

Reincarnated as a SWORD



WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka
ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo

14
NOVEL

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD

– Tensei Shitara Kendeshita –

- VOLUME 14 -

-AUTHOR-

Yuu Tanaka

-ILLUSTRATOR-

Llo

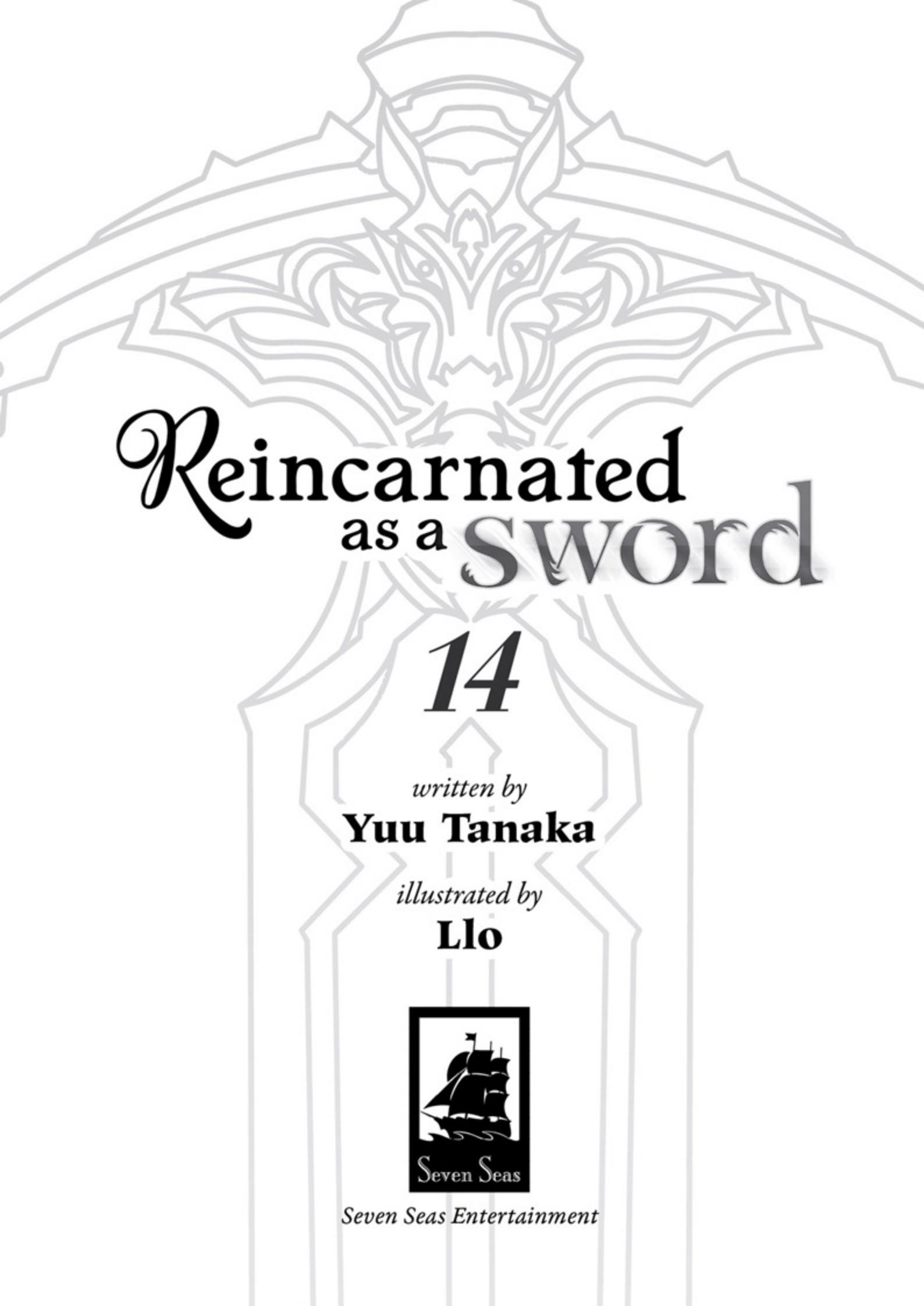
[SEVEN SEAS]



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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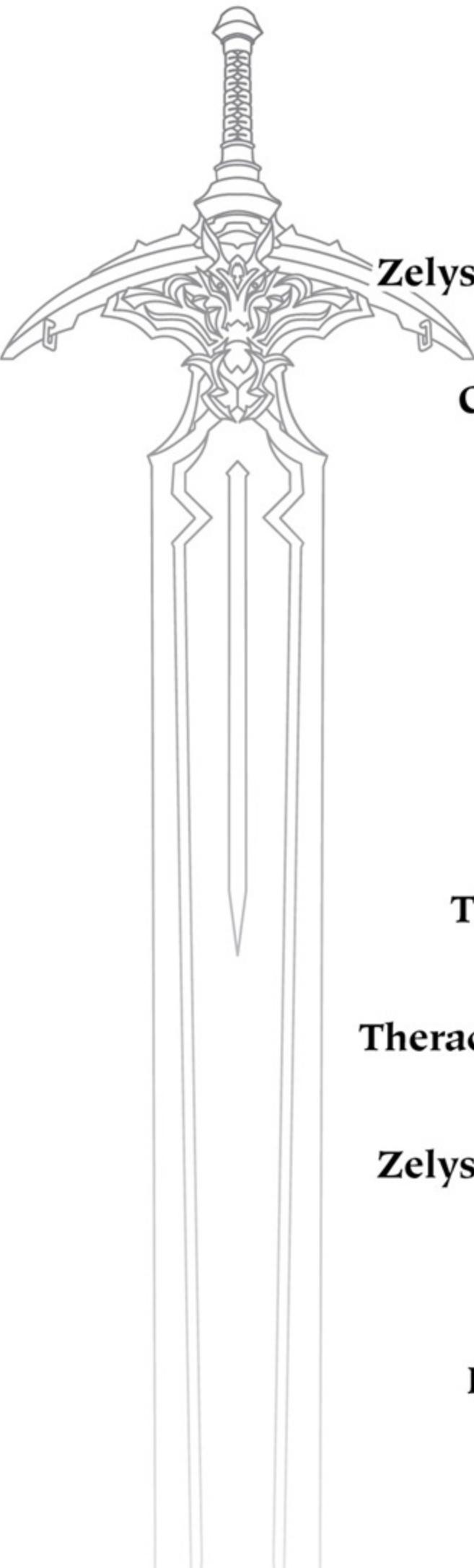
TRANSLATION: Michael Rachmat
ADAPTATION: Matthew Grune
COVER DESIGN: Kris Aubin
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny
COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
SENIOR LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
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PROLOGUE

ZELYSE PAST AND PRESENT

“THEY ESCAPED. It’s completely different from before.”

“Don’t worry. We know where they are...”

“Good.”

“...but it looks like history’s going to change ever so slightly.”

“Of course it will. I’ve been moving things left and right.”

“You were insistent, back in Bulbola. That’s why I’ve changed things up from last time.”

“Uh-huh. Fran defeated over a hundred crystal golems last time, I believe.”

“And this time, she only defeated a few.”

“That’s right. Technically, that’s enough for us to go down a different branch of history.”

“Things haven’t completely diverged, however.”

“No. Just like the last time, we began by escaping here, to this country.”

“I guess the part where we attacked the adventurers and caused a commotion is the same.”

“True, but there were a lot more casualties last time.”

“And only injuries this time?”

“Theraclede’s gone soft.”

“Is he different from the Theraclede you know?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. Either way, what now? Are you going to grab him?”

“I don’t know. Before—no, I shouldn’t ask. Why take the fun out of it? Hmm. Theraclede is one of the few successful hellions out there. It’s about time I did some research on him.”

“Uh-huh. I made so many discoveries last time and had oh-so-much fun!”

“Now I *really* wanna get my hands on him. Ah, I have it—I should try running that new experiment on him!”

“Hellion crystal? That’s a difficult one to pull off. Seventy percent of the subjects still lose their minds.”

“All right, so there’s a little risk involved, but...”

“That sounds like fun!”

“Exactly!”

“But how are we going to infiltrate the Academy of Magic? That high elf is not to be underestimated.”

“Not to worry! I’ve already sent some people there! Completely expendable, of course. You don’t mind losing one or two messengers, do you? Not when Theraclede’s at stake.”

“You’re right! When you put it that way, you can even take a more grandiose approach. Isn’t that right, present-day me?”

“It’s going to be so much fun, past me!”

“Ahahahaha!”

CHAPTER 1

CROSSING THE BORDER

“THIS IS NICE.”

“Woof!”

Fran didn’t blink once as she enjoyed the wind blowing in her face. Thanks to a combination of the manatech we’d bought at the auction and a wind spell, she was able to withstand the strong headwind, even as it rumbled around us. Without protection, it could’ve easily blown her off her feet.

As for Jet, he was just too fast when he was at his largest. He traversed a distance that would’ve normally taken a whole day in just under an hour, Air Hopping over mountains, rivers, and forests. There wasn’t a single monster that could stand in his way. Anything that tried became the perfect in-flight snack.

“Nom, nom.”

“Good?”

“Woof!”

They weren’t worth butchering for materials, so it was fine.

These days, Jet ate anything he came across. Still, some of these monsters were pretty weird... like that one moss that spewed smoke, or that slime the color of mud. Identify didn’t mark these creatures as edible... not that human edibility probably had much to do with the diet of a newly elite monster.

“Which one of those is good?”

“Arf?”

Fran, you can’t be thinking of eating that thing, can you? You’ll ruin your stomach!

But maybe objecting would show her that I lacked faith in her. Fran was a bona fide adventurer now, after all. She could decide what she wanted to eat for herself.

“I can handle a little poison with Abnormal Status Immunity.”

“W-woof?”

She’d be fine... right? Or should I stop her? No, she would think I was being annoying if I stopped her from doing every little thing. She was gonna hit her rebellious phase any day now. My mind would totally shatter if she said something like “Shut up, Teacher. You stink.”

“Teacher? You’re shaking.”

D-don’t worry about it.

“Hmm.” She was looking at me suspiciously. Not mad, just exasperated. Or was I just imagining things? I needed to change the subject before things got more awkward.

O-oh? Hey, I can see the next town! That’s Didian, our last stop in Granzell! Apparently, it has its own specialty!

“Specialty?”

Didian is famous for cheese made of domesticated monster milk. Apparently, it’s super tasty.

“Wow.”

“Ruff!”

That got her attention.

Based on how fast Jet was going, we could’ve reached Belioth by this point, but we were still in Granzell. We’d been stopping by every town to sample its delicacies. So far, we’d spent over a week learning new cooking techniques and staying overnight at towns we liked.

We weren’t in any rush, so I thought we could take our time and let Fran enjoy herself. If anything, getting to our destination in the blink of an eye would be boring—and it’d

be a waste not to take our time to enjoy the journey. I wanted to let Fran experience something other than life-or-death battles for once.

Didian, the town known for its cheese, was situated close to the border. It had high walls and stricter security checks. What with the town being at the frontier, there wasn't exactly a long line of people waiting to get in. Still, the gatekeepers were heavily armed and there were five extra guards at the post to the side of the gates.

We landed some distance away from the gates so as not to cause alarm and walked the rest of the way there.

We immediately caught the guards' attention. They stared cautiously at the little girl with a giant wolf in tow, which was fair enough... but were things really that bad here?

"Welcome to Didian. You an adventurer?"

"Hm. Here's my card."

Despite being cautious, they weren't rude. They didn't waste our time underestimating Fran, either. In fact, they were exceptionally polite.

That changed as soon as they saw her card.

"Y-you're a B-Rank adventurer?!"

"Hey, you're the Black Lightning Princess! To what do we owe the honor?"

Fran's name had spread across Granzell. Regular civilians might not have known her, but merchants and members of the guard sure did. Gatekeepers—those city guards who picked up rumors and information from the people passing them—seemed especially familiar with her. Fran passed inspection quickly and they welcomed her with open arms.

The first people we saw past the gates were more guards, all just as heavily armed as the gatekeepers. I'd known this was a frontier city, but they were really laying it on thick with the security.

But when we made our first stop at a food stall, we learned the reason behind the excess security.

"Hey there, little miss! Care for a bite of Didian's famous cheese bread? Best in town!"

They were selling gigantic bread—the stuff was the size of Fran's face! The crust looked tough on the outside, but it was soft and fluffy once you cut into it. It looked delicious.

"Hm. I'll take five."

"So generous! Coming right up!" The man stuffed the bread into a jute bag. Judging by his speed, he was used to getting these large orders. "I take it you're an adventurer by the way you're dressed."

"Hm."

"Wow! A life of hard work at such an early age. First time in town?"

"Just got here."

"I see, I see! So what do you think?"

"There's a lot of soldiers?"

"Aah, you've noticed?"

A few months ago, a notorious man with a bounty on his head had been spotted in the vicinity. The local and regional guards were mobilized to deal with him, but that single man had decimated them.

"Fella took down a hundred soldiers by himself! Crushed 'em! Things have been a little tense here since then."

"I see."

You had to be really strong to crush a hundred-man army by yourself. Probably gave the local viscount headaches. But that wasn't the only thing that seemed strange about the town.

"The guards don't look too worried..." noted Fran.

She was right. Despite their great numbers, the guards weren't emitting a murderous

aura. It wasn't that they didn't take their jobs seriously, but they sure didn't seem enthusiastic about bringing the bounty in.

"Well, you see, there were no casualties."

"No casualties? I thought you said they got crushed."

"Arf?"

"That's the thing. They all got beat up but nobody died. The boys kind of lost their reason to fight after that. I'm pretty sure the viscount is only getting guards to make himself look good, too."

The viscount was trying to make himself look like a benevolent ruler who cared about his people, but he didn't really care about capturing the bounty. Given that the bounty could easily repel his forces, who could blame him?

"The city was close to panicking after we heard what kind of man we were dealing with. The unrest only got worse after adventurers came to try and take the bounty. Fortunately, we haven't spotted the fellow in quite a while, and the additional soldiers did a lot to settle public unrest. Honestly, I hope he never gets found."

"Uh-huh. Say, this bounty... what's it like?"

"You gonna get him? Can't say I recommend it."

He took one look at Fran and could tell that she wasn't just making small talk. Pretty good read on his part, considering Fran's lack of obvious emotion. Then again, Fran always got fired up whenever she smelled a good fight in the air.

"Now, listen. The guy's name is Theraclede. A nasty mercenary. Guy killed hundreds of people in his day. Not exactly someone a fresh adventurer would want to tussle with."

"Theraclede...? He's here?"

"Y-yeah."

Hang on. That couldn't be right. He fought a hundred people and all of them survived? If he had brutally murdered all one hundred, I'd be more inclined to believe it was him. But this was Theraclede we were talking about. He'd readily kill people just for being

near him. Was it really him?

Report accuracy rated at nineteen percent.

Figures. Theraclede was a criminal, but he was still famous. It could be an impostor posing as him to intimidate the locals.

“What’s he look like?”

“I hear he’s a big man covered in wounds. Don’t tell me you’re actually thinking of going after him?”

“Maybe.”

