up, Knighthart was set on finishing him off as quick as possible, the

way he did Elza.

I noticed that his feet were charged with magic; must have been Skanda, his unique skill. It allowed him to move at great speeds for a long period of time. Not the most impressive in terms of features…but very useful to have.

Phelms was prepared, setting up tripwires beforehand to warn him of the dangers to come. Their vibrations let him pinpoint his opponent's location, allowing him to avoid attacks from his blind spots.

He continued dodging Knighthart's dual blades, letting his tripwires do the work of damaging his opponent for him.

Though it looked like the dual blades had cut Phelms, he didn't take any damage from them. This thread barrier gave us a lot of trouble, too. It deflected both cuts and strikes by absorbing their shock at the moment of impact.

"Phelms is really strong."

"He is. He fought alongside the guildmaster once, remember?"

But Knighthart was showing no signs of slowing down. He pressed on despite his wounds, and he was rewarded with finally landing a hit on Phelms.

Knowing that his attacks were being nullified, Knighthart started looking for gaps in Phelms's threads. His Skanda-amplified legs also increased the momentum of his attacks, imbuing each of his strikes with great force.

This was not a good position for Phelms considering how frail he was in comparison. If Knighthart kept this up, Phelms would soon be in a losing position.

Still, he calmly kept weaving his threads until finally capturing Knighthart.

"Hundred Thread Binding Array."

"Urgh!"

The countless threads had looked harmless as they stretched around the arena. But once charged with mana, they immediately became sticky, tangling Knighthart's feet before he could realize it.

Knighthart quickly cut the threads down to escape. But this was exactly what Phelms wanted.

Phelms was standing still in the middle of the arena, arms hanging down his sides, looking almost defenseless. He closed his eyes, a sign that what was about to come required his utmost focus.

"Hmph!"

"Gah—"

Knighthart reacted and threw the sword in his right hand, his raw strength enough to make the blade a deadly projectile. He deemed Phelms dangerous enough to risk losing half of his offense.

Knighthart's sword hit Phelms, staining his shirt with blood.

It didn't look like Phelms made any attempt to defend himself. Even if he was focusing, there should've been threads ready to protect him… In fact, the threads covering his body seemed to have loosened slightly.

The sword sank deep into Phelms's chest, but he remained standing. He smiled.

"Ten Thousand Thread Control… Death Blood Array…"

Blood spouted like a fountain out of Phelms's chest. The pressure was so great that it couldn't have been from the initial wound. The threads were dyed red with his blood, lighting up the arena with an eerie glow.

As its name suggested, this move used Phelms's blood to power up his threads. Phelms had anticipated Knighthart's attack and chose to welcome it.

"You planned this all along!" Knighthart shouted, watching the red threads spread within the barrier.

The floor and the walls looked like they had countless veins pulsing on top of them. The inside of the arena soon looked like the insides of a hideous monster. The audience gasped as the veins launched toward Knighthart.

He swung his sword, trying in vain to cut them down. They were much tougher now that they had been reinforced with Phelms's blood.

"Urk! This is quite a dangerous situation!"

"…"

Phelms remained silent as Knighthart struggled against his threads. He appeared unable to respond, looking like he was halfway between life and death. This trump card of his was probably a gamble he risked his life on. He only used it because he could be brought back to life in the tournament.

Either Phelms would die of blood or mana loss first or Knighthart would find a way out of this predicament.

With every passing moment small holes appeared in Knighthart's body, slowly but surely draining him of his vitality. Meanwhile, Phelms was now on his knees.

"Urgh…"

One of the threads finally struck Knighthart's leg. While its damage was insignificant on its own, it stuck Knighthart to the arena floor, severely restricting his movement.

The slower he was, the easier it was for the threads to strike, further slowing him down. Every red thread caused continuous damage as well as lowering his agility at the same time.

The threads attached to Knighthart also became redder, reinforcing themselves with Knighthart's blood. His body, legs and arms were pierced with the threads that pinned him to the ground.

"Gaaah!"

Knightheart was no longer able to evade, and one of the threads shot through his chest and his heart. More threads rushed to his heart, skewering him right through. He looked like he was being eaten by countless worms. Screams were heard from the audience as the sight became unbearable.

"Eek!" Even Elza screamed.

While not real insects, the threads wriggled and squirmed like worms. I would probably have the same reaction if I were still alive. The whole thing was grotesque.

Phelms had the advantage. The match was decided. Or so I thought…

But it wasn't over yet.

Thirty seconds after Phelms activated his trump card…

"Huff, huff… Looks like I win."

"Indeed. I lost."

The Cradle of Time activated, reviving Phelms. Knighthart had managed to outlast him in the match.

Fully recovered, Phelms threw some potions on Knighthart.

But how did Knighthart survive his heart being pierced?

I had a feeling it was his Insect Form skill. I Identified him as he was being attacked and found that he had turned into an insect. He didn't look any different, but he must have taken on the organ arrangements of an insect.

They say that insects don't have hearts the way humans do. Insect monsters had tubes which functioned a lot like hearts, and if Insect Form turned even his organs into an insect's, Knighthart's *heart* would no longer be that of a mammal.

Add to that his enhanced regeneration, and he was able to outlast his opponent.

I gathered that Knighthart had yet to fight at his full strength. His stats increased in Insect Form, after all.

"Knighthart's so strong!"

“Woof!” Jet barked smugly. He had won the bet this time. “Woof, woof!”

“Hm. You win, Jet.”

And that’s all for today. Let’s head back to the inn.

“Hm. Bye-bye, Elza.”

“Yep! See you around,” Elza said, having recovered from the shocking conclusion of the round.

We left the coliseum, Fran dragging her feet. After that nail-biting match, she must have been starving. But then something got in our way.

“You looking for a fight?!”

“You’re the ones looking for it in the first place. If it’s a fight you want, then it’s a fight you’ll get.”

“Let’s throw down!”

“Don’t spit at me!”

Adventurers were arguing in the middle of the road. A carriage was blocking the way, so we couldn’t just walk past them.

Some of them were drunk. Specifically, the bald guys with fur headgear. They looked to be barbarian types.

They were arguing with younger, proper-looking adventurers. At the head of this party was a young archer.

This was a scene that had become increasingly common in Ulmutt as of late. The guards who were meant to deal with these

minor disturbances were preoccupied. Around us, townspeople watched with worried faces as the argument escalated.

Neither party was very strong, so we could just leave them to sort this mess out for themselves. Alternatively, we could beat both of them up to resolve the fight before it could happen. Fran might have been exhausted from using divine element, but they shouldn't prove a problem for her.

But Fran didn't start whaling on them and instead stepped between them.

She knew some of the people who were in the argument.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh? Master Fran!"

The young adventurers were Naria and Miguel, Fran's one-time students. Naria looked at her awkwardly, hearing the annoyance in her voice.

"You wanna go too?"

"Umm!"

Naria was clearly dismayed when the drunks glared at Fran. She saw how Fran's eyebrows furled in frustration.

"You're making a scene."

"S-sorry…"

"Whuzzat?"

Naria and Miguel turned pale and silent at Fran's quiet rebuke. But the drunk, unable to gauge Fran's strength, challenged her

further.

"Buzz off and mind your own business!"

I guess we have to get violent again…

"Hmph."

"Gwargh!"

Fran punched his side, bruising it and turning it blue. But I'm pretty sure there were no broken bones.

"Miguel, pick them up and leave them at the side of the road."

"Y-yes, Ma'am!"

"T-thank you, Master."

"Hm. They were in the way."

Naria and Riddick thanked her. The lack of manpower this year was really beginning to disturb the peace.

"We just got back from a quest, too, and we immediately had to deal with those losers!"

"A quest?"

"Yes."

The Adventurers' Guild had posted an extermination quest outside of town. Undead were on the rise, with some of them even showing up in town. Though not a problem by themselves, the undead would eventually attract monsters which preyed on them, so they needed to be dealt with quickly.

"And Dufaux just ditched us! I can't believe that guy."

"He ditched you?"

"Yeah. I thought he was going to help but then we found that he checked out of the inn… And what, because he lost to you?!"

Dufaux had been so shaken by his loss to Fran that he had apparently left Ulmutt.

As we were talking to Naria, someone tripped my Presence Sense. This particular someone was on top of a building, looking down on us.

Teacher?

…Jet, can you get that guy on the roof?

Woof!

Fran, you take the one in the alley.

Got it.

Three intruders. Hidden, but their bloodlust was obvious. They couldn't hold themselves back; they were probably new at this.

"Master, I'm feeling a strange presence…"

"Ssh. I know. Keep talking."

"A-all right."

And if Naria could sense them, they were absolute rookies.

Get 'em!

"Hm!"

"Grr!"

I fired a thunder spell, signaling Fran and Jet to get moving. The suspects were quickly apprehended. They barely put up a fight.

Naria looked startled at the sudden blast of magic followed by Fran and Jet dragging three strange-looking men.

"Uhh, Master?"

"They're assassins. I think."

"Y-you think?"

"Hm. They wanted to kill me."

Naria winced. She probably thought knocking them out before capturing them was a bit too much.

We found a nice quiet alley to begin our round of questioning. I healed the one I'd electrocuted so that Fran could start intimidating him.

"Why are you trying to kill me?"

"I-i-it's just a job!"

Fran's assassin was very talkative. These wannabe bandits had apparently been paid by people who looked like nobles.

Let's just take them to the guild.

All right.

Fran had plenty of reasons to be targeted. She was famous, and she was a big enough threat to anyone who wanted to win big on the tournament's illegal betting circuit.

I didn't think any of her competition would've put a hit on her, but outside of them the possibilities were endless.

We dragged our wannabe assassins to the Adventurers' Guild. But there was quite a scene there, too.

Dias had also been attacked, though he'd dispatched his attackers just as easily as we had. Were they going after the semifinalists?

"Fran? What brings you back so soon?"

"Hey, Elza. Here. For you."

"And who are they?"

"Assassins."

"Goodness! You got hit, too? All right, I'll take care of them for you!"

"Thanks."

"Can someone throw these chumps to the dungeon? Thanks!"

Elza licked his lips when Fran handed the assassins over.

"I can't believe this is happening. Now I have to send people over to Hiltoria and Knighthart to make sure they're okay. We'll have to bring their assassins in, too, if they had a hit put out on them."

"Good luck."

"I feel a million times better with you cheering me on, Fran!"

…Settle down, Elza.

But there sure was a lot of trouble surrounding this year's tournament. Raydossian spies, undead infestations, Chalusian nobles, and now assassination attempts.

The town guard had no way of keeping up with all of this. Was Ulmutt going to be okay?

In any case, we had a match to worry about. Hopefully, Fran would feel better after a good night's rest.

Chapter 4:
Fight to the Top

THE SKY WAS clear and cloudless. A fresh breeze was blowing through Ulmutt this morning.

Fran was excited as she made her way to the coliseum. She stretched, took a deep breath of fresh air, and smiled.

It was a wonderful day for sports fans everywhere. Even bloodsports fans.

Was there an ideal weather for bloodsports? Well…better sunny than rainy, I suppose.

Fran probably didn't mind how the weather was as long as she got to fight against a strong opponent.

"It's time for the semifinals and we've got some promising faces this year! Our combatants have already entered the arena for our first match of the day!"

The seats were packed. Even the empty seats in the VIP and noble sections were filled.

Everyone wanted a piece of the action.

"Fighting her way through the ranks as first seed is Black Lightning Princess Fran! She's made it to the semifinals for two years in a row! She's already Awakened and crackling with black lightning as she stands in the arena!"

The roar of the crowd shook the coliseum. They'd been hyped up before, but today they were on a different level. Their sound had the force of a tsunami.

"She'll be up against Ulmutt's own guildmaster and A-Rank adventurer, Dragon Twist Dias! I never thought I'd see our guildmaster compete, folks! Will his decades of fighting experience defeat Fran's youthful exuberance?! Or will the young lay waste to the old?!"

Things were also heating up between Fran and Dias. Their sharp gazes clashed as their bloodlust arose. If it weren't for the barrier, their bloodlust would've been enough to knock people in the audience unconscious.

"A direct confrontation," Dias muttered, barely audible at this distance. "We'll keep it simple. Winner wins our bet."

"Hm."

That was all that was said between them. But I knew they would start trying to kill each other as soon as the match started.

Dias wanted to win to put an end to his obsession with his own hands.

Fran wanted to win to protect Theraclede and Romeo. She also wanted to overcome the wall of defeating an A Rank.

But we had one little concern on our minds…

Fran, how are you feeling?

A bit heavy.

I see…

Fran had yet to fully recover from the battle with Sibyl. The burden of divine element still deeply fatigued her body. She was exhausted, far from optimal. But stamina management was part of competing in a tournament. We couldn't let this weigh us down.

We'll stick to the plan.

"Hm."

Our opponent was a master illusionist, an expert at disabling his enemies. Meanwhile, we weren't at a hundred percent. I was ready to forego everything and bet it all on our plan.

"Let the first round of semifinals…begin!"

"Raaah!"

Fran made her move as soon as the match started, putting all her strength into Skycutter. With all our Skills activated, this was the most powerful move we had in our arsenal. Though she could only move at seventy percent of her maximum speed, it was still plenty fast.

Dias was strong. If we let him cast his illusions, he would have us dancing in the palm of his hand.

But if nothing else, we knew where Dias was standing at the beginning of the round.

He couldn't react. As good as he was, he couldn't dodge the incoming Skycutter.

I'd noticed during his match with Abbav that his defenses weren't that high. A direct hit from Skycutter would not leave him unscathed.

Meaning this one attack had the potential to end the match before it began—

"Huh? What?"

Fran?!

Suddenly, Fran's Awaken deactivated. Her stats plummeted, but she also lost control of Skycutter. She wobbled, losing her balance.

I held her up with telekinesis as the momentum threatened to make her hit the ground.

Are you okay?

"Hm… What happened?"

It's Dias's Skill Amnesia!

I hadn't thought that it could work against Awaken.

Skill Amnesia: Temporarily causes a target skill to be forgotten. Duration depends on skill level and rarity. Max duration of one minute. Cooldown depends on skill level and rarity.

"When a beastman's Awaken is halted, the leftover mana implodes because it has nowhere to go. I knew you were going to pull something at the beginning, which is why I'm going to seal that ability of yours!"

Dias didn't react because he didn't need to. He knew what would happen if Awaken was disabled during a powerful ability.

"Urgh…!"

Fran!

Just as Dias said, Fran's mana ran wild inside her once she lost control. She barely managed to keep it from self-destructing.

Meanwhile, Dias was making his approach. He smiled, not his usual mischievous smile. This was a smile of a hunter whose trap had caught his prey.

"Tsh!"

"Gaah!"

He easily landed a hit. Just as Fran avoided his illusory fist, he cut her inner thigh.

Fake an attack with an illusion and then follow up with an invisible attack. The bread and butter of an illusionist. But Dias's illusions were far trickier compared to any illusion we'd seen so far.

He managed to reproduce signs of life, the sound of wind being cut, even smell. His illusion looked just like the real thing.

Fran winced after backing away from him.

"My leg feels weird."

What?

I checked Fran's leg. The wound Dias left was not healing.

Signs of Life Magic detected. Regenerative capabilities have been limited for a short time.

You can't be serious!

Was it Dias's weapon? I tried checking but Identify didn't work. Identify only pointed out Skills it could see. Hidden with Illusion Magic, it couldn't detect what Skill had been used. All I could tell was that the wound came from a slashing weapon.

According to my pre-match Identify, Dias should still have been using his Dragonfang Dagger. He must have switched it out when the match started.

Fran, be careful around his weapon!

"Hm!"

But I still didn't know the length and shape of it. So much for caution. Dias's cunning might have been the sharpest weapon in his arsenal.

We continued trading blows, but Fran's movements were getting worse. Not only was she tired, she was still feeling the effects of having Awaken forcibly ended.

She no longer had the lead in stats—even her agility had been taken away from her.

Meanwhile, Dias's movements were still crisp and clean. No wasted movements; if it seemed that way, they had been deliberately left there as bait. If we took the bait and attacked, a painful counterattack would be waiting for us.

Teacher, phaser!

Right!

I activated Dimension Shift on Fran's command. The attack nullification should have allowed us to regain our footing.

But Fran's neck twisted the moment I used it.

"Hurk!"

Blood gushed out of her nostrils. She had barely avoided an attack aimed at her nose. No, the attack still landed, leaving a cut inside her nostrils. We knew it would hit because of Danger Sense.

"I've seen that move too many times!"

"Hrm…"

Dias knew how to deal with Dimension Shift. Timespace weapons were rare, but he might have had one prepared for this occasion. A dagger with both timespace and life elements imbued on it? Was he dual wielding? No, the wound wasn't healing. It was probably the same weapon.

You okay, Fran?

"I can't stop bleeding…" Fran snorted through her nosebleed. She couldn't heal because her regeneration was being disrupted. Blood continued dripping out of her nose, now disrupting her sense of smell.

Dias must have known that a beastman's sense of smell was a dangerous asset to have against him even with his illusions. I didn't think he'd actually stab a little girl right in the nose, though! He really wasn't pulling his punches.

Fran's mana continued to rage in her body. She wouldn't be able to use Awaken again in this match. Now without her sense of smell, she was at the utter mercy of Dias's illusions.

Melee combat might have been a bad idea at this rate. Fran must have thought the same thing, because she switched gears to suppress Dias with magic.

But her spells went around Dias. Lightning and flame missed the mark, whizzing harmlessly past the old guildmaster.

"What?"

What's wrong, Fran?!

I don't know!

Was it Dias again? But this flow of mana…

Fran's senses might have been rendered unreliable because of his illusions. I had enough resistance to deal with Mental Suggestion and Visual Suggestion, but Dias's Illusion Magic was still a force to be reckoned with.

We couldn't let him keep pressuring us like this.

I aided Fran in firing spells, but the same thing happened. My aim was way off. He was doing something! But *what*?

Meanwhile, Dias kept focusing his attacks on Fran's legs. I activated Dimension Shift again, but he went through it. Again.

Dias was aiming for legs, eyes, and heart. Organs which would prove highly advantageous or lethal when hit.

I'm warping us out of here!

Hm!

I teleported. I thought Dias would pursue us, but he had a surprised look on his face. He wasn't expecting Fran to teleport.

Maybe he had a teleport sealing device on him. Well, it was a good thing I had Seal Immunity ready.

Just like with Winalene, we were still susceptible to moves that disrupted Timespace Magic, but sealing abilities and equipment didn't affect me.

But my teleport behaved strangely. I was trying to get us to one of the corners of the arena, but instead we were warped into the air. Something was throwing off my aim.

At least this played into our plan.

Fran, time for Plan B!

Hm!

You get that ready.

Got it!

Abbav had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Dias yesterday, but he gave us a huge hint with his strategy.

He had tried to defeat Dias by covering the arena with an unavoidable attack before Dias could cast his illusions. We had something like that up our sleeve. Dias had been ready for Abbav's poison, but he might not be ready for this.

"Taaah!"

Fran opened Pocket Dimension, pouring out a red-hot fluid from within. It was time to make use of Mordred's lava.

Lava flowed on the arena like maple syrup on a pancake, covering the ground in a flash.

Dias put up a barricade of Earth Magic, but we succeeded in slowing him down.

And slowing him down wasn't the only thing the lava did.

It disappeared.

He cast illusion spells all over the arena and barrier!

I guessed that he had cast an illusion to alter the levels of the arena ever so slightly while also distorting the view of the bleachers from within the barrier. This was what was screwing up our sense of distance. This was what was messing up our spell aim.

The lava destroyed the illusions, reverting things back to normal.

I'd never anticipated that he would use such a large-scale spell right at the outset. Dias was so good at concealing his mana that I couldn't detect it.

Time to lay down some spells, Fran!

Hm!

We had him on the run this time!

"Urgh! So, you saw through me!" Dias winced, swinging his sword to deflect our spells. He wasn't enjoying himself. But considering this was Dias we were talking about, it might all have been an act.

But now wasn't the time to worry about his strengths. It was time to flex ours!



Let's do it!

"Hm!"

Multicast Kanna Kamuy!

I fired three bright flashes of lightning. The pillars of electricity crashed into the ground, illuminating everything within the arena with a blinding light.

Last year, we'd defeated Phelms by combining both white and black lightning into one. This attack was similarly charged, and it was coming straight for Dias.

With his unimpressive defenses, Dias shouldn't have been able to take much magic damage. His areas of expertise were distraction and assassination. Not things that could shine in the restrictions of an arena.

Last year I'd ended up breaking the barrier because I couldn't control the spell properly, but I had it covered now. If anything, the damage was greater now because it was focused on the inside of the arena instead of being wasted on the barriers.

The only downside was that we couldn't escape. I had to use Dimension Shift to withstand the backblast of the explosion. Soon, the brilliant whiteness dimmed, the loud crackling subsided.

Dias was lying flat on the ground, barely breathing, body burnt.

"Heh… Not bad…"

His body was then engulfed in light. The light which would revert him back to life.

"We did it…"

Yeah. Even Dias couldn't survive a direct hit from Kanna Kamuy.

Fran sniffled through her nosebleed, too worried about Dias's safety to celebrate her victory. Finally, she breathed a sigh of relief.

First, we needed to heal her up. Seeing blood keep flowing out of her nose just wasn't cute. When would this regeneration blocking effect wear off?

As Fran started healing herself, the commentator started shouting.

"Was that the end of the match?! Your guess is as good as mine, folks! All I can see is Dias lying on the ground after that blinding lightning strike!"

What? Fran hadn't won yet?

"Urgh!"

After the commentator's strange comments, Fran was flung to the side.

"You won't get away!"

Dias!

How?! He was—

An illusion!

Dias had replicated the effects of the Cradle of Time to such a high degree that we let our guard down. He crafted the perfect illusion of death.

The commentator knew that the real Cradle of Time had not yet activated, and he was confused when Dias was seemingly resurrected

by the Cradle of Time in the arena.

Dias warped to Fran's side, piercing a dagger into her neck with his off hand.

She barely managed to get out of the way, her senses warning her of the attack just before it landed. But she couldn't avoid it completely, and blood was drawn from her shoulder. While her carotid artery was intact, the cut into her shoulder was quite deep. Had Dias damaged her tendons? Her arm seemed heavier than before.

Even as she bled, Fran turned to face him.

"Ugh… That was good."

"You're one to talk after dodging a lethal attack."

"I can sense you easier because of your injuries."

"Heh… I guess I am getting old." Dias laughed bitterly at his failure.

But I was surprised to see him still moving at all. Dias's body had been charred black, blood leaking through cracks in his skin. The wounds we saw in his illusion were merely a reproduction of his own.

And still he managed to conceal enough of his presence to approach Fran from the side.

"Hate to admit it, but it looks like I'll have to use an item to finish you off…"

Jet, get him!

A chill ran down my spine as soon as I saw Dias take a crystal out of his pocket. It wasn't just the magic that the thing emanated; there was something "other" about this crystal as well.

I commanded Jet to attack, him being our trump card against attacks which covered a large area.

"Groooaar?"

"Ha ha. Another illusion."

Dias's dagger fell onto the ground. It was the only thing real about it.

I was so sure that we'd been attacked by the real thing! Had the illusion hurt Fran? If not, when did he swap himself for the illusion?

The new Dias appeared, similarly burnt. Were his wounds even real?

No, now was not the time to think about that! This kind of confusion was exactly what Dias wanted!

"Storm, destroy all."

Dias had no more reason to hide. I Identified the item in his hand: a Spirit Sphere. As its name suggested, it housed the power of a spirit, allowing the user to unleash it in a single powerful blast.

It didn't house an actual spirit, of course, but its power. You needed a sorcerer to make one of those things.

The sphere emitted a green light. One glimpse of it was enough to tell me that we would lose if things went on like this.

The power was immense, like it came from a Greater Spirit…

Of course. Klimt's Greater Spirit! Dias and Klimt were acquaintances, after all! This was not good!

Jet, protect Fran!

"Woof!"

Oooooh!

Jet covered Fran, shielding her with his gigantic body. Meanwhile, I activated Spirit's Hand to mitigate the spirit's power as much as I could.

I had enough experience with Spirit's Hand to make the best of it. Fortunately, it also behaved a lot like telekinesis.

I covered the Spirit Sphere with Spirit's Hand to contain its power. It wasn't working. I could feel the spirit sphere blowing my spirit hand away.

I concentrated harder. If I couldn't contain it, I could redirect the energy.

I shall shoulder part of the calculations to redirect the energy to Dias. You may concentrate on controlling the energy.

Thanks, P.A.!

Dias winced in surprise.

"Spirit Magic, too? In such a short time…!"

The next moment, the spirit sphere flashed and rumbled. It exploded, releasing the furious winds of the spirit it was made of. Half of its fury was now directed at Dias, but even the aftershock of the storm was like a high-level storm spell.

"Hurk!"

"Grr!"

Unable to maintain her footing, Fran was blown away. Jet chased after her, cushioning her landing before she could crash into a wall or the ground.

Nice catch, Jet!

"W-woof…"

Jet looked like he was about to faint, but he would be fine. He's a tough boy.

The fearsome winds subsided after a few seconds, revealing what could only be described as a nasty mass of flesh. Dias was utterly destroyed, his limbs torn and his equipment in tatters.

White light enveloped the mess that used to be Dias. We watched, still on full alert, refusing to make the same mistake.

I searched around us.

Was that the *real* Dias?

The commentator's voice soon put our worries to rest.

"The Cradle of Time has officially activated! The Black Lightning Princess has emerged victorious!"

SIDE RAYDOSSIAN TRIO

"THAT WAS AN intense match. We definitely need to be careful with those adventurers."

"You're right, Boss. That old guy's crazy. I couldn't see him at all…"

"Yeah. How many men do you think we have who can prevent an assassin like that from infiltrating the palace? I could take him on

in a fistfight, but… What do you think, Cricca?”

“I don’t think I can beat him even if I managed to figure out his illusions. Despite his area of expertise, the old man is not weak in direct combat.”

“So, adventurers aren’t specialists… That leaves East and South. Do we have to settle things between them?”

“Yes. War might break out between them if their relations worsen, and the effect it will have on our country won’t be pretty.”

“Do you think the dukes will stop, though? Civil war might break out…”

“Better than an invasion. The time has come for our nation to change.”

“But…”

“Biscott, I know how much you love our country. Our last captain showered you with affection, after all. But there is light and shadow even within Raydoss. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I mean…I was born in a lab, too. But the old man took care of that! He destroyed all those facilities…”

“The ones close to Central, sure. But there might be other facilities in the East and South, maybe even in the West and North. As long as that possibility exists, you can’t take your eyes off it.”

“…Right.”

“Now, I would want nothing more than to go back home…but how are our observers doing?”

"They're still watching us. But they're far away enough that a wind spell is enough to stop them from hearing us."

"I'm not worried about that. We should probably make our exit after the grand finals. They should be spread thin because of the ceremony."

"About that… There's something you need to know."

"Go ahead."

"It seems there are *other* operatives snooping around in this town."

"Seriously? How did you find out? We've had eyes on us this whole time. We can't go out, can't go for drinks, can't do nothin'!"

"You and your drinks… You're becoming a splendid drunk."

"My actual age aside, my physical age is a middle-aged man. But now I get why the old man got excited about downing a cold one after work."

"You'll have to stay sober as long as we're in this town. Cricca, where did you get this information?"

"From him. It should be accurate since there is no point in him betraying us now. Mercenaries are true to their contracts."

"I see. Then it should be reliable… And that would change our escape timing. We'll have to see when they make their move."

"Yes. Worst-case scenario, we go through the northern border if we cannot secure a ship from Bulbola."

"Are you sure? That's still under Phyllian control."

"My family's network of merchants should be able to get us through. They're one of the few organizations we have operating outside of the country."

"I would rather keep your family out of this if possible. They're one of our supporters, after all."

"My parents are prepared to lose a trade route or two if it will be of use to you, Lady Sibyl."

"No. They recognized you as their biological daughter after you went missing for years and even approved of you as their heir. I can't do that to them."

"Listen, the boss is right. Take it from us lab rats, you gotta appreciate your parents while they're around. Hell, you gotta appreciate the fact you even have parents at all."

"Look at you speaking wisdom…"

"Ha ha. Biscott is right for once."

"For once?!"

"…Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. Worst-case scenario, I undo the red seal and use the Red Sword. I can take you two and that guy on my back."

"Now that sounds fun!"

"I know."

"That should really be our last resort. Please don't use it if you don't have to."

"I know, I know."

"I feel like I've heard that line many times before…"

"Aha ha. I'm serious this time."

"…Please."

SIDE ???

"HEE HEE HEE. The festival is about to begin…and how are preparations on your end?"

"Our targets are Dias the guildmaster, Widget Aurel, beastmen representative, former A-Rank adventurer Phelms, and S-Rank adventurer Dimitris. These four…"

"But?"

"We've narrowed it down to Aurel and Dimitris. We'll focus on these two."

"Well, well! You would actually attempt to lay hands on the S Rank!"

"Yes. They both have grandchildren."

"And so you'll take them hostage."

"That's right. Aurel will be useful both for his strength and knowledge. Meanwhile, Dimitris can destroy an entire country by himself."

"You did your homework. But they'll both have bodyguards attached to them. Dimitris's grandchild is protected by one of his stronger disciples."

"I know."

"By the way, I'll be busy helping the Chalusians, so I won't be able to help on that front."

"Al Azif will make quick work of any security detail."

"Oh? But I don't see him with you."

"Don't worry about it. He'll be back before the operation begins…"

"Y-you don't sound too sure."

"It will be fine!"

"Besides, I have requested support from my master. I have forces already installed in this town. We will use them."

"And what kind of support might that be?"

"First are the undead soldiers created from those adventurers. Your potion made quick work of them."

"Aah, yes. I was wondering why you put in a request for undead potions… You really turned them undead while they were still alive?"

"The ritual was quite simple… Though they are quite a bit weaker compared to when they were alive."

"Good enough for cannon fodder."

"Indeed. I have also seen people who should not be here in this town."

"What do you mean?"

"The Red Knights. Thinking of themselves as Raydoss's guardians, they never leave our country. And yet here they are. While

we don't get along, they are still Raydossians. I should be able to rely on them to help us. With their help, we can take the city head on."

"Now *that* is quite interesting. Raydoss's secret fighting force! But are you sure we can depend on them when the time comes? Even you sound doubtful about that."

"I know. I've prepared a main force of ghouls who used to be C-Rank adventurers. While they have lost the use of reason, they are quite powerful since they were created by the master."

"Hee hee hee. Very interesting. I never realized how strange it is that we're even having this conversation. Here you are an undead, and yet you have retained your reason."

"A gift from my master and the Blessed Mother. Once Dimitris and Aurel become undead, they will be as loyal as I."

"Hee hee hee hee! An S-Rank undead adventurer is bound to be powerful! I can't wait!"

"We shall carry out our plan the day after tomorrow when Aurel and Dimitris are gathered in the same place."

"All right. I guess I'll adjust the dosage for the Chalusians…"

"Don't forget that we still have a use for them. For now, we are only using them to stir trouble."

"I know. Chalus is conveniently located for you people. It allows you to invade Granzell from the north *and* south if it comes to it. It would be a waste to cast them aside now."

"That's right. Their king will do anything his close advisors tell him to do. He would even become allies with his long-standing

enemies if they told him to. Though our double agents have failed in Phyllius, they continue to do their work in Chalus. They will have to do."

"There are objectors among the Chalusian nobility, though. There are even those who are skeptical of the king's aides among our current party."

"Dealing with them is your job."

"Very well."

"You are to prepare everything for the day of the operation."

"I have so many poisons I want to try out. I can't decide."

"And don't forget to use the Chalusians as a distraction."

"Yes, I know. But Dimitris and Aurel! I am quite interested in seeing how this will all turn out… Hee hee hee!"

*

"Dias."

"Hello, Fran."

Dias smiled as he greeted Fran. He was already awake. He didn't look like he was hiding anything, but who knew when it came to this man?

"How are your wounds doing?"

"Hm. They're better."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that."

Dias, the loser, seemed worried about the winner. It was a strange sight, but not uncommon in a tournament where the Cradle of Time completely healed the loser.

Fran's wounds were completely healed as well. The effects of Dias's regeneration disruption wore off after a few minutes, and she started healing soon after the match ended.

Seeing her nose get better was a relief. I would need to figure out a way to deal with these healing blockers in the future.

According to P.A., Life Magic had a spell to counter those effects if I put more levels into it. It sounded like a good investment.

There was one other thing that was on my mind…

When your attack went through Dimension Shift…was that because of a manatek? You don't have to tell us if you don't want to, of course.

"It's all right, Teacher. That was one of my Skills."

A skill?

I didn't remember Dias having a timespace Skill on him.

"Identify me."

O-okay.

Name: Dias

Age: 71

Race: Human

Class: Phantasmist

Level: 76/99

Life: 239, Magic: 670, Strength: 122, Agility: 290

Skills: Sensitive Sole 4, Intimidate 4, Conceal 7, Stealth 8, Disassemble 8, Martial Arts 4, Sense Disruption 7, Fade 7, Sleight of Hand 8, Reveal Weakness 4, Royal Etiquette 6, Presence Sense 8, Conceal Presence 7, Illusion Magic 10, Phantasm Magic 6, Reveal Vulnerability 10, Hush 3, Abnormal Status Resistance 5, Dagger Arts 7, Dagger Mastery 7, Earth Magic 3, Magic Tricks 10,

Throw 7, Poison Magic 4, Fire Magic 3, Mana Drain 2, Magic Resistance 3, Mana Sense 6, Charm Resistance 4, Carpentry 4, Play 7, Disarm Trap 7, Trap Sense 8, Lay Trap 7, Spirit Manipulation, Dull Pain, Fortitude, Split Thinking, Mana Manipulation.

Unique Skill: Skill Amnesia 7

Class Skill: Mental Suggestion 8, Visual Suggestion 8

Titles: Illusionist, Trickster, Surpasser of Human Limits

Equipment: Dragonfang Dagger, Dragonscale Suit, Fleetfoot Boots, Bracelet of Sacrifice, Phantasmist Ring

I Identified Dias again, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Are you hiding it with Identify Disruption?

"No, no. It's the one called Sleight of Hand."

"Sleight of Hand?"

"Yeah. A touch of timespace is added to it with enough levels. It doesn't really do much. At most it just allows me to warp things from one hand to another, make some parts of my body invisible, stuff like that."

Wow. And here I'd thought it was just an advanced form of Magic Trick, using mana to put on an actual magic show. But Dias had used Sleight of Hand to imbue his attacks with timespace.

Fran remained quiet as Dias and I carried on our conversation. She listened to us, casting her gaze on the floor.

When the conversation was over, she lifted her head and looked Dias in the eye.

"…Are you mad at me?"

Kiara, the woman Dias had been searching for all his life. Theraclede, her murderer and his nemesis.

Fran knew of Theraclede's whereabouts but had refused to tell him.

They ended up making a bet on the tournament. Now that Fran had won, she didn't have to tell Dias about Theraclede…

Fran wasn't completely satisfied.

But despite having lost, Dias looked *completely* satisfied.

"Ha ha. Not in the slightest. It's strange, but I feel quite good."

"…Oh."

Dias smiled and sat up on his bed. He had a peaceful look on his face.

"You won our bet. I won't go after Theraclede." He then bowed his head deeply as if apologizing to Fran. "Fran, thank you for beating me."

When he lifted his face a few seconds later, a brilliant smile graced his lips.

"I went all out. Held nothing back. And lost."

"Hm."

I could tell. Dias had not been holding back in the slightest.

"Maybe I should be more frustrated. But for some reason, I just can't find it in me…"

"Why?"

"Why indeed… I don't really know, either. I just feel like I've been…set free."

Dias had carried his hatred for the Beast King and regret for not being able to protect Kiara for years…*decades*. And now that burden had been lifted. No wonder he felt free. It must have been as if a great millstone was taken off his back.

"The Kiara in my memories always has a scowl on her face. She was always fighting, after all. But I feel like she's smiling now. A gentle one," Dias said, a similar smile rising on his own face.



"Now, you get going. The next round is about to start and it's going to determine who you're up against. You can't miss that."

"Hm. All right. But what about you? You'll have to fight the loser of that for third place."

"I'll be fine. I have my job as a guildmaster to go back to."

Dias sent Fran away with a smile. He couldn't afford to sit in the infirmary considering how short-handed Ulmutt was at the moment.

As we were walking to our seats, Fran muttered, "Dias was smiling."

He was.

"That's good."

It is.

Fran was relieved about many things. That Dias didn't hate her. That he was freed. That she won their bet. That he was smiling.

I was just happy that nothing bad came out of it for her.

Let's hurry back to our seats. We can't miss this next match.

"Hm."

I just hope there's still seats left…

Hilt versus Knighthart. If Dias and Fran weren't around, this could've been the grand finale match by itself.

As we were looking for an empty seat, we felt eyes focus in on us. They weren't hostile; more curious. Fran did just beat the guildmaster of Ulmutt, after all. In a way, she was the lady of the hour.

Seemingly keeping each other in check, none of them approached. They knew that Fran was here to observe her competition. These were experienced spectators, seasoned by years of watching the Ulmutt tournament.

Finally, a hero called out from among them.

"Over here, Miss Fran!"

"Kaitley."

Kaitley had saved a seat just for her. The servant sitting next to her stood up to give her the seat. This was much appreciated. A seat was not guaranteed even if Fran had asked nicely.

The match had yet to begin, earth mages still fixing the arena from our fight. Then Hilt entered the coliseum. Right on time.

It's starting soon.

"Hm!"

Fran hurried to her seat, and as she sat down, the commentator's voice rang out.

"Hiltoria of the Piercing Fist, successor of the Dimitris School, enters the arena! We know she has a lot left in the tank! Let's see if we can see some Dimitris ultimate techniques this year!"

Like the commentator said, Hilt had yet to use most of her Dimitris moves. Only Mana Thruster had been observed so far.

Keep them as close to your chest as you want, you still had to play your trump cards at some point if you wanted to have a chance at winning this tournament. I was really excited to see what she had.

As always, Hilt's gaze was pointed at us.

She's definitely glaring at you.

"Hm."

But an A Rank's anger was more like a reward for Fran than anything else. She happily returned Hilt's glare.

Hilt wasn't guaranteed to be her next opponent, however.

"I'm jealous that you're looking at someone else before our fun little match."

Knighthart appeared. His words were oddly polite as usual, but you couldn't bring yourself to hate him. How did he do it with his mantis head?

Hilt turned her sharp gaze toward him. As strong as she was, beating him wasn't going to be easy. An upset wouldn't be surprising.

"I hate bugs…and I hate *creeps*, too."

"Aah, forgive me. But I am truly interested in you. I wish to see how strong the heir to the strongest is…"

"Uh-huh." Hilt's attention was now focused on Knighthart. Now that he was standing before her, she had a better picture of how strong he was.

The electricity present in the air during Knighthart and Phelms's match returned.

"And now Flash Blade Knighthart has entered the arena! Let's see if those blades are still sharp after cutting down a former A Rank the other day!"

Knighthart had been nicknamed Flash Blade. Not surprising considering how he had done so far in the tournament.

But something else caught my eye.

His armor's different.

Knighthart wasn't wearing the armor he wore yesterday—the light orihalcon armor with an emblem of his mercenary band emblazoned on it.

Now he was wearing unadorned adamantine gear. It wasn't as good as his other set, but I guess his previous armor was beyond fixing.

The Cradle of Time only reverted time for the loser, not the winner. It was common for the winner's gear to be left broken beyond use at the end of the match. In fact, Amanda had had to swap to her backup whip after breaking her Sky Dragon's Beard fighting Fran.

"You won't think this match is any fun soon enough."

"Hah. I'm still looking forward to it."

"Hmph."

Hilt and Knighthart took their places before the round began. They knew they would need all the preparation they could get.

Hilt put her left hand in front of her, her right hand close to her body. The stance of an outboxer.

Knighthart drew his dual blades, crossing them in front of his eyes. An uncommon ready stance…but there must have been a reason behind it. Maybe he was drawing Hilt into a false sense of security before attacking her.

As fireworks went off between the two contestants, Fran and Jet watched from their seats. Fran clenched her fist.

"Hilt's going to win."

"Woof!" Jet curled his wrists in a familiar mantis pose.

Fran and Jet were having a second round of bets: Fran on Hilt and Jet on Knighthart. I wondered how it was going to work out.

"Electricity is mounting inside the arena, so let's not waste any more time! Let the second round of semifinals… Begin!"

CLANG!

A loud noise rang throughout the arena as soon as the round started.

The combatants' weapons clashed in the middle of the ring, the impact sending shockwaves that fluttered their hair and clothes.

"You're pretty strong…!"

"You too…!"

Hilt's knuckle duster ground against Knighthart's dual blades, neither party giving an inch. They looked evenly matched, but already the stalemate was being broken as Hilt pushed Knighthart back.

Hilt was smaller with lower stats. The difference in race could not be overcome. But she had the advantage in Skills.

Not only was her Brute Force well leveled, she'd increased her strength by wrapping her fists in spirit.

After a brief clash, the two jumped back, putting distance between them.

"You have the upper hand in strength."

"You seem calm enough. Not that I can tell what an insect is feeling."

"I am…frustrated. But strength isn't the only thing you need to win."

"That so?"

"Yes. There are other things that are just as important…like speed!"

Knighthart disappeared.

He moved so quickly that we would've lost track of him if we weren't paying attention. It was as if he'd teleported. Yet Hilt wasn't easily outrun.

CLANG!

"Very good! I didn't think you'd strike with your fists head on!"

"You're pretty fast, too! Not as fast as I was expecting, though!"

Knighthart's instantaneous acceleration was just as impressive as Hilt's ability to react to it.

Fran was so excited that she even forgot about the skewer in her hands. She leaned forward, intent on taking it all in.

They're both very strong.

"Hm!"

Hilt and Knighthart's match went from a test of strength into a high-speed battle in the blink of an eye.

"Shaaa!"

"Too slow!"

"Speak for yourself!"

Knighthart was moving too fast for the average spectator to see, but his mobility remained intact. He made impossible turns, attacking Hilt from impossible angles. After attacking her from the front, he immediately reappeared behind her.

He continued peppering Hilt from all directions, but Hilt wasn't just taking his attacks sitting down. Though slower than Knighthart, she was still moving at incredible speeds, blocking his attacks with Dimitris style and countering them.

Some of her counterattacks even landed; and when they did, a loud sound would ring out as the two sturdy objects rammed into each other.

Though Hilt was getting hit more overall, every counterattack which landed on Knighthart's body did considerable damage. They were about even as far as damage was concerned.

But Knighthart's insectoid biology gave him more health. At this rate, Hilt was at a disadvantage.

…And she was just as aware of this as we were.

Suddenly, Hilt's movements changed. She abandoned her defensive stance, leaned in, and rushed forward.

Was she prepared to take a hit? Knighthart seemed to have the same idea I did. He slashed his dual blades across Hilt's defenseless face as she approached him.

But he missed!

"What?"

He adjusted his attack's trajectory after it cut nothing but air, but he still couldn't catch Hilt. Thrown off balance, Knighthart now leaned forward slightly, and Hilt wasn't one to let this chance go to waste.

"Haaa!"

With a powerful shout, she pulled both arms close to her body. Knighthart immediately switched over to defense and took evasive action, but he couldn't jump back for some reason.

"Ugh…!"

His arms were locked by an invisible…*something*. They hung in the air, not moving.

"Sei! Sei! Seryaaa!"

"Eegh!"

Knighthart's body jerked slightly as Hilt landed blow after blow on him. A shrill noise came from his mantis head, as if two hard objects were grinding against each other. It might have come from the teeth in his mouth.

"Gah…!"

The adventurers in the crowd murmured with confusion as they watched what was happening to Knighthart. But we had seen this technique before.

It's the same thing Colbert used last year. Asura, if I remember correctly.

That was really strong.

Hilt's wind-up and follow-up were perfect, too.

Asura was a move which created four extra arms using mana. It also increased the user's physical abilities.

Colbert's mana arms were visible…but Hilt's were invisible to the naked eye, making her technique difficult to discern. And while Colbert had needed to charge up to use Asura, Hilt's activation was *much* faster. Her flow of mana was unreadable up to the point of activation. She fooled both my and Knighthart's Mana Sense, and we remained oblivious to it until it was too late.

You could probably be prepared for it if you concentrated hard enough, but focusing on detection in the heat of battle was easier said than done.

We'll have to watch out for that.

Hm.

Now, let's see how Knighthart handles it.

We would probably just teleport out of it.

As we continued watching the match, Knighthart did something unexpected—he let go of his dual blades. As he continued taking Hilt's hits, he focused his mana into his arms and broke through Asura by sheer strength.

Even Hilt's expert mana hands were helpless against the mantis man's brute force.

Knighthart took a step back as he coughed blue-green blood out of his mouth.

"Gaah…!"

His insides must have been crushed from the pressure of his high-speed maneuvers. He used the floor as a brake, skidding across it until he reached its edge.

Hilt did not pursue. A Skanda-enhanced Knighthart was far too fast for her, even if he was injured. His escape speed was a threat all by itself.

She remained calm and focused her spirit, preparing herself for her next move.

"You feel different from before. Are your organs different from a normal human's?"

"Well… *That* is a question of great interest."

And that was the reason why Hilt didn't give chase. Knighthart had, at some point, activated Insect Form, changing the makeup of his body. His blue-green blood was one sign; his blood had been red before.

Hilt's attacks, fatal to a human, were now greatly reduced.

"Fine. I'll just beat you to a pulp. Doesn't make a difference."

Hilt stretched out her hand. Her knuckle duster changed shape, turning into something like a hand wrap.

Now free, she spread open her five fingers…

"Air Crush."

…And squeezed them.

"Urk!"

Knighthart was immediately thrown to the side, barely managing to avoid Hilt's attack.

Was that Hilt? Her mana felt a bit weird.

It's probably a variant of Asura. She created a mana arm in the distance and attacked with it.

Going by its name, Air Crush was probably an attack which used the mana arms to crush things from afar. Its force was considerable, and it restricted the opponent's movements.

This might have been the origin of Dimitris's nickname, the Unmoving. He would annihilate his enemies with an attack like Air Crush without taking a single step.

Now, Hilt was using both hands to launch one Air Crush after another.

Knighthart did his best to deal with her attacks, dodging and deflecting them with his own hands. He had a knack for sensing where the Air Crushes were going to be.

It would be difficult for Fran and I to detect her flow of mana unless we concentrated. You needed unbelievable senses to be able to detect them while in the heat of battle.

Were Knighthart's senses heightened because he had used Insect Form? It seemed likely.

"You are very good!"

"I can say the same for you for being able to dodge my attacks!"

The roles had been flipped. Knighthart had started the match on the offensive, and now he was trying to survive against Hilt's

relentless attacks.

I doubted things would end this way. Who would make their move next?

"Hrm."

Knighthart's focusing mana into his arms!

And he was doing it all while evading these invisible attacks.

"Shaaa!" Knighthart shouted and his arms changed shape.

Giant mantis scythes came out of his elbows, long enough to scrape the ground if he relaxed his arms. Unlike a regular mantis, his scythes were covered in short, thick thorns, and the scythes themselves terminated in incredibly sharp blades. They looked like they were covered in sharp knives.

Knighthart's green carapace glistened under the sun, giving his scythes a metallic sheen. They probably had metallic sturdiness, as well.

His body wasn't the only thing that Insect Form changed. Knighthart imbued his scythes with mana and started swinging. At first sight, it seemed that he was flailing randomly, but that was not the case. He somehow knew where Hilt's Air Crushes were and eliminated them before they could strike. His defensive measures linked seamlessly into his offense, firing a blade of mana at Hilt as he swung.

"Tsk."

Hilt sidestepped, forced to move to evade Knighthart's slashes. But as she did, she kept pressuring him with Air Crush.

Both combatants sped around the arena, attacking each other from a distance with both hands.

It looked like Knighthart was the only one attacking due to the invisible nature of Air Crush, but everyone could tell that neither fighter was giving an inch.

Knighthart leaned to avoid Air Crush while several locks of Hilt's hair were shorn away by his magic blades. A few inches were all that stood between them staying in the fight and getting knocked out.

After a few minutes of ranged attacks, the two came to a ceasefire. They knew that their attacks were not going to finish each other off.

They stared at each other from opposite corners of the arena. After a moment's silence, the announcer's voice erupted from the stands.

"Spectacular speed! I have no idea what just happened, but I know that it must have been intense! A-Rank adventurer and Dimitris successor Hilt seemed to have the upper hand in that exchange, but mercenary captain Knighthart isn't that far behind, either!"

Knighthart smirked after hearing the commentary.

"I'm not captain anymore, you know."

"Really? Did you get fired?"

"Ha ha ha. I stepped down of my own will. I wanted to quit before entering the tournament, but everyone was opposed to it. I filed for my retirement regardless. I got word yesterday that they finally agreed. I'm a freelancer now."

The audience's applause drowned out Knighthart's voice. I could only pick it up because of my special abilities.

He wasn't a mercenary captain anymore?

Knighthart said he quit being captain.

Why?

I don't know.

Hmm.

Hilt seemed to be thinking the same thing as we were.

"Why? I don't think you need to retire to participate in this tournament."

"I'm getting old. It was time I passed on the torch."

"How considerate of you," Hilt muttered, a pained expression on her face. Having trained as Dimitris's successor, Knighthart's words hit close to home.

It looked like they were taking a breather and having a nice chat, but both were charging their energy, looking for an opening to exploit.

"I didn't want to use this because of how awful it would make me look…but I suppose I have no choice."

Knighthart made the first move. Something started growing out of his back until it broke through his clothes. They were half-moon in shape, green like his head, and sprouted beautiful translucent parts that spread underneath.

The wings of a mantis.

The opening in the back of his armor was to facilitate the expansion of his wings. His previous orihalcon armor had had the same feature, as well.

A green carapace was also growing beneath the gaps of his armor. His lower body expanded, turning his loose pants into a tight fit. He still looked somewhat humanoid, but he was much bigger.

But the biggest change was to his aura. He didn't just look more intimidating. Monstrous bloodlust now emanated from him, and his eyes looked like those of a beast which had spotted its prey.

"Giii… Shaaa!"

"Ah!"

He roared like a mindless monster, startling Hilt. It looked as if the humanity of the gentlemanly Knighthart had been overwhelmed by his insect side.