“Your funeral.” The man thought Fran was just being vague to dodge the issue. He gave her a wry smile as he handed her a bag of bread.

But Fran was serious. She still detested Theraclede, but Kiara had told her not to seek vengeance on her behalf. Fran had complied by not going out of her way to find him, but now that he might be close at hand, it was a different story. The Theraclede we were dealing with was probably an impostor, but we couldn’t just let him roam free. Not with us around.

Maybe Jet can sniff him out.

He’d be able to track Theraclede down if he was hiding nearby, although the trail would probably be cold if the last sighting was a few months ago. Besides, we didn’t even know if we were dealing with the real Theraclede.

“Hm! Jet!”

“Woof, woof!”

“Don’t go killing yourself, little miss! You and your pup have got a lot to live for!”

“We’ll be okay.”

Jet was a giant wolf, after all!

Let’s start with the town.

“Hm. Jet, if you would.”

“Woof!”

And so, Fran and Jet began their hunt for the bounty...

“Munch, munch. Not here.”

“Arf! Nom, nom.”

Were they *actually* looking for him? It seemed to me like they were looking for hidden food stalls more than anything else.

“Sniff, sniff.”

“Well?”

“Woof...”

We searched Didian for Theraclede, sampling their delicacies all the while. If he was in town, escaping Jet’s mighty snoot was close to impossible. He’d memorized Theraclede’s scent from all our battles with him.

But our search came up empty. There was no trace of Theraclede left to even determine whether he was the real deal. Even if he was in the area, he definitely wasn’t hiding in town.

It can’t be helped. All we have is hearsay, after all.

“Hm.” Fran had also given up on the search, but she didn’t look broken up about it. It was just something to do while she took in the sights and ate. She wasn’t expecting much.

So, what now? We got a lot of cheese, but should we stay the night here?

“I’m good,” she said. “Let’s get to the next town.”

You sure?

“Hm. I’m getting sick of cheese.”

That was it? No wonder she was buying up other kinds of food. She had gotten bored of the dairy product after eating nothing but cheese since breakfast, and no one girl should have all those cheeses.

Our next stop will be in Belioth. We'll have to cross the border before that. We have to go through the official channels to avoid further headaches down the road.

“Got it.”

Borders were vague in this world. No clear lines were drawn, no walls built. It was very easy to ignore checkpoints altogether. This wasn't a problem among friendly countries whose citizens were allowed to freely cross each other's borders—but Belioth was different.

Belioth was famous for having the toughest immigration procedures in the world. Checkpoints were set up along the highways, along with a ton of lookout posts. Those who were discovered to have entered the country outside official channels would be slapped with a hefty fine. Commit a misdemeanor without going through immigration, and that charge got upgraded to a felony.

Such were the countermeasures employed against their neighbor, Raydoss, which regularly sent spies. Detainment was very much a possibility. But it wasn't that bad as long as you went into Belioth through the proper channels. It wasn't something we'd have to worry about.

“Let's get going.”

Uh, now?

“Hm.”

She really *was* bored of cheese. *Now that I think about it, she didn't ask for any toppings on her curry today.* But it wasn't that Fran hated cheese. No, she either liked something, loved something, or was crazy for something.

Let's get to the checkpoint. Jet should be able to get us there today.

“Woof!”

“Hm.”

Unlike Jet, who was enthusiastic, Fran looked indifferent. She'd either had too much cheese or was disappointed that we couldn't find Theraclede.

L-let's get going.

“B-bark!”

An hour passed.

After shopping and reporting to the Adventurers' Guild that we would be leaving the country, we reached the checkpoint.

That's Granzell's side of the checkpoint.

“That garrison?”

“Arf?”

It's a checkpoint, yeah. Kind of a fortress, almost. The structure really did look like a heavily guarded fortress. It was as if the checkpoint doubled as a check against Belioth. *We need to climb a mountain after going through the checkpoint. Past that mountain is Belioth.*

“Hmm.”

Granzell and Belioth were separated by a river, but here they were split by a mountain. The peak was apparently the location of the border.

Highways were built between the mountains and checkpoints were placed along those highways. They weren't precisely on the border because that was where the garrisons were set up.

Even allied nations wouldn't allow for one-sided fortifications. If there was a garrison on Granzell's end of the border, there was another one on Belioth's side, and they were likely built as close to each other as possible.

Of course, you couldn't have the two fortresses outright rubbing up against each other. Treaties were signed which prohibited the nations from building their fortifications a

certain distance from the border, or so we'd heard from the guards at Didian.

We'll need to be processed at the Granzell immigration side first. Then, we'll go over the mountain peak to go through the same thing at the Belioth side. A bit of a pain, but rules are rules.

"Okay."

Anyway, let's descend here. We don't want any misunderstandings about our giant flying good boy. If they thought Jet was some dangerous monster, it'd take up even more time.

"Woof, woof!"

I was a bit nervous going into immigration, but the process was smooth sailing. It was especially relaxed compared to Didian, probably because of the bounty they had out there.

We didn't have to wait either, since we were the only ones there. The process went especially quick because we had an adventurer card. Reason for departure? "Adventure." Boom, done.

The guards had a lot of time on their hands since merchants and adventurers were the only ones who used this route. The last people processed here were in a merchant caravan and they had come through five days ago. They gave us a warm welcome.

They were a bit dubious about Fran being a B-Rank, but no further questions were asked after her adventurer card was verified. Most adventurers preferred keeping to themselves, and the officers were wise enough not to tick off a B-Rank.

Jet wasn't a problem either, thanks to his familiar license and shrunken size. The whole process took a little under five minutes.

The Belioth side probably wouldn't be as lenient. The Granzellian guards warned us not to cause a scene; entering a country was always more difficult than leaving it.

We're going to have to walk for a while. Wouldn't want Jet to alert Belioth.

"Woof."

"Hm."

They weren't our enemies, but it was bad manners to cause a ruckus for no good reason. Jet shrank to the size of a large dog and we started our hike.

It wasn't far to the summit, and the slope was easy—your average person could reach the top in half a day. Monsters spawned here, but the soldiers hunted them down every night. They were mostly F-Threats, with the odd D-Threat showing up once every several years.

As long as we didn't run into any D-Threats, Fran and Jet could probably reach the top in twelvish hours, probably less. Even if we ran into monsters, we were strong enough that we'd make good time.

Soon enough, evening fell. I figured we'd probably reach the other side the next morning if we set up camp right away. Or so I thought...

I just had to jinx it.

"Hm?"

Never mind. What should we do about them?

"We have to help them!"

As we were reaching the peak, we saw a group of travelers being attacked. By a D-Threat Storm Wyvern, no less.

"Come on, Jet!"

"Grr!"

Fran immediately shifted gears.

At the mountaintop, we saw three women doing battle with the Storm Wyvern. At first glance, I thought they were adventurers. One wore full-plate armor more becoming of a knight than an adventurer, while the other two were lightly armed. All their armaments looked ornamental, to be honest, as if they were nobles playing at being adventurers.

"I'll draw its attention, Lady Carna! Run away while you still can!"

“Urgh...! Come on, Shera!”

“B-but Lady Dianne...!”

“We’re only slowing her down!”

Carna, the girl who looked to be in her early teens, was apparently their master. I didn’t know whether she was a noble or just the daughter of a rich man, but she wasn’t frozen with fear, which was commendable. Shera, who looked about twenty, was her servant, while the woman in full armor was Dianne, her bodyguard. Her face was concealed by her helmet, but I could tell from her voice that she was young.

Dianne was serving as a distraction so her master could escape... though honestly, I wondered if the metallic rattling of her armor was what attracted the wyvern in the first place. But, uh, that was beside the point! We still had to help her.

Its attention is completely drawn to the knight. We’ll take it down with one strike.

“Hm! Teleport me up!”

Yeah!

“Jet, protect the women!”

“Woof!”

The Storm Wyvern was actually quite weak for a D-Threat. Its stats were more in line with the average E-Threat, but its ability to fly put it just over the line. If you could figure out a way to hit the thing, it wouldn’t be much of an issue.

“Ha!”

“Gyaoooo!”

After teleporting, Fran immediately gravitated towards the creature’s crystal by detecting its mana flow and stabbed me into it. I pierced the crystal in the Storm Wyvern’s neck and it immediately went down.

We quickly stored it away before it could hurt Dianne and the others below us with its fall. The silence returned and it was as if the wyvern had never existed at all.

“Huh?”

The three girls looked up, perplexed. They hadn’t even noticed Jet, who was standing beside them.

“Are you all right?” Fran came down from the sky to address them.

“Y-yes. Thank you for saving us...”

The youngest, their master, was the one to reply. She was a beautiful girl with fluffy violet hair and purple eyes, clad in fancy, well-made armor. I was sure she was of noble birth, but Identify didn’t reveal anything about her lineage. Apparently, the daughter of a nobleman who had no rank in court herself didn’t have a title.

“Did you do that?” she asked.

Fran nodded. “Hm. I beat it and stored it.”

“I see. Again, I thank you.” The girl bowed her head, snapping the other two out of their reverie.

“Y-you saved us. Thank you.”

“Thank you very much... Eek! A wolf!”

“Wh-when did it get here?!”

They finally noticed Jet next to them. The knight flailed and pointed her sword at him.

“It’s okay. He’s with me.”

“R-really? This monstrous-looking wolf? Incredible...”

“Woof!” Hearing the knight’s complaints, Jet turned himself to the size of a pup. Seeing that made them realize that he wasn’t hostile, and the three girls finally relaxed.

The purple girl bowed her head towards Fran.

“Again, thank you. I am Carna. These are Shera and Dianne, my companions.”

“Fran, B-Rank adventurer.”

“Goodness, you’re an adventurer?”

“Hm.”

The three of them immediately reacted to Fran’s declaration. Carna was genuinely surprised, Shera looked scared for some reason, and Dianne had a look of hatred on her face. They definitely didn’t have a good impression of adventurers.

Feeling the sentiment in the air, Fran quietly made ready to leave. She knew staying would mean trouble, and so she took the initiative. I was proud of her. “I’ll be going now.”

They should be able to defend themselves against monsters.

I Identified them and found that their basic abilities were pretty good. Carna and Shera were also around level 30. I’d thought it was because they power leveled, but that wasn’t the case. Carna had fire and water magic, while Shera had healing magic.

Dianne was the real powerhouse of the group. She couldn’t fight a flying Storm Wyvern, but the other monsters there wouldn’t give her any trouble. There was no reason for us to stay and incite bitter feelings.

Shera and Dianne breathed a sigh of relief as Fran turned around to leave. But that relief was turned to ashes by their own master, Carna.

“W-wait!”

“Hm?”

“Umm, could you please be our bodyguard?”

Carna’s words shocked her companions even more than they shocked Fran.

“M-my lady, she is an adventurer!”

“But didn’t you see how strong she was?”

“Adventurers are nothing but money-grubbing barbarians! What if she betrays you?!”

A nasty thing to say. Fran's mood immediately plummeted. Still, the argument continued.

"But can you defend us if another one of those monsters comes along...?"

"I... Y-yes! I'll defend you even if it means I would have to die!"

"That will not do. I do not want you to die, Dianne."

"I am still a proud knight of the Crimson Flag! I am prepared to die for you at any moment!"

What were we supposed to do? They seemed to have completely forgotten about Fran. She hadn't even said she'd take up the offer.

Should we just leave?

Hmm.

No? You want to stay with them?

I... don't want Carna to die.

Fran had taken a liking to Carna, who was the same age as her and respected adventurers enough to defend Fran from her subordinates. But she was *also* quite angry at Dianne.

So, what now?

I'll let her hire me conditionally.

All right.

All we could do now was wait until the two finished arguing.

Dianne's hatred for adventurers was exceptional. She didn't have a single good thing to say about them—they were all money-grubbing opportunists, no better than selfish conmen. Apparently, she felt this way not because of any personal experiences but only from what she'd heard. Or so it seemed, at least.

Carna had heard similar things, but unlike her knight, she reserved judgment until she saw an adventurer for herself. Dianne the believer and Carna the doubter. They went back and forth until their conversation finally ended.

Dianne, obviously annoyed at Fran, looked down at her. "You. Adventurer."

"What?"

"I will allow you to come with us."

Wow, who did she think she was?! Fran's irritation was growing at a rapid rate. She squinted her eyes. "What's your offer?"

"You dare to ask for money?!"

What was she talking about? Of course adventurers ask for a fee if you want to hire them as a bodyguard.

But Dianne wasn't finished with her abuse. "This is the problem with you adventurers."

"Paying an adventurer to be your bodyguard makes perfect sense," said Fran.

"Lady Carna is granting you the *honor* of protecting her! That should be reward enough!"

Honor? We didn't even know who Carna *was*! Dianne's hatred for adventurers might have been blinding her, but this conversation was becoming downright painful.

"You knights can fill your stomach on honor, can you?" said Fran. "How nice. But adventurers need to work."

That was a long statement coming from Fran, so you *knew* she was mad.

Sensing her anger, Carna stepped in front of her and bowed her head. "I am truly sorry. We do not know the ways of adventurers. How much is your fee?"

"My lady, stop this!" Dianne screamed.

But the master turned to her bodyguard with a sharp glare. "Silence, Dianne."

“Wh-why?!”

“You cannot impose your values on others. Knights and adventurers are different, just as knights and nobles are different...”

“That’s...”

“If you’re going to just sit here and talk,” said Fran, sounding exhausted, “I’m leaving.”

Before Dianne could retort, Carna once again lowered her head. “I apologize. How much will it be?”

“Hm...”

“Hmph. You’re probably just going to highball us. Fine. Here.” Dianne threw a leather pouch at Fran’s feet, seemingly oblivious to the way Carna was practically glaring at her.

Fran opened the leather pouch and found two thousand gold inside.

“One night,” said Dianne. “That should be more than what you’re worth.”

Maybe, if all you wanted was Fran’s company. But it was nowhere near enough for her to work as a bodyguard. This kind of money would only hire E-Ranks and below.

But Fran was a B-Rank. It wasn’t enough even for a single night. And she was offended, more by Dianne’s cheapness than her nasty attitude. If Fran hadn’t been in a bad mood before, she sure was now. Dianne was saying two thousand gold was all that Fran was worth.

“Yours is that most glorious profession that risks their lives protecting the weak and hunting monsters for vile and dirty money. Am I correct?”

Was Dianne trying to end the negotiation by making Fran mad? Or did she just hate adventurers that much? Either way, Fran wasn’t one to latch onto these subtleties.

She tossed the pouch back at Dianne’s feet. “It’s not enough.”

“Impossible! It’s one night! That should be more than enough!”

"I'm a B-Rank adventurer. I don't work for this kind of money. An adventurer's worth is reflected by her fee. If you think I'm only worth this pittance, our negotiation is over."

"Hmph... that's what I expect to hear from an adventurer who sells her body for money. Well, then, how much is it?!"

The more she went on, the more I wished we could just kill her to shut her up. Fran was doing a very good job at being patient with her, somehow keeping all that murderous intent she was feeling bottled away.

"Everything you have on you," said Fran.

"Wh-what?! Don't be absurd! How are we going to make the rest of our trip?!"