The audience also gasped at his transformation.

In the silence that fell over the coliseum, Hilt was knocked to the side of the barrier. Knighthart had charged, attacking her with his scythes. He was so fast that it looked like teleportation. He was on one edge of the arena one moment and reached the other side the next.

Knighthart's insect speed went beyond what Fran and I could observe.

"Gah…"

Hilt's severed left hand flew to the sky. It looked like Knighthart's attack had landed. But perhaps not completely… If it had, he would've

sliced his defenseless opponent in two. The fact that Hilt only lost her left hand meant that she had succeeded in reacting to his attack, if only barely.

Instead of being surprised, Knighthart was on the move again. He reappeared right in front of Hilt as if teleporting and brought his arms together down on her.

Hilt didn't move.

Was this the end?

No. There was no way she couldn't react to this.

"Gishiii!"

Knighthart was knocked back. Hilt had managed to land a spirit counterattack despite his otherworldly speed. She'd probably anticipated his movement.

But she wasn't able to completely mitigate his attack. Blood flowed out of her shoulders where the tips of his scythes had grazed her skin.

Meanwhile, Knighthart used his wings to leap at her again.

"Gigi… Giiiaaa!"

He roared furiously, glaring at Hilt with his compound eyes. A deep hole had been gouged in his chest, piercing his adamantine armor, shattering the carapace beneath. But it didn't seem to slow him down.

"Do bugs not feel pain? Well, I'll just have to squash you until you stop moving."

Blood gushed from the stump where her left hand used to be. But Hilt didn't complain. In fact, she was smiling confidently. She knew her victory was assured as long as she gave it her all.

"Haaa!"

Mana quickly charged within her body. Its immense volume shocked the mages in the audience.

"Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Sky!" Hilt shouted, and an explosion of spirit engulfed her body. It was as if she had manifested spirit and was now wearing it like armor. Was this a defensive technique?

Apparently not.

"Giii!"

"Haaa!"

Hilt was now moving at a speed close to Knighthart. We couldn't tell exactly what was happening, but it seemed like the Dimitris Ultimate Art enhanced her physical capabilities by several factors.

Knighthart's movements were already difficult for us to keep up with. He was faster than a Flashing Thunderclap-enhanced Fran. His wings also allowed him to make quick stops and accelerations. If we'd been in the arena instead of Hilt, we would've lost the match. We probably wouldn't have lasted as long as she did.

Now, she was keeping up with him. She might have been behind in top speed, but her turning and agility were remarkable.

I don't know how she did it, but she perfectly responded to Knighthart's tricky movement. She even managed to pull off some feints of her own, slowing down and speeding up randomly.

Their exchanges intensified, moving so fast that we could barely see their shadows within the barrier. They would show up for one split second before disappearing and resuming their battle.

Hilt's missing hand didn't even seem to bother her; her repertoire of pointed kicks more than made up for her loss.

A loud rumble went off as the two carried on. The arena was falling apart.

The two superhumans went at it for another two minutes until the end of the battle was finally in sight.

"Ugh…!"

Hilt was the first to reach her limits. She fell on her back, having lost most of her armor. Her legs seemed to be broken, the high-speed combat and her kicks having taken their toll. She didn't seem like she would be getting up any time soon.

Meanwhile, Knighthart also looked severely damaged. His wings were in tatters, unable to keep up with his speed. He might be down for the count if this went on for another ten seconds.

"Geergh…" Knighthart stepped in front of Hilt, scythes held high. The next moment, it felt as if the calm of the old Knighthart had returned.

Even if he looked like he had lost his mind, he was still Knighthart on the inside.

"Gisha!"

Knighthart brought down his arms for a decapitating strike. But she caught his blades with both arms.

"Huh? How?"

"W-woof!"

Fran and Jet were stunned. Hilt's arm had suddenly grown back thanks to her Pendant of Recovery.

It had a very simple ability: recover any damage done to your limbs. But it broke once you used it, and you had to bear with the excruciating pain that came with the healing for a few minutes.

Hilt had been saving it for this moment. Neither Fran, Jet, nor Knighthart knew that there was a way to recover the loss of a limb.

Once recovered, she used both hands to defend herself from a lethal attack. She squeezed the scythes which had dug into her hands, holding them in place. Knighthart tugged to get away, but he couldn't do it.

Bloodied as she was, Hilt had successfully restricted her opponent's movement. A violent smile crept on her lips.

"Garuda!"

To our surprise, Hilt got up. She rose instantly despite lying flat on her back. She'd used Mana Thruster to push herself up.

Was this what Garuda did?

"Aaah! Yakshaaa!"

Hilt launched herself, bringing her head right into Knighthart's.

The head of a human and an insect. At first glance, Hilt seemed to be at a disadvantage. But her head was wrapped with immense

spirit. It was so thick that I didn't know where she'd conjured it out from.

Was this from Yaksha, or was it some other Skill?

WHUMP!

A dull noise sounded. Hilt's forehead was cut open, blood spraying out of it.

Knighthart's head broke and splattered, green shell and blood pulverized like an unripe melon hit with a stick.

"I-it's over! It's all over! What a comeback from what we thought was an impossible situation! But Hiltoria is also down! Healers! Hurry up and get to work!"

Hilt lay motionless as blood continued to pour from her head. Several healers rushed to her side. This was a very close match.

"They were both strong."

Definitely top of their class. We needed to be prepared to die to win this tournament, but Fran didn't seem the least bit afraid.

You look happy.

"Hm! I get to fight Hilt next… I can't wait."

"Woof." Jet looked a little bummed out that his fighter had lost the match.

But Fran was thinking about something else. "Won't Erianthe and the others be sad that Knighthart quit?"

Probably. He said that they tried to stop him, but he insisted on quitting.

"I wanna hear his story."

Would be nice. Though I'm not sure if he's in any condition to…

We might not have been close enough friends to go for an uninvited visit, anyway.

We could check out the infirmary… With the way he died, I'm not sure if he wants to talk, though.

"Hm."

Even if he fully recovered, Knighthart had died a gruesome death. He might not have been feeling very chatty.

But as we prepared to enter the infirmary, the door opened and Knighthart walked out.

"Knighthart, are you feeling better?"

"Oh, hello, Fran. Did you come all the way to see me?"

"Hm."

"That is very kind of you. Thank you. I'm all right now." And he sounded all right, too. His voice was the pinnacle of calm.

Apparently, having his head popped like a melon hadn't affected him all that much. Was this not his first time? Then again, I wasn't sure if anyone could survive that kind of hit and live to tell the tale. I guess Knighthart just had really good nerves. He might just be willing to answer Fran's question.

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"You quit being captain?"

"So, you heard…"

"Hm."

Or rather, *I* was the one who heard that. But it seemed that I'd heard correctly. Knighthart's voice lowered, but he smiled again.

"Hah hah. I just thought it was high time for me to pass the torch, you know. I've been slowing down lately. Getting a little older, you see."

It sounded like a plausible explanation, but every word that came out of Knighthart's mouth had been a lie. There was something he wasn't telling us.

"Really?"

"Yes."

He must have had his reasons for not wanting to talk about it. As much as we wanted to know, Fran wasn't close enough to pry, and she was only interested in his resignation because she was worried about Erianthe and the other mercenaries.

In the end, the conversation wound down with small talk. But before Knighthart left, he gave Fran a word of encouragement.

"You're going to have a big day, the day after tomorrow. Good luck."

"You too."

"Of course. Farewell."

A big day. Was he talking about Fran's match with Hilt? Did he know about Hilt's feelings for Colbert and how Fran would inevitably

get caught up in it?

Well, at least he wasn't lying with his words of encouragement.

The next day.

Tomorrow was the day of the grand finals, and we were currently outside of town.

Are you sure you're okay?

"Hm. I'm fine."

She should have been resting today to prepare for tomorrow. Divine element and fatigue from an intense battle would take a couple of days to recover from.

But Fran had her reasons for going out. She wanted to hone her usual abilities and test out some of her new ones. Two abilities were of particular interest…

First was Physical Body Manipulation, freshly leveled up. It was an advanced Skill which combined many physical enhancement Skills into one, allowing its user to increase all of their stats.

Currently, our only real answer to Hilt's Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Sky was Unleash Potential. Just keeping track of her movements had been difficult enough.

So, we leveled up Physical Body Manipulation. But maxing it out without knowing how to use it was useless, so we put two points in it to see how it would go.

The other ability was the grace of a god that I'd used against Sibyl. I'd managed to tap into the God of Chaos's power, but it wasn't

perfect. To make matters worse, I still didn't know what Wisdom God's Grace really did.

If I learned how to use these powers, they could give us an edge in combat strength. There might also be a better way of using Sword God's Blessing.

With that in mind, we went out to go undead hunting. They were the perfect training dummies.

"Woof, woof!"

"Do you see them, Jet?"

"Woof!"

Jet was particularly good at sniffing out the undead, particularly zombies. He was able to find them even when they were well outside our range of detection. After walking through a forest for a bit, we soon found our targets.

"There."

There's a lot of them, too.

"I'll go first. That okay?"

All right. Just don't go crazy.

"Hm."

Fran test drove Physical Body Manipulation against the monsters, but the results were unsatisfying. They were so weak that they immediately died to her. So much for our perfect training dummies.

Her speed was definitely increased, but we couldn't tell whether her strength and eyesight were better. The monsters fell before Fran like they were nothing but mere bowling pins. It couldn't be helped.

"I need something tougher."

As much as I want you to rest, this was *kind of useless… Can you find us a stronger opponent, Jet?*

"Woof," Jet barked, as if saying "I can try."

He closed his eyes to concentrate, pointed his nose to the sky, and started sniffing. A minute later, his eyes widened.

"Bark!" North, he indicated confidently. He seemed to have picked up some powerful undead.

"Good job, Jet."

You can say that again! Lead the way, boy!

"Woof!"

He started running, and it turned out to be farther than I imagined. The journey took five whole minutes on Jet-back. We even passed over a small mountain. I was impressed that he could detect our enemies this far away.

Are we really going the right way?

"Woof!"

Where—There it is!

I finally picked up on our enemies' presence. The mana they emitted was quite ominous.

It's on the other side of this mountain. Let's be careful.

"Hm."

They were at least C Threats—a bit too strong for casual practice.

Well, if things got really hairy, I could always teleport us out if these enemies proved to be too tough customers.

Let's see what kind of monsters we're up against.

We concealed our presence and advanced into the mountain.

A few minutes passed. Once we were off of the mountain ridge, we finally had a visual on the undead.

In the valley over the mountains, there was a whole horde of undead.

That one in the middle. He's pretty strong.

Hm.

That must have been the horde leader. It looked like a mummy wearing a wizard's clothes, conducting a sinister ritual in the middle of the undead.

There was an altar in front of it. A small fat man was laid on top of it. He was no longer breathing.

He had been decapitated, and his head was placed on top of his stomach. Blood had stopped flowing out of his neck, so this hadn't happened recently.

The undead boss raised his staff, channeling mana from his pitiful victim. Black mana spread from his staff into his minions. None

of the other undead were moving. But I could tell that they were becoming much more powerful.

I don't think we should leave this unchecked.

Hm. The undead are getting stronger.

Woof!

Yeah.

We couldn't just turn a blind eye to this. This might have been the cause behind the recent undead outbreak, and he was probably using the sacrifice to power up his minions.

We'll take them by surprise.

All right.

Fran, you take the boss. Jet, you deal with the minions.

Woof!

With a basic strategy established, we got to work.

Fran would teleport close to the undead boss and cut it down. Jet would use shadow warp to ambush the surrounding undead, biting their heads off.

Now that we were close enough, we could learn our enemy's identity.

Mummy King. As its name implied, it had the power to create minions and then empower them. Even all alone it was quite powerful.

Fran managed to land a direct slash on the Mummy King's back. But he didn't seem the worse for wear.

"Adventurer! You won't leave here alive now that you've seen us!"

It's his Skill!

The Mummy King had a Skill called Undead Shield. It transferred the damage it took to its undead minions, functioning kind of like a Shield Art.

The Skill was passive, an advantage since you could afford to be a bit careless with it. However, it was also a weakness. If the user took too much damage, the minions would pay the price.

"Kill her!"

The undead started moving at the Mummy King's command. These were also quite strong…E Threats, probably.

There were High Ghoul Soldiers and High Ghoul Magicians. They must have been powerful adventurers when still alive.

Each was quite dangerous, specifically due to the Skill Pollute. It probably boosted their threat level to D. Pollute spread a circle of deadly poison in the area which lingered for hours, infecting both living things and food. An elite ghoul had a Pollute diameter of over twenty meters, and they had been known to destroy entire villages just by walking through them.

Our resistances rendered us immune, but we couldn't leave without dealing with them.

Fran struck the Mummy King again, but it didn't seem like the ghouls around us took any of the damage. He must have had another horde of undead hidden somewhere.

But that horde wouldn’t be limitless. For Undead Shield to work, you needed to create undead and make them your minions.

The *minion* part was crucial. Summoning and necromancy had a capacity limit determined by the user’s strength. You could control a single strong monster or a hundred weaker ones, for example. This was why Jet was the only summon I could use—he was powerful enough that he maxed out my limit.

And what’s more: simply making more undead didn’t automatically make them your minions. You had to properly form contracts with them to do that.

Looking at the powerful ghouls, the Mummy King probably didn’t have hundreds of minions to spare.

We’ll stick to the plan. Fran, you keep attacking the boss! Jet, go after the ghouls!

Got it.

Woof!

Using an area-of-effect light spell would be more advantageous here, but Fran would use only her sword.

I’m going to try some of my blessing powers too, okay?

Okay.

The Mummy King was strong, but he didn’t have a chance against Fran one on one. Fran laid on the damage and the Mummy King called for help, but Jet was keeping his ghouls busy.

Ten minutes passed after our ambush began.

"NO! I can't believe this is happening! Forgive me… Guaaah!"

The Mummy King ran out of minions to power Undead Shield and fell to Fran's sword, turning into ash after being cut in half. No magicite. Judging by his last words, he might have been the product of a more powerful necromancer.

There might be others like him still lurking. Let's look for them.

Hm.

Woof!

So how did it go?

All right, I guess?

Fran had gotten used to Physical Body Manipulation after walloping the Mummy King for a few minutes. She was at least closer to Hilt now than she'd been before.

The Mummy King was a powerful enough opponent that it took a lot of hits to take him down, even for Fran. He was a great sparring partner to train our Skills.

What about you?

I tried to be more conscious of Wisdom God's Grace. Apparently, it increases my control over magic and Skills. It's got a hefty mana cost, though.

I couldn't just leave it on, but it was reassuring to know that we had a powerful blessing on our side.

I see.

Hilt's going to fight even harder than she has been so far. Every little bit of strength counts for us.

"Hm!"

Hilt wasn't just in this to win the tournament. She needed to win because of her love for Colbert—it was the only way to become head of the Dimitris Style so she could marry whom she chose. She would not hesitate to use everything she had at her disposal.

We carried on surveying the area, looking for signs of the Mummy King's summoner…but we couldn't find them. That thing was definitely the product of an evil necromancer.

Then there was the increase in the number of zombies around Ulmutt, forcing adventurers to go on extermination quests to hunt them down… It was too convenient to be a coincidence. They had to be connected somehow. It was highly likely that someone somewhere was behind all this.

Let's report this to the guild when we get back.

Sure.

Jet, keep your nose open for any suspicious smells.

Woof, woof!

The tournament in Ulmutt was a well-known event, attracting the attention of people all over the world.

Unfortunately, it also made it the perfect chance for ne'er-do-wells to plot and plan conspiracies while the authorities were distracted.

Unluckily for them, we wanted a chance to test our strength…

Chapter 5:
Grand Finals

IT WAS FINALLY the day of the grand finals.

Fran looked excited as she walked down the hallway which led to the arena.

The atmosphere in the coliseum was so intense that it looked like a heat haze was coming out of her body. It wasn't just that she had warmed up, it was a representation of her true fighting spirit.

How are you feeling, Fran?

Hm. Perfect. Not fatigued at all.

I see. What about you, Jet?

Woof, woof!

Fran had recovered from her intense match. I was feeling great and so was Jet. We should be able to give it our all during the final match.

Shame about the third-place match, though.

Hm. Real shame.

Dias and Knighthart had both withdrawn, eliminating the third-place match altogether.

They both cited mental exhaustion as the reason. Even if they were physically healed, the same didn't go for their minds. Dias was old and Knighthart had died a gruesome death. I could easily imagine them still being exhausted by that.

But it still didn't sit right with me that they had readily dropped out of the tournament like that. I guess you couldn't force them to fight, but… In any case, it had been decided. Too late to change anything now.

Let's go over our plan again. No using Unleash Potential or Skill Taker. Open with teleport. That all right?

Hm. Hilt's strong. I'm gonna try to beat her before she can get started.

You'll be up from the start today, Jet.

Grr!

Based on her previous matches, Hilt would probably begin by watching Fran's opening gambit. She wasn't hooked on fighting like Fran was, and as successor of the Dimitris Style, she was likely to let Fran make the first move. It was tied to her pride as the best disciple of the greatest combat school in the world. We would take full advantage of her hubris.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the time has finally come for the grand finals! First up is the strongest B Rank! The strongest girl! The strongest Black Cat! Black Lightning Princess Fran! Will she be able to shock us again this year?!"

Fran entered the arena to the loud cheers of the audience. Her eyes were locked onto Hilt, who was also stepping out of her side of the arena.

"Her opponent has also stepped into the arena! Dimitris Style successor and A-Rank adventurer! Give it up for Hiltoria of the

Piercing Fist!”

The audience got just as hyped for Hilt, I think. Unlike Hilt, Fran only had a single year’s time to collect fans. Even so, both sides were nearly tied for intensity.

I could still hear some middle-aged man scream Fran’s name. They treated her like an idol, and for their own sakes I hoped that was all they saw her as!

“So here we are.”

“Hm.”

Whoa! I needed to focus on the match!

“…I’ll be taking this match.”

“Same.”

Hilt was overflowing with fighting spirit. Of course she was…her future was on the line.

I don’t think she was that interested in becoming the head of Dimitris Style, but her love for Colbert was a different story. As head, she would have the right to choose who she would wed.

As much as I wished her the best, we couldn’t afford to lose.

Fran, Hilt’s not at her best.

Really?

Yeah. Her stats are slightly down. She hasn’t fully recovered from her match with Knighthart.

Oh…

Like Fran, Hilt had lost a lot of blood and used abilities which took a toll. Two days wasn't enough for a full recovery.

This was a huge opportunity for us, but Fran seemed genuinely disappointed. Would this affect her motivation to fight?

Even so, it still won't be easy, though. She's still stronger than we are, remember.

Hm!

That cheered her back up.

"Will the fangs of this young tiger maul the fists of the ultimate heir?! Or will the elegant fists of the successor break the teeth of the tigress?! Only one will stand victorious!"

Already Awakened, Fran drew me in a huge arc. Hilt also readied her stance.

"Flashing Thunderclap."

"…Garuda."

They both spoke at the same time.

And Garuda? That was the move she'd used against Knighthart. Hilt used it to help herself get back on her feet. It seemed more suited to support than full-on offense. Was she going to use it to boost her movement today?

"Let's not waste any more time! Let the grand finals…begin!"

At the commentator's signal, I used Short Jump.

Teleportation into Skycutter was what we were going for. But Hilt was already gone by the time we warped back in.

Fran stared at the empty space as she swung me into nothing and then immediately jumped to the side.

She felt something behind her back.

WOOSH!

A ball of energy sliced through the air, grazing the side of her body.

"Hm!"

Fran turned her head to see Hilt approaching her at breakneck speed. She was fast—much faster than when she fought Knighthart the other day.

Hilt was using mana thrusters on her feet, an effect of Garuda.

Fran still had her back turned to her opponent, but she remained calm.

"Black Lightning Strike."

She activated a signature skill to deal with Hilt's attack. She went around Hilt's back and returned the favor with a Pressurized Quickdraw. She released the air charged in her sheath, amplifying my speed.

The sharp slash was aimed at Hilt's neck, but it was stopped by an invisible hand. Hilt had activated her mana arms.

Not only did Hilt deflect Fran's attack, she redirected the flow of her energy to knock Fran off balance. Hilt would normally control her opponent's attacks to break their posture. But we had foreseen this tactic.

I supported Fran's body with telekinesis, keeping her upright. Hilt immediately read our counterplay and got out of our range as fast as she could.

"Grr?!"

Jet's ambush also failed. There were no breaks in Hilt's movement that he could exploit. She had probably worked out a plan to counter Jet's attacks after watching Fran's matches.

Catching her with teleport had proven impossible because of its delay. In fact, she might be waiting for us to teleport again so she could exploit this very weakness.

Hilt completely read our ambush. She was a monster even in her detection abilities!

"Jet, no more ambushes. Switch to magic."

"Grr!"

Teacher, suppress her with spells and keep an eye out for any hidden attacks.

Got it.

The match had only just begun and the struggle for advantage was already underway.

"Here I come!"

"Come on!"

The battle intensified.

"Haaa!"

Multicast Thunderbolt!

"Groooar!"

Fran went in with physical as Jet and I hit with magic. We pressed our offense relentlessly with Jet circling behind Hilt, casting shadow spells at her.

But Hilt had yet to take significant damage.

She didn't have the superhuman defense of Sibyl, though I guess everyone would be cardboard next to her. By ordinary standards, Hilt's spirit armor made her a very tough opponent.

As someone who fought with her fists, she would need some way to bolster her defense. Monsters possessed all sorts of elements: flame, thunder, even poison. Getting in close to hit them with your fists without a plan was a surefire way to get killed.

Even the black lightning I was wrapped in didn't seem to be doing much damage. I was currently something like a powerful stun rod, strong enough to knock out a goblin with just a light touch.

But even black lightning was having a difficult time getting through Hilt's spirit armor. All it seemingly did was add a bit of extra burden to her mana consumption.

More dangerous than her defenses was the sheer number of moves she possessed. She had managed to perfectly deal with our attacks, knocking Fran's slashes away with her mana arms, crushing my spells with Air Crush, and reacting to Jet's ambushes like she had eyes on her back.

Even if Hilt was currently our opponent, I couldn't help but be impressed at how she was dealing with our attacks while moving at

such a high speed.

And she was still exhausted from the fight with Knighthart! Fran should have been faster with Physical Body Manipulation, and yet Hilt showed no signs of slowing down.

"Sei!"

"Argh!"

She even managed to land a few counterattacks here and there. The impact rattled Fran enough that it slowed her down, even when she was buffed with Skills and magic. Good thing her recovery was enough to cover her for now.

But Hilt was also recovering from most of Fran's attacks, making it look like neither side had taken much damage.

Having both contestants more or less unharmed despite the intensity of the battle was a rare sight.

"Taaah!"

"Cheryaaa!"

Their weapons clashed, letting out a loud rumble. Hilt's knuckle dusters were made of sturdy stuff, remaining intact even after clashing with me many times.

Can you slow her down, Teacher?

I can try. Jet, get ready to attack with Fran.

Woof!

I drew power from Wisdom God's Grace and activated Transmogrify.

Yes! I knew it! It's much easier to use than before!

Transmogrify was much easier to use thanks to my greater magic control. I knew I should be able to control myself with greater precision than ever before.

Raaah!

I split my decorative strip into twenty pieces, each as thick as a tug-of-war rope. My thin strip wouldn't be able to penetrate Hilt's defenses, so I thought a spear would do the trick.

The twenty amorphous spears surrounded Hilt, assaulting her from all sides. The added thickness allowed for better mana conductivity, and they were imbued with Fran's black lightning. This wasn't a spear art from a rookie lancer.

"You can do that?!"

Hilt immediately sensed danger and dodged my attack. It missed by a hair, but would that be enough?

There!

The strip spear bent and morphed into a whip. I was thinking about Amanda's whip here. It was nowhere near as strong or precise, of course, but the quantity had a quality of its own…

Twenty strip whips assaulted Hilt.

"Ugh!"

It didn't do a lot of damage since I didn't have Whip Mastery, but I succeeded in throwing her off balance. It worked, but I wasn't about to take any chances…

Earth Hole!

I used a land spell to open up a rift under Hilt's feet. Hilt's eyes widened when she felt the ground beneath her vanish. I also added telekinesis and wind magic to push her down into it. The whips were still going after her, too.

But Hilt did not fall.

A blast of mana came out of her feet, accelerating her out of the pitfall. It was so powerful that my telekinesis couldn't hold her down. Garuda again.

It was an impressive maneuver, but as I was keeping Hilt busy, Fran and Jet had finished prepping for their attack.

Hilt sensed danger again and turned her attention to Fran. But this was a fake.

"Groooar!"

Jet leapt at her from behind. Wrapped in deep darkness, he was now faster than Fran and charged at Hilt.

Dark Embrace launched Jet to the upper tiers of B Threats. A direct hit from him in this state would leave a mark.

"Hmph!" Even with her back turned to Jet, Hilt responded calmly.

Fran wasn't just going to stand by and watch, however. She chased Hilt down and swung me into her most powerful attack: Skycutter.

"Haaaa!"

A Black Sky Tiger in front, a shadow wolf behind. Sword and fang closed in on the A-Rank adventurer to take her life.

It was the most desperate of desperate situations.

But Hilt looked perfectly calm. She looked quite at ease as Fran was bringing me down on her.

Had she given up?

No way.

She had just made her mind up to do something.

"Raaaaah!"

An immense blast of magic erupted from Hilt's body. Was it Sky? The ultimate attack she used against Knighthart?

But it was too late now!

She couldn't escape no matter how fast she was, couldn't defend herself no matter how thick of a barrier she put up.

Jet's charge and Fran's Skycutter collided into Hilt at the same time—

Huh?

"Hm?!"

"Grr?"

Just as I thought we had her on the ropes, something felt off. Losing her target, Fran stumbled. Jet whizzed past us, crashing into the barrier.

What just happened?

We used our killer moves at the same time. But we didn't make contact with her. Did she dodge it?

How?

Urgh!

Sensing an attack coming our way, I teleported us out; there was no time to think. A ball of mana blasted into the place we'd just been standing.

I thought Hilt would give chase, but she didn't. She stood glaring at us, propping up half of her body. A deep gash ran down her right arm while her left arm was bent and broken. Blood streamed out of her eyes and nose.

But she was still standing where she was. How on earth had she avoided our attack?

Having read Fran and Jet's attack, Hilt likely spun her body to attack them both.

It was all so simple. Hilt simply twisted her body counterclockwise, deflecting my blade with her right hand and avoiding Jet's charge with her left elbow. Simple, but *impossibly* difficult.

This is not an impossible maneuver with the help of Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Sky. However, it carries only a twenty percent chance of success.

Hilt bet her life on it and won.

Yes. But her arms took most of the damage since she couldn't execute it perfectly.

Not that bad of a price if it meant she could evade our most powerful attack…

And the tears of blood and nosebleed are also because of her gambit?

Likely an effect of using Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Sky.

But she didn't end up that way when fighting Knighthart.

It is likely that the ability takes a great toll on her body. Unable to recover in two days, she now pays an even greater price than before.

Apparently, Dimitris Style had a double-edged move like our own Unleash Potential. It would probably shave off years from your life if you used it repeatedly. But Hilt wanted to win, and this was proof.

As an adventurer… As a martial artist… As a woman… She wouldn't lose.

Fran felt it, too.

"…Wow," she whispered, full of admiration of Hilt's determination and combat capabilities.

Their eyes met. But Hilt wasn't moving.

Maybe she couldn't move because of her ability. Maybe she'd switched back to watching and waiting. Regardless, her body was still wrapped in overwhelming energy. But the damage was done.

Her right arm wasn't regenerating because of the divine element imbued into Skycutter.

Despite her dodging our best attack, we had the advantage.

Fran refocused herself and readied me again.

Teacher, Kanna Kamuy!

You got it! To the shadows, Jet!

Woof!

Grasping for victory, I multicast Kanna Kamuy, one of our trump cards which left even Dias in a critical state. The swirls of white lightning fell down on Hilt.

And she showed no signs of dodging it. She maintained her stance, lifting up her right arm as if to receive the falling lightning.

Was she seriously going to defend herself with that?

"Aaaah!"

She let out a blast of spirit which crashed into Kanna Kamuy. The two sides seemed evenly matched for a moment before the momentum of the lightning won out and engulfed Hilt in a blast of white.

The same explosion and rumble as the fight with Dias. Electricity ran throughout the barrier.

The epicenter could not have remained in one piece. I didn't know whether we had won, but we certainly did damage.

Let's go!

Right!

A look of determination upon Fran's face. She would end this now. She rushed headlong into the winds and rumbling electricity.

And then it happened.

"Urgh!"

A dull sound followed by Fran's ankle being crushed.

Yes, crushed.

It looked like it had been pulped in a giant vice. Fran lost her balance and fell forward. I quickly steadied her with telekinesis and set up a barrier. A powerful shockwave immediately rattled the shield.

It's Hilt's Air Crush!

No doubt about it. She had managed to attack us even in this situation. And that wasn't all.

Something's coming!

Hilt's presence was rushing toward us in a straight line, straight out of the rushing violence of Kanna Kamuy. Her speed was insane.

"Haaa!"

"Hm!"

By the time I noticed, Hilt was already in front of us. Her face was that of a demon, her body broken and battered.

She'd suffered burns from the explosion. Bruises and lacerations from the debris. A third of her beautiful face was burnt while her right eye and eyelid were charred to ash. But even now she was still beautiful, probably because of her overwhelming presence.

Her right arm which clashed with Kanna Kamuy was gone to her shoulder.

She didn't defend herself with her right arm as much as use it as a shield to keep her from dying.

As long as she was alive, she was still in the fight… That was probably the thinking behind it. Hilt would tank her opponent's powerful attack to make them drop their guard. Despite being stronger than Fran, she wasn't above using this strategy.

Still exhausted from her fight with Knighthart, Hilt was prepared to give it her all right from the beginning of the match.

She focused all her energy into healing her left arm. Her bones were already set again.

Fran gasped when Hilt came at her, faster than ever before.

"Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Dragon!"

The move was quite simple for an ultimate art. Hilt coordinated herself so that she could thrust out her left arm in a twisting motion with the full weight of her body. But she now had incredible speed on her side and a concentration of divine element on her palm.

It was an attack which utilized the enhanced state of Sky along with divine element. The most powerful in Hilt's arsenal. This was Dimitris Ultimate Arts: Dragon.

Divine element might have been the reason behind the Sky's exhaustion.

Hilt's palm heel easily broke through my barrier, slamming into Fran's stomach.

WHACK!

An unbelievably low sound was heard—not the sound normally created when hitting another human being—and Fran was flung

sideways without a chance to scream. She was going so fast that it felt like she would break the speed of sound.

Crashing into the barrier would kill her. But a black beast intercepted Fran midflight.

"Wuff!"

"Eegh…!"

Jet used himself as a shield to protect her. It was better than hitting the barrier, but Fran and Jet were both injured by the move. Fran wheezed, the sound of broken bones louder than her voice. Blood and bile poured out of her mouth like a fountain.

Jet was much the same. No, he was worse for taking most of the force of Fran's impact. All of his legs were broken, and he could barely breathe. His organs and bones were probably a mess too.

"Gaah… Blurgh…"

Jet! Get back in the shadows and heal yourself! It's too dangerous here!

Arf…

With that, Jet retreated from the battle. Fast Regeneration should have him fixed up in under an hour, but he was not likely to come back to this fight.

Fran wasn't dead…yet. She was on death's door. But she refused to go down.

"Aah… Guh…"

Her eyes were blurry, but she still directed them to where she felt Hilt was standing. Her feet wavered as she took a step forward.

I could feel her hand squeeze me slightly.

Fran, can you use Instant Regeneration?!

I can… I can still…

She didn't hear me. She was barely conscious now.

I used healing magic on her, but divine element was difficult to recover from. If she couldn't regenerate, it would take time for her to be out of the danger zone.

Win…

Fran kept walking.

Hilt was frozen, palm heel still extended in front of her, and she watched Fran stagger toward her, zombie-like. She was clearly shocked.

Her ultimate attack had failed to finish her opponent. Divine element was the *ultimate* element, in a sense. In a fight against humans, who generally had less health than monsters, one solid hit should result in victory.

But we hadn't just stood there like a statue when Hilt attacked us. Fran managed to jump back, reducing the impact, and I pushed as hard as I could against Hilt's strike with telekinesis.

Maybe it wasn't much, but it was enough to save Fran's life.

I continued casting recovery magic on Fran, but she was still hazy. She was no longer Awakened or in Flashing Thunderclap, the damage she suffered being too much for her to maintain her state.

Yet her fighting spirit remained, and it propelled her forward.

"You…are quite the monster." Hilt swallowed. Even an elite adventurer like her couldn't help but be astonished. "But I can't lose now…!"

Hilt's will to fight was also still present. She cast a stern gaze at Fran.

But Hilt still stood motionless. Or moved *very* slowly, to be exact. It was like she was moving in slow motion.

The recoil from her ultimate skill and her injuries must have been keeping her from moving properly. Her movements were sluggish, and the powerful spirit wrapped around her body had faded away.

It would be very easy to defeat Hilt now. I just needed to attack her by myself. The battle had exhausted most of my mana, but I had enough for a Telekinetic Catapult and one more Kanna Kamuy.

But I wouldn't dream of doing that.

Win or lose…this battle was Fran's.

"…"

"…"

Hilt steadied her breath, composing herself as best she could as she strode forward. Fran swayed left to right, somehow managing to walk forward on her uneven feet.

The arena was disturbingly quiet.

Hilt made the first move. While she still looked awful, she at least managed to control her breathing. She had been

hyperventilating up to this point, but now she was breathing like she was cooling down from a sprint.

"Huff… Huff…"

She breathed out painfully and slowly thrust out her left palm at Fran. She lowered her hips to reassume her stance. It looked like she was waiting to counterattack instead of initiating. Her legs were shaking slightly. She probably had no strength left to rush us.

Meanwhile, Fran carried on staggering her way toward Hilt.

As our distance slowly closed, I felt myself change.

What…?

Transmogrify had activated, turning my shape into that of a katana.

What surprised me the most was how different it felt compared to when I used Transmogrify on myself. But I didn't feel like I was being forced into the change, either. Fran's will had flowed into me, and I had responded by allowing her to Transmogrify me.

A strange feeling.

It reminded me of when Fran used Sword God Form, but I felt more united with her now. Sword God Form was overwhelming, and it was clear that the one using me was someone *far* greater than we were.

But I knew that Fran needed me now. Not as a familiar, but as a comrade in arms. The powerful bond between swordsman and sword had never felt clearer.

This is…

Blue light emanated from both me and Fran. The warm strength whenever Fran and I were united. It had saved us many times over.

This time, it was healing a little bit of Fran's wounds.

Teacher…

Fran! Can you hear me?

Let's go…win this…

No. Even with her wounds healed, her consciousness was still hazy. And yet—or perhaps because of that—she unconsciously took the best possible course of action.

As dire our situation was, I felt pleased. Even if she wasn't fully conscious, she was relying on me. As her partner. As her teacher.

And it made me happy.

Yeah, let's win this!

Hm…

I didn't know whether she could hear me. I just saw her nod slightly.

Her steps were as slow as ever.

Ten seconds. Twenty.

The passage of time felt suffocating. The audience swallowed, leaning on the edge of their seats with bated breath.

Another five seconds, and there was now only five meters between Fran and Hilt.

"Ah…"

Fran's eyes were unfocused, unsure of where or what to look at, but she somehow found her opponent. At the same time, her body moved.

Moved and cut. That was all there was to it.

But it was so fast and precise that it caught Hilt completely off guard.

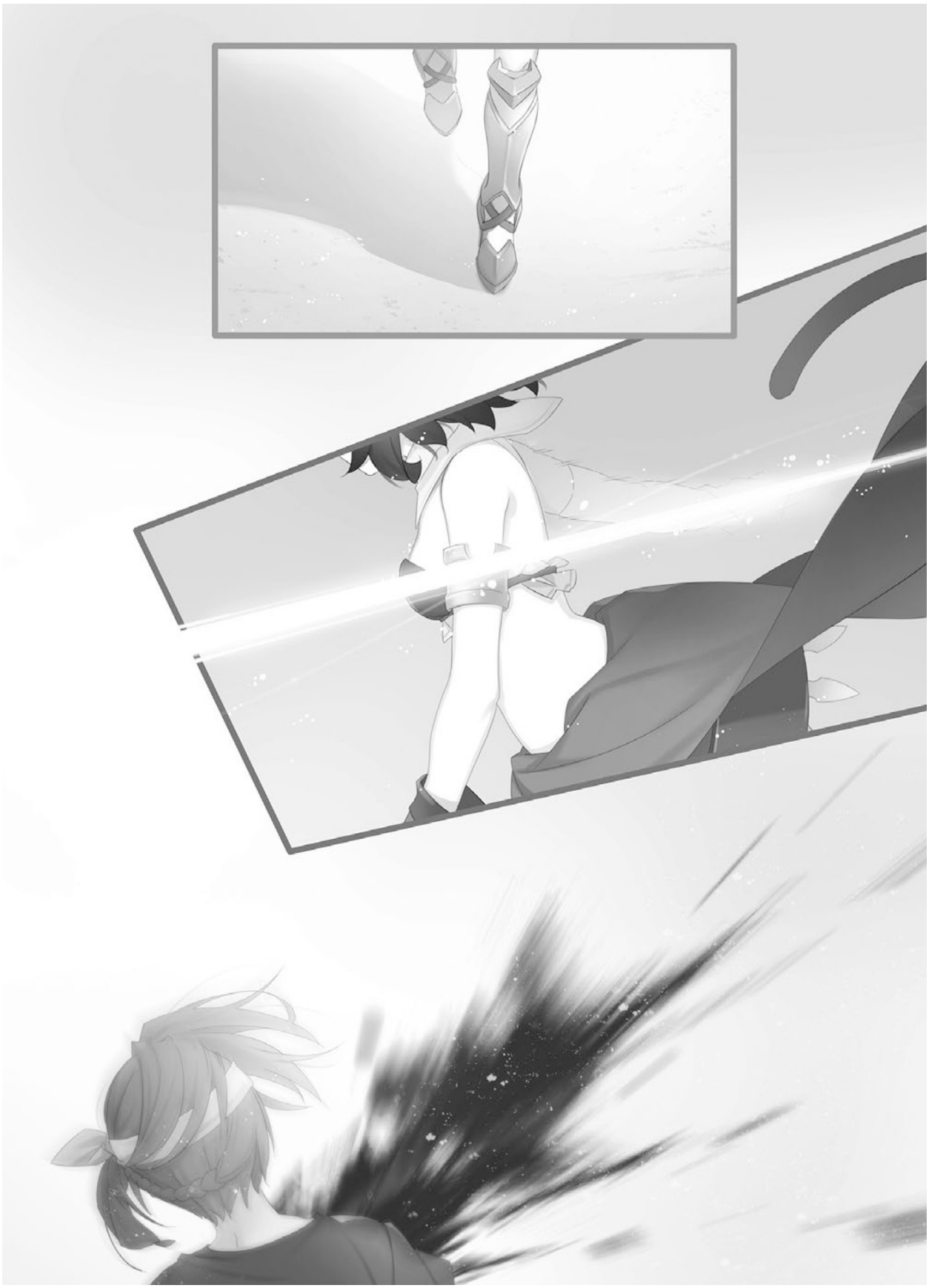
Even I only realized Fran had attacked after I felt myself going through Hilt's flesh and bone.

Fran owed her sudden acceleration to Mana Thruster. Limping, she had moved her body with the Skill without so much as flexing a muscle.

She didn't just push herself from behind, either. She used Mana Thruster on her elbow to raise her arm and another Mana Thruster on her shoulder to bring it down. She added to the acceleration by applying it to her knees, hips, and heels.

She did it all at once.

It was reminiscent of Hilt's Garuda, only Fran's was much more roughshod—certainly not a high-level ability. You could say it was the perfected version of the imperfect move Colbert used on Sibyl.



Hilt observed her opponent's muscular tension, their shifts in weight. It was because of her precision that she couldn't see what Fran was doing.

Fran's perfect mana concealment played a huge part, of course…but the attack was a culmination of everything we'd learned during the tournament.

The speed itself wasn't all that fast—flashing Thunderclap was much faster. What made it surprising was that it was produced by a half-dead Fran, and that was enough to throw anyone off guard.

Hilt *couldn't* react to it.

She had a look of confusion on her face as she looked into Fran's unfocused eyes. Her mouth was agape as she finally realized that she had been cut down.

"Huh?"

That was all Hilt said before blood burst out of her. She fell to the ground, and the light of time engulfed her.

"Wh-what a quiet end to an intense match! The thirteen-year-old Flack, er, *Black* Cat Fran is your champion! She is without a doubt the youngest winner of the tournament to date!"

The commentator could barely contain his excitement, so much that he stumbled over his words.

I listened, still in a dream-like state.

Fran won? Really?

I couldn’t believe it. But it was true.

Fran was knocked out, after all.

F-Fran, are you okay?!

“Uhh…”

She was almost dead.

I did my best to heal her, but her wounds weren’t closing. Divine element made it difficult for my magic to take hold.

Physicians rushed to the arena and carried her off to the infirmary.

“Th-this is awful! Get to healing, people!”

“Yes sir!”

“We can’t have the champion dying on us after she won! Drain *all* your mana if you have to!”

The three healers did everything they could to bring her back from the brink, but she still took forever to stabilize.

“Even Greater Heal isn’t working!”

“Same goes for life magic!”

“What is going on?! Chug some mana potions and keep healing! It’s just going to be slow!”

“Yes sir!”

Their leader, a veteran mage, didn’t seem to have much experience when it came to divine element damage.

They cast a lot of spells, thinking that it was poison or some kind of curse, but Fran’s recovery was stalled out. Still, she had three

top-notch mages looking after her. She was probably out of the danger zone. That was my only consolation.

How are you feeling, Jet?

Wurf…

With Fran in the hands of expert healers, I turned my attention to taking care of Jet. He was also beat up after giving it his all.

His injuries were mainly from having to cushion Fran, who'd slammed into him like a cannonball. He was already recovering, but it wasn't something that would mend overnight.

I cast Recovery Magic on Jet while he was in the shadows.

You saved Fran at the end there. Good job.

Woof… Urf.

Calm down! You're still ready to go even when you're beat up, huh?

Ruff…

I'll treat you to something nice later.

Arf!

The door to the infirmary opened. A familiar face walked in.

"How is Fran doing?"

"Miss Elza. It's not looking great. It doesn't look like she's waking up any time soon."

"I see… I guess it can't be helped after that kind of match. It appears the champion won't be present for the closing ceremony this year."

In a tournament where the winner wound up being the most injured contestant, this sort of thing happened every few years. With the intensity of the grand finals, it was unavoidable.

Postponing the closing ceremony, on the other hand, was impractical. Most of the honorable guests had busy schedules to keep, and holding a ceremony without them would be seen as demeaning. In the event there wasn't no one present to accept the prize, either the viscount or Adventurers' Guild would take the money for safekeeping. Still, this tournament was more about bragging rights than the money.

"Try to get her to the award ceremony if she wakes up."

"Understood."

Elza left. Making it to the award ceremony was going to be tough. Fran had been fighting hard for the last few days. Moving about was going to be difficult if she wasn't fully healed.

And then another visitor came to the infirmary. One whose presence I couldn't sense.

"S-Sir Dimitris?" the healers yelped in surprise. The S-Rank adventurer had come in through the door.

He approached slowly. I thought he wanted to take revenge for his disciple, but I didn't sense anything malicious in his mind.

"I see she isn't healing… May I help?"

"Huh? B-but…"

"Damage done by dragon energy takes time to heal properly."

"Dragon energy?"

"I fought a dragon once who was cloaked in the stuff… Now it's one of my school's ultimate techniques."

Was he talking about divine element? Dimitris apparently referred to it as dragon energy. No wonder the ultimate art was called Dragon.

"C-can you help her?"

"Not much…but yes."

Dimitris wasn't lying. He had really come to help Fran without any hostility or malice. There was almost something like tenderness in his eyes as he looked at her.

"B-but she defeated your successor…"

"What is *one* loss? It would be a waste to see such talent snuffed out at such a young age."

"O-of course… She's in your hands."

"Hrmm."

I watched Dimitris work. He had no wish to harm Fran. In fact, he apparently knew how to heal the damage done from divine element.

He breathed deeply and placed his hands over Fran's stomach and head. Spirit slowly flowed out of his hands and into Fran.

And that wasn't all.

Is this divine element?

Dimitris's energy had a trace of divine element inside it. But it didn't feel offensive. In fact, Fran's face softened in what looked like

relief.

A few minutes later, Dimitris finished his treatment. I could tell that the S Rank was exhausted. Maintaining the flow of divine element was just that difficult.

"Now heal her."

"A-all right."

Surprisingly, the healing spells were far more effective now. They still lacked their usual potency, but considering she was suffering from divine element, this was much better than before.

With the three healers working in tandem, she would be feeling better in no time. If nothing else, she was no longer in the danger zone.

Using divine element to deal with the wounds inflicted by divine element… There was still a lot I didn't know.

"I'll be going back to the closing ceremony. Take care of her."

"Y-yes! Thank you very much!"

"Hrm."

A few minutes passed.

Jet was mostly healed, and I was now secretly helping the healers with healing Fran. The healers got excited, thinking that she was taking their treatment much better. I felt a bit bad about it.

And then we had yet another visitor.

"My, my. She really can't move, can she?"

"A-and you are?"

"Oh, no one important. Hee hee hee."

The man slithered into the room, a noxious smile on his lips.

Abbav. The B-Rank adventurer who lost to Dias in the semifinals and Eiworth's student. What the hell was he doing here?

He looked at Fran with his unsettling snakelike eyes.

"Hee hee hee hee!"

He definitely wasn't here to wish her well.

Sensing trouble, the old healer approached Abbav.

"Th-there are supposed to be guards outside."

"Oh, them? They were sleeping on the job…so I just helped them sleep forever!"

"What?"

The next moment, Abbav swung his sword at the healer leader's neck—a killing stroke.

Fortunately, I was around to deflect it with telekinesis!

With that much bloodlust, it was easy to predict what he was about to do. He also had his guard down among the unarmed healers, so disarming him was easy as twisting a goblin's wrist.

"Wow! You're quite good to block my attack!"

"Huh? What?"

The three healers had yet to grasp what was going on. As notorious as Abbav was, he was still a tournament competitor and a high-rank adventurer. They couldn't believe he would just attack them out of the blue like that.

"Shiiiya!"

"Eeek!"

The old healer shrieked and covered his head when he saw Abbav raise his sword. This was no combat healer. A sadistic smile crept onto Abbav's face as the thrill of killing surged inside him.

But his sword was foiled again, this time by a well-placed barrier.

Give it up, chump! Your sword's not going through my shield!

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"…Are you pretending to be helpless? You're quite the actor if you are. No matter. I don't have time. Hand over the girl."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"My client is looking for powerful adventurers, you see. And you have a monster who could crush me under her heel just lying asleep there like a baby. It's the perfect opportunity."

"H-How could you…"

He was after Fran! He might have been looking to enslave her now that she was weakened.

Grrr…

Don't kill him, Jet. We'll make him talk first.

"Groar!"

"Eegh! What the…?! But she didn't summon you!"

"Bark!"

"And those wounds are already gone…?"

Knowing that Jet was Fran's familiar, Abbav hadn't expected him to show up with her still asleep.

Jet had also been heavily injured during the fight with Hilt. He should have been out of the equation. He was at about fifty percent power…which was more than enough to deal with scum like Abbav!

"Gaah…" Abbav screamed as Jet chomped on his legs from the shadows.

But the B-Rank adventurer took a potion out of his pocket, even as he suffered a lethal blow. Seven Winks. The poison he used against Dias. Switching tactics to protecting your own life was the mark of an experienced adventurer.

"Damn it! I have to use this now…!"

"Bark!"

"What?!"

But Jet leapt from the shadows, biting off Abbav's hand along with the poison. Jet's poison immunity meant that Seven Winks was just a bit of bitter water.

"Impossible…!"

Abbav looked dumbstruck as he watched Jet spit out the gas of Seven Winks. A look of despair soon followed.

He knew that his poisons wouldn't work against Jet. And Seven Winks was probably the most powerful poison in his arsenal.

"Grrrrr…"

"Ugh."

Jet growled, intimidating Abbav. Maybe it was just me, but I had a feeling that Jet was angrier about drinking the bitter poison than at Abbav's attempted kidnapping.

In any case, we could now start questioning him.

"That's enough, boy."

"Woof."

I showed up in the guise of my doppelganger—something I hadn't done in a while.

"Wah! Wh-who are you?!"

"When did you get here?!"

I introduced myself apologetically to the healers for startling them. "Uhh, I'm Fran's teacher. Isn't that right, Jet?"

"Woof!" Jet leaned into my hand, rubbing his head against it.

"I-I see."

My familiarity with Fran's familiar was proof of my identity. The healers breathed a sigh of relief while Abbav's face twisted hatefully.

He looked frustrated, sensing that my doppelganger wasn't that strong. But knowing that I was Fran's teacher, he seemed to suspect that I was very good at concealing my strength. In fact, he'd been right the first time—my doppelganger was pretty weak.

"Shit…"

"So, are you gonna talk? I'll just let the guild deal with you if you do."

"And if I don't?"

I squatted over Abbav, looking straight into his eyes. “You won’t get out of here in one piece after trying to lay hands on my beloved disciple.”

Abbav sighed. “So much for an easy capture… Very well. I’ll tell you everything.”

He looked at me, having clearly given up. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to outrun me and Jet. Yet I suspected that his cooperation was likely a pretense. He was probably looking for an escape route as we spoke.

I pointed a weapon at him and started my interrogation.

“Who are you working for?”

“A Raydossian unit called the Black Bones,” he answered easily. I guess he wasn’t obliged to keep his mouth shut under duress.

“The Black Bones!”

“You are acquainted?”

“Kind of. We have some history together.”

“…They didn’t tell me about you.”

Apparently, Abbav had been kept in the dark about our previous encounters. Did they consider him expendable?

“What are you going to do with Fran?”

“That I do not know. They just told me to capture her.”

“Uh-huh… They probably have other plans, too. Well, what are they?”

“They wish to increase their ranks.”