"I'm not being absurd. Pay me and hire me or don't hire me at all. Honestly, I think I'm doing you a favor."

"Huh?"

"I'm relieving you of that vile and dirty money you hate so much. Isn't that how you put it? So I, a vile and dirty adventurer, will happily take all of your vile and dirty money."

"Th-this is absurd!"

"It's not. Unless you actually *like* that vile and dirty money. Unless you're *lying*. Are you a liar, fake knight? What kind of pathetic country would let you be a knight, anyway? It's probably overflowing with pathetic knights just like you."

Fran was pissed now, and probably purposely speaking her mind to anger Dianne. Apparently, *she* was the one who wanted to end the negotiation early.

"Ugh... Do not mock my country, you fool!"

"You started it. I don't care who you are, but don't go around putting down adventurers. The only fool around here is you."

"H-how dare an uneducated adventurer like you insult a knight?! I am no fool!"

"I'm just calling it like I see it. You don't listen to your master, and you don't even realize

that the person you were trying to hire is trying to kill you. A real idiot.”

“Huh?” Dianne stared quizzically at Fran, a question written all over her face: “Trying to kill me? How?”

In that slight pause, Fran slipped behind the knight’s back. “See? You’re dead.”

“...!” Dianne’s spine twitched, not expecting the voice to come from behind her.

Unable to trace Fran’s movements, Dianne finally understood their enormous difference in strength... and the awful predicament she was now in. Dianne’s face paled and she fell to a crouch.

She’d been too blinded by contempt to really *see* Fran before. Now that she was eye to eye with Fran, she finally did.

“...”

“Ah...”

And she finally saw the fury in Fran’s eyes.

Dianne squeaked and cowered in fear. Nothing could change the fact that she had derided and angered someone far stronger than her, and that someone was now hostile towards her. Her lips trembled and tears welled up in her eyes.

I didn’t think Fran was actually going to kill her, but...

“Hmph...”

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she was so angry that she couldn’t hold back her murderous intent. Was it my job to stop her? Or my duty as a sword to *help* her kill once she’d made up her mind?

Fran, honey, you’re not really going to kill her, are you?

I’m... just scaring her.

Aah, of course. Still, she had such an aura of violence that I was actually worried for a second. I sighed with relief.

Just then, Carna stepped in between Fran and Dianne. "That's enough. Dianne, you are in the wrong here. Hearing what you said made my skin crawl. No more talking."

"A-ah..." Dianne stammered.

Wow. The young lady had reprimanded her own bodyguard while simultaneously protecting her from Fran. What's more, she stood within Fran's intimidating aura without flinching. This girl was pretty good.

"Hmph!" Fran scoffed as if annoyed, but I knew that she was impressed by Carna's courage.

"I truly apologize," said Carna. "I will make sure to reprimand Dianne later. She will not cause you any more grief. Please, will you withdraw your anger?"

Without a word, Fran switched off her intimidating aura and turned to Carna. This girl was special. Shera looked like she was about to faint after watching Dianne take a beating, but there wasn't a trace of fear on Carna's face. Even if she was bottling it up, she was doing a good job of it. Her apology was clearly an honest one, too.

"So," said Fran, "are you going to pay up or not?"

"About that: could we perhaps pay you later?"

"Hm?"

"We must take the money we have on hand with us to Thanal, you see."

Thanal? Fran wondered.

Uhh...

A city in the western region of Belioth, P.A. answered as I wracked my brain. *It is located near the Magic Academy.*

Ooh, I see.

"I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to cover our expenses if we handed you all our money now..." said Carna with a pleading look. Interesting. She was still trying to negotiate, even after Fran's display of intimidation.

I caught the twitch of a smile on Fran's face. With her frustrations at Dianne vented, all she had left was her interest in Carna. She was amused by the fact that Carna was so fearlessly negotiating with her.

"You've shown us how strong you are, and I know that I'll need quite a bit of money to employ your services. But this is all we have to offer for now. Will it be enough for you to accompany us to the next checkpoint?"

Carna handed Fran a leather pouch of gold coins, thirty thousand gold in total. Funny; she got the price just right. That was the rate you'd pay a B-Rank adventurer to protect you from low-level monsters. In fact, it might've been too much if you considered the power levels of Carna and her companions and whether they would set up camp for us. Did she know that?

Either way, Fran took a definite liking to her. "All right. In exchange..."

"Of course. She won't badmouth you any longer."

"Hm. I'll take it."

"Thank you so much!"

But how would things shake out on the road? I smelled nothing but trouble. Still, Fran had taken the job and it was my duty to support her.

The sun had set by the time Fran and Carna finished their exchange. Talking with them had taken more time than expected. In the end, we decided to set up camp.

Camping here should be fine since we won't end up blocking the side paths.

"Hm."

The path to the peak wasn't a one-way trail; instead, it branched off to connect to different locations. One of them even led to Raydoss. Of course, it was defended by guards and watchtowers, so you couldn't just go there freely.

Once we decided on a camping spot, we made a wall out of land magic and set up a barrier around the perimeter. It'd be enough to keep anything short of wyverns out.

Dianne and Shera were shocked to see Fran's barrier.

“S-such powerful magic...”

“Impossible...!”

They knew she was a strong fighter, but they weren’t expecting such powerful magic from her. Carna and the others gasped when they saw the ten-meter walls surrounding us. Honestly, it probably shocked them more than seeing Jet at full size.

The atmosphere wasn’t as rancid as I’d expected. Dianne’s spirit was completely shattered and Shera was still afraid, so neither of them talked much. As for Carna, she was actively making conversation with Fran.

After setting up camp, Dianne and Shera sat a reasonable distance away from Fran and Jet, concealing their presence. They watched Carna sit right next to Fran, who was eating curry and smacking her lips. That got her a death glare from Shera, but Carna didn’t complain about the so-called “scraps” she got from Fran. Sure, the food looked a little rustic, but it was made of well-spiced monster meat. Pretty much on the level of fine dining, in spite of its appearance.

Carna ate her shish kebabs off the skewer with relish. Her cheerful expression seemed genuine. “You’re an adventurer, correct?”

“Hm?”

“I think we are the same age. Are there other adventurers like you?”

“Hm... yeah.”

“I see. Umm, why did you choose to become an adventurer?”

Despite Dianne’s prejudice against adventurers, Carna was interested in them. Were they rare where she came from? Adventurers had guilds in pretty much every town, so maybe she’d just grown up super sheltered. Then again, maybe not—she was pretty proficient with magic and didn’t complain about camping out. In fact, she seemed a reliable sort.

“To get stronger,” said Fran.

“Stronger? Couldn’t you have done that as a knight or a soldier?”

“They don’t take kids.”

“I see. But isn’t it hard being an adventurer?”

“Why do you say that?” Fran was genuinely puzzled.

“It must be incredibly difficult to become stronger at our age.”

“Well, I... became an adventurer so I could get stronger. That’s why I don’t think getting hurt and fighting strong opponents is difficult.”

“I-I see...”

Carna turned away from Fran as if to avoid the intensity of her piercing gaze. Their worlds were just too different. Maybe they could come to an understanding, but it wasn’t going to happen overnight.

The days Fran spent adventuring must’ve seemed like hell on earth to Carna, but they were irreplaceable for Fran. On the flip side, Fran couldn’t understand Carna, either. Even girls born to a good home had private pain known only to themselves.

That was true of every person, when you got down to it.

“An adventurer’s job is to defeat monsters and bandits, correct? They protect merchants and travelers, too.”

“Hm? No.”

“Oh? It isn’t?”

Wait, huh? Even I was surprised by this.

But Fran had a more concrete ideal of adventurers than I thought.

“An adventurer’s job is to go adventuring.”

“Adventuring?”

“Yeah. An adventurer goes on adventures.”

"But what about catching thieves and hunting monsters? Don't adventurers do that too?"

"We do. I was just trying to catch a bounty called Theraclede in the last town I was in."

Dianne reacted strongly to Fran's words. "Theraclede...!" Her eyes widened as she spoke the name.

"Heard of him?"

"I... Yes. Yes, I've heard stories..."

There was an immediate tension in the air. Theraclede was downright notorious, so Dianne had probably heard the horror stories.

"Hmm?" Fran tilted her head but didn't press the issue. Instead, she returned her attention to Carna. "Capturing bounties is supposed to be the knights' and soldiers' job."

"W-well, I suppose you could put it like that."

"We only take up the job because they won't do it."

Most adventurers probably wouldn't agree with Fran here. To her, the ideal adventuring life was one filled with combat, taking on haunts and dungeons whenever possible, while eradicating bandits and monsters for public safety was a knight's job. But that was where the line started to blur. They couldn't fight monsters both inside and outside of the dungeons, and the same could be said for bandits.

Carna was surprised by what Fran said, but Dianne was the one who reacted most strongly.

Dianne was downright glaring at Fran now. "B-but protecting the weak is the duty of the strong!"

"Is it?"

"Yes! With power comes responsibility!"

"Hmm. I don't get it."

“Dianne...” Carna warned.

But Dianne kept going. “You have all that strength! Don’t you care at all about the weak? Won’t you try to save someone who is in danger?!”

“I do. That’s why I saved you.”

“But you said you didn’t understand...”

“Hm? I saved you because I wanted to. That’s all. I would’ve tried to help you even if I thought *I* was weak. Do you only help people because you think you’re strong? Would you abandon them if you thought you were weak?”

“Th-that’s...”

“Do knights only help people if it’s their job? If someone gets attacked in front of you, do you ignore them?”

“That’s not...! The red knights—”

“Quiet, Dianne!”

Dianne’s face paled at Carna’s reprimand. “But...! I-I apologize...”

It was a difficult question. I didn’t like thinking about the responsibilities of power. On one hand, you could say that the weak wanted to take advantage of the strong... but on the other hand, wasn’t that exactly what a strongman drunk with power would say?

Fran didn’t think about it too much. If she saw someone in trouble, she would step in to help them without thinking. In her own words, she helped because she wanted to. That was all. If the person in question turned out to be annoying, she could either abandon them afterwards or ask for an exorbitant payment for her help.

This was one of the stark differences between adventurers and knights. Knights were effectively a class that lived off taxes. They had rights and responsibilities that went with it, all of which were drilled into their heads when they enlisted... well, when their heads weren’t rotten like August, lieutenant of the former brigade in Alessa.

But no one could truly be motivated by a motto like “Earn your keep!” There was no honor in that, which was probably why knights said things like “save the weak” or

“serve justice” instead. *Those* were a lot more motivating.

Of course, get a little too invested in those concepts, and you wound up with knights like Dianne.

Unlike knights, adventurers were self-centered. Whatever power they had was theirs to begin with and so they were free to use it for their own purposes.

“Not to take Dianne’s side,” said Carna, “but I hear that some adventurers do take part in criminal activities.”

“There’s a lot of trash on the knight and noble side too, isn’t there? Or is your country completely innocent?”

“That’s... yes. You’re right. There are bad eggs even among knights and nobles.” Carna nodded deeply. Something that Fran said had struck a chord inside her. For a rich girl like her to be traveling with such a small party... I was sure she had her reasons. “So, you adventurers—”

“Hm.”

Carna pelted Fran with questions about adventurers until they fell asleep.

It was the day after we saved Carna and her crew.

“There. I see the checkpoint.”

“Already? Now, *that* was quick.”

“Hm. Jet is amazing.”

We’d resumed our journey at sunrise and reached the Belioth checkpoint in under two hours. Jet carried everyone, though he ran slower than usual so our clients wouldn’t get motion sickness. Still, he got us there in record time.

We eliminated any monsters that got in our way during the journey, but we didn’t waste time with anything else: Carna and the others’ safety was top priority. Fran had taken up the task of protecting her, so we were going to do it perfectly.

“We’ll get off now. Don’t wanna cause a scene.”

“Very well.”

As for Dianne and Shera, they’d been pale throughout the trip.

“I’ve... never seen such an obedient monster before.”

“M-me neither. I didn’t think it was possible.”

As friendly as Jet was, he did still happen to be a giant monster. And in Dianne’s case, she’d angered Fran the day before. No wonder she didn’t want to make any sudden movements or statements around Fran’s buddy.

Shera, well aware of Fran’s strength and wanting to keep any further conflicts at bay, stuck by Dianne the whole time. We had her to thank for the peaceful nature of the trip.

“Let’s get going.”

“Hm.” Fran took the lead as they went inside the checkpoint. Hopefully we’d be able to pass the strict inspection.

The Belioth checkpoint was about the size of the one in Granzell. The fortress was made to withstand both monsters and enemy states.

Archers aimed their bows at us from inside the fortress, a countermeasure against spies and enemy soldiers disguised as travelers. Still, they didn’t draw attention to themselves, so Fran and I just ignored them.

“Halt! Are you a group of four?”

“Hm.”

“I’ll need to see your identification.”

“All right.”

“Very well.”

Fran and Carna obediently gave the guard their papers. As always, the guard was shocked by Fran's adventurer card, though he still allowed her to enter after verifying its authenticity. Being a high-rank adventurer had its perks. Belioth had no reason for denying access to powerful adventurers. If anything, they could probably use more of them.

"And you're a party of three?" asked the guard. "Did you enter from a different checkpoint?"

"We hired Fran yesterday as our guide and bodyguard."

"Morley Trade Association, eh? Can't say I've heard of it."

"We're a rather minor association."

"The daughter of the association head and her two servants, eh?" The guard seemed suspicious of Carna and company. On top of that, was she really the daughter of some trade association's leader? I guess it made sense—she did have the guts you often found in a good merchant. But that gutsiness didn't take away the graceful aura around her.

Maybe that gracefulness was the problem. The heiress to a large trade association might behave like a highborn, but this guard was used to checking travelers' credentials, and he had seen a lot of people come and go. Wouldn't someone from such a minor organization be rougher around the edges? Maybe not if she was raised in a strict environment. Still...

Dianne, too, was a mystery. She had called herself a knight, but her Class showed up as Swordsman. She was only a knight on paper—could a bodyguard working for a trade association really call herself something like that? Sure, maybe she just admired knights and wanted to model herself after them. Great. But all that talk about the Knights of the Crimson Flag and the Red Knights got awfully specific for some affectation.

Maybe they'd dismissed her, leading Dianne to bounce back with a job working at a trade association. But if that was the case, why would she still call herself a knight?

Teacher, what's wrong with Carna and the others?

Hmm... We'll have to watch and see what happens.

Okay.

If push came to shove, we'd deny any affiliation. We wouldn't be able to move freely in Belioth if they suspected Fran of being a spy.

"Base of operations?"

"A Granzellian harbor, Dars."

"Name of current head?"

"Raymond Morley."

"Destination in Belioth?"

"Special autonomous region."

"Hrm..." The immigration officer had a lie-detecting Skill. It wasn't high-level, but it was enough to give him a sense of unease when someone was trying to put one over on him. Even though the Skill hadn't reacted, he clearly couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about Carna's crew. His well-honed professional instincts contradicted both his own Skill and the veracity of their identification.

But I kept Essence of Falsehood on, too, and Carna hadn't lied so far. Was she *really* the heiress of a Granzellian trade association? We had been to Dars before. It was a port town located in the northern region of Granzell.

The officer was now discussing the matter with his superior in hushed tones. I could hear them loud and clear.

"What should we do?"

"That girl is a Granzellian adventurer, right?"

"Yes."

"The fact that she has employed a Granzellian adventurer basically means the Adventurers' Guild is vouching for her. Besides, she's headed to the special autonomous region. It shouldn't be a problem."

“Are you sure?”

“Given their destination... yes, I’m sure. Just don’t forget to verify whether she actually went there.”

“Yes, sir!”

Wait, had Carna just played us? If you brought an adventurer along as a bodyguard, anyone would assume that you hired them at the guild for a quest. That meant you would be someone verified by the guild.

Maybe it’d be overstating it to say that she’d tricked us, but Carna had definitely used some of her cunning.

The four of them passed the border without further questioning. There was nothing more that could be done, really. Immigration had also let her through because she was headed for the special autonomous area, which was treated as its own sovereign state within Belioth. Effectively, that made it the Academy’s problem.

We walked for a while after leaving the checkpoint. Fran turned to Carna and signaled to Dianne and Shera, who were trailing behind them.

“This is the end of the contract,” said Fran.

“Yes. Thank you for keeping us safe. And Jet was so quick in getting us to the checkpoint that we are ahead of schedule.”

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Is Dianne a knight?” Fran had been curious too. She just hadn’t brought it up at the checkpoint to avoid further questions.

“Yes... yes, she is. Do you wish to know where I come from?”

“Hm? Not really.”

“What?”

“Adventurers aren’t interested in the past.”

Different people became adventurers for different reasons, often abandoning their past. Prying into another adventurer’s earlier life was forbidden. This spirit seemed to have rubbed off on Fran after spending time with adventurers. That said, she was never one to be fussy about another person’s background.

“But I am worried.”

“Worried?”

“Dianne said that she was a knight and she dresses like one, too.”

This wasn’t going to be the last time Carna’s identity would come into question. Fran was simply worried about her. She had taken a liking to this wily little girl.

“Aah, I see...” said Carna. “She is not my vassal, strictly speaking. Rather, she is a servant I borrowed from my father. I asked her to leave her armor and dress like an adventurer, but she wouldn’t have it.”

With her strong prejudice against adventurers, I wouldn’t expect her to. It would be like telling Fran to dress up like a Blue Cat. She’d rather die.

“And although she is unaccommodating and narrow-minded,” Carna continued, “she is competent in her own right. A woman with her might is hard to find.”

As problematic as Dianne’s personality was, having a strong female bodyguard was important to Carna.

“Thank you for keeping quiet at the checkpoint,” Carna said, bowing deeply once again.

If Fran had said something during their interview, Carna and the others would’ve been in trouble. Dianne’s suspect credentials, the fact that Fran was hired *after* crossing the border, the fact that the last set of travelers had crossed Granzell’s checkpoint five days ago... there were all kinds of things Fran could’ve pointed out to bring suspicion on Carna and her party.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Fran.

Carna chuckled. “We were very fortunate to have met you. I hope to see you again.”

“Hm. See you around.”

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways without looking back; we’d let them go, and there was no taking it back.

After they left, I asked Fran a question that had been bothering me. *Why were you so interested in Carna?*

Carna wasn’t exactly a bad person, but she was cunning enough for us to be cautious around her. She hired Fran because she saw it would help her get past immigration and she’d managed to squeeze out a discount. Not exactly the most endearing qualities.

Now that I thought about it, she might’ve even let Dianne’s outburst go on for a while on purpose. What if she was trying to figure out what kind of person Fran was?

You know that she was using you, right?

“Hm. But she didn’t trick me.”

I guess you could say that, but...

“We’re the same age.”

Now that you mention it, yeah.

Was that it? But apparently, Fran had an even bigger reason for liking Carna.

“She didn’t look down on Black Cats.”

I see.

“Hm. And yes, Dianne did look down on adventurers... but not on Black Cats.”

Everyone we had met on our travels—even the ones we’d become friends with—had always been shocked when they met the Black Cat girl. Their shock came in two flavors. Most of them were surprised to see a little girl coming from the weakest of the races, a Black Cat, leading the life of an adventurer. The others were not just shocked at Fran being a Black Cat, but also taken aback by just how strong she was.

No matter their intentions, both groups still looked down on Black Cats. It seemed like common sense to them that the race wasn't cut out for fighting, and that brought Fran a lot of grief. But Carna, Dianne, and Shera hadn't said a word about Black Cats being weak. They looked down on her because she was a little girl and an adventurer, but that was it. And Carna? She didn't seem fazed by Fran's race, age, or identity. If anything, she respected her for it.

"Carna's interesting. She should be an adventurer."

Huh? That was high praise coming from Fran. It was the equivalent of a high-ranking noble telling a commoner that the land would experience peace and prosperity if they were to become a noble too.

"Carna's weak."

She's about as strong as she can get for a low-level mage.

"But she wasn't scared of me. I can't underestimate her."

When strong adventurers met, they often measured each other's strength in their minds. Their wills clashed, and they calculated one another's power with a dance of feints. To the untrained eye, two adventurers might appear to be about to draw their weapons and kill one another, but no grudges were held after this little ritual. In fact, the adventurers might find someone they could treat as an equal if the other was strong enough.

Fran and Carna had engaged in something like this adventurer's greeting. There was something in Carna—something other than her combat prowess—that managed to strike a chord in Fran's heart. They were the same age, and Carna didn't scorn her for being a Black Cat or an adventurer. She had shown no fear, even after seeing what Fran was capable of. I found the girl quite the specimen.

"Carna's interesting."

As long as you're okay with it, Fran.

"Hm!" She'd taken a liking to her, and that was the end of that discussion.

When she could no longer feel Carna and the others, Fran rode Jet again. We were far enough from the border now that he could fly at full speed without drawing attention.

We're about five days away from the Magic Academy.

"Jet can get us there sooner."

"Woof!"

True, but it was our first time in Belioth. We could afford to make a few stops.

Anything you want to do?

"Eat local delicacies."

"Bark, bark!"

That's one option.

We would also need to check in with the Adventurers' Guild and see if we could get up to speed on the latest news, especially regarding relations between Granzell and Raydoss. I didn't want to get dragged into a war, and I was ready to forcefully divert Fran's course if it meant we could avoid it.

"Is there anything else?"

"Arf?"

Adults... really have lots to think about.

"Ooh, I see."

It was best to keep Jet at a less than giant size. We wouldn't want any rumors cropping up.

In the end, Jet turned into the size of a pony and we made our way to a nearby village. There was apparently a decent-sized town some distance past it, but the village itself didn't yield much. I'd thought a place so close to the border would at least have an inn, but it turned out to be a sleepy farming town.

The local guild branch was run by a kindly old man who used to be an E-Rank. He told us a lot for the price of a meal, including some info about a great lake near a large town that was about an hour away. Most travelers skipped the village entirely and headed

straight there.

A lakeside town.

“Can’t wait.”

You’ve never seen a big lake, have you?

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

This wouldn’t be Fran and Jet’s first encounter with a lake—there were small ones throughout Granzell. But this one would be different. We wouldn’t be able to see the other side of it. It was probably the size of Lake Biwa back in Japan... maybe even larger.

“Come on, Jet!”

“Woof, woof!”

Hey now, the lake’s not going anywhere.

“But there’s fish!”

“Woof!”

The old man also mentioned that the town was famous for its large freshwater fish. Maybe there’d be carp? Would freshwater fish work with curry? Carp curry, eel curry... did people make those back home? I remembered getting them as souvenirs, but I wasn’t sure. Fish curry was popular in India, I knew, but the curry I made was Japanese.

Now, Fran, there may be some ingredients that don’t go well with curry.

“Don’t worry. Curry is the best. It makes everything in it taste good.”

Fran’s faith in curry was fanatical. I’d have to step up to the plate and make some good freshwater fish curry!

As I thought about recipes, Jet ran gleefully through the air. Jeez, didn't he know he could take his time? As if ignoring my plea on purpose, Jet reached our destination lickety-split.

"I see it. The big puddle."

It's a lake.

"It's like the sea."

No, it's a lake.

The first thing we saw in the distance was the town of Kierlazen. It seemed small, but only because it was dwarfed by the lake. Its magnificence became clearer as we got closer.

There was a square with a statue of the water spirit in the middle of the town, overlooking the lake. The Maiden of the Lake, they called it, and it was a popular tourist attraction... not that Fran had any interest in it. The town's buildings were also painted white to match the beauty of the lake, earning it its nickname.

The view of the city, the lake, and the statue rivaled the beauty of any maiden. Sunlight reflected off the water's surface, splashing the lake's blue color upon the white buildings next to it. The play of light and color was electric. Small fishing boats cruised across the great lake, giving us a glimpse at the honest work of fishermen.

"It's huge..."

"Woof..."

Even the gluttonous duo couldn't help but stare. I was glad that the beautiful sight had touched Fran's heart. They sat and stared, mouths agape, although it didn't last for more than a minute.

"Fish."

"Woof!"

Okay, okay. Let's get to town.

“Hm.”

Entry to Kierlazen went smoothly. There was a bit of a queue, but it didn’t take more than five minutes. I thought the war had discouraged people from traveling, but in fact there were a number of travelers who entered by way of boat through the lake. The land route was mostly used by merchants and adventurers.

Fran?

“Hm?”

Let’s take a break from getting food and go to the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Nom!”

It’s bad manners to talk with your mouth full.

I didn’t think she’d make a beeline for the food stalls thirty seconds into this town... yeah, sampling local foods was definitely on Fran’s itinerary now. Not good. We had money, but letting her eat whatever she wanted whenever she wanted couldn’t be good for her character. Still, at least she was guaranteed to leave no leftovers...

Hmm.

“What is it, Teacher?”

I was just thinking about your big appetite.

“Heh heh!”

Why did she look proud? Fran wouldn’t even flinch if I said she was cute. Was “big appetite” supposed to be a complement?

So what did you get?

“This.”

Ooh, fried fish.

The fish looked like a carp or a goldfish. Definitely freshwater. It was simply prepared;

first gutted and then fried. They didn't even bother scaling it.

How's it taste?

"Salty?"

That's... all?

"Bit muddy."

As was typical of under-prepared river fish. Even so, Fran continued munching on it.

"I like the crunchiness of it."

So you like the texture?

"Hm."

She enjoyed the mouthfeel of the fried scales. The texture made up for the lack of flavor.

After finishing it, Fran charged into the food stalls and bought another fried fish. As we walked away, she dug in.

"Wha—?"

Wh-what?

"This is good." Fran froze and widened her eyes. Apparently, she had just bit into a fried fish with actual flavor.

"Ruff! Nom nom..."

I guess you like it, too, Jet.

Fran had bought up all the fried fish this strip had to offer. But the one she'd liked looked pretty much the same as the rest—or at least it seemed like that to me. Still... if Fran and Jet said it was different, it must've been different.

Looks like you found a keeper. They must've prepped and seasoned it well.

“We’re going back!”

“Woof!”

Hey, wait!

Fran and Jet shot down the road we’d just gone through and went straight for a particular store. This must’ve been where she bought it.

The stall was almost deserted. It was old, too. The paint was peeling off the facade and the curtain was in tatters. Did its run-down look scare away customers? Or did it look run-down *because* it didn’t attract customers? Personally, I couldn’t blame anybody for avoiding the place.

“Oh, you’re back?”

The shopkeeper was a blonde girl, her hair done in half-pigtails. Her fluffy blonde hair and white skin suggested noble blood. And even though she fried fish for a living, her skin was free from the blemishes of sputtering oil.

But the girl’s looks weren’t enough to attract droves of customers. On her face was a black bandage that covered not one but both her eyes. Though beautiful, the blindfold concealed her beauty and gave her an air of strangeness. Fran, who didn’t care at all about such things, promptly ordered more fish.

“Hm! Your fish is the best. The smell doesn’t lie.”

“Woof!”

“Thank you.” The girl bowed slightly, giving Fran an easy smile.

Fran’s nose had led her to this food stall. Was it the frying oil? Maybe the girl was replacing the oil regularly instead of using the same batch.

“Give me all you’ve got.”

“Huh?”

“I want all of it.”

“Um... you want everything here?”

“Hm! And if you make more for me, I’ll buy those too.”

Come on, Fran. You can’t go buying the entire stall’s stock. That’s bad for business.

Sales weren’t the only thing necessary for a shop to survive. They had specialty and regular customers to satisfy. Selling out all the time might actually hurt their standing.

But the girl was more than happy to sell her whole stock.

“Thank you. I’ll get to frying them right away.”

The store wasn’t exactly buzzing with customers, so I supposed it made sense that she’d be happy to offload everything she had.

Still, she’s amazing.



I'd been worried about the girl's lack of vision, but she fried fish with the grace of a pro. Everything from the preparation of the fish to the time she lifted it out of the oil was perfect. And that wasn't all: upon receiving Fran's payment, she quickly sorted through the silver and bronze pieces and gave Fran her change.

I Identified her out of curiosity, and that answered my questions.

Name: Lene

Age: 24

Race: Human

Class: Cook

Status: Vision Loss

Level: 25

Life: 84, Magic: 101, Strength: 30, Agility: 41

Skills: Sharp Hearing 2, Wind Magic 4, Air Current Vision 2, Presence Sense 2, Staff Mastery 2, Echolocation 4, Water Magic 2, Cooking 4, Mana Manipulation.

Equipment: Evergreen Oak Short Staff, Water Spirit Clothes, Magic Blindfold, Magic Necklace.

She had Skills which compensated for her lack of vision. Judging by her Skill composition, she used to be a mage.

“Huh?”

Wait, had Lene's eyes just detected me somehow? But that shouldn't have been... Wait, had her Mana Vision told her that I was a magic sword?

I felt strange. It was as if she was looking through the sword right into my soul resting

within... but that couldn't be right.

Still, her other senses were definitely more acute to make up for her lack of sight. I made a note to be careful around her.

"Put it right on here."

"All right. That's a big plate."

"Hm."

Fran took out a large plate and Lene stacked her freshly fried fish on top of it.

Her hands did not hesitate and the fish showed no signs of toppling. Lene was definitely more aware of her surroundings than she let on. By the end, she'd made a tower of thirty fish stacked on top of each other.

"That's all of it."

"Hm! It looks great."

"Bark!"

"Thank you for buying them all," Lene said, extending her right hand.

Fran automatically took her hand and shook it, but Lene then put her left hand over hers and squeezed. She shook Fran's hand vigorously.

I know Lene was happy and all, but she was coming off as overly familiar. Fran didn't seem to mind, but I'd never seen such a friendly shopkeeper. Maybe she was simply ecstatic about all the fish she'd just sold.

"This is the first time I've ever had someone buy up all my fish!"

"Hm. I'll be back."

"Thank you. I'll see you soon."

We left Lene's stall, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she was watching us the whole time.

No... am I imagining things?

“Teacher?”

Fran, do you get the feeling that we’re being watched?

“Hrm...?”

“Arf...?”

Fran and Jet immediately took up a defensive position, but they soon tilted their heads in confusion. Try as they might, they could detect nothing. Maybe it really *was* just me.