"So, they're recruiting? Were they going to enslave Fran or make her an undead?"

Abbav's eyes widened with surprise. "You really *are* acquainted. Yes, that's right. They are capturing powerful adventurers to turn them into undead. Hee hee hee! Isn't it a wonder!"

"…Any casualties so far?"

"Yes, indeed! We've had twenty taken from the tournament contestants alone."

Leaving town after a defeat wasn't uncommon, and there were too many people going in and out of Ulmutt to keep track of everyone. People wouldn't notice a few missing adventurers here and there. Besides, their party members would be the only ones looking for them—Ulmutt was too shorthanded at the moment. Organizing search parties was just implausible.

Which made tournament-season Ulmutt the *perfect* grounds for kidnapping.

Security was usually well organized, but things were slightly different this year: the undead breakout, the Chalusian troublemakers, and there were even more fights among thugs this year.

"So, the undead breakout outside of town…"

"Would be the Black Bones' doing. We want to reduce the number of guards in town!"

"What else?"

"Let's see—" Abbav continued to lay out the Black Bones' plot. All I could do was sigh.

"So Raydoss is behind the thugs *and* the assassins sent to the contestants."

"Even if they were all amateurs, the city would still need to deal with them. Eventually, they would have to split their forces."

They seemed so well-prepared. They'd even devised a plot to thin out the ranks of the guard. It seemed a bit excessive just to kidnap a few strong adventurers.

"Hee hee hee. Our real goal is to capture *powerful* people."

"Powerful people…?"

People. Not necessarily adventurers. That meant—

"The important people who have gathered in Ulmutt!"

"That's right. Aurel, an evolved beastman with both political and combat power. And Dimitris, the most powerful adventurer alive. These two are the main targets."

I wasn't expecting that. Those two were incredibly strong. Even if security was lacking, they still had their own personal bodyguards.

Dimitris didn't seem like he would even be fazed by an assassination attempt. You needed to throw several Frans at him for it to be a real fight.

"They've unleashed their forces both inside and outside the city. Guards and adventurers should be dealing with them as we speak, leaving the closing ceremony defenseless."

"And you were waiting for the closing ceremony to launch your plan?"

"Outsiders would stick out after the tournament is over. And it would be more mud on Granzell's face if we captured some extra nobles and politicians along the way. That must be another goal of the Black Bones."

"I see. Just one problem. The guards don't matter, since they'll be up against Dimitris."

"Hee hee hee. The thinning out of the guard was to facilitate easy infiltration and exit. We have devised a separate plan for capturing Dimitris and Aurel. I believe you'll find it to be *quite* effective."

Abbav seemed very confident about that last statement.

"How?"

Abbav smiled and laid out their plans.

"Did you know that Dimitris and Aurel have grandchildren? They are absolutely adorable. Hee hee hee!"

"Hostages!"

Dimitris's granddaughter Nilphe and Aurel's granddaughter Kaitley. These two had bodyguards…but they would be far easier to deal with than going up against their grandfathers.

Judging by his relaxed demeanor, they must have already kidnapped them.

Should I send Jet to sniff them out? Should I tell the guild so they could start looking for them? I couldn't leave Fran's side as long as she was still asleep…

"…Kaitley's in danger?"

"Fran! You're awake!"

"Teacher."

Fran slowly opened her eyes. The recovery magic had done its job. Still, simply getting up was an ordeal.

"I'm going to save them."

"Absolutely not! Don't be stupid!"

"No. We're going."

"…"

I couldn't turn her down when she looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Where are Kaitley and Nilphe now?"

"I helped secure them, but I do not know where they went after that."

"Jet, can you find them?"

"Woof."

Not from here he couldn't.

"Let's start with your hideout. Where is it?"

Abbav told us the location of the hideout. They were using a house close to the coliseum. It seemed like we would have to get there on Jet-back.

There were other questions, but now wasn't the time. Best to hand him over to the guild so they could lock him up.

As we were tying up Abbav and preparing to leave, another figure barreled into the infirmary.

"Fran! Are you okay?!"

"Colbert?"

"Some weirdos started causing trouble, so I got worried—Huh? Whaaa?! Curry Master!"

Colbert was shocked. Of course he was. He'd thought I was dead.

"Curry Master! H-how…? I-I thought you were dead…!"

I wasn't expecting to run into him here. But now wasn't the time to sort out misunderstandings. I gave him my best '*No, I don't believe I am*' look.

"No, I'm fine."

"Huh? Th-then—"

"Colbert, what happened?! I heard screaming!"

Another familiar face entered the infirmary after Colbert.

"Hi, Judith."

Judith, leader of the Crimson Maidens. She looked confused when I said her name out loud.

"Uhh…oh! You're Fran's master!"

My chance encounter with Colbert threw me off. I had seen her in Bulbola and Ulmutt many times but as a sword. I think she'd only seen my human form once. I was just another unfamiliar face to her. Fortunately, she seemed to remember me.

"Listen, we're a bit strapped for time. Can you tell me what's going on outside?"

"Oh, sure!"

Judith and Colbert (having returned to his senses) explained.

Undead and thugs had come out of nowhere, attacking everyone in sight. While not much of a threat on their own, the sheer number of them created chaos in the city.

A similar event occurred right outside the coliseum. Adventurers and guards had been dispatched to deal with the situation, but there were already casualties.

I told Colbert and Judith what I had learned about Abbav's plan so far.

"They kidnapped Miss Nilphe?! The cowards!"

"Hee hee hee. She got hurt during the process, too. We applied some first aid, but considering her injury… Why, she might be *dead* by now."

"Bastard!"

I quickly grabbed Colbert as he lunged at Abbav. Nilphe was hurt, sure, but that she was dead was a bald-faced lie. She had been in no danger of death when Abbav left her, in any case.

Whether Abbav lied out of retaliation or to cover for his comrades, he succeeded in clouding Colbert's decision making.

"A hostage is no good to them dead. They'll keep her alive."

"Y-you're right. Sorry."

"Anyway, we must save them as fast as possible. We'll need your help."

"Of course!"

"Judith, take the others and secure this man."

"U-understood."

Lydia and Maya were outside standing guard. They could carry Abbav off once he was disarmed.

We knocked him out, stripped him of his equipment, and tied his entire body up with rope. He would no longer be a threat now.

"Colbert, you and Fran go look for the kids."

"Roger that! But what about you, Curry Master?"

"I have other things to attend to. I'll leave you guys to it."

Honestly, my doppelganger was just running out of time. Much easier to just end it now.

But the others misunderstood me and thought I had a greater mission to carry out. Fran's master was super strong, therefore he must have some super important quest to accomplish.

"I-I see! You have other plots to thwart!"

"Uhh, sure. Yeah."

"I'll take care of Fran for you! I won't let those bastards lay a finger on her!"

"T-thanks. Catch you later."

I had to leave before Colbert brought up the Curry Master thing again. I made a show of teleportation before my clone faded.

Phew. Fran, I know Colbert's with you, but nothing too reckless, okay?

I know.

Fran got on Jet and led the way out of the infirmary. As we left the coliseum, we could hear noises of fighting in the distance. But the commotion seemed to have settled down here.

"It's a weird time to say this, but congratulations on your victory, Fran," Lydia said, filling the silence of our mostly quiet trek. Colbert looked like he was having mixed feelings about it.

But Fran tilted her head. "…I won?"

"What?"

"I don't remember what happened at the end."

"Y-you don't…?"

"I cut down Hilt. I know that for sure…but the rest is hazy."

I'd had a feeling Fran might not remember the final moments of the match. Her consciousness was already fading by then.

"W-was the battle that intense?" Lydia asked with a horrified look.

As I looked at her, I remembered her Knowledge God's Grace. Was that a different god from the Wisdom God? Their names were kind of similar…

P.A., what's the difference between Knowledge God's Grace and Wisdom God's Grace?

The gods have many faces. The Beast God—origin of the beastmen—for example, is known both as the Animal God and Insect God.

Different names, same divinity? So, it's their realm of power, then.

Yes. For example, possessing Beast God's Grace might give one access to the graces of Animal God and Insect God, as well. The more powerful the divinity invoked, the stronger the blessing.

So, the Animal God has lower standing than the Beast God.

Yes.

Meaning that Wisdom God and Knowledge God might be the same god but with slight differences. And Wisdom God's Grace is of higher quality?

That is a good way of thinking about it, yes.

As I talked about the nature of graces with P.A., Colbert stopped.

"Is that Dufaux? Rachid and Dolhan are with him too."

"You know Dufaux?"

"Yeah. He's doing pretty good in Bulbola."

Dufaux, together with some other adventurers and guards, was fighting off zombies near the coliseum entrance.

Fran had completely forgotten about Dufaux, but we had actually met him and his party once. Naria and the others were Bulbolan rookies who'd had the privilege of Fran beating them up in practice. They were all in town for the tournament.

But there was a martial artist among them whom I didn't recognize. The young man was apparently called Dolhan. He must

have been one of Dimitris's students.

Although now that I thought about it, hadn't Dufaux left town?

Colbert approached Rachid and called out to him.

"I'll back you up."

"Colbert! And Fran, too!"

"Hm?"

Rachid was surprised to see us, but he gladly accepted our help.

After all the zombies were dead, we asked him about the situation.

After losing in the tournament, they had taken quests in Ulmutt to help pay for their travel fees. Among them was a quest to investigate murders which were happening in town. The town guard led the investigation while the adventurers were hired in case things got violent.

"I wanted to take on the undead extermination quest, but they insisted that I was needed to help with the investigation in town."

The guards were more concerned with the murders. Mainly because of how the victims were killed.

"They were brutally killed with a bladed weapon and had their blood sucked dry."

As grotesque as it was strange. The murders didn't attract a lot of attention due to how much was already going on; normally, they would've caused a lot of distress among the townspeople.

As the investigation went on, they made another unsettling discovery. Nothing too shocking by itself, but it raised a lot of concern with the murders in the background.

"We found these guys tied up in some rich guy's rented-out mansion."

Dufaux, Dolhan, and several others had been found in the basement. Dufaux had been thought to have left town, and Dolhan was at liberty to go where he wanted. That was why no one reported them as missing.

They had, in fact, been kidnapped. The powerful adventurers had been ambushed by powerful undead and defeated.

Colbert looked startled.

"You lost just like that, Dolhan? Fran, I know he's young, but even Miss Hilt has her eyes on him. He's already a C Rank."

Dolhan scratched his head, flattered by Colbert's compliment.

"Aww shucks, Colbert. That's a lot coming from a B Rank. Besides, I think Lady Hilt only has eyes for you."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Colbert tilted his head. The younger disciple of Dimitris let out an exasperated sigh. Even the students were aware of Hilt's feelings for Colbert.

"I was just a betrothal candidate. Charlie is a far better fit for Miss Hilt."

"But what are your feelings for her? Don't you like her?"

"I guess? She's ten years younger than me. I can't look at her like that; it's rude."

Colbert really didn't seem to have an eye for romance. He liked her, but not in any romantic capacity. Dolhan pumped his fist, as if wishing Hilt the best with her love life.

"Now is not the time."

And Fran was right. As much as I wanted to know the juicy details, now was the worst time to stand around gossiping!

"Right! We must go after the bad guys!"

Rachid looked at the device in his hand. He used it to inform the guard that there was a connection between the strange murders and kidnapped adventurers. As important as the matter was, we couldn't really help them.

But was Raydoss really involved in all of this?

They were kidnapping adventurers to turn them into undead. Dufaux and the others would've died if Rachid hadn't found them. But I decided not to bring up Raydoss just yet.

That would only complicate matters. And we didn't have any positive evidence linking their connection yet.

"As much as we'd love to help, we have to go. There are other troublemakers to deal with. You guys be careful, too."

"R-right. Thanks for the trouble."

We parted ways with Rachid and the Crimson Maidens and began our search for Nilfe and Kaitley. Our first stop was the hideout near the coliseum. It was where our mastermind was supposed to be, but…

"I knew it. They're gone!"

"Kaitley's not here, either."

As Abbav had predicted, the hideout was empty. I knew it would be, but it was best to verify that as fast as we could.

"There are no signs of where they might have taken Miss Nilphe…but that's where your nose comes in, Jet."

"You can do it, Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet started sniffing the area, Fran still on his back. He'd managed to track down undead miles away just yesterday. We could rely on him today.

He paced around the hideout, sniffing the ground as he went. He stopped here and there, taking a deep whiff of the air.

"Woof!"

After a few minutes of sniffing, he broke into a run. We followed him through the streets of Ulmutt.

There's not so much chaos as there is unrest.

Hm.

The thugs and undead running rampant through the city had already been defeated. Adventurers could be seen standing triumphantly over their defeated enemies.

Even with the guards falling behind, there were a lot of adventurers roaming the streets this time of year. Considering this plan was cooked up by adventurer-ignorant Raydossians, it's no wonder the attack was put down quickly.

As we ran through town, Colbert spoke up with a conflicted look on his face.

"Fran."

"Hm?"

"Congratulations on winning. I didn't think you could beat the miss."

Even though he was a former student of Dimitris, he still had affection for the school. But that wasn't the only reason why he'd thought Fran would lose.

"The difference of experience between you is astounding. The miss is an expert at fighting swordsmen. Not to mention the specialization. Dimitris Style was developed to dominate one-on-one encounters. I mean, the master is pretty much invincible on all fronts, but…it's still the best combat style for dueling."

The defensive maneuvers were developed to deal with armed humans. Although still useful against monsters, they shone best against people.

"I know that you've beaten other A Ranks. I saw you beat Gaudartha myself last year. But he specializes in fighting armies and monsters. Different A Ranks have different specialties."

The battle against the rhino beastman Gaudartha was one where Fran ran circles around him while we pelted him with our most powerful attacks. He was like Biscott in a way, but tougher and stronger.

"It's only been a year since then. There's no way that you could beat the miss in the tournament…or so I thought."

Having the utmost respect for Dimitris Style, Colbert felt conflicted about its successor's defeat. He wanted to celebrate his friend's victory but felt a bit bad about doing so. The only thing he knew for sure was that he had no romantic feelings for Hilt.

She was his master's successor, a former compatriot who was far more talented than he was, a comrade he respected very much… That was all she was.

And with Fran's victory, Hilt would remain a successor for a while longer.

Oof… Good luck, Hilt!

Teacher?

Oh, nothing. I was just wondering how Hilt was doing.

Uh-huh.

Ten minutes passed as Jet led us on the trail.

"Woof!"

He suddenly increased his speed. While not at a full sprint, he was at least as fast as a regular dog.

Are you getting close?

Bark!

He turned a corner, cut through a street, and ran at full speed. Was this really the right direction, though? It looked like Jet was leading us back to the coliseum.

Are you sure this is the way?

Woof!

Apparently so.

Then Jet led us right back to where we started.

This is the coliseum.

"Arf…?"

Jet tilted his head slightly as he looked at the coliseum. He twitched his nose and looked confused.

"Jet?"

"Woof."

He barked again, eyes still fixed on the coliseum.

"Are they somewhere inside the coliseum?" asked Colbert.

"Bark!" Jet confirmed.

They must have been preparing to use Kaitley and Nilphe as hostages against Dimitris and Aurel. Perhaps as human shields.

What if the Black Bones had brought them into the coliseum as soon as we left? Damn it! They were under our noses all along…!

But now wasn't the time to second-guess ourselves. Jet took point again and led us inside the coliseum.

No undead in sight. They must have been defeated already, but there were adventurers lying on the ground being tended to. The undead must have put up quite a fight.

As we walked down the hallway, we heard a shout somewhere in front of us. The guards were panicking.

“Hey! Something’s happening at the closing ceremony!”

“Well, what is it?!”

“I don’t know! Whatever it is, it makes those undead look like a cakewalk! Come on!”

“A-all right!”

“Damn it! The troubles outside have us stretched thin!”

The Black Bones had interrupted the closing ceremony. We needed to hurry before things got ugly.

“Let’s go, Jet.”

“Woof!”

Jet ran again, following the guards. They got spooked when they saw him run on the walls. Sorry…but we were in a hurry.

“Bark, bark!”

Jet led us through several branching paths until we found a familiar hallway. Up ahead were the bleachers.

But I could already tell that something was off. Despite it being the closing ceremony, things were awfully quiet.

“Wait! Stop, stop!”

“Arf?”

Colbert halted us and lowered his voice to a whisper. “We won’t know what’s going on if we just barge in like this. Let’s observe the situation first.”

“I see.”

“Woof.”

Good point. We wouldn't know who to target if we just charged in guns blazing.

But Fran and Jet had a look on their faces that said, "Oh yeah, that's just how we want it!" They really would've rushed through if Colbert hadn't stopped them.

"Are Miss Nilphe and the other girl here?"

"Ruff."

"What? They're gone? Both of them?"

"Arf."

Colbert started asking Jet questions. It took a while because of the yes/no format, but we eventually got a handle on the situation.

Their scents had diverged. Kaitley was still somewhere ahead. Nilphe had been taken somewhere outside the coliseum. They must have been holding them in separate locations to make rescuing them more difficult.

"We'll split up. Jet, Colbert, go get Nilphe."

"Wait! You can't just go out there alone…!"

"I'm fine. I won't be reckless."

"But… No, you're right. Miss Nilphe would be more reassured with me around… All right. We'll take care of her."

"Woof!"

Jet and Colbert left to look for Nilphe. Fran and I would go after Kaitley.

I was going to have to do most of the heavy lifting considering Fran was still in poor condition. It was time for Swordacting (not a real Skill) to win the day!

I'll have a look at the closing ceremony.

Thanks.

Just wait one second…

I turned my strip into a thin bit of string and extended it from the hallway into the bleachers. This string was sufficient to be my ears and eyes.

"Now put this collar on your neck, Dimitris!"

Down at the arena, a man with an iron mask was shouting triumphantly.

SIDE BLACK BONES

"DAMN IT! I can't summon any of them! Not the Mummy King or any of the ghouls!"

I hadn't been able to contact them since last night. Had they been annihilated?

"The guild has been putting up extermination quests lately. Perhaps they've been wiped out."

"Useless monsters! Being defeated by the likes of mere adventurers!"

And the closing ceremony was about to begin! My plans were ruined! And I had yet to get a hold of that black cat girl, either…

"Hee hee hee! You seem worried!"

"Shut up, Al Azif!"

"Don't worry, I'll cut them all down for you!"

"You've got some nerve…! Your meals have only increased security! The captured adventurers have also escaped and are now roaming free in town! They're clearly looking for you."

"What? I was just doing my part to create more mayhem."

"That doesn't mean you can just go around killing people! There is a time and place for that! Now our movements are restricted with knights and adventurers patrolling Ulmutt!"

The local knights and guards were primarily concerned with the safety of the townspeople; they wouldn't waste their time trying to spot outsiders. We could count on them turning a blind eye to our activities as long as no one was hurt.

But now that Al Azif had killed civilians in broad daylight, they'd had no choice but to increase security!

"Oh, relax."

"Ugggh!"

"Well, no use crying over spilt milk. You were saying something about the Red Knights? How they might prove to be of assistance…"

"Apparently they're not as strong as they seem."

Sibyl, captain of the Red Knights, had been defeated by a mere adventurer. And by a little Black Cat girl at that, the *weakest* among the races. I couldn't believe my ears when I first heard the reports.

Of course, Sibyl had not used her trump card, but it was an intense battle all the same. As much as the Black Bones hated the

Red Knights, there was no doubting their strength. And their captain was the strongest among them.

And she lost…

Now they were so exhausted that they refused our request for backup.

These adventurers were trouble.

"It can't be helped. Abbav, go and capture the Black Cat. It should be much easier now."

"Oh? I thought my work was finished once I administered stimulants to the Chalusians? Not to mention I am still recovering from one of your indiscriminate attacks the other day."

"I only helped you since it looked like you were having trouble securing the girl."

"That's no justification for you to use a large-scale spell in the middle of town. There was quite a commotion. Our target almost died because of it, too."

"As long as she's not actually dead. And it's too late to complain about a commotion now."

We could've proceeded with our plans more quietly if it hadn't been for Al Azif!

"Hee hee hee… You're scaring me."

"Anyway, secure the Black Cat. You shouldn't have a problem capturing a half-dead adventurer. Do it and I'll supply you with the toxic materials you've been pining for!"

"You should've said so sooner."

Our master was also interested in the Black Cat. He would be pleased if we captured her.

"I'll be on my way. Will you be all right without me?"

"Of course I will. Who do you think I am? I am Acid Man! Seventh seat of the Black Bones!"

"Hee hee hee. I see. I will escape once I deliver the Black Cat to you. I hope that's all right."

"That will be fine."

Hmph. I knew that he actually looked down on undead. As if he were somehow superior, having sold out his country due to a petty squabble with his master!

But it mattered little; he'd become an undead once we were finished. He was useful in helping us infiltrate the town, but we had no more use for him now.

"Then I shall also take my leave."

"Hyah hah! Hell yeah! It's finally killing time!"

Donning a mask to conceal my identity, I called out to the girl tied up in the corner.

"Come here."

"…"

"The same attitude as always… Get over here!"

"Wah!"

"Heh heh. Perhaps I will sacrifice you after this mission is over. The blood of a child makes for potent material."

"…"

She didn't cry or show fear, no matter how I intimidated her. I hated her for it.

"Let's see if you can keep up your little facade after your grandfather Aurel falls into our hands!"

"…"

"Brat… Stop looking at me like that!"

"…"

"Kua hah hah! Even the kid thinks you're full of shit! This is great!"

"Silence!"

Damn it! Why wouldn't she despair? She had been captured by someone powerful and would be used against her grandfather as a hostage!

"The more you resist the more you're wasting our time. That Nilphe might die as a result!"

"…!"

"Heh heh. That's right. That's how you *should* look! Shadow Bind."

"…Wah!"

The brat—Kaitley—had screamed when I tied her up.

The closing ceremony was already underway. Kaitley would be vital to us acquiring Dimitris and Aurel. We'd use her to get slave collars on their necks.

She wasn't our only hostage. Nilphe, Dimitris's granddaughter, had also been captured and locked up in a separate location. We would use Kaitley as a shield and get her to verify the truth of our threats.

As powerful as Dimitris was, he couldn't rescue his granddaughter without knowing her location. Our victory was sealed the moment we captured these children.

"You're coming too."

"Uhhh."

"…"

Nilphe's former bodyguard was also under my control. His body mutated because of my poison, so he was no longer as strong as he once was. But he could still be used to intimidate Dimitris as a meat shield. Fortunately, his face was still preserved, allowing past acquaintances to recognize him even as an undead.

Unlike my master, I wasn't an expert in necromancy but in shadow magic. I should have been able to pass through the city undetected with a stealth spell. A moot point, as it turned out…most people were too busy fleeing for their lives to notice us.

As we continued making our way to the coliseum, I summoned my minions and ordered them to cause havoc in the city. This is where the ghouls were supposed to have come in, but alas…

I had reduced the number of my minions in the city, opting to take most of them with me as backup. Only half of my forces were left, and it was only a matter of time before they were suppressed.

This was where the Mummy King failed. Not one for concealment, he was supposed to have caused chaos, allowing us to slip through unnoticed.

All my plans were undone. It was insufferable.

"All that matters in the end is getting Dimitris."

As we made our way to the arena, ten guards came at us from the front. The place was heavily secured with their nobles gathered in one place.

Their leader was powerful enough to see through my cloaking. But that was all he was capable of…

"Y-you there! Stop!"

"Who—"

"Acid Mist!"

"Waaargh!"

I had no time for weaklings. I cast a deadly poison spell, covering the guards in corrosive mist, killing them instantly.

There were many of them, but they were weak. They must have been shorthanded from the chaos. The captain was the only veteran among them; the rest were new hires.

I stepped over the melting corpses of the fools and entered the arena.

As expected, the closing ceremony proceeded as usual. Political rituals are not so easily disrupted.

I drew the attention of people around as I entered. Soon, the others followed suit.

"Wh-who are you?! Guards!"

"Silence, worm."

"Aagh!"

I kicked the noble who seemed to be in the middle of making a speech. I thought it would kill him, but he yet lived. Lucky bastard.

But my intentions were now made clear to everyone around me. I sensed their hostility.

Not enough to make me quiver, but Kaitley was terrified.

As guards surrounded us, I pushed Kaitley out into the open and undid the shadows binding her.

The guards ceased their attack when they saw the girl materialize out of thin air. They couldn't bear to see her caught in the crossfire. Heh heh. Those kind souls.

"Now, then. I have no time to waste, so I'll get to the point. I am Acid Man! Citizen of the great Raydossian Empire!"

The crowd murmured greatly at the mention of Raydoss. I could sense their hostility toward me increasing. The insolence of an inferior rabble from an inferior kingdom!

"Heh heh. I have a hostage with me, as you can see. But she's not the only one. There is another called Nilphe, whom I have locked away in another location."

My words echoed throughout the unrest of the coliseum. One of

the participants of the closing ceremony looked shocked.

"Nilphe! She's been missing since this morning…!"

I believed this was the one they call Hiltoria, Dimitris's successor. An excellent candidate, but there weren't enough special slave collars to go around. I'd have to pass for now.

"I speak the truth. Isn't that right, Kaitley?"

"Y-yes… They have Nilphe… And she's hurt! You have to save her!"