Sorry. I must have imagined it.

“Hm?”

“Arf?”

Let’s get back on track and head to the Adventurers’ Guild.

“All right.”

But even as we were walking to the guild, I couldn’t get the girl with the blindfold out of my head.

I wonder if that girl noticed when I used Identify.

“Lene?”

Yeah. I could’ve just imagined it, but I couldn’t bring myself to shake the feeling.

“She’s amazing if she did.”

After our intensive training in the Garden, our stealth and concealment abilities were greatly enhanced. I’d learned how to suppress the activation of Identify, and I was confident that you’d need a high level Identify Sense yourself to notice when I used it. Even Amanda needed to focus in order to notice, and that manifested less as a certainty and more as a hunch that someone might be peeking.

From what I could tell, Lene wasn't that strong. Although her senses were sharpened, her movements were little more than amateurish and her magic was on the weak side. Honestly, someone at her level shouldn't have been able to sense me. She didn't have any Identify-detecting Skills, her stats were low, and she lacked the intuition and senses of a veteran. Or so I'd thought, but—

There goes my confidence.

After all that training in the Demon Wolf's Garden, too. It wasn't like I forgot what Dias told me. He'd warned me about not Identifying royalty since it could very well turn into lese-majesty, though he hadn't told me to *never* use Identify. It was more like he wanted me to use it properly.

Sticking to his advice, I'd been practicing and using Identify only on easy targets I knew I'd get away with. Lene was an anomaly. Still, maybe it'd be a good idea for me to hold back on Identifying humans for a while.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, the Adventurers' Guild banner came into view.

"Excuse me."

"Welcome to the Adventurers' Guild!" We were welcomed into the Kierlazen guild by a lady with a bright smile. She seemed honest and guileless, if a bit absentminded. The receptionist didn't condescend to Fran, putting her squarely in Fran's good books. "Don't suppose you're here for a quest?"

"I'm here to look them up, yeah."

"I knew you were an adventurer. Running solo?"

"Hm."

"Really? How odd."

"What is?"

"You're not affiliated with the Trade Fleet, are you?"

"Trade Fleet?"

“I take it you’re not from around here.”

“Hm.”

“Okay. You see—”

The receptionist proceeded with her explanation. The Trade Fleet was an armada of ships operating on Lake Vivian (which was the name of the giant lake).

Lake Vivian was bigger than most small countries and was home to all manner of large towns and cities. The Trade Fleet regularly went about these population centers, doing a variety of jobs: buying and selling local goods, transporting adventurers and travelers, fishing in the dangerous lake center, and processing materials. They also ran a circus and hired minstrels for entertainment, and even employed physicians who performed regular checkups.

“All those people can fit on a ship?”

“Ah, but there’s more than one ship. That’s why they call it a fleet.”

“So there’s lots of ships?”

“You bet. I don’t know the exact number, but there are more than ten large vessels and over fifty small and medium-sized ones.”

“Wow.”

That was amazing. The Trade Fleet probably had more people than a village. I’d assumed they were just a merchant caravan on water, but their scale was vaster than that.

“Apparently, they’ve been sailing the lake for hundreds of years.”

“Really? Who started the fleet?” asked Fran.

“This is where things get interesting. Now I don’t know the details of the matter, but they say that Lake Vivian used to be a sea.”

“A sea turned into a lake?”

A sea...? No way. Maybe it was a lake so big it was once mistaken for a sea, right? Or maybe it'd been connected with the sea once...?

"It used to be a small lake, but one day it merged with the sea to become the great lake you see today. Vivian was the name of the original lake, and that name stuck."

"How'd that happen?"

"I'm sketchy on the details, but there were some natural disasters involved. In the process, it was somehow cut off from the sea and became the giant lake we have now."

What on earth could cut off a lake from the sea? Even if it was a natural disaster, it had to be one of extraordinary scale.

"The merchant ships which were stuck on the lake then banded together to protect themselves from monsters and formed the Trade Fleet. Or so the fleet's merchants say."

"They've been on the lake this whole time?"

"They can't exactly leave their ships behind, right? Might as well make the best of it."

Ships were expensive to build. A single ship could cost a fortune; it could easily be worth more than its cargo. Effectively stranded, the captains of these ships, whether or not they owned the vessels themselves, had no choice but to stay.

But they still had to work in order to live. They were apparently decent enough people not to turn to piracy—though maybe that was just due to a lack of prey—and they set up ports in the surrounding villages to start trading.

Transportation, fishing, protection, entertainment, trade, healthcare. They figured out a lot of ways of making money, all of which led to the Trade Fleet of today.

"Lots of adventurers get their start on the Trade Fleet," she said. "Transportation is a safe job and they can learn a lot from their seniors."

Hmm. So the rookie adventurers near Lake Vivian usually started by working the Trade Fleet, huh?

"There should be a lot of adventurers your age on the fleet."

“Wow.”

Places with a lot of child adventurers were quite rare. But with the lower risk to life and helpful mentors around, the fleet sounded like a decent workplace.

“The fleet would be more than happy to welcome you,” she said.

“Really?”

“Think about it. Doing adventurers favors while they’re still developing can be a great boon for them in the long run. They can always use defenders on deck, and their endorsement will be valuable down the line.”

“I see.”

We probably didn’t need to board the Trade Fleet, but I did want to see it once. I think Fran felt the same way, too.

“Where can I see the Trade Fleet from?” she asked.

“Oh, did I pique your interest?”

“Hm.”

“Let me think. The main fleet should be in the eastern part of the lake this time of year, though I can’t tell you its precise location. The sub fleets make their rounds once a week.”

“Sub fleets?”

“Fleets made of smaller ships. They regularly go around the lake villages. Unlike the main fleet, which sticks to a predetermined route, they go wherever their quests take them.”

I assumed they were composed of smaller merchant vessels with good maneuverability. Still, it was interesting that the main fleet was due east, given that this town was located dead south of the lake. If the main fleet was to the east, it’d be right in our path on the way to the Magic Academy. Sure, the Magic Academy was far from the lake, but the special autonomous region still had dealings with it. Maybe we’d behold some mighty boats!

“Did you come from Granzell by yourself?”

“Hm. How’d you know?”

“Well, it’s not like there are any adventurers in Raydoss. Foreign adventurers mostly come in from Granzell.”

“I see.”

“I’ve never seen anyone your age run solo, but I think you’d be perfect for the Trade Fleet. Stick with them for a year and you’ll be a decent adventurer.”

“Hm? I don’t want to.”

“But I thought you were interested?”

“Just to see some big boats.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. Still, I highly recommend it, especially with how low the risk of death is. There’s a guild branch on the Trade Fleet, too, so you can rank up as you go.”

A guild branch on a ship? That was something. The fleet was more than a mobile trade association. It was like a moving town!

“G- and F-Rank kids can rank up in a year. With their accumulated knowledge of adventurer development, they’ll get you there in no time.”

They must assign you jobs appropriate for your current abilities as an adventurer. That sounded like a good system, given how other guild branches tended to have a high mortality rate when it came to children. You might end up getting attached to the Trade Fleet in the long run, but all the connections you’d made in the area would also benefit you if you planned to work nearby.

“So won’t you consider it? I can write you a letter of recommendation.”

“No thanks.”

“Trust me, you’re not the first girl to be this stubborn. I really think you should go for it.”

“No thanks.”

“Oh, come on! It’ll be good for you, I promise. You should at least check it out.”

“Well... can I get stronger there?” Fran asked, yielding to the receptionist’s persistence. She knew she meant well and didn’t hold it against her. The least she could do was humor her.

“Of course. You can get to about F-Rank in a year or so.”

The receptionist continued her explanation, but Fran was only interested in one thing. Not effective leveling techniques, not hidden farming spots—none of that.

“Not F,” she said. “Higher. Like A.” That was the only thing that mattered to her.

“I don’t think so. Most adventurers who reach high B- or A-Rank leave the fleet. But I hear the fleet’s made a lot of C-Ranks.”

“Then I think I’ll be fine, thanks.”

“Why’s that?”

“Here.” Fran handed her adventurer’s card to the receptionist, who still thought she was a rookie.

“Huh...? I thought these things were supposed to be black...”

G- and F-Rank cards were copper. E- and D-Rank cards were black. C- and B-Rank cards were silver. The receptionist was so used to servicing D-Ranks and below that she didn’t know what to make of Fran’s card.

“Huh?! I-it’s real? It is! It’s absolutely real! This thing’s real!”

“You’re being loud.”

The receptionist started screaming after she verified Fran’s card. She stood before her, petrified. “M-m-my deepest apologies! I’m sorry if I said anything to offend you!”

“Hm?”

“I’m so sorry!”

What, did the receptionist think Fran was some kind of gang boss? She was terrified of Fran, and this time Fran hadn’t even done anything scarily strong. Now that was a first.

“Warararagh...!” She was so panicked now that she couldn’t form a sentence.

A few minutes after the chaos started, I sensed someone approaching the desk from inside the guild. A man in fine clothing with slicked-back silver hair stepped toward us. Was this the Guildmaster? He definitely had the build of an adventurer.

“What’s going on out here?” he demanded.

“Awawawargh... Guildmaster!”

“H-hey! What’s gotten into you! Get off me!”

“I’ve embarrassed us all!”

“What the hell is going on?!”

Five minutes later...

“I apologize for the trouble our idiot gave you.”

In his office, the Guildmaster bowed his head. Despite his polished appearance, his speech was lax and casual. Nevertheless, the aura he emitted was that of a high-rank adventurer.

“We don’t get many high ranks in these parts,” he continued. “Seeing a foreign B-Rank was bound to freak her out. She’s used to handling rookies, you see. Honestly, today’s episode wasn’t as bad as last year’s.”

“Not enough high ranks? What if some strong monsters show up?”

“They usually don’t. In the event that they do, I either deal with it myself or we file a quest with the Trade Fleet.”

The fleet itself went on its predetermined routes, but they could send boats out which would arrive in a few days. Those were the sub fleets the receptionist mentioned.

When faced with an overwhelming emergency, town adventurers did what they could while waiting for backup from the Trade Fleet. This was the driving motivation for many of the local high ranks working there. They only stopped by the individual towns for contract work.

"There aren't many adventurers above B around these parts."

"How come?"

"At that point, most of them just move on. Most of the quests here don't suit their rank."

C-Rank was considered high in this region. The Guildmaster dealt with those adventurers most of the time, further limiting the receptionist's experience with high-rank adventurers. No wonder she freaked out the way she did.

"Speaking of which, we've been seeing fewer adventurers of late," the Guildmaster continued. "I'm in the middle of talks with the Trade Fleet to see if they can't install a permanent mid-rank adventurer in town."

"Wait... what happened?"

"As you can see, a lot of adventurers just never come back. This isn't the most dangerous area, so they may have simply let their guard slip while out on the road... but I'm sure there are other reasons, too. You can't afford to get complacent out there."

More and more adventurers were taking on quests only to never be seen again, for reasons unknown. Whatever the cause, it seemed wise to stay on our toes. No wonder the Guildmaster seemed so tired.

"So, what's on your schedule, Fran?" he asked. "You actually planning to check out the Trade Fleet like the dingus said?"

"Hm... I'm interested, but there's somewhere I need to be. Maybe next time."

"All right. It's an honor to have you in our midst, Black Lightning Princess."

"You knew?"

The Guildmaster laughed. “There isn’t a single Guildmaster on this continent who doesn’t know you, Fran. Old Dias had his eye on you, and we learned a lot about you during your B-Rank promotion hearing.”

For an adventurer to be promoted to high rank, they needed the recommendation of a Guildmaster as well as the approval of the Guildmasters from other branches. The guild’s top brass would definitely know about Fran by now.

“Never thought I’d get to see you in person, though...” he mused. “You’re really a Black Cat? I’ve never had Strength Sense ping that hard in a long time. I used to be a B-Rank, ya see.” The Guildmaster was strong, but Fran’s rank seemed like false advertising considering her current strength. He gave her a once-over and broke into a wry smile.

“I came here for information about Belioth,” she said.

“Ah. I’m guessing you just reached Belioth by way of Granzell?”

“Hm. How does Belioth do with the other countries?”

“Let’s see. To start, Belioth and Granzell are more or less on neutral terms.”

Both kingdoms shared borders with the militaristic empire of Raydoss and had never really clashed with each other. If one fell, the other would soon become Raydoss’ target, so they worked with each other while still maintaining a reasonable distance. This relationship had existed for a long time.

“What the people at the top want,” he said, “is for Granzell and Raydoss to destroy each other. They’d really rake it in, then. But they also know this is unrealistic, if not borderline impossible.”

The ambition of Belioth’s nobles was kept in check by the constant threat of Raydoss. Even if war broke out, the kingdom would still be at relative peace.

It reminded me of the Three Kingdoms period in China, from back in my past life. During that time, the master strategist Zhuge Liang proposed the Longzhong Plan to his lord, Liu Bei. The plan involved three rivaling kingdoms keeping each other in constant check, thereby creating stability. Here, in northern Jillbird, those three kingdoms were Granzell, Raydoss, and Belioth.

“Granzell’s been through rough times recently, but they’ll be all right—at the very

least, they're not going down anytime soon. Besides, Belioth wouldn't want that."

Just because Granzell and Belioth spied on each other didn't mean they wanted each other's destruction.

"Sooner or later, Belioth will probably *help* Granzell. Behind closed doors, of course."

"I see. What about Raydoss?"

"Them? Bad as ever."

They had been fighting for hundreds of years and public sentiment towards them was the lowest in recorded history. Frankly, most people downright thought of them as an enemy.

"But as for whether Raydoss would invade," he continued, "that doesn't seem likely."

"Why's that?"

"Because of the special autonomous region."

The special autonomous region housed the Magic Academy. It was located in western Belioth, an area Raydoss would have to traverse in order to invade.

"Belioth wouldn't just *give* someone all that land—not even a legendary high elf. In a way, the autonomous region is Belioth's breakwater. And as head of the region, Lady Winalene's made a lot of deals and treaties with Belioth."

"Treaties?"

"I don't know the details, but the government has dibs on any innovations made by the Magic Academy with military applications. In case of emergencies, Winalene herself will also engage in combat."

Which gave Winalene a lot of privileges with the kingdom.

"Autonomy over the special region is her number one privilege. Tax exemptions, the right to deny criminal extradition... you name it, she can do it. She also has the authority to intervene in matters related to Lake Vivian."

“The high elf owns the lake?”

“Not quite, but she has the right to speak out on developments around it. The lake is home to a spirit, after all... and it’s not a spirit you want to piss off unless you want to risk destroying the whole kingdom. Winalene’s basically on watch duty to keep that from happening.”

“A spirit that can destroy a kingdom?”

We had heard the story of Klimt’s wind Greater Spirit before. Maybe this one was a water Greater Spirit. Yeah, you *really* didn’t want to piss one of those things off. When the wind Greater Spirit had unleashed its power, it had destroyed a small country.

“The Trade Fleet complains about her all the time. Every time they want to set up a new trade route or build a new ship, they have to send a notice to the autonomous region.”

No one knew whether or not the spirit actually lived in the lake. But High Elf Winalene said that it did, and everyone took her word for it.

“Unless they want to upset the high elf,” said the Guildmaster, “they’re not going to call her a liar anytime soon.”

CHAPTER 2

LAKE VIVIAN

“THIS THE PLACE?”

I think so. You picking up anything, Jet?

“Arf?”

I guess detecting plants is gonna be hard.

“Ruff...”

We had accepted a quest from the Guildmaster of Kierlazen to gather necroweed.

The Adventurers' Guild here had a special system in place. Quests put up by one branch could be picked up at another, and the quest could be fulfilled at other guilds too. This was limited to collection quests and the like, but still—convenient!

We had the Trade Fleet to thank for this novelty. They'd pick up the items and ferry them over to the original branch, apparently with smaller vessels from their sub fleet.

The necroweed grew on the lakebed. Collecting it was quite difficult because of the surrounding monsters. Once we gathered the necroweed, all we needed to do was to turn it in at the nearest town and they'd transport it to Kierlazen.

We'll get a better picture once we get in. I'll put up a wind barrier. You two watch out for monsters.

“Got it.”

“Woof!”

Here goes.

We dove into the lake and were greeted by a stunningly beautiful sight.

The great lake had excellent visibility due to the sheer clarity of the water, maybe because it was from a fantasy world untouched by the pollution of modern-day civilization. Green seaweed grew on the lakebed, dancing slowly in the current. Colorful flowers surrounded us.

In my past life, I had once seen the white water-crowfoot, a plant whose white flowers bloomed underwater. These were similar, but the flowers were so much larger that they looked like the plants you'd find on the surface.

Schools of fish swam over the green carpet; shrimp and turtles peeked out from between the flowers along with unfamiliar creatures that must've been unique to this world. Sunlight refracted through the water's surface, casting a swaying, gentle light over everything. The flickering light gave the scene a dreamlike quality.

We were so taken by the lake's beauty that for a moment we forgot it was still home to dangerous monsters.

This is amazing.

Hm.

Woof.

It was beautiful indeed if it could take Fran's breath away... but our reverie didn't last long.

“Kyaaaar!”

Tsk. Looks like we have a guest.

The lake's high visibility meant that we could see the local predators.

It's a huge lizard.

It's called a crocodile!

I said that pretty confidently, but it wasn't *quite* a crocodile. Its face resembled one, and its body *was* covered in hard scales—but that body was shaped more like a seal or sea lion. It had four pairs of fins specialized for swimming, two pairs on each side. For you dinosaur fans out there, imagine an eight-finned mosasaurus. That said, it was

only three meters in length, about the size of a crocodile.

Is that a Lake Murder?

Probably.

This nastily named monster got in the way of anyone attempting to harvest necroweed. It was an E-Threat, though most aquatic monsters were usually placed higher on the threat scale than land-dwellers.

With a quick Identify, I found that its stats were actually on par with an F-Threat. It had a high Swim Skill, like most aquatic monsters. But honestly, a low-rank adventurer should've been able to take care of this thing with proper knowhow.

At least, they'd be able to take care of one Lake Murder. But these guys hunted in packs of ten and over. When they sensed danger, they scattered, making extermination difficult. Currently, we were dealing with a pack of over thirty Lake Murders.

What's more, they could attack from afar thanks to their (low-level) water magic, making them the most hated monsters in Lake Vivian. The things had a heck of a kill count.

Like goblins and orcs, Lake Murders were classic targets for extermination quests.

Guess we'll have to deal with them first.

Hm. We'll have to be careful not to harm the necroweed and flowers.

No fancy moves, then.

Yeah.

Woof!

W-whoa. I couldn't believe Fran actually wanted to protect the flowers...! I was so touched! Hearing her say that alone was worth this whole trip!

Come on, Jet!

Awooo!

Fran released a flash of light magic. It was meant to blind targets or act as a long-distance signal. This time, she used the flash to instantly create shadows.

Jet followed up with his dark magic, a binding spell that drew darkness from shadows to truss up our foes. The technique was often called “shadow wrap” or “shadow bind.” I’d been surprised when Fran started casting that light spell, but this actually synergized very well with Jet’s dark magic. The ability to create shadows at-will was a huge advantage. It took me some thought to realize how well it worked, and it honestly made me feel like my Fran was a genius.

I'll take care of the rest!

The Lake Murders struggled to break the lake’s surface once they were bound by Jet’s magic. I transmogrified my blade into several pieces and rushed through them, piercing every one of their crystals.

We then immediately stored away their bodies, and that was that.

Lake Murder meat had a nasty odor and couldn’t be eaten, but its skin could be used for armor and its stuffed head was highly prized among collectors. We’d also cleared an extermination quest by hunting down the most hated monsters in the region, which would definitely win us extra points. Either way, this was a win.

All right, now let's get that medicinal necroweed. We're looking for red with thorns.

Is it... that one?

It is red... thorny, too. That's our plant, yep. We'll harvest it up to its roots.

Got it.

Jet, you're on guard duty.

Woof!

A short distance away from Fran was a deeper section of the lake where the red necroweed grew. Rather than picking it up with telekinesis, I split my blade to surround the stuff and stored it that way; it was much easier.

Fran was working hard at gathering it, too. She was crouched next to Jet, who kicked

and floated around the lakebed, keeping his eye out for monsters. The water was so clear that it looked like they were above the surface... which made the schools of small fish swimming next to her look downright hallucinatory.

Time to strike a harvest! I thought. But then I sensed that we weren't alone. I looked up and saw a dinghy approaching us. Someone else had come for the necroweed, and one of those someones dove from the boat.

It was a child, a boy with brown hair around the same age as Fran. Had he really come alone to known Lake Murder territory?

As we watched him, he noticed Fran and Jet despite their concealed presence. His eyes widened with shock—literally as wide as saucers, which seemed like a bit much.

"Bloop!" he burbled.

"Bloop?"

"Bloop!" His shock faded and he regained his composure. Now he was glaring at Fran. She only tilted her head at his open hostility.

I thought he was angry because Fran had made a mess of the field. She pensively gave the boy the necroweed she was holding. They were quite far away, but I was sure Fran's message got through.

That didn't calm the boy at all. If anything, it only made him more hostile. His glare intensified to murderous levels.

I wondered if Fran had beaten him before. If so, she clearly didn't remember.

He's looking at you like you killed his parents, Fran.

Don't know anything about that.

We don't know what he's thinking, so we'll just have to be careful.

Hm.

What, did Black Cats murder his parents? Was he the child of someone Fran killed? Either way, his hostility wasn't something you showed to someone you just met.

Still, a glare wasn't a good enough reason to take somebody out, and the boy wasn't planning to start fighting us down here either.

He brought himself under control, nodded to Fran, and started collecting necroweed. He'd surely seen Jet by now, but he didn't seem scared of him at all. Did he know something about us?

Well, as long as he wasn't getting in our way, we'd continue our gathering quest. But of course... things didn't pan out that way.

We stopped what we were doing and braced ourselves. Something was headed our way, and fast.

Organic lifeform approaching at high speed, said P.A.

It's here after all!

No kidding—a Lake Killer!

There'd been reports of a Lake Killer, the advanced form of Lake Murders, in the area recently. It was never confirmed for sure, though—the creature was always too far away to identify clearly. We chalked it up to the rumor mill spinning along, as it did, but...

We didn't have a visual yet, but already we could feel that the mana of the creature approaching us was of a different level from the Lake Murders. We're talking the difference between a goblin and a high orc.

It was five times larger than its littler cousins, but at least ten times stronger. Its scales were thicker, and its subcutaneous blubber provided an extra layer of protection against physical attacks, while a magical water shield protected it from magic ones. Its large fangs could easily rip a man to shreds and its water magic was strong enough to capsize a small boat. Although it should've gained more water resistance due to its increased size, it was still faster than its unevolved form, owing to its better usage of water magic.

This C-Threat monster was the apex predator of Lake Vivian. Every time it showed up, a dedicated party had to be dispatched. And now it was going after Fran, ignoring the boy. Maybe she looked tastier?

It's fast!

Much faster than we expected. The Lake Killer launched through the water like a torpedo and reached Fran in a matter of moments. It opened its mouth, a gaping maw large enough to swallow a man whole. Even *I* was creeped out.

But Fran remained calm and struck back.

“Goooorgh!”

Ha!

CLANG!

As she dodged the Lake Killer’s attack, she swung me in retaliation to finish it off.

That won’t do it! It’s still going!

Hm!

Fran had aimed at the creature’s neck for a fatal blow. But the combination of the Lake Killer’s water shield and its scales deflected the hit. In the end, it only sustained a small cut right above its fin. Fran wasn’t used to underwater combat, after all.

But now the Lake Killer knew how strong she was and turned its attention to the boy, who had yet to escape. It opened its crocodile jaw and twisted its tongue as if to suck him in.

Damn it, we should’ve gotten him out of here! Now there wasn’t enough time to save him!

But as I worried for the boy’s safety, he dug his heels and prepared himself. He set his feet on the lakebed and reached for the sword on his hip.

Wait, he was actually going to fight?! But I could tell from his movements that he was still low-rank. There was no way for him to win. He’d come here alone, glared at Fran threateningly, and now *this*? How reckless could he get?!

But before he could draw his sword, Jet grabbed him by the collar and rushed him to the surface.

“Bloop?!”

That took him aback, but it was better than dying. And while Jet was at it, it wouldn’t hurt to give the kid a good scare.

“Gooorgh!” Having given up on the boy, the Lake Killer once again turned its attention to us. It looked frustrated at losing easy prey.

Here it comes!

“Hm!” Fran readied me again. She was going to take it down without magic to avoid harming the necroweed.

“Groooorgh!”

It's spinning.

Yeah, it's trying to build momentum for an attack!

The Lake Killer spun its whole body into a crocodilian death roll. It created a vortex so great that it sucked the sand and seaweed into itself.

The necroweed is going to be ruined if this keeps up!

I'll kill it in the next spin.

The Lake Killer’s centrifugal force increased its attack and defense... but Fran was going to take it head on.

She let herself relax as the Lake Killer approached. For a moment, she appeared completely defenseless. The Lake Killer opened its jaws, ready to tear into Fran’s agile body, polluting the river with her blood.

And then Fran quietly drew me.

The cut was as silent as it was elegant, a flash of metal and speed. This one swift movement was the pinnacle of perfect motion and perfect silence, a beautiful attack that exemplified the art of swordplay at its finest.

I only noticed that Fran had drawn me at all after the attack landed. And she did it all

underwater. Fran's training had paid off. She'd realized her potential.

She cut through the water, through the Lake Killer, and left a deep mark in the lakebed.

Water pressure took over, splitting the Lake Killer's body into perfect halves. The bloody lump of meat that used to be Lake Vivian's apex predator floated past Fran.

Hm. Nailed it.

That was great! Good job, Fran.

Heh heh. Fran looked smug, but it was such a complete win that I didn't mind. She could be as smug as she wanted to be for the moment.

Anyway, it was time we headed back to the surface. I wanted to see what happened to the boy.

"Jet, are you okay?"

"Woof!"

"..."

On the boat, Jet, now puppy-sized, was sitting with a very cross-looking boy. He was still glaring at Fran as if to say he hadn't needed her help at all.

"Come on..." muttered Fran.

"Hmph."

This little punk! Not even a thank you?! As I was raging in my heart, Fran left the boat without saying a word. She skipped over the lake's surface with Air Hop.

That sword on his hip... something's weird about it, thought Fran.

The sword on his hip?

That was probably the sword he'd been about to use. It must've been enchanted. I'd sensed some mana coming out of it, but hadn't identified anything particularly strong...

Still, it unsettled Fran. Maybe the sword could disguise itself to the point of it fooling Identify. That would make it a powerful sword, indeed.

Maybe he actually could've taken down the Lake Killer himself. I guess we overstepped our bounds.

"I wonder what kind of sword it is." There was excitement in Fran's voice. Instead of being angry at the boy, she was plainly interested in his weapon. I'd made a real combat junkie out of her.

* * *

The next day...

We're in luck!

"Hm!"

Who would've thought that we'd actually get to see the Trade Fleet make port?

As we were riding Jet by the lakeside, we saw several gigantic ships docked at the shore. The harbor couldn't possibly fit all of them and so they had to each wait their turn. As mentioned by Kierlazen's dingus receptionist (we never did get her name), there were over fifty ships of all shapes and sizes. What amazed me was that all these ships somehow managed not to crash into each other.

We saw them dock in a town called Seftent, one of the bigger towns on the shores of Lake Vivian. I'd heard that the Trade Fleet was going to be docking soon, so I'd been hoping we'd get to see it, but hadn't expected it to happen so quickly.

"Let's look at it from above, Jet."

"Woof, woof!" Jet quickly traversed the air by using Air Hop.

It looks like a scrambled mess from up here.

"Hm."

The spectacle looked more like a shipwreck from above. Still, one ship stood above all the rest... the flagship. It was the biggest among the large vessels and was built like a

fortress.

It must've been over a hundred fifty meters in length with a width of about thirty meters. It hummed with magical energy, probably from its manatech propulsion system. As a matter of fact, I could sense mana coming from the *entire* ship. Was it reinforced with magic? Maybe it used specialized magic timber.

It wasn't quite a luxury cruise liner, but it was much bigger than a car ferry.

Fran and Jet sped through the air, excited by the multitude and size of the ships. They wanted a closer look. Of course, if we approached from above, people might think that a monster was coming down to attack them.

"We'll head to town first."

"Woof!"

We'll turn in our quests at the Seftent guild and ask about the Trade Fleet there.

"Hm."

Seftent was packed with people by the time we got there. It was bigger than Kierlazen, but not by much—it was just crowded at the moment, probably because of the Trade Fleet. The number of people present rivaled the line to get into Granzell's capital. It was like there was a festival going on.

Straight ahead from here.

I guided Fran through the crowd, since she couldn't see anything past it. Luckily, the Adventurers' Guild was one of the tallest buildings in town and all we needed to do was keep our eyes on its roof.

After making our way through the crowd, interrupted by the delectable aroma of food stalls and hawkers shilling their wares (along with people munching on said foods), we somehow reached the Adventurers' Guild. But it was just as packed inside.

"So many people."

These must be the adventurers on board the Trade Fleet.

The Trade Fleet adventurers took stock of their quests every time the fleet made port. There were a lot of young adventurers among them, matching what we heard in Kierlazen.

They're all lining up...

There weren't enough counters to serve this many people, even after the guild had set up some extra temporary ones. Still, this kind of crowd only gathered a few times every year, so they didn't see a reason to expand.

It can't be helped. Let's line up.

"Hm."

It was a good thing that Jet could hide in the shadows. He didn't take up extra space.

Still, Fran was getting stares from everyone in our vicinity—maybe even from everyone in the building. We were used to drawing attention, but it wasn't every day that she got it as soon as she walked through the door.

What gives? she wondered.

Now that I think about it, everyone here knows each other except for us.

She was bound to stand out. Still, it wasn't like we were doing anything bad. Nothing to do but confidently walk inside. Being an outsider wasn't a crime, and if anyone wanted to pick a fight with her, we were ready to have one. Fortunately, no one did.