"And if you don't believe the child's words, see with your own eyes…"

I flipped back the hood of the man behind me, the man who used to be Nilphe's bodyguard. Even with his body half melted from acid, his face was still recognizable.

"Michael!"

"Yes, that's what his name was. Strong, but unprepared for a fight with mages."

"You bastard…!"

The angry man was called Zelt, I think. Did he know Michael?

"My baby brother…! How dare you…!"

"So, he was your brother? Will you avenge him, then? Together, all of you might be able to overpower me…but Nilphe will die."

"…Damn it!"

Bwa ha ha! These adventurers were *pathetic*! They were helpless in front of a hostage!

“My demands are simple. The S-Rank adventurer Dimitris and Widget Aurel are to heed my words!”

Screams erupted from the coliseum as I mentioned their names. The lowlifes were about to witness the glorious moment when the great Black Bones slapped the face of Granzell in the name of Raydoss!

“They will wear these collars on their necks!”

I took out the slave collars, holding them high for all to see.

“Now put this collar on your neck, Dimitris!”

This slave collar had been specially made. Although its effective time was incredibly limited, it was able to bind even the most powerful S Rank.

“What’s the matter? Do it! Or do you not care whether the child lives or dies?”

“Urgh!”

The girl groaned as the darkness crushed her body.

“Is this not painful enough? Al Azif! Come!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The patchwork undead Al Azif quickly changed its shape. Although it looked human, its real self was the greatscythe the humanoid was wielding.

The greatscythe was a patchwork of different weapon parts, and it could suck its humanoid form into itself like a slime.

Unlike its first form, which created a patchwork undead from the creatures it killed, this second form focused on empowering the greatscythe by feeding it with the vital essence of its victims.

It still possessed the powers of its first form, but they were incredibly weak. On the flip side, the first form didn't have the ability to power up like the second form.

Although possessing incredible abilities, the Al Azifs were treated as a failure. The patchwork undead they created were far less powerful than their former selves, and they needed hundreds of bodies to make up for the loss. Creating individual undead was far more efficient.

The same went for its power-up ability. It took too much fuel and lasted for too short a time. Once it wore off, it lost all of the power it had stored up.

Both abilities were deemed unfit for mass production and the Al Azif project was put on ice.

But I thought it should be enough for now. It had been eating people ever since we came into the city. It messed up our plans…but at least we could get some return out of it.

"Move it! I'm so riled up that my hands are shaking! There's no telling what I'll do!"

"Waah!"

Al Azif grazed Kaitley's cheek, cutting her skin.

"Aha ha ha! That's a good scream! And you've got tasty blood too!" rang out a voice of unknown gender from the scythe. The

stadium went silent at the strange sight.

Blood flowed down Kaitley's white skin, dribbling down her neck and staining her white dress red.

"The blade of this scythe is like a saw. You need to treat her fast before she gets infected. She might end up looking like patchwork herself!"

The hearts of the foolish people shivered in fear at my words.

That's right! Be afraid! Wail and scream! Feed us!

"We have another hostage; we will not hesitate. Or would you like to try to defeat me before I take the girl's life? Think twice! I have put a curse on her, linking her life to mine! If I die, she dies!"

And it was true. My existence had been linked to the two girls, and if I were to die, they would both perish.

Undead have a great affinity for curses. Even a powerful magician would not be able to easily undo them.

Sensing the truth behind my words, the adventurers did not move. They ground their teeth and glared at me like the pitiful dogs that they were!

"…Will my granddaughter and that girl be spared if I put on that slave collar?"

"Grandfather!"

"Quiet, Hilt. Well?"

"That's right. I will let your grandchildren go if you and Aurel become my slaves. If you surrender, we will leave this place with little resistance."

Lying and being detected would only ruin the plan. I really did intend on letting the girls free. That is why I allowed Nilphe to survive.

"…Then it must be done."

"But grandfather!"

"The masked man isn't lying. You have two old men against two children with their whole lives ahead of them. The scales weigh heavily on one side," Dimitris declared and stepped forward. But a man stood in his way. A noble, it seemed.

"W-wait! You rate your value poorly! The nations will be in danger if Raydoss gets a hold of you! You must rethink this!"

"You are the minister of war, if I remember correctly?"

"Yes! As a noble of Granzell, I cannot allow you to defect to Raydoss! I know this is a difficult decision for you, and I mourn for your granddaughter but—Ack!"

"Make no mistake. I am not a citizen of your kingdom. I have no need of your permission, nor anyone else's. My granddaughter's life is on the line. No one will stand in my way. Understand?"

Dimitris hit the noble, sending him flying. His words caused those around him to pale. He had barely strained himself, and yet it felt like the laws of physics bent in his presence.

Even as an immortal he looked like a monster. He would kill me in an instant if I were to make him an enemy.

Adventurers seemed to be nothing but glorified errand boys, but the powerful ones were a rare breed.

And this great power would soon be mine… Ah, what joy!

"Me too, huh…? Fine."

"Master!"

And then Aurel got up from his reserved seat. With these two enslaved, my victory was at hand!

Suddenly, a figure approached us from the hallway where we made our entrance. Thinking it to be an adventurer, I readied myself… but I was mistaken. I was familiar with this newcomer.

Sibyl of the Red Sword. She had finally answered our call for reinforcements.

"I see it's the captain of the Red Sword Knights."

"And I see the rotting corpse of the Black Bones."

An unpleasant woman as ever, there was no questioning her strength. Together with Dimitris, she would make our escape effortless.

"Bwa ha ha! And now my cavalry has arrived! You stand no chance against us now! Come, Dimitris, Aurel! Hurry and put these collars on! Sibyl, if you would!"

"I'm not bound to listen to you."

"This is not the time—"

"Besides, I owe that girl a favor."

"A favor…?"

"She enlightened me on important matters. So—"

What was this woman saying? A favor? What of it? Now was not the time for small talk—

"I'll be removing this little curse of yours!"

"Gaaah!"

What had she done?! She'd lifted my curse!

I could feel the curse escaping my body. The link to the girls was broken!

"Sibyl, you bitch! Traitor…!"

"Mmm… I've never had a curse woven by a corpse before. Not too bad."

"Impossible. You *ate* the curse…?"

"Heh. I'm something of a gourmet for strange foods. Nothing I wouldn't try once."

"Why would you…"

"I don't like the way you do things."

"What?"

What was she saying? What kind of absurd reasoning—

"Acid Man! Leg it! You're gonna get creamed if you don't!"

"What?"

And why was Al Azif making such a ruckus?!

"I don't like the way you kidnapped kids to use in your plan!"

"Gaaargh!"

Th-that woman cut me!

"We are in enemy territory…! Have you gone mad?!"

"Shut it, corpse. Your breath is as rotten as your soul."

No! *That* sword—Why?!

Chapter 6:
To Each Their Own Circumstance

THROUGH MY STRING, I saw a masked man threatening Dimitris. The mask made him look human, but Identify revealed him to be undead, and the mana surrounding him was *quite* powerful.

He was at the very least a C Threat. But if he had enough intelligence to conceal his mana and masquerade as a human so he could walk around town, I wouldn't be surprised if he was actually a B Threat.

His abilities were specialized for magic. High levels of Deadly Poison, Shadow, and Support Magics. Not much of a threat up close but powerful at long distances. No Unique Skills, but a wealth of high-leveled Skills to make up for it.

Defeating him without getting Kaitley caught in the fight would be difficult.

Acid Man had bound her with a shadow spell, and he was smiling triumphantly because of it. Behind him was the man who used to be Nilphe's bodyguard, I thought. He was undead now. Hilt and Zelt were furious when they saw him—Michael was apparently Zelt's brother. He was so angry that it almost felt like I could see the blood in his eyes.

No! What's that fiend doing to Kaitley's face?! I know she's small, but that is a woman you're hurting! What if it scars?!

I felt an ominous magical energy between Acid Man and Kaitley. A curse. Defeating Acid Man would result in Kaitley losing her life. This was shaping up to be a horrible situation.

The most dangerous thing seemed to be the greatscythe in his hand.

I could immediately tell who it was without Identifying it: Al Azif.

I knew there was something to that patchwork undead we fought during our last encounter. I wasn't expecting to meet it here, though! Its existence served to lend credence to Acid Man's threats.

Oh! Now Dimitris had just punched a cocky noble to the sky.

"How is it, Teacher?"

Pretty bad. Dimitris might put the collar on of his own volition at this rate.

"What should we do?"

I could try getting in the way with telekinesis…

If Dimitris became a slave to Raydoss, it would drastically change the balance of power between the nations.

He probably thought it was better for him to be enslaved than have his granddaughter die. There always was a chance that she might rescued if she was still alive.

"Kaitley and Nilphe's safety is top priority."

You're right.

If we couldn't do anything that might jeopardize them, then what should we do? Our hands were tied because of the curse. Even

if we somehow got Nilphe back, Acid Man would still have the upper hand.

As we clenched our teeth, a figure appeared from the opposite side of the arena.

Sibyl!

"…Reinforcements?"

Probably. This is really bad.

Acid Man had hostages and now Sibyl on his side. Was there no way out of this? Dimitris might have been able to take her on, but he couldn't take that risk…

I watched on, desperate to find a solution. Acid Man now ordered Sibyl to give Dimitris the slave collar.

Sibyl reached out—

What?!

"Teacher, what's wrong?"

S-Sibyl just cut the undead bastard down!

"Hm!"

It wasn't just a show of hostility, either. She'd really tried to end his *un*life just now. As everyone was stunned into silence, Sibyl brought her sword down on Acid Man's head to split him in two.

But Al Azif blocked the attack! The sentient weapon melted over Acid Man's right arm, assuming it.

"Gaaah! Al Azif! My aaarm!"

"No way I'm letting you be in control at a time like this!"

Small tentacles crept out of Al Azif, extending all the way up Acid Man's bicep. Was Al Azif taking over? It might have free reign over Acid Man's body now.

It truly was a cursed weapon which could control its user.

But Acid Man survived despite the takeover. He was pissed, though.

Sibyl grabbed Kaitley and scooped her into her arms. She had removed the curse somehow. I think she…*ate* it? Do curses even count as food?!

"Let's go, Teacher."

R-right.

The situation continued progressing as Fran made a move.

Biscott and Cricca followed out of the same hallway Sibyl came from. They weren't alone, either. A small girl was with them.

Seeing her, Hilt cried out, "Nilphe!"

Cricca was leading the hostage by the hand. She looked unharmed.

But what were they doing here? If Sibyl had betrayed Acid Man, I assumed they must have helped Nilphe get out, too. But why? I'd thought they were all Raydossians.

"Aaargh! Michael! Get the brat back!"

"Ooooh!" The zombified Michael moved at Acid Man's command. And he was fast! None of the adventurers and guards had time to react! But Biscott easily rammed his shield into him.

"Ha ha! I've seen that move before!"

Having fought Zelt, Biscott was used to the Dimitris movement. Michael bounced off of his shield and stumbled. Then his head rolled off his neck. As his body stood by itself, his head was still rolling away.

The adventurers were stunned to silence, but I knew what had happened. Cricca had used her Wind Magic, a blade of concealed wind to decapitate Michael.

Then his body crumpled and people began to understand what was going on. Screams broke out from the audience. Seeing the strength of Biscott and Cricca, the adventurers and guards were at a loss.

Now Sibyl would have both hostages in her hands…

Fran, hang on! I wanna see how this develops!

Hm. Okay.

The situation was such a mess that we didn't know who we were supposed to beat up.

Sibyl was patting Kaitley's dirty dress down without a trace of malice.

Hilt was glaring at her.

"You people… I thought you were with the masked man?"

"We're not necessarily comrades, though we do come from the same country."

"So, you are also Raydossian?"

"Yeah. The name's Sibyl, captain of the Red Sword Knights of the Raydossian National Defense Force," Sibyl casually introduced herself.

I knew she was no ordinary knight, but a captain! The National Defense Force sounded like a hefty title, too.

Hilt looked visibly surprised. "C-captain? What's a captain doing here?"

"Ha ha ha. We have our reasons."

The adventurers and guards readied themselves, knowing that they were still faced with an enemy. They'd been holding back because of the two girls held hostage, but they were ready to strike as soon as there was an opening.

Acid Man, too, was looking for an opening. The threat was far from over.

And now more characters entered the stage.

"It's Jet and Colbert," Fran whispered, positioning herself near the entrance of the bleachers.

"Miss Nilphe!"

"Woof!"

Having gone out to look for Nilphe, Jet and Colbert had finally caught up to her.

"Unhand her, you bastards!"

"Bark!"

But Kaitley and Nilphe were Sibyl's lifeline. They wouldn't let them go that—

"She's all yours. Go on."

"Huh?" Kaitley looked confused as Sibyl pushed her toward Colbert.

"Cricca, let that little lady go, too."

"Yup."

Unlike Kaitley, Nilphe wasted no time running to Hilt. She reached her destination unimpeded.

"Oh, Hilt!"

"Nilphe!"

Kaitley remained confused. She didn't know what Sibyl was up to.

"But…why? Why are you helping me?" Kaitley asked.

"I owe you a favor," Sibyl answered.

Kaitley tilted her head, Sibyl's answer not making much sense to her.

"A favor?"

"You taught me never to underestimate adventurers. Even rookies."

Was she talking about their encounter in the dungeon? Kaitley didn't lecture Sibyl as much as she poured her heart out to her. For Sibyl, it must have come as quite a shock.

She looked kindly upon Kaitley and patted her on the back. But Kaitley stood in place.

"I-if I leave, you'll all…"

"We're enemies from now on. Don't worry about us."

"But you saved us!" Kaitley was worried for Sibyl.

Sibyl now gave the girl a strong shove.

"Go on. Get moving"

"Ah!"

Kaitley stumbled her way toward Hilt. Not wasting the opportunity, Hilt quickly secured her. She then looked at Sibyl, half hostile and half confused.



"Why did you let go of your hostages?"

Releasing Kaitley and Nilphe was suicide for the professed Raydossians. Dimitris was among the people surrounding Sibyl and the others. They could've easily used Kaitley and Nilphe as a shield and left town.

Hilt felt the same way. She looked at Sibyl, trying her best to figure her out.

But Sibyl just shrugged and said, "I attacked him because I don't like bastards who use children in their plots. Do you think I'd stoop to using kids to run away?"

"That's it…?!"

Hilt and everyone around her were stunned. They didn't need a Skill to know that Sibyl was telling the truth.

The Empire of Raydoss was international enemy number one. Out of that hateful country came a woman with the integrity to betray her own countryman to save a child.

Confusion descended as no one knew what to make of Sibyl. Those poised to attack were now having second thoughts.

"Have you lost your mind, Sibyl?! Do you mean to betray our motherland?!"

"Quiet, corpse! You bring shame to our country!"

"We were so close to victory…! You know nothing of the outside world, and you let your foolish ideals ruin everything! Al Azif! Summon the patchworks! We'll overwhelm them with numbers and escape in the chaos!"

"You got it! Kuh ha ha! Come on out, friends!"

The greatscythe glowed with a black light, and countless magic circles appeared around Acid Man. Patchwork undead made of human corpses crawled out of them.

Their skin was of different colors, some having the long ears of an elf while others had differing arm lengths. There were over thirty of them in all.

"There's one like we saw last time!"

Yeah! It's the patchwork undead Al Azif made back in the Crystal Cage!

There were a lot of them this time, but they seemed a lot weaker. Not so weak they could be easily dismissed, but they were nowhere near as menacing as the patchwork undead we faced last time. They were all humanoids this time.

The problem was their spawn location. They weren't just showing up in the arena, but in the bleachers, too.

And now countless ghosts were coming out of Acid Man. There were over fifty of them, all headed for the audience.

"Waaah!"

"H-help!"

"Ow, ow, ow!"

Chaos immediately descended upon the stadium. People were making a run for it on their own, disrupting the evacuation process. The guards, who were supposed to keep order, had been thrown into disorder of their own. No one knew what to do.

Some of them stood their ground to fight off the patchworks, but they were easily defeated. Adventurers joined the fight, to little avail.

Even if these were weaker than their predecessors, they were still a tough match for ordinary adventurers and guards. They were also having trouble fighting because of the people fleeing the carnage.

We have to help them, Teacher!

On it!

We jumped into the bleachers, blocking the claws of a patchwork about to maul an innocent bystander.

"Y-you're…"

"Run."

"Right away!" The man nodded, heeded Fran's words, and got out of there as fast as he could.

"Oooh!" The patchwork roared in anger but was no match against Fran.

"Too slow!"

It brought its fist down at Fran. After narrowly avoiding it, she walked past and decapitated it. But the patchwork was still standing, attacking her again despite its headless state.

We'd seen it coming, of course! The last set of patchworks we fought had also been unnaturally sturdy. These guys probably had similar regenerative powers.

"Yaaah!"

"Oooh—"

Fran cut the patchwork in two before its attack could land. At the same time, the flames of Elemental Blade burned its body. It wouldn't be coming back from that one.

Burnt to ashes, the patchwork couldn't regenerate.

Let's keep moving!

"Hm!"

We ran through the bleachers, taking down patchworks and ghosts along the way. There were too many people around for us to blast them with ranged attacks. The risk of collateral damage was too great.

Below us, Dimitris was also attacking the bleachers.

What is that move?!

Wow.

Yeah. That's crazy.

Dimitris demonstrated why he was nicknamed The Unmoving.

He was standing in the arena, opening holes in the chests of patchworks in the bleachers with every punch he threw. Even more amazing: he managed to avoid hitting any civilians with his powerful attack, all while keeping his mana flow undetected. He expertly dispatched the patchworks and ghosts terrorizing the people.

Sibyl and the others remained in the arena, attacking the ghosts around them.

The adventurers had focused their attention on beating back the undead instead of attacking Sibyl.

At the center of it, Acid Man was fighting a lone martial artist.

"Out of my way!"

"No. Not until I avenge my brother!" Zelt was fueled by righteous fury.

The other disciples of Dimitris showed no signs of helping him. This matter was between Zelt and Acid Man, and they would honor it. Hilt and the others focused on attacking the ghosts and undead around them. The same went for Dimitris.

The adventurers also stayed out of the way, though, probably not out of honor or anything so noble. They could sense Zelt's power and decided they'd let the disciple of Dimitris deal with the undead menace.

And so the fight was one on one.

"Dimitris Style: Smash and Tear!" A sudden burst of speed into a spinning elbow drive. Acid Man barely avoided it. Zelt's movements seemed sharper than in his match against Biscott.

"His movements are faster…? Tch!"

"You survived that? How about this!"

"Urgh! Get off me, scum!" Acid Man blocked the two-step kick with Al Azif. He was not having a good time.

Zelt was moving much faster than before. He was also using the Dimitris style combat moves now, having removed his seal. It made

quite the difference if all you knew about him was his match with Biscott.

It wasn't just his speed, either. He was recreating Air Hop by using mana thrusters on his feet. Kicking the air, he was able to execute attacks from unlikely angles.

Acid Man couldn't keep evading and was eventually hit. He put up a barrier to defend himself, but it didn't last long under the continued pressure.

"Zeyaaa!"

"Gugaaah! Damn it! Gaaah!"

Zelt got within striking distance of Acid Man's greatscythe, peppering him with attacks. Even though they were face to face, Zelt continued to expertly avoid all of Acid Man's attacks.

None of Acid Man's strikes were landing, but Al Azif was not going to take the pressure lying down.

"Guaaah!" Acid Man screamed in pain despite not being attacked. Al Azif's parasitical tendrils were spreading all over him. Al Azif's reddish-black blade and tentacles were slowly consuming Acid Man's body.

"Al Aziiif! Traitooor!"

"Sorry, can't hear you! You'll get us both killed if you keep piloting us! I'm taking over!"

"Gaaah!"

"Hya hah hah! Weak as he was, he's still got some meat on his bones! Not bad for a rotting corpse!"

Acid Man's voice was gone, replaced by Al Azif's shrill laughter. Now it was in full possession of Acid Man's body.

His movements had changed. It looked like the greatscythe in his arm was swinging Acid Man instead of the other way around. He was definitely better at handling the scythe now.

"Hya ha! DIE!"

"Kuh!"

Al Azif could now move the greatscythe the way it wanted. The scythe struck Zelt at close quarters and clashed with his fist. Then it used the impact of the shockwave to knock itself away.

All in one fluid motion.

"Time for a rematch!"

"Urgh! These movements…!"

Al Azif hadn't just gotten stronger. Having complete control over Acid Man, the rhythm of its attacks was unreadable. It used the momentum of the greatscythe to leap and spin before lowering its body close to the ground like an animal. These tricky movements were difficult to follow, forcing Zelt into a defensive posture.

Zelt's opponent still had a formidable barrier and was capable of rapid regeneration, allowing it to ignore most of his attacks. On the other hand, a direct hit from the greatscythe would prove lethal for him.

But having released the Dimitris seal, Zelt was not about to be outdone.

He wrapped his arms with mana, allowing him to block the greatscythe and counterattack. Al Azif was also wrapped in a mana blade, and touching the flat of its blade alone could cut flesh. Zelt was proficient enough to deal with that threat.

"You look like a dumb meathead but you're actually pretty smart!"

"Uoooh!"

Zelt had humored Biscott's small talk, but he was not having it against Al Azif. The cursed blade's mockery of Zelt's attempt to avenge his brother only infuriated him.

He clenched his teeth and stepped forward. He had been focusing on counterattacks to minimize the amount of damage he would take, but he knew that he would have to take risks to defeat Al Azif. Zelt was prepared to be hurt as long as he could avenge his brother.

The greatscythe grazed Zelt's left arm, releasing a fountain of blood out of his bicep. In exchange, Zelt was now right up against his opponent.

He unleashed a punch, and the dull sound of an impact followed.

But Al Azif remained unchanged. The attack which was supposed to defeat Al Azif had been blocked, and Zelt's fist was in its left hand.

"Not bad… But not *good*, either!"

"Aaargh!"

Al Azif squeezed its left hand, crushing Zelt's right fist like a tomato. Zelt groaned and tried to get away, but Al Azif wasn't letting go.

Instead, it squeezed harder, sending even more pain through Zelt's crushed fist.

The pain must have been intense.

But even through it all, Zelt was fighting back. He pulled back his arm to try and punch Al Azif.

"Oraaah!"

Avoiding a powerful spirit-enhanced attack, Al Azif jumped back. But a new figure stepped in between Al Azif and Zelt, jumping in from behind.

"Die, shithead!"

A beastman with the head of a white wolf, a sword of ice in his hand. He blocked Al Azif's escape.

It's Aurel!

Yeah. I've never seen him evolved before, but that's him, all right.

His presence was ferocious. He was the same old foulmouthed Aurel, but I had never seen him so filled with bloodlust.

"You have the balls to take an old man's granddaughter hostage! I'll make you wish you stayed dead, you rotten freak!"

He was furious at Kaitley's kidnapping! No surprise there.

Now restrained by Aurel, Al Azif took the full brunt of Zelt's attack.

"Oorgh!"

Zelt hit Al Azif right in the face, sending it flying several meters.

The attack left a mark, taking a good chunk of its mana. Even when absorbed by a barrier, the attack did decent damage.

Now the fight was Zelt and Aurel versus Al Azif.

Having transformed into a white wolf, his body was covered in frost mana. He waved his fist, sending ice crystals toward Al Azif. The white wolf was the evolved form of the white dog and had the ability to control frost mana.

But Al Azif's greatscythe easily dispatched his attack.

Knowing that long-distance attacks wouldn't be effective, the two closed in on Al Azif. They moved in formation, deciding that this was the most effective way to fight the undead.

They coordinated quite well. Aurel was adjusting his pace to Zelt. This wasn't the first time he had to team up with a stranger, either. Having lived for a long time, Aurel had probably even teamed up with some of Dimitris's people before.

Al Azif aimed for Zelt's head but missed. Zelt was forcibly moving his limbs with Mana Thruster; itreminded me of Hilt's Garuda and Colbert's Rhythmless Strike. It must have been a signature of Dimitris Style.

But Al Azif wasn't finished with its attack.

"You're not running away!"

"Gaaah!"

It didn't cut off Zelt's arm. Instead, the greatscythe grabbed onto his limb and dragged him in.

"I'll suck you dry!"

"Urgh… My blood…"

Al Azif's blade pulsed and shone a menacing red, exsanguinating Zelt.

"Let go of him, you monster!"

"Aha ha ha ha! That won't work!"

Zelt couldn't shake off the greatscythe no matter how hard he tried. Aurel fired off some frost spells to assist, but Al Azif evaded all of it. The greatscythe deformed itself and curved so as not to hinder its body's movement, preventing Zelt from escaping the cursed blade.

His arm was slowly going limp, drying up as he lost blood. It did not look good.

Aurel made a judgment call. With a distressed look, he raised his frost sword in the air and rushed to Zelt's side.

"I'm cutting it off!"

"Do it…!" Zelt nodded, having steeled himself for a field amputation.

Aurel's ice blade lopped Zelt's left arm clean off. The wound quickly froze over, stopping the bleeding entirely. Normally, this property was used to prevent regeneration.

"Tch! He got away!"

The arm left in Al Azif's blade immediately dried up, turned into dust, and was blown away. Its vampiric powers were a force to be reckoned with.

Having lost an arm, Zelt and Aurel were now at a disadvantage. But they didn't back down or request help. In fact, their fighting spirit only increased.

Rage was their fuel.

But Al Azif's attacks were getting more powerful as time went on. Typical for undead, it wasn't bothered by muscular fatigue and was free to swing its greatscythe with limitless centrifugal force.

"Listen, kid, I'll stop that thing from moving. Can I count on you to finish it off?"

"I'll hit him with all I've got."

"Heh heh. Counting on ya."

"Of course."

Zelt and Aurel's movements were beginning to slow down from the various wounds they had suffered. They were clearly on the back foot, but they showed no signs of relenting.

They were coordinating with each other as they dodged Al Azif's relentless attacks.

"Hya ha ha! I don't know what you two are planning, but it's useless!"

"Hmph! We're just getting started!"

Aurel stopped and faced the arrogant Al Azif. His sharp lupine

eyes housed intense resolve.

"I'm not about to bring shame to the hero Widget by losing here! Frostedge!" Aurel shouted, and immediately his body was covered in what looked like sparkling diamond dust. Tiny ice shards formed around him. It didn't like it would be useful for offense or defense, but Aurel was imbuing the beautiful frost with incredibly offensive mana.

This must have been the white wolf's racial Skill, equivalent to the black cat's Thunderclap. I knew it should be incredibly strong.

"Let me drink your blood!"

"No way in hell!" Aurel roared, sending the pale blue diamond dust away. Countless blades of ice materialized out of nothing and launched themselves at a high speed. It looked like he was casting a frost spell, but his ice blades were of a greater caliber.

Al Azif swiped at the projectiles. They exploded, freezing the blade of its greatscythe.

"Shit! That's annoying!"

Now slowed, additional ice blades stabbed into Al Azif's body. Most of them were blocked by the barrier, yet the ice blades exploded one after another, burying Al Azif in ice.

Aurel's mana was almost exhausted. Barely a minute had passed, but the ice blades were unbelievably powerful.

Al Azif was unable to set itself free.

"Now's your chance! Get him!" Aurel, now exhausted, tagged in Zelt. His primary focus had been movement restriction rather than

damage.

"Right!"

"Garudaaa!"

He accelerated so fast that a loud bang could be heard from his starting point. He was propelling his body using a massive amount of mana.

"Ooooh! Dimitris Style Weapon Art: Yaksha!"

"Giiigh!"

A simple straight punch but backed with a lot of speed and force. Hilt had also used Yaksha, and it seemed like a move which focused all of the user's mana on one body part to increase damage.

Aurel's ice faded at the perfect time, allowing Zelt to drive his fist into Al Azif's body.

The attack succeeded in going through its barrier and armor, depleting Al Azif's mana which was the lifeblood of undead.

But it still wasn't enough. In fact, it looked like Al Azif had taken the hit on purpose.

"Bastard…"

"How is he still standing…?!"

"You'll pay for that mana with your *life*!"

Zelt couldn't pull away after that huge attack. This was what Al Azif was looking for.

Aurel was too exhausted to move. Zelt would die at this rate!

Fran!

Hm!

Fran understood the situation despite not taking her eyes off the ghosts and patchworks in the bleachers. She had a spell ready to go just in case things got hairy in the arena—but she stopped.

"Foolish pupil. You must learn to see through the guise of your opponent."

Dimitris had gotten to them before we did. The old man was ready to bail his student out if things got too dangerous.

He grabbed Zelt by the collar and flung him away. At the same time, he crushed Al Azif's arm to splinters.

I couldn't quite make out what was going on, but it looked like he struck from below with his elbow and used the force of that impact to knock Zelt back. Al Azif's arm was blown to pieces, but Dimitris barely looked he was breaking a sweat.

That one moment demonstrated the heights of Dimitris's strength. Speed, power, precision—everything lined up perfectly for the attack to work.

"M-Master…"

"Its real form is not the undead called Acid Man. It is the scythe. The scythe is the only aura left that can be felt."

"The greatscythe? Now that you mention it… Does that mean the scythe is an Intelligent Weapon?"

"No, it is an undead with a will like Acid Man. Don't tell me you didn't notice that?"

"I apologize…"

"Hmph. Well, watch and learn, foolish pupil." Despite Dimitris's rough choice of words, he gently put Zelt down outside the arena.

He now threw his sharp gaze at Al Azif.

Although I could tell from his erect spine that he trained every day, he still looked like a willowy old man. His arms looked like withered branches as they hung from his robes and his white hair and beard looked like pine needles. He didn't look very intimidating.

But everyone present knew not to judge a book by its cover. His presence was overwhelming, attracting the gaze of everyone around. Even Fran and I couldn't help but look at him while we were fighting.

Some of the adventurers even got knocked out because of the distraction. They knew they were still fighting, but they couldn't help watching Dimitris. I knew the feeling.

The willowy old man was simply that strong. Mana, spirit, presence. Dimitris was like an infinite expanse of power, sucking everything into him.

Al Azif was no exception.

In fact, it probably got a better feel for Dimitris's power since it was up close.

It made no attempt to attack Dimitris despite the latter turning his back on it. It wasn't like Al Azif failed to prepare for an attack. It just didn't want to.

"Old man… I know I can't beat you, but I might not be able to get out of here, either…"

"Oh? Can it be that you can gauge a man's strength better than my pupil?"

"Urgh…"

Al Azif looked like it had lost the will to fight from that single exchange. There was fear in its voice now. For Dimitris to strike fear in the heart of a mad undead… His S Rank wasn't for show.

"I need to tend to my foolish pupil's wounds. I'll make this quick."

"You dare disrespect me?! I'll show—"

"It's over."

Huh?

I wasn't the only one with a stunned look on my face. Everyone in the stadium was dumbstruck.

Dimitris was behind Al Azif by the time we noticed, gouging a fist-shaped hole in the greatscythe. What he did was simple, the same attack as Zelt: a running right jab. But the quality of it was immaculately refined.

His speed was untraceable to the human eye, and he manipulated his spirit so expertly into his move that it tore through Al Azif's defenses like paper.

In the end, the attack was a simple punch. One that no one could avoid or survive.

"Goh… Impossible…"

"You're quite strong for an undead, but alas. Not a match for

me.”

Dimitris sighed, looking disappointed. The old man was a blood knight looking for tough opponents to train with. It must be difficult to find anyone sturdy enough to withstand a sparring match with you once you got to his level.

“We’ll prove to those bastards that we aren’t failures…”

“Hmph. Those are your last words? How dull.”

Al Azif fell and turned into dust while Dimitris shrugged. He barely exerted himself, let alone broke a sweat. This was an easy fight for the old man.

Zelt and Aurel weren’t weak. They were quite strong, really…but even these two were toyed with by Al Azif like they were weaklings.

Dimitris really was the pinnacle of strength.

With the big danger vanquished, we cleaned up the rest of our enemies with overwhelming speed. I, Fran, and Dimitris no longer had to worry about Zelt and the audience had been mostly evacuated, making fighting easier.

Within five minutes, the stadium was clear of all undead. The healers got to work on Aurel and Zelt, pulling them out of the danger zone.

The only threats left were Sibyl and her crew, who had been fighting ghosts and patchworks together with the adventurers.

“Could you guys just surrender? That would make things much easier for us,” Elza said from the side of the arena. He had joined in at some point. The adventurers had gathered behind him.

"As strong as you are, the three of you won't be able to get out of here. We've also captured the cart you were planning on using."

"So, you've seen right through us. I had a feeling we were being watched from last night."

"That's right. Although we were so preoccupied with you that we didn't notice any of the other Raydossians who had snuck in."

The guild had to keep tabs on someone as strong as Sibyl while they were shorthanded. The Black Bones must have exploited this hole in the town's defenses and snuck in.

"And you came to the stadium instead of leaving town."

"We have our reasons."

"I don't know what you're up to, but the guildmaster is dealing with your conspirator himself. Why don't you save us all some needless bloodshed and give up?"

Dias along with a team of adventurers were waiting for Sibyl outside the city, cutting off her escape route.

This was also another reason why Dias forfeited the fight for third place. Phelms wasn't here, either. He was probably outside with his old party-mate.

But the plan was all for naught, because of Sibyl's little detour.

"Not happening."

"No? So, we're doing this the hard way? I thought you were going to hand yourselves over to us because you didn't run in all the chaos."

"Hmph. I just wanted to make things clear. We have no desire to be captured here, and I expect you won't let us go even if we asked nicely?"

"That sounds about right."

"The hard way it is!"

Sibyl drew her sword, spreading her bloodlust all around her. This was enough to nail the weaker adventurers in place. They looked like they were having trouble breathing.

As expected, Sibyl was stronger. Perhaps stronger and more dangerous than Al Azif… But she didn't lash her bloodlust out in Hilt's direction.

"How long are you going to let the child stay here? Hurry up and get her to a safe place!"

She was being considerate to Kaitley and Nilphe, still in Hilt's arms.

"Y-you don't have to tell me what to do!" Hilt's expression lost its hostility, and she took the kids with her out of the arena. They should be fine as long as she was with them.

"T-thank you!" Kaitley shouted. Sibyl waved her hand in return. The whole scene looked insane.

Here was a spy from enemy Raydoss, and she had rescued children. Even the adventurers who were supposed to apprehend her couldn't hate her.

Even so, Elza took the lead. "I'll handle Sibyl. The rest of you get the other two!"

"Ha ha! Come at me!"

Elza ran at Sibyl, swinging his mace. Seeing that got the other adventurers moving, but Dimitris, Radule, and Colbert stood still. They were watching how Sibyl and the others would react.

Most of the adventurers weren't specialists in formation fighting. It would be hard for them to help when things eventually got messy.

"Something's coming, Teacher."

What? Y-yeah. And it's really fast, too…

Just when I was about to observe the battle down in the arena, Fran turned her attention outside the coliseum. Something terrifying was rapidly approaching our position.

It seemed to be moving in a straight line through the town. Was it…*flying*?

Ten seconds passed and it arrived.

"Excuse my tardiness, Lady Sibyl." The man greeted Sibyl from the top of the coliseum. He was carrying a badly beaten Dias at his side.

"I was waiting for you, Knighthart."

The mantis man was showing a level of ferocity surpassing himself when he fought Hilt.

"Guildmaster, no! You look like a ragdoll," Elza screamed to Dias as Knighthart alighted next to Sibyl.

As he said, Dias had been beaten so badly that he did resemble a mistreated doll.

"Did you do that to him, Sir Knighthart?"

"Yes. Dias and his squad were simply too strong for me. I had to use my trump card in order to win. Rest assured, I quickly applied first aid and he's not dead."

Knighthart did that to Dias all by himself? The mantis man barely looked hurt at all…

And was Knighthart teaming up with Sibyl now? Being Erianthe's friend, I'd thought he bore Raydoss a grudge.

"Are you a Raydossian too?"

"No."

"Oh? Then were you hired as a mercenary?"

"Yes…but not as a mercenary. I've already left my band, after all." Knighthart shook his head to Elza's question.

"Well, I can't fathom *why* you're working for them. Is it just the money?"

"I have my reasons for wanting to go to Raydoss."

The rest of the adventurers and observers watched on with bated breath as Ulmutt's renowned adventurer spoke to Knighthart. No one had the guts to interrupt Elza.

Not to mention, Dias was effectively a hostage now. Any wrong moves might put him in peril. Neither adventurer nor noble wanted to shoulder that responsibility.

"I also need some level of freedom once there. Lady Sibyl and her men will guarantee my safe passage."

"And what do you plan on doing once you get there? Not just sightseeing, I hope?"

"Do you have friends? Friends who you share meals with, hide nothing from, friends who are like family?" Knighthart answered Elza's question with another question.

As stunned as Elza was by this turn of events, he still answered him. He knew how serious Knighthart was being. "I do. I'm a solo adventurer, but the adventurers who admire me are like family."

"I, too, had friends like that once. I still do, but there used to be *more* of them. But the mercenary band I led fell apart when we lost in a battle against Raydoss." There was sadness in Knighthart's voice now. "I was in the rear guard of Granzell at the time, and the Red Sword Knights were pursuing us. Lady Sibyl's unit, in fact. Most of my comrades died on the battlefield while the rest of us dragged our miserable bodies back to Granzell. We *gained* a pittance of money and some fame. We *lost* our family."

Knighthart was mournful. For him, the tragedy wasn't in the past but a nightmare that never ended.

"Then why are you helping Sibyl?! Isn't she your enemy?! Or do you have a grudge against Granzell for what happened?"

That was the most likely explanation. Perhaps Knighthart hated Granzell for using and discarding his mercenaries more than Sibyl, who was just protecting her country.

That was what everyone was thinking, but again Knighthart shook his head.

"I do not. It was all part of the contract, and someone had to be rear guard. It was the best possible decision at the moment. If I'm angry at anyone, it's at myself for being unable to protect my friends. I feel nothing for Granzell."

"Now I'm even more confused. Why work with Raydoss? Do you want to visit your comrades' graves?"

"That is one of my intentions. The battlezone is under Raydossian control. But that's not all. The friends who I thought were dead are still alive, living in Raydoss."

"Wha!"

"Some are imprisoned while others have fallen into slavery. I wish to save them. That is why I must cross over into Raydoss."

Knighthart would easily be able to infiltrate Raydoss by himself. But to look for his friends and safely get them out of the country would be close to impossible.

You needed someone to work with you. Someone like Sibyl, who could guarantee your safe passage.

"That is why I cannot let Lady Sibyl be captured."

"So, you're going to fight us for her?"

"Are you sure? We have a hostage." Sibyl answered Elza instead of Knighthart.

"Oh, you'd free some children but take our guildmaster?"

"Fighters are fair game. My only issue is with people who use defenseless children as bait."

"Can't you show respect for the elderly? Look at him, he's an old man! He's been getting senile lately, too. He's entering his second childhood with all the pranks he's been playing on the staff."

But just as Elza finished…

"And who's going senile, exactly?" Dias somehow spoke from behind Elza.

"Wah! Could you stop surprising people like that?! You're such a child!"

"Huh?" Despite Knighthart's mantis face, I could tell that he was surprised. "Why… I've been duped!"

"Hah! I might not be as strong as I used to be, but I'm still the best at deception!"

The Dias Knighthart was holding had disintegrated when the real Dias showed up behind Elza. He had replaced his battered body with an illusion.

And he'd been able to escape without Knighthart noticing… Dias was a truly fearsome man. Still, he *was* wounded, indicating that he had lost against Knighthart.

"Did you lose on purpose so we could get more information?"

"Nope! I gave it my all and got the tar beaten out of me. Insects aren't that affected by illusions, and I can't figure out what they're thinking. It was a really tough fight. But that's not all… Knighthart, you were holding back during the tournament, weren't you?"

Dias had been utterly defeated after fighting Knighthart seriously. Knighthart must have been really powerful, if that was the

case.

But Knighthart wasn't the one who was most disturbed by Dias's statement. Hilt glared at Knighthart, frustration in her face.

"Knighthart! You *let* me win! I knew something was off! You weren't being serious!"

"No, not at all. I was not holding back against you. But my trump card isn't something I can use all the time. I really gave it my all when I fought you."

"You were holding back!" Hilt's victory against Knighthart was hard fought. But what if he hadn't been giving his all? The prospect wounded her pride, and she glared at him angrily.

"Fine… Then come at me with all you've got. That's the only way you'll get away, anyway."

"Oh. I really wanted to escape peacefully… I suppose this is what I get for letting Dias escape."

Knighthart and Hilt's aggression was mounting. They looked about ready to kill each other. The same went for Sibyl and Elza.

Teacher, what do we do?

Hilt's going to resent us if we interfere.

In that case, I guessed we could help fight Sibyl.

But someone else interrupted before the fighting could start.

"Calm down, foolish grandchild."

"G-Grandfather."

Dimitris stepped into the center of the arena. His mere presence was enough to chill the flaring tempers of everyone.

"I shall be the one to fight you."

"Ha ha ha! An S Rank! I'd be honored!" Sibyl looked pleased, despite the direness of the situation. She really was a blood knight. "You stay out of this!"

"Very well."

Sibyl ordered Knighthart to stand down and stepped forward. Immediately, Dimitris made his move.

"Hmph."

"Ugh!"

He jabbed at her from afar. Sibyl's jaw was punched upwards.

"So fast! I expected nothing less!"

"You still laugh after that?"

Did you see that, Teacher?

Barely. It was so fast.

Dimitris was so fast that I didn't even see him wind up for the punch. The ensuing spirit blast also required me to concentrate to see it.

The punch looked casual, but the force behind it was immense. Sibyl could take it while laughing, but any other person would've had their head blown off.

"Let's see how you handle this."

"Urgh! Gah! Gorgh!"

"Tsk!"

"Bwah!"

Dimitris pelted Sibyl's body with consecutive spirit blasts. She attempted to dodge them, but he wouldn't let her. He read her movements, hitting her vital organs.

Sibyl looked like she was being beaten to a pulp, but Hilt and Colbert watched with their mouths agape.

"S-she's taking all of Grandfather's attacks…"

"And she's not even hurt…?"

To the uninitiated, it must have looked like Dimitris was pulling his punches. But each of his attacks was loaded with fearsome power.

I wondered if Hilt and Colbert had been hit with them at some point.

"You're amazing, S Rank! You look like you're swatting a fly, but these punches are heavy!"

"You are quite sturdy yourself. I've never seen anyone able to stand after so many hits."

"Sturdiness is my calling card! Hah!"

"Hrm. Your attacks aren't bad, either."

"Tch. You parried my telekinesis, too?"

Sibyl's telekinetic blast had the force of my telekinetic catapult. But Dimitris neutralized her deadly force with a wave of his hand.

The spirit wrapped around him was immense. It only looked like there wasn't much of a difference between him and Sibyl because he

wasn’t at a hundred percent. Still, his immense spirit gave Dimitris’s attacks a whole new level of force.

“Raah!”

“Hmph!”

Sibyl swiped and swung her sword, but Dimitris dodged everything and followed up with a counter punch.

“Gah! None of those hit, either?!”

“Heh heh. You can really take a beating!”

There was a bright glint in Sibyl’s eyes after she took the hit. She licked her lips with half a smile. This somewhat pleased Dimitris, too.

“Daryaaa!”

“Hmph.”

Sibyl started varying her pace, bringing a new level of speed and precision to the table. But Dimitris simply moved to the side to avoid her attack.

“Damn it! I thought for sure that would hit! You’re so nimble!”

“It was a good strike, but you won’t hit me like that! Let’s see how you handle this?”

“Gah!”

For the first time, Dimitris put a little force into his movement. His step put a dent in the arena as he followed up with a twisting punch with his right fist.

His powerful fist slammed right into Sibyl's solar plexus. But she was still standing. She skidded several meters across the arena and rubbed her chest, slight irritation on her face.

If Fran had been hit, she would've taken a lot of damage. But that was Sibyl in a nutshell. Her defense was world class. When Dimitris witnessed her, the joy of a warrior came upon his face.

"That didn't really work, either. Heh heh."

"I dunno…that one kinda hurt."

"It doesn't look that way."

"I might have to get serious for this," Sibyl said, slowly raising her left hand to eye level.

That was enough to freeze all of the adventurers in the arena. Something was about to happen. They knew that for sure.

Red mana started coming out of her left hand. Mana as red as blood. At the same time, Sibyl's presence began to change. Thus far, she had felt like a menacing, starving monster. But now she was more than that. Her aura felt unbearable.

The ring was expanding as adventurers backed away. Was this the trump card she didn't use against Fran? Sibyl now felt like a furious, rampaging dragon. But Dimitris didn't even brace himself.

He stood still, retaining his calm and composure. He sounded almost friendly when he spoke to Sibyl. "…I have a question to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"Raydoss is known as a nation that spreads conspiracies and wars to its surrounding neighbors. What do you think of this?"

"Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"Answer me."

"I think it's a damn *shame*. Sorry about all that."

Surprised gasps from everyone present. They weren't expecting a Raydossian to apologize for her nation's actions.

"I know it's cold comfort, but I didn't think things were this bad until I got here."

Then Sibyl proceeded to casually talk about the internal state of affairs back home.

The death of the king was causing power in Central Raydoss to collapse, allowing the four cardinal dukes to do as they pleased. The southern and eastern dukes were hungry for territory, planning invasions even now. These plots were part of a bigger plan to gain a foothold in other countries.

An officer of an enemy nation's forces wasn't supposed to be talking about internal affairs, but Sibyl probably didn't know about this since she had little use for politics. I guess she belonged to an isolated country to begin with. She had zero experience of negotiating with other nations. Or perhaps she was trying to make it seem like not all Raydoss was terrible because she felt bad about it. Maybe she had a different plan altogether.

In any case, the head of a combat-focused unit like Sibyl probably had little interest in diplomacy…but she was certainly

indignant about how her country was running things. Her apology was genuine.

"Central told us to refrain from making drastic moves until things stabilize. I didn't think the Black Bones would just ignore that command."

The dukes were left unchecked with the weakening of Central's government. The situation was even worse because the inspectors sent by Central had been bribed by the dukes.

"I see… One more question. Are you able to move freely about Raydoss?"

"You sure got a lot of questions."

"Well?"

"You could say that, I guess. The six orders of the red knights are free to do as they please within Raydoss. We answer only to the king and the chancellor. That's the amount of discretionary power bestowed upon us."

That sounded crazy. They just let people as strong as Sibyl wander around Raydoss? It could become a hotbed of rebellion if things went wrong…

The knights were created to exterminate monsters soon after the ban on adventurers was enacted. The hole left by adventurers really needed filling when it came to hunting monsters. They'd done enough well in the past that their successors were allowed to do as they pleased.

Dimitris nodded, listening intently. He then uttered the most surprising words I'd heard all day.

"I see… Would you mind taking me with you to Raydoss?"

"Whaaat?"

"Grandfather, what are you…?!" Hilt, standing right behind him, shouted.

But Dimitris paid her no mind. He didn't even turn around.

"Have you gone senile, old man?"

"No. I've just had thoughts for a long time. Granzell, Belioth, and all the other nations call Raydoss evil—a heartless nation. But is that really the case?"

Dimitris had been interested in Raydoss for longer than anyone suspected, pondering about the mysterious nation to the north.

Wherever Dimitris went, Raydoss was spoken as the root of all evil with no redeeming qualities. But was there a nation whose evil was so great that it deserved to be wiped out from the planet? No. Even if the nation was criticized by other countries over its official conduct, it was impossible that *all* its citizens were evil.

"There are plenty of villains even in Granzell. Especially among the royalty and nobility. I'm sure there are others like that masked man in Raydoss…but that can't be true of everyone there. It is difficult to find information on Raydoss because of the adventurer ban."

The empire didn't allow visitors to begin with. You couldn't find reliable information on it if you tried. Dimitris had looked into the matter, but only as something of a side interest.

Now that a Raydossian officer was before him, his interest was greatly kindled.

"And you really want me to take you along? That's just daft."

"More than anything, I wish to see the truth with my own eyes. The information I have is always filtered by the opinions of the one relaying it to me."

"You have a point…"

"Besides, I haven't found a decent sparring partner lately. Most of my opponents fall in one hit and they take time to recover. But you…you're different, aren't you?" He grinned. I was beginning to wonder if this was his real reason for wanting to go on a field trip to Raydoss.

"Heh heh. So you want to use me as a punching bag? I'd be more than happy. You can level up my pitiful strike resistance."

"Then it's settled."

"Welcome aboard, old man."

Dimitris turned his back to Sibyl and addressed the adventurers. "That's how it is. Sorry, but could you let her go?"

Despite his apologetic tone, Dimitris had no intention of taking no for an answer. His sharp eyes looked more threatening than pleading.

Well, this is an unexpected turn of events… What do we do now?

We can't fight Dimitris, Sibyl, and Knighthart all at the same time.

True.

They weren't opponents who could be stopped, no matter how hard we tried. Letting them go would be the best option.

Also, Dimitris wasn't the sort of man who would let his granddaughter's kidnapping slide. Maybe letting him loose in Raydoss would be better for Granzell…

"What will you do, Dias?"

"Ugh… I don't think you'll just settle down when you get to Raydoss. I kind of feel sorry for them, really. And I'm not about to let my adventurers die needlessly."

"I won't kill them."

"Yeah, well…I'd rather not have you *half* kill them, either." Dias had reached the same conclusion. He knew what Dimitris was capable of more than anyone else present.

Dimitris wasn't someone you made an enemy of if you could help it. The adventurers looked visibly relieved at Dias's statement. They were very pleased that they wouldn't be asked to prevent the S Rank from leaving.

But someone else thought differently.

"C-cease this nonsense! I won't let this happen!"

It was the noble whom Dimitris had punched earlier. He descended into the arena, full of wounded pride. Helping an enemy nation would amount to treason. In a sense, he had a point.

"Dimitris! Think about what would happen to your disciples and grandchildren if you ally yourself with those people! You'll regret this!"

the noble shouted, casting a sideways glance at Hilt and Nilphe.

Dimitris loved his grandkids. It was the best way to threaten him.

Dimitris replied without a smile. "I see. So Granzell wishes to make an enemy out of old Dimitris."

"Erk!" The noble paled when Dimitris hit him with his bloodlust. He remembered the ferocity of the old man before him.

He was one of the few people in the world you didn't want to cross. A monster who could overthrow an entire kingdom singlehandedly. The consequences would not end with this one noble.

"Ah… Uhh…" The noble fell to his knees, speechless.