Eventually, it was Fran's turn to go to the counter. The Trade Fleet adventurers were more well-mannered than I expected. Being such a closely knit community, they must have weeded out the bad eggs or disciplined them whenever they got out of hand.

The receptionist was perplexed when she saw Fran.

"Um, is this your first time here?"

"Hm. How'd you know?"

"The Trade Fleet adventurers have an emblem to set them apart."

I looked around and finally noticed that everyone around us was wearing this silver badge. That must have been the emblem she was talking about. No wonder she could tell that Fran wasn't a local.

"Hm. I just got here."

"I see. How may I help you today?"

"I'm turning in quests. Collection and extermination. Here are the goods." Fran handed the Kierlazen quest papers over to the receptionist.

"Oh, the quest for scarlet seaweed," she said, looking surprised. "We've been going through a shortage of it lately, so every little bit helps. Please place your collection here."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

Fran, wai—

"Sure."

Brrrssh!

She hadn't done this in a while. The receptionist probably thought Fran was a rookie who only had one or two strands of the seaweed in her item pouch. Low-rank adventurers would sometimes find scarlet seaweed in the shallows and submit it. She probably thought Fran was one of them.

"H-huh?"

"This is all of it."

"H-how...? What?!"

"Around two hundred?"

Two hundred and eight, to be exact.

I was beginning to wonder whether we'd taken too much. But there was a lot at the lakebed and the receptionist *did* say they were going through a shortage. The scarlet seaweed in that area had been cut off from them.

The place was known to be home to packs of Lake Murders, and the waters were quite deep. Gathering was difficult, to say the least.

“H-hang on!”

The receptionist was now panicking, the adventurers now staring. Shock, jealousy, calculation... a dark cloud now hung over the guild.

What now? Were we in trouble?

As the receptionist continued flapping about, an old, seasoned adventurer with a dandy air to him called out from behind us.

“Lulu, just count it all and clear her. Scarlet seaweed is unique in appearance; I think it’s legit.”

“R-right!”

“Processing all this necroweed takes priority because of the shortage. We’ll wait until you’re done. Isn’t that right, fellas?”

The dandy adventurer seemed to have some clout, since the adventurers around him nodded.

“Y-yeah, of course.”

“No problem.”

Looks like we were going to be okay. Thank you, Mr. Dandy! But just as I thought we were out of the woods, the dandy addressed Fran. He looked so grave that I thought he was mad.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Hm. I just happened to be in town.”

"I see... I know it's bad manners, but I have to ask. Where did you get all that seaweed? I'll pay you for the tip."

"You want the location?"

"Yeah. Scarlet seaweed shortages are a constant worry for us locals. A new gathering spot would be huge."

I understood. He thought that if a rookie like Fran could gather it, it must be an easy farming spot.

"You don't have to pay me."

"A-are you sure?"

"Hm. I'm not going back there anyway."

"We owe you big time!" The man bowed his head and quickly produced a map. It was a detailed diagram of Lake Vivian with the lake and all its surrounding towns.

Unfortunately, we weren't going to tell him anything new.

"Can you point out where you found it?"

"Hm. Right here."

Fran pointed to an area slightly west of a small island between Kierlazen and Seftent. We'd been told at Kierlazen that we would find the seaweed one hundred meters west of the star-shaped island. The Guildmaster had known that Fran would be able to handle the dangerous farming spot.

"Huh? But I thought there was a nest of Lake Murders there..."

"There used to be one."

"What? You killed them?"

"Hm." Fran nodded and murmurs broke out among the adventurers. The mood was even worse than before.

"Look, if you don't wanna tell us, just say so. Everyone can tell when you're lying."

"Hm? I'm not lying."

"There's rumors of a Lake Killer out there lately, too."

"Dead, just like the rest."

"What? A Black Cat like you destroyed a whole pack of Lake Murders?"

"Hm." Fran's tone dropped. Yet again, people were looking down their noses at her because of her race.

"Th-then you should have the materials from the Lake Murder, right? And the Lake Killer's too! If you killed them, where are they?"

The dandy was mad now. I was impressed by the fact he wasn't outright yelling, but Fran was even madder than he was. If he didn't pick his next words carefully, there could be blood.

Oblivious to the fact that Fran held his life in her hands, the dandy made further demands. "Can you show them? You should be able to if you weren't lying."

"Here?"

"Where else?"

Fran looked around to see all the adventurers judging her harshly. Well, *now* they definitely thought she was lying.

Yeah, I take back anything nice I said about that dandy. Sure, he was polite on the surface, but given we were surrounded, he might as well be barking orders at us. As far as adventurers go, these guys were on the nastier side. They clearly scorned Fran for what they thought was her low rank and thought it was okay for them to rake her over the coals.

And they scorned her for being a Black Cat. This realization only worsened Fran's mood.

"..."

“Don’t just stand there. Don’t you have anything to say?”

I was getting pissed off, too. If Fran wanted to give them a wallop, I wasn’t going to stop her.

“Fine.”

The adventurers screamed even louder than the receptionist did. A mountain of Lake Murders suddenly appeared in the middle of the guild hall. The remains of the Lake Killer were also placed on top, and they were still substantial even if the body was cut in two.

We’d gutted and removed the meat from the monsters last night, leaving their skins intact. Their heads were still whole, making them look quite intimidating. The sight of a giant Killer placed atop thirty Murders was quite terrifying.

“Gyaaa!”

“Whoa!”

And then the mountain toppled over. Adventurers screamed as the skin of the giant Killer fell on them.

“Good enough?”

“H-huh...?”

Panic and the stench of raw meat spread over the guild. They were still raw even after we processed them, after all. Besides, we had Mr. Dandy to thank for this whole mess!

“Now do you believe me?”

“N-no way...”

“Yes way.”

“Uhh...” The receptionist was at a loss for words.

But the adventurers were just getting started.

“You probably bought these!”

“Why the hell would she do that?!”

“I mean, look at it!”

They weren’t taking it well, to say the least. Maybe I should’ve stopped her after all. The receptionists sure didn’t know what to do. Everyone was panicking now.

Should we just beat them all up? Fran mused.

Huh?

If that doesn’t shut them up, I don’t know what will.

So assertive! But perhaps a bit too violent. Whoever was in charge would definitely tell her she went overboard. Then again, Fran was getting tired of the whole thing. Maybe the guild could do with some light electric shock therapy.

As I considered my options, a little old lady appeared from inside the guild. She was hunched over. Deep wrinkles covered her face. She really looked her age, but I could tell at a glance that she wasn’t your ordinary senior citizen.

This was definitely the Guildmaster. The robe she wore was powerful manatech and there was also her mana itself. The quality of that mana flowing within her told me that she was a first-rate mage.

“What’s all this then? Lulu, what the hell is going on here?!”

“G-Guildmaster! You see, this girl...”

“Well, well... what’s a nickname bearer doing here?”

The old woman looked at Fran. She immediately discerned her identity.

“Just making a stop.”

“Well, thanks for dropping by. But I have to ask ya to calm down.”

“They started it.”

“I know, I can tell. I’m just sayin’”

The Guildmaster could guess what had transpired, but she asked the receptionists for more details. She then let out a deep sigh.

“This is a guild of fools and outright dumbasses! Makes me sick to my stomach, to tell the truth. The lot of you shoulda known that she was outta your league when you first set eyes on her.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Forget it! Why don’t you go clean up this mess, huh? Swift, you’re helping out, too. This whole mess is on you for being too weak to get a read on her.”

“Y-yes.”

“As for the rest of you idiots...” The adventurers twitched when the old woman glared at them. Her shrunken body sent out waves of intimidation. “You were actually lucky that this kid was stronger than all of you! You were one step away from lynching her, weren’t you? You’re all paying a fine for that!”

“B-but...!”

“W-we thought she was lying...”

“Shut your fool mouths! You lot’re thicker than a milkin’ cow’s ass! You’re in for a hell of a time, I’ll tell you that! And Swift, you’re gonna get it worse than them. You might even be in for a demotion!”

“Y-yes, Ma’am...”

“And if I catch you idiots doing something as stupid as this again in the future... Hmph! Just you wait.”

Th-that’s all she’s going to tell them? What was she gonna do? The adventurers took a collective gulp and trembled. As annoyed as I was with them, I couldn’t help but pity them a little. This old lady was not one to be trifled with.

“Black Lightning Princess, you’re with me.”

“Hm.”

When she called Fran by her nickname, a different kind of murmuring started to spread... one of astonishment. Fran's nickname had spread as far as Belioth.

When Fran and the Guildmaster entered the back rooms, shouts erupted inside the guild hall. They were loud enough that we could hear what they were saying about Fran without trying.

Many said there was no way that a kid like that could be that strong. Others calmly stated that the Guildmaster couldn't be wrong. Still, the youngsters laughed and said that they could probably take Fran in a fight.

“You'll have to excuse those idiots. And my thanks again for not beating the ever-loving crap out of them.”

“It's fine.”

“I'm the Guildmaster here. The adventurers call me Old Jill.”

“I'm Fran. B-Rank adventurer.”

Fran produced her adventurer card, but Jill only took one look at it.

“I know. You're the only Black Cat who's made it this far. You look exactly like they described you, too. Where you headed?”

“Magic Macad... Magic Academy.” Fran was cute when she fumbled her words. She'd be even cuter if she were embarrassed about it. But it was nothing to be ashamed about for her and so she just said it again properly.

The Guildmaster didn't pay any attention to it, either.

“The Magic Academy? Don't tell me you're enrolling.”

“I'm not. I have a quest there.”

“I see. Combat isn't all they teach there. At your age, enrolling might be a good idea.”

“I can get stronger by adventuring.”

"Well, don't let me stop you either way. We'll ship the scarlet seaweed over to Kierlazen. But see, we've been having a shortage of the stuff here, too—all of us lake-dwellers, really. Would you mind if we shared it with the other guilds? I'll make sure that you're credited with clearing multiple quests."

"Hm. Share it with the places that need it."

"Thanks. We really appreciate it." Old Jill sighed with relief. The shortage must've been killing them. "Can we buy the Lake Killer and Murder skins off you, too?"

"Sure."

"You don't often see such clean skins. We'll throw in something extra for you."

"Thanks."

"Now, that's enough chitchat. I'd like to discuss some pressing matters with you."

There must have been a reason why Jill brought Fran into her office.

"I have a quest for you," she continued, "and it's something that only a B-Rank like you can accomplish."

"A quest?"

"Don't worry," she said with a chuckle, "it shouldn't be a problem for you."

Fran was all for it, but what kind of quest was this? I was starting to freak out a bit.

It's huge.

Yeah, you can really see how big it is up close.

It was the day after we accepted Old Jill's quest. Fran was on a boat now, and beside her was Old Jill the Guildmaster. They were headed to a medium-sized ship referred to as the Adventurers' Ship, a hundred meters away from port.

Even if it was a medium-sized vessel, it was still bigger than a house. The sheer size of

it really sank in when we compared it to the small boat we were on.

At first, Fran offered to ride Jet in there, but Jill decided against it. She didn't want to alarm people. There was no way to inform all the crew members in advance, after all, and they might mistake Jet for a monster attacking them. If panic broke out among the fleet, it would have repercussions beyond the town. Ships might even crash into each other and sink trying to escape.

"They have an Adventurers' Guild there?"

"That's right. It's smaller, for better maneuverability."

"And the whole branch is on it?"

"Yep. There's accommodations, training grounds, carving spots, and weapon stores. She has everything an adventurer needs."

"So I'll be sparring there, too?"

"That's right."

Old Jill had tasked Fran with sparring with the local adventurers. Most of the adventurers of Lake Vivian were born and raised in the region. Usually, they'd travel from region to region, whether that was to get stronger, because of the allure of a dungeon, or just plain wanderlust. Most of them would set up their base of operations near a dungeon or haunt they'd wanted to conquer from a young age.

But with the Trade Fleet at its center, most of the lake adventurers remained in the lake. I guess you could say the guild there was heavily community-oriented. Having come from the same place, they were well-mannered and knew all the unwritten laws of Lake Vivian.

So far, so good. But they were under constant threat of becoming complacent. The low-ranks, especially, lacked an adventurer's danger sensor and competitiveness. Most of the adventurers there knew each other and the senior adventurers were usually everyone's childhood heroes. When they lost a match, they'd just shrug and think, "Well, of course I lost to so-and-so," thinking nothing of it.

Competitiveness may turn into hostility, but on the flip side, it can become a case of iron sharpening iron. Lake Vivian lacked this kind of competitiveness.

"I want you to beat the tar out of our boys," said Old Jill. "Good thing they still don't want outsiders to show them up."

"Hm. I get it."

"You do?"

"I don't want people looking down on Black Cats, either."

"Yeah, I guess it *is* similar to that." Jill chuckled, "I can't wait to see the looks on their faces when they see what you're made of. Feel free to trash them, body and soul."

Old Jill was *not* a nice little old lady. But I was in complete agreement. The adventurers would get a shock from losing to Fran. She was a girl, *and* a Black Cat to boot. Not exactly your stereotypical champion.

I mean, *I* would cry in that case too. But if the adventurers were going to resent anyone, then let it be Jill, who put Fran up to it in the first place. Should I tell Fran to hold back? Nah, she wouldn't dare to do so, even if I asked.

We reached the Adventurers' Ship as we talked. We came alongside the vessel and took the staircase made specifically for adventurers. They'd probably set it up because adventurer traffic was so common around here.

Still, it looks pretty much like a normal ship.

"Hm."

"Woof."

Aside from the flag bearing the guild's emblem, it looked more or less the same as the other medium-sized ships nearby. The real differences announced themselves when we stepped inside. It was as if they took a standard guild lobby and placed it inside the ship. Adventurers did their business here and the place was buzzing with activity.

Even with most of the adventurers disembarking at Seftent, there were still many on board.

Their gaze immediately darted to Old Jill when she and Fran entered the room. The stronger among them started calculating her power level at once. A lot of them seemed

skeptical. They looked at Jill, then at Fran, then turned away... though they still stole glances from time to time.

They must've known Old Jill was bringing in an outsider for a sparring match. The guild's finest would go up against them and the outsider would have to be an excellent adventurer in their own right. But they couldn't work out why a little girl was with Old Jill.

This was especially true for the weaker adventurers. I heard people mutter among themselves, "What's this girl doing here?" Knowing Old Jill, they figured that she must've brought her here on purpose.

"I see you made it, old hag." A wrinkled old man about the size of Old Jill greeted us at the reception.

"Good to see you, old coot."

Although he was as small as Old Jill, I could tell that he wasn't as he seemed. His bent back looked like he might have movement problems, but the old man was very strong. He must've been quite the fighter when he was younger.

This old man was definitely the Guildmaster here.

"The name's Barfillan. Call me Old Bar." He was a bit rough with his words but his handshake was polite.

"Okay."

"Come on, I'll fill you in on what you'll be up to today. We're pleased to have you."

"Thanks."

Now that Barfillan had welcomed her, everyone knew that Fran was going to be their sparring partner. The high-rank adventurers nodded and the low-ranks gasped.

Suddenly, a young man who didn't seem to agree with the arrangement stood in our way. "Old Bar, is she the—"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

“Eep.”