"Rest assured. I remember your name and face."

"Eegh…!" The noble trembled, his face white as paper.

Dimitris, losing interest in him, turned back to Sibyl as if nothing had happened. Threatening a representative backed by the might of the kingdom was the height of audacity…

"He's so cool."

Fran! You are never to act like that!

She couldn't help but admire Dimitris. He was so superhumanly powerful that he was able to fight an entire nation and win if he wanted to.

Casting a sidelong glance at the shivering noble, Dimitris moved his right arm.

"Hmph."

"Wah!"

He motioned as if to grab something that wasn't there and pulled back. Nilphe, who had been resting safely in Hilt's embrace, flew toward him and landed safely in his arms.

"Nilphe, you're coming with me. All right?"

"A-all right."

He was going to Raydoss! Nilphe was okay with that?! She didn't look unwilling in the slightest. In fact, she looked relieved that grandpa wasn't leaving her behind. I guess we knew who she was attached to now.

"Old man…"

"Worry not. There isn't a place safer in the world than in my arms. Isn't that right, Nilphe?"

"Yeah!"

Unlike Nilphe, his *other* granddaughter wasn't smiling.

"Grandfather, have you gone mad?!"



"What an awful thing to say to your elders. But I'm serious. There aren't that many opportunities to visit Raydoss."

"But what of your pupils…?!"

"I hereby relinquish my position as head of the school! From now on, Hiltoria, you are the mistress!" Dimitris took something from his pocket and threw it at Hilt. It looked like a metal plate. "You are free to do as you please. Shut the school down if you wish…I will not interfere."

"Th-that's…" Hilt's eyes shifted to Colbert for a split second before going back to Dimitris. She remained silent and just sighed while heaving her shoulders. "…I guess it can't be helped."

"You're smiling."

"I-I am not!"

"Granzell is bound to object. I leave that to your discretion. You can fight back or appease them. It matters not to me."

Dimitris was talking like everything to come had nothing to do with him. The stuff we'd heard about him hadn't been right on the money after all. Meanwhile, Sibyl was looking more worried about Hilt and the others than he was.

"You sure about this, old man? Even if you step down from your position, they might take your disciples hostage…"

"I don't care."

"You should."

"Unlike Nilphe, they are excellent fighters. They'll figure it out. And if they don't, that's the end of them."

Absolutely spartan! Though I guess that was how people generally thought in this world. Fran was one of them.

From where I was standing, it seemed that all the high-rank adventurers had some weird quirk. Fran had nothing but glittering admiration in her eyes for this absurdly audacious old man. Having so much strength as to be able to assert your will in the world was something of her ideal.

"That will be all. Sibyl, it will be faster if we escaped from above. Can you do that?"

"Not a problem."

Dimitris kicked the air and jumped. The way he used spirit was very close to Air Hop. Meanwhile, Sibyl lifted her two subordinates with telekinesis.

"We'll take our leave. Don't worry. I have no intention of joining Raydoss. I'm just doing some sightseeing."

How could we not worry?! Well, at least we'd avoided having to fight Sibyl, Dimitris and Knighthart all at once. The adventurers and guards made no motion to stop them. They knew that it would only result in pointless bloodshed if they did.

As I was breathing a sigh of relief, Fran stepped forward and shouted at Dimitris.

"Dimitris! I won!"

Umm! Fran…*honey*?

"Oh. It's you…"

"What about our bet?!"

Fran had made a bet with Dimitris. If she did better than Hilt in the tournament, Dimitris would take the quest issued by Belioth.

And Fran had *definitively* won that bet.

But with Dimitris going to Raydoss, he wouldn't be able to take the Belioth quest.

"Uhh…" Dimitris averted his eyes. He had been so fascinated with Raydoss that he completely forgot about the bet with Fran. "Hilt! This is my last order as head! You are to assist young Fran any way you can! Lend her our men as well!"

He just delegated the issue to his granddaughter! But Hilt shook her head with a stern look.

"No. I refuse. As long as I have the seal, I am the current head. Therefore, I have the right to choose whichever assignments I wish."

The metal plate Dimitris had given Hilt was the mark of the current head, and she was the one who held it. Hilt was probably getting back at him by refusing to do as he said.

"Ungh…" Dimitris thought about for a moment before tossing something in Fran's direction. A small item pouch filled with gold and potions. "…Take this, Fran. Help yourself to some money! Take it as a sign of my apology!"

"It's not about the money!"

"I am terribly sorry about this! I owe you a favor now! And I will *definitely* repay it! For sure! I'm really sorry!"

"Dimitris!" Fran shouted as Dimitris kept moving upwards.

"I'll pay you back, I promise!"

I could almost hear an echo of him saying, *I'm sooorry!* as he flew away.

"I won't lose next time, Fran." With that final word from Sibyl, they left.

"…I'll still win."

The noble ordered the guards to loose their arrows, but it was more of a formality than anything else. A fierce battle had been avoided.

"Dimitris… Hrmp!"

Come on, don't pout. Let's see how apologetic he really was.

An item bag and a small fortune in cash. It was decent enough. Besides, he said he owed Fran one. It was unfortunate things had worked out this way, but he would repay us later. I just hoped he'd actually be in the mood to make good when the time came…

"I apologize for grandfather's behavior, Fran."

"It's not your fault."

"Even so… You won the bet, but it's like the outcome was reversed, with me losing and becoming head. This won't do. I'll see to it that grandfather keeps his word."

Hilt no longer had a resentful expression when she looked at Fran. She really was sorry about Dimitris's actions.

"We will lend you our strength if you ever need it. Belioth will have access to Dimitris Style's current head and top students. Will that suffice?"

"Are you sure? You told Dimitris you didn't want to."

"I was just giving that troublesome old man a taste of his own medicine."

Well, at least she was honest.

"So how about it?"

Teacher?

That's probably the best course of action. Belioth didn't say we needed *to get Dimitris on board.*

They just wanted to contact him and get him to accept the quest if possible. But having his pupils instead of the man himself wasn't a bad deal.

"Hm. Thanks."

I didn't know how much she would make up for Dimitris's absence, but Hilt was an A Rank. Not a bad substitute at all.

"Although things are going to be a bit of a pain going forward…"

"Can't be helped."

"Dias."

Dias joined the conversation, looking tattered and exhausted. His wounds from the battle with Knighthart had mostly healed, but he was still exhausted. He looked even worse because of the battered state of his equipment.

"The guild's not going to be able to claim ignorance on this one. I'll probably get summoned along with Hilt. We can't keep this under wraps with so many witnesses."

The audience started murmuring again, discussing the great incident that had just occurred before their eyes. They couldn't stop talking about it.

"Will you be okay?" Fran tilted her head, looking worried.

It might be tricky for Hilt to accept quests, given the current situation. Dimitris—*former* head of Dimitris Style—had assisted Raydossian spies in escaping and joined them in returning to Raydoss. Everyone he'd left behind was going to be in a difficult spot. A pointed inquisition would likely follow. The investigation could go on for months and might even result in jail time.

But Hilt and the others thought that outcome was unlikely.

"I don't think the lockdown will take months. They should be able to help you with the Belioth quest."

"I think so too. The government won't be that harsh."

"Why not?"

"A lot of damage would be done if we fought back. The most realistic likelihood is that we'll make some concessions and deals with them. Ugh…it looks like we'll have to work for Granzell for the time being. Haven't done that in a while…"

"In a while?"

This wasn't the first time?

"You saw how grandfather is. He's done similar things in the past…though this one takes the cake when it comes to sheer outlandishness."

One time, Dimitris wiped out a criminal organization and the knights who were in bed with them, only to find that affiliates of the royal family had been involved. Another time, he snuck into the palace after hearing rumors of a powerful knight being present…and wound up causing a lot of trouble, to say the least. There was also the time he had a bounty put on his head for killing a viscount's eldest son for trying to rape one of the girls in town.

These were just a few of Dimitris's exploits. His students would take on difficult quests for a cheap price afterward in order to make up for it.

And his students remained with him because they admired his strength. In fact, his outrageous actions saved a lot of innocent people, and his students soon learned to accept the consequences of his actions with a pained smile. Some took to considering it part of the Dimitris Style program.

"Rather than shutting them down, making the world's greatest combat school owe them a favor would be more beneficial for them."

We were still worried, but if Dias said it would be okay then we would take his word for it.

"We're going to be short on manpower… S-so Colbert will have to help!"

"Uh-*huh*."

Fran! Not "Uh-*huh*!" Ask her about her plans! I get that you're not interested in romantic relationships…but still!

Still, Hilt seemed ready to go on the offensive where her love life was concerned. She might yet be able to get through Colbert's thick skull. As he watched Hilt blush, Dias gave a wry smile and shook his head.

"Yeah. Good luck with that… With everything, really. But we must bring our closing ceremony to a close. I guess I'm the one who'll ask our guests of honor to bow their heads this year. Our lord viscount is still incapacitated, after all."

The viscount was the noble who got kicked by Acid Man at the beginning of all this. If I forgot his face, it's a real testament to how low-profile the man was!

At Dias's command, the adventurers quickly moved to their places. This was one hell of a closing ceremony.

"Will Erianthe be all right?"

Hmm…I don't know. The current members of the merc band aside, I don't think the government will go after former members…

That's not what I mean.

Oh?

Erianthe's gonna be mad. Real mad. She might destroy the capital guild.

…Oh.

I remembered Erianthe's personality. Despite looking like a highly competent woman, she had a short fuse. If she heard that her old comrade Knighthart had gone turncoat, she might go on a rampage.

Let's pray that the adventurers of the capital will be all right. That's the only thing we can do.

Hm.

Dias carried on with the closing ceremony, bringing the highly eventful event to a final close.

The Adventurers' Guild was speeding things up. The way they were moving everyone out of the coliseum, I thought they would get complaints. But the audience and guests were okay with it.

They were too excited about the amazing incident they'd just witnessed to be upset. It was like they'd just gotten the show of their lives. People still died, though, so the mood would probably shift once things settled down.

Fran and I left the coliseum and were soon on our way to the Adventurers' Guild.

"I know it's a little late, but a lot's happened today. Congratulations on your victory."

"Thanks."

"And you're the youngest tournament winner to date, too. Without a doubt!" Dias said, producing a small medal. Next to it was a leather pouch which produced a clinking sound. The victor's gold medal of Ulmutt and the prize money.

It's a lot more glamorous than last year's third-place medal.

"Hm. It's a lot shinier."

The first-place medal was appropriately intricate and gold-plated.

"I wanted to give it to you during the closing ceremony, but the nobles were shaking like leaves. The ministers had their heads in their hands the whole time."

"Because an S Rank went to an enemy country?"

"It's not just a matter of battle power. Dimitris has many supporters among the people. He's been hunting rampaging monsters in the provinces for over fifty years, remember."

"I see."

"He's good to the common folk. He's a free spirit, but that's why he's able to do right by his conscience. He's defended the poor from nobles many times in the past."

Dimitris seemed like the height of arrogance to adventurers and nobles, but the people didn't see him that way.

"A lot of these people will be disappointed to hear that he's gone to Raydoss. He's helped the guild out a lot by taking super high-level quests, too…"

Not a lot of adventurers would volunteer to go into certain death zones.

"But I mean, what was I supposed to do about him? You think I had a chance of holding him back?"

"Hm. No way."

Not a chance.

There was no one who could dictate what that old man could do.

"See? Well, let's put this matter to one side. What'll you do now? Hilt said she'll join you on your trip to Goldicia."

"Hm…"

"But you seem conflicted."

"Hm. Do you think war's going to break out with Raydoss?"

"Maybe. Do you plan on joining the cause?" Dias looked at Fran, seeing into her heart. I wanted to know, too. Personally, I didn't want to take part in that war.

We watched as Fran worked her way through to an answer.

"…I don't know. I hate Raydoss, but I don't necessarily want to go to war against them. If I have to, I just want to protect something. Like Alessa."

"A girl your age has no business taking part in wars. Defending Alessa shouldn't be too bad, I guess… Besides, I don't think war's going to break out for a while yet."

"Really?"

Raydoss had disgraced Granzell with this incident. I thought retaliation was unavoidable…

"This isn't a feud between adventurers. War can't be declared right away even if the government wanted to. If nothing else, they'd have to coordinate with the other countries first. Negotiations might take several months. And we can't rule out nothing happening in the end, either."

"Okay… Then I'll go to Goldicia. I'm Winalene's representative."

"I think that's a good idea. You'll get a lot more annoying invitations with winning the tournament. Might as well go on a trip to Goldicia and wait for things to settle down. And it's just what you need too."

"Hm?"

"I'm talking about your promotion."

"Promotion! Can I be an A Rank now?"

"Not so fast."

You needed more than just combat skills to become an A Rank, after all. Dealings with nobles. Commanding an army in battle. Knowledge and achievements as an adventurer. Instructing the next generation. All sorts of things, most of which had nothing to do with combat.

When you looked at it that way, combat skills were the only thing Fran had going for her. Even if she had defeated an A Rank in combat, that wasn't enough for the guildmasters to approve her promotion.

"There are no problems with your ability to fight. But you lack other achievements… You've heard this before."

"Hm."

"The guild has some high-rating quests. Extermination of an A-Threat or higher monster, gathering rare spirit herbs—both of which you can take up in Goldicia."

Quests in the service of larger community goals increased the overall reputation of the Adventurers' Guild. These quests were

common in Goldicia.

"Though we can't give you the promotion immediately, the guild will have to acknowledge your achievements if you participate in enough battles. You won't be promoted to A Rank immediately…but it's something to shoot for."

"Okay. I'll do my best."

A stroll through a continent filled with monsters was enough to pique Fran's interest, but now she was really fired up. We were definitely going to Goldicia.

"Good luck. There's one more thing I wanted to talk about with you."

"Sure."

"I'm guessing that you'll be free to do whatever you want once you land in Goldicia. That's what most of the adventurers representing Belioth end up doing."

That's what Winalene said, too. Apparently we're free to do whatever when we get there.

Since Fran was backed by Winalene, none of the other kingdoms would dare force her into doing errands for them.

"I'd like you to take some guild quests when you get to Goldicia. Aside from antibody extermination."

"There's an Adventurers' Guild in Goldicia?"

"Of course. There are guilds wherever there are adventurers."

And the masses of adventurers being transported to Goldicia meant that there must be a guild to oversee them. A united front was

better than everyone doing their own thing.

"Why do you want me to take quests in Goldicia?"

"Honestly, it's to increase the reputation of the guild in Ulmutt."

"Hm?"

"Today's incident doesn't just affect my standing; it hurts the guild here as a whole. You understand that, right?"

"Hm."

Ulmutt got played by Raydossian conspirators, allowing them to run rampant and create chaos in the city. This was a black mark against the guild here.

"They might go easier on us if the winner of the Ulmutt tournament were to do great things in Goldicia. I hope you don't mind us leaning on you for a bit."

Th-that's awfully honest of you, Dias.

"I prefer to be as frank as possible when dealing with you."

That just went to show how close we were.

Go to Goldicia, take some quests from the guild there, name-drop the guild in Ulmutt. Shouldn't be a problem, but…

What do you wanna do, Fran?

"Hm. I don't mind being taken advantage of for the right price."

"Aha ha, very *adventurer* of you! All right. Take this introduction letter with you."

"Who's it for?"

Izalio?

The recipient was an adventurer named Izalio. Was he the guildmaster in Goldicia?

"You've never heard of him?"

Dias was surprised—Izalio must have been quite famous. He went on to explain, and Izalio was more than just another celebrity.

"S-Rank adventurer Izalio. Current owner of the godsword Ignis. One of the strongest people in the world. They call him Flame Sword or Crimson Sword."

"A godsword!"

An S Rank?!

It was definitely our fault that we didn't know him despite being adventurers.

"If Dimitris is the problem child of the S Ranks, Izalio is the teacher's pet. He might be the only sane man among the S Ranks. Not that he's without his…*quirks*."

Izalio was an S Rank. You probably needed a couple quirks just to get to S Rank.

"Do you know him?"

"He operated out of Ulmutt a long time ago. He won't ignore an introduction from me."

Dias's long years of being guildmaster meant that he had connections all over the world.

"You can ask him to train you or just talk to him, really. Conducting activities in Goldicia will be much easier if you know its

master. And take this with you, too."

"What's this? Wine?"

Whoa, whoa, what kind of wine is this?!

It was wine, but Identify revealed it to be three hundred years old…the kind of absurd wine that could only exist in this fantasy world!

"An elven brew from my private stock."

The elves would brew this special wine from the fruits of the holy tree unique to their homeland. This ancient wine was miraculously preserved despite the city producing it being destroyed by a volcanic eruption.

"The wine cellar was somehow spared. And thanks to the temperature control magic circles, so was the wine inside. This isn't something you can buy with money. A million gold for this would be dirt cheap on the market."

That was crazy expensive! But there were instances of wines like these back on Earth, too. Old wines salvaged from shipwrecks going for millions of yen.

"Wine… Is it good?"

You're too young for it!

"Ha ha ha. Yeah, not for a few years, at least."

Fran liked tasty things, so the wine piqued her interest. But she needed to be an adult before she could start drinking. No need to turn to substance abuse at this age.

"Just give it to the guildmaster when you get to Goldicia. He's a dwarf, you see."

I see. This is probably going to be more effective than the introduction letter.

"Well? Is the price right enough for you?" Dias smiled mischievously.

Fran nodded with gleaming eyes.

"Good enough. What do you think, Teacher?"

Sounds good. An S-Rank dwarf with a penchant for ancient wine isn't a contact you can find any day.

"Thanks. I owe you one."

Next stop, the continent of Goldicia.

Epilogue

HERE YOU GO, Jet. For all your troubles lately. Super spicy, red-hot curry!

"Bark, bark, bark!"

Having left the Adventurers' Guild, we were now back in our hotel room.

Whoa! Stay! I haven't put it on the floor yet! You'll dirty up the room!

"Woof, woof!"

You're starving? But you had snacks along the way.

"Woof!"

Okay, okay! Here!

Now that I thought about it, he went half a day without a proper meal. He probably was running low on calories after the fierce battle of the finals.

"Teacher."

I know, I know. You don't have to give me that look.

The smell of Jet's curry was torturing Fran. She rubbed her stomach as it rumbled and looked at me with needy eyes.

She'd be a hit with the boys if she wasn't begging for food. Although Fran was always cute all the time.

Congratulations on your victory! An extra-large helping of curry for thee!

"Oooh!"

Your choice of topping with infinite extra servings. You can eat as much as you like today!

"Really?"

It's a celebration, after all. Mild, spicy, extra spicy. Beef, pork, chicken, fish, lamb, shrimp. You can have a little bit of everything if you want!

She was even allowed to forget about manners while she ate today!

"Seriously?"

Seriously. Today, you're allowed to eat whatever you want, as much as you want, however you want!

"Oooh…" Fran was shaking with excitement. I hadn't seen her so moved in a while. "Heaven was here all along."

Now there was an exaggeration!

But Fran was serious. She solemnly tucked into her meal.

"…I'll win again next year so I can go to curry heaven once again."

G-good luck.

"Hm. I'll get stronger. I can do it. Munch, munch."

You don't have to be that serious about it…

Fran's eyes were as earnest as when she was fighting in battle.

"We'll go to Goldicia. Munch. Train. Yum. Undergo any trial for the sake of curry. Gulp."

I-I see.

"Hm."

As weird as her motivations were, at least she was *motivated*.

"Yum, yum!"

"Munch, munch!"

Fran! You're getting crumbs all over the place! Jet! You're getting curry all over the place!

I caught their mess with telekinesis and used a cleansing spell to clean up the carpet and furniture. Why? Because this was the premium suite in Ulmutt's best hotel, that's why.

It was the only place in town that refused solicitous merchants, nobles, and other hangers-on.

Dias had hooked us up with a room usually reserved for guild VIPs. We would've been content with a run-of-the-mill hotel, but this was the only place that would even shut out nobles from bothering their guests.

Fran was very satisfied with the soft bed and carpet, but I was restless. Everything was so luxurious that I got a stomachache when I thought about Fran and Jet breaking it.

Huh? Someone's coming. This mana…

"It's Lumina!" Fran shouted, spitting out the rice still in her mouth.

A knock on the door.

I telekinetically opened it and there stood a small doll. It had the features of a black cat and was about twenty centimeters tall.

It looked like the kind of doll that would be used by girls playing house. Very cute. We had seen it before. There was also a familiar mana emanating from it.

This was the doll the black cat dungeon master Lumina would control when she needed to go out. I once saw her have a meeting with Aurel in this form.

Thanks for coming. We were going to see you tomorrow, though.

"Indeed." The doll walked inside and closed the door. She jumped onto the table. "I watched the tournament through this doll's eyes. You did our race proud."

"It wasn't just me. I won because Jet and Teacher were there."

Nah, it was mostly you, Fran. We did our best to help, but it would've all been over if you had given up. We couldn't have done it without you.

"Woof!"

"Thanks."

"Ha ha ha. It's good to see you still get along so well. Take care of her, Teacher. The winners of the tournament tend to be pestered a lot afterward."

Apparently, some people even loitered in the dungeons, betting on the off chance that Fran would go there. That was how in-demand the winner was. Some merchants went out of their way to hire adventurers.

Seeing that, Lumina came out to see us first.

"Munch, munch, munch. Someone else is coming."

Aurel and Kaitley this time.

I should really have just left the door open. I swung the door wide, but in doing so I startled Kaitley who was just about to knock.

"Huh?"

Sorry about that.

"Come in."

"Don't mind if we do, Fran."

"H-hello."

Aurel led Kaitley in by the hand. He must have wanted Fran to see Kaitley before she left town.

Kaitley fidgeted for a while. Then she made her mind up and bowed her head to her friend.

"Thank you so much. Grandfather told me everything. About how you went around town to look for me. You hadn't even recovered from your injuries…"

"No need to thank me. Besides, Sibyl was the one who saved you in the end."

"It doesn't change the fact that you went out to look for me. Thank you."

"Hm… Are you gonna be an adventurer, Kaitley?"

Fran changed the subject, feeling somewhat bashful. Kaitley brought out sides of her I'd never seen before. It was quite refreshing.

"Y-yes. I plan to."

"Good luck. You'll make a great adventurer."

"I will. I'll do my best!" Now smiling, Kaitley continued talking with Fran.

Fran even offered her some curry, so she must really have taken a liking to her. We gave some to Aurel, too. I had to. Seeing the old man look so sad pierced my heart!

"Will you be heading to Goldicia after this, Miss Fran?"

"Hm. That's the plan."

"Please be careful. I hear it's a terribly dangerous place."

"Thanks. But I'll be okay," Fran answered confidently.

Kaitley looked at her with gleaming eyes. "One day…"

"Hm?"

"One day, I'll be strong enough that I can fight alongside you. So…"

"Hm. I'll wait for you. We'll go adventuring together once you become a top-class adventurer."

"Yes."

A quiet resolve burned in Kaitley's eyes as she chewed on Fran's words. If Fran would work tirelessly for curry, perhaps now Kaitley had a similar source of motivation. She would eventually evolve under Aurel's guidance. She might become strong enough to stand next to Fran one day.

Fran must have been thinking of the same thing. She stopped eating curry and patted Kaitley's head.

"…You'll be fine, Kaitley."

"Yes!"



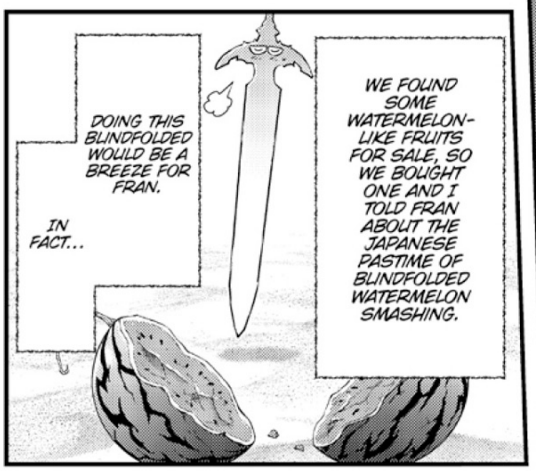
READ ME
RIGHT-TO-LEFT



Extra Chapter

Fran and Watermelon Smashing

Story by Yuu Tanaka
Illustration by Tomowo Maruyama








AAAH...
YOU'VE GOT YOUR SENSE OF SMELL, SO YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE A HANDICAP.
WHAT'S THAT, JET? YOU WANNA TRY, TOO?
WOOF!
IT TOOK THREE ATTEMPTS TO GET THIS RIGHT!
AND I HAD TO TELL HER THAT THE POINT OF THE GAME WAS TO BREAK THE WATERMELON SO WE COULD EAT IT.
SHE ENDED UP DISINTE-GRATING THE FIRST WATER-MELON...
I'M SORRY, WATERMELON-LIKE FRUIT X3
WE ATE ALL THE SPLIT WATERMELONS AFTER.
WHACK
CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH
TASTY! ♡
ARF, ARF! ♡
CRUNCH CRUNCH
NO! SPIT OUT THE SEEDS!
THIS CRUNCHY STUFF TASTES BAD, THOUGH.
END
BRSSHHH
MY EIGHTH GRADER HEART!
BABUMP
HUH... YOU LOOK PRETTY COOL, JET!
NO FAIR.



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