“Is that how you treat an adventurer on a quest?! Where are your manners?!”

The young man fell on his haunches after Old Bar chewed him out. His friends had to help him to his feet.

“I’ll introduce you later. And until you can properly gauge somebody’s strength, I suggest you shut your damn trap!”

“B-but...”

“Really, the fact that I went out of my way to welcome her should be enough to tell you how important she is. If you can’t even read basic social cues, back off!”

This must’ve been the plague of complacency Old Jill was talking about. I thought he got off easy, given the fact that he interrupted the Guildmaster and looked down on his guest. If we were back in Granzell’s capital, Erianthe would’ve cut the offender down. Hopefully his big head would get cracked after seeing how strong Fran was.

As we descended the stairs, Old Bar gave us the details of the quest.

“I just have to fight them once?” asked Fran.

“That’s right. Mow the lawn with them. Break their spirits. Just beat the living tar out of them.”

“It’ll be good medicine for these chumps.” Old Jill chuckled.

Old Bar swung his arms to emphasize what he was saying. Old Jill just sat back, clearly enjoying herself.

“You sure?” Fran asked, tilting her head. The senior citizens might not have been able to tell, but she was more than up for it.

“You saw what they just did. They’ve got no respect.”

“You’ve been spoiling them, haven’t you?” mused Fran.

“I won’t deny that. There aren’t that many life-threatening quests here to begin with.”

“And words can only do so much.”

“Indeed. You know, adventurers have been disappearing lately. Did you hear that?”

“At the last town, yeah.”

“I think they’re too relaxed, you see. They take a quest, assume everything’s going to be business as usual, let their guard down, and...”

“That worries me, too. More and more people have been getting complacent at my guild.”

The adventurers ganging up on Fran was a manifestation of that complacency. They were imposing their unspoken rules on outsiders without a thought. It really was cause for concern.

“So, let them know who’s boss.”

“Heh heh heh. We’re counting on you.”

Us beating the snot out of the guild’s elite would get the rest of the guild to straighten their backs. There had to be other ways to illustrate the gulf in our abilities... but when it came to adventurers, this was the best method.

“But before you do, I’ll have to lay some ground rules. You’re gonna have to hold back.”

“I just have to not kill them, right?”

“You can’t injure them to the point of disability, either! Y-you’re joking, right?” Old Bar stammered.

“Hm?”

“Old hag...” I saw a bead of sweat trail down Old Bar’s chin. It finally dawned on him that Fran was more dangerous than he’d thought.

“She took the quest,” said Old Jill.

“Y-you’re right. Look, these are promising adventurers. Don’t do anything that will leave a permanent injury.”

“Okay. I’ll try to be careful.”

“Please! *Promise* me you’ll be careful!”

“Hm. I’ve got it covered.”

“I’m... counting on you.”

Don’t worry, I thought to myself. I’ll stop Fran if she gets out of hand. I’ll try, anyway.

“And no flashy magic.”

“Why not? You have barriers set up.”

“Yeah, well, we’re still inside a ship. You’ll blow the whole place up if you use fire and thunder spells.”

“I see.”

Given Fran’s nickname, this detail was crucial.

“We’ve reinforced the barriers, sure, but I guarantee they won’t last if you hit them with one of your fully charged spells.”

Fran, do NOT damage the ship!

Okay, I’ll try to be careful.

Promise me!

This was still a ship with manatech parts, and those didn’t come cheap. Jeez, I really did *not* want Fran to go overboard on this.

“And I hear you have a familiar. Can we see him?”

“Jet.”

“Woof!”

“I didn’t even notice him there! Dark Magic! And he’s a...”

“A Darkness Wolf? No, not quite. I can tell that he’s strong, though...”

People with years of experience could surely detect Jet’s might. The steady flow of mana in his body, his firm stance, his eyes... there was a lot to go on. If you could gauge Fran’s strength even when she was holding back, then you could do the same with Jet. Call it adventurer instinct.

But these two didn’t seem to know much about wolf monsters. As they evolved, wolves got better at concealing their mana, making their strength even more difficult to gauge.

“Jet’s really strong.”

“Really? If you say that, it must be true. Good. We want him to fight, too.”

“Woof!”

“Jet said he’ll do it.”

“Thanks. There aren’t many strong beast monsters in these parts, and I’d like our boys to see how terrifying they can be. An adventurer’s blind spots can get him killed, you know.”

“Blind spots?”

“That’s right. Our adventurers are all Lake Vivian professionals. But they’re specialized to a fault.”

While they had mastered all the skills necessary to handle the lake’s quests, they couldn’t begin to conquer dungeons in other regions. A newly promoted C-Rank had actually died in a Level-E dungeon recently. That death had only made the Lake Vivian adventurers more insulated, and no one saw that as a problem. After all, most adventurers stuck to Lake Vivian.

Still, the people of Belioth had begun to mock the adventurers of Lake Vivian. They’re your go-to guys on the lake, they would say, but everywhere else they’re all fish out of water.

“It’s all very frustrating. We’ve tried to change their minds but nothing’s worked.”

"That's why we really appreciate your cooperation, Jet," said Old Jill, petting Jet. "But what a beautiful beast you are. I bet you're a truly ridiculous threat level, eh?"

"Who knows?" said Fran.

"Well... just don't destroy the boat."

"We'll be fine. Right, Jet?"

"Bark, bark!"

"Let's head to the training grounds," said Old Bar.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

The training grounds were located at the ship's lower levels and were quite spacious. About the size of an auditorium. They had low ceilings, but there was more than enough room to move around.

A large crowd of adventurers had already gathered. Over fifty, at least. Fran would only be fighting one of them, but she had attracted a lot of onlookers.

Not enough to satisfy Old Jill, though. "This it?"

"Can't be helped, with the emergency quest going on. Most of our adventurers are away."

"I guess. It's a quest from them, after all..."

As we scanned the onlookers, a single adventurer came forth from the crowd. The man seemed to be head and shoulders above the rest.

He's strong. His stats placed him above C-Rank. Much weaker than Colbert, but he had Water Magic and Trap Sense, along with some Skills which helped with aquatic movement. The guy was a balanced all-rounder who could do a lot of damage.

"Hello. I'm Lovren, a B-Rank adventurer."

“Hm. I’m—”

“Ah! Before you introduce yourself, please give me your name.”

Fran looked puzzled, “Okay. I’m Fran.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Fran. I think we have a lot to learn from you today.”

“Hm.”

Lovren extended his hand and Fran shook it. This black-haired man with good looks and a real polite air seemed like a nice enough guy.

“But really, Guildmaster,” he said, “do you actually need to hide her identity? I’m not the only one here who’s worked out who she is.”

“Yeah, well, there are a lot more blockheads who haven’t. Not only are they ignorant, but they can’t even see well enough to figure her out!”

Lovren chuckled. “Harsh as always.”

“This is no laughing matter, sonny! Never mind the low-ranks, I can’t even expect those punks to wipe their own behinds! The problem is that even the D- and C-Ranks can’t figure out who Fran is! They’ve been too comfy for too long! They’ve gone soft!”

“It’s not like there’ve been any major incidents for the last twenty years or so. The closest thing we had was that whole fuss about the bounty. Never did know how that ended up.”

“Quit laughing, ace! You’re the reason why people talk smack about Lake Vivian’s adventurers! The folks at the capital say we’re nothing but a bunch of water striders!”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Urgh...”

“Look, don’t worry about it too much. It’s just a matter of work distribution.” Lovren genuinely looked like he didn’t mind one bit. Where Old Bar was testy, Lovren was magnanimous.

Not a great match. Actually, it looked like the old Guildmaster was about to pop a blood vessel. Either way, there was one more thing we needed to clarify.

“Is he the one I’m fighting?”

“No. He’s our ace, after all.”

If Lovren lost, the shock to the guild would be too great. For a moment, I felt sorry for whoever got chosen to be sacrificed to Fran. But then I learned that our opponent had cheerfully volunteered. I guess he deserved whatever was about to come.

“All right, clear out, you idiots! The fight’s about to start!”

“Don’t just stand there! Move it!”

The Guildmasters scattered the crowd until a lone man was left standing in the arena.

He was a stern, manly individual with orange hair in a crew cut. He looked like a genuine man of the sea. Or, y’know, of the lake.

“I am Dagor. A C-Rank adventurer. I look forward to this duel, Lady Fran.”

“Hm. Let’s have a good one.”

“I am honored to be able to fight such a powerful warrior. I will do my best not to disappoint you!”

He was as earnest as he looked, his sincerity evident even in how deep he bowed.

I Identified him and found that he was an expert with the spear. High levels of Spear Mastery and Arts, Harpoon Mastery, and Throw. He also had a strange Skill called Water Cutter that allowed him to cleave through water resistance when attacking underwater. He was a lake specialist, too.

“To a good fight!” he boomed.

“Hm!”

“Ready? Begin!”

"Haah!" Dagor made his move on Old Bar's mark. He wanted to finish this battle in one stroke.

Fran smiled as she used me to block the strike.

Dagor was smiling, too. "Hahaha! Such power!"

"That was good."

Their first clash was an exchange of offense and defense. Dagor came at Fran with all he had while she hung back to observe him. Both were enjoying themselves.

The duel wasn't without its close calls, most of them owing to Dagor's spear. It had a big hook like a harpoon at the end of it which he could use to pull his target in once he'd stabbed them. I'd never seen a weapon move quite like it, and it came close to grazing Fran multiple times.

"Interesting."

"Ah! I am honored that you would think so, Black Lightning Princess!"

Dagor started casting spells in the middle of his attacks. He was quite the combatant to pull off this kind of multitasking! He wasn't at B-Rank yet, but he must've trained every day. You could see the results right in front of us.

Still, it wasn't going to be enough to beat Fran. She knocked his spear out of his hand with her sword and that was the end of it. Dagor beamed with a satisfied smile, but our audience was in shock. The only people who were unsurprised were those who'd recognized Fran's strength from the start.

Was that a quest completion? No, Jet hadn't fought yet.

As silence fell over the training grounds, one man stepped into the ring. "I guess I'm going next. May I fight that wolf of yours, please?"

"Arf?"

The B-Rank adventurer Lovren had volunteered himself to spar with Jet.

"You wanna fight Jet?" asked Fran.

“Yes.”

“Lovren, wait!” Old Bar shouted frantically. “What do you think you’re doing? Get back here!”

“But someone has to fight the wolf. Might as well be me.”

“No!” cried Old Bar.

The adventurers were still in stunned silence. If Lovren lost, I couldn’t imagine what would happen to them.

But Lovren didn’t have any intention of backing down. “I lack experience fighting beasts, so this would be good practice for me. Also, it’ll shake things up a lot more if I lose.”

Now a look of surprise fell upon Dagor. He couldn’t believe that the guild’s strongest could actually lose. *Would* actually lose.

“S-sir Lovren, you don’t think you can win?”

“That wolf looks like he’s pretty strong,” said Lovren.

Fran nodded. “Hm. Very strong.”

“Woof!”

Old Bar had told Lovren off for not being more self-aware as the guild’s ace. Was that why he’d volunteered? Did he want to show himself losing to snap the others out of their complacency?

“If you lose... what about your reputation?” Old Bar didn’t agree with him.

Meanwhile, Lovren was as relaxed as ever. “Everyone loses to someone stronger than them sooner or later. Besides, you know I never had much of a reputation to lose.”

He laughed and readied his spear. Jet stepped forward, ready to fight.

“Let’s have a good one.”

“Woof!”

The fight now captured the attention of everyone, both veteran and greenhorn alike. There was great expectation in the young rookies’ eyes. Lovren should be able to avenge Dagor, they thought.

“Lovren, listen to me!”

“Can it, old coot! When a man says he wants to fight, you let him!”

“But...!”

“Hmph. Never mind him,” said Old Jill. “I suppose you’re both ready. Let the fight begin!”

“Hyaaa!” Lovren opened the fight with a stab the moment Old Jill said go. Knowing Jet’s strength, he didn’t pull his punches. He aimed for his jugular, but missed. Jet had twisted his body in order to avoid it.

“Grr!”

“A graceful dodge! How about this!”

“Woof!”

“Yaaaah!”

Jet and Lovren were both agile fighters. They moved on the field of battle so fast that it was hard to keep up. I don’t even think the low-ranks knew what was going on.

Neither used magic because they didn’t want the audience to get hit by stray spells. They were moving way too fast for the adventurers to be able to dodge any bursts of magic.

Lovren began to slow down. He was pushing himself to keep up with Jet, but now he took a deep breath.

“Huff...” He readied his spear and gathered his mana. He’d risk it all and end the fight before exhaustion got to him.

Jet leapt from floor to ceiling before finally turning around to jump at Lovren.

Stillness and movement. Two different strategies leading to the same conclusion. The end of the duel.

The tension in the room was palpable.

“Sssh...! Sharp Thrust!”

“Groooaar!”

Lovren turned to face Jet and launched his Weapon Art. It was a strike of speed and precision.

Even though he knew he would lose, he wasn’t going to just let it happen. The others would see through that. No, he was going to instill alertness into his adventurers by losing with all he had.

The attack struck Jet in a flash. Lovren’s spear rushed through the air and into Jet’s mouth—but never pierced his head. Jet had seen through Lovren’s attack. He bit down on the spear with his mana-charged teeth, shook his head, and flung it away.

The sudden shift in momentum caused Lovren to lose his footing. It happened for a split second, but that was enough to cost him the match.

Jet wasted no time in tackling him.

“Gah!” Lovren was blown back, sent rolling across the deck. It wasn’t a lot of damage, but he wasn’t going to pick up his spear again.

Instead, he raised his hands in defeat. “That was great. I lost.”

“Woof!”

The adventurers murmured when they saw Lovren easily declare defeat. The low-ranks were howling.



“I’ve been getting lazy lately. Guess it’s time I got training again.”

Lovren wanted the truth of his words to sink in. He wasn’t hungry enough for combat to keep fighting a losing battle. But unlike his fellow adventurers, he was all smiles.

Old Jill turned to the restless adventurers. “You heard him. That’s the end of the match. Now get going!”

But most of the adventurers remained on the training ground, chattering among themselves. They were excited by the intense matches they’d just witnessed. Eventually, the higher-ranked ones gathered around Fran.

“That was amazing! Absolutely splendid!”

“You can say that again. I’m embarrassed to call myself a B-rank.”

Fran was surrounded from all sides, but she looked happy. This kind of communication was new to her. It was very adventurer-esque.

The veterans’ mood inevitably affected the low-ranks. Their gloom faded and was replaced with motivation as they started to discuss how to get stronger. These training grounds would probably get busy over the coming weeks.

Excited, the adventurers stood shoulder to shoulder and started singing. It was a song about the spirit of the lake, called “Ballad of the Maiden by the Lake.”

From what I gathered, this Maiden was a blonde, fair-skinned lady with strangely colored eyes—the right amethyst, the left emerald. The lyrics claimed she protected the lake, for which the adventurers offered her their thanks.

Riled up by the singing, Old Bar shouted, “Right! Time for a celeb—”

“Don’t go senile on me yet, old man!” Old Jill, arms crossed, broke up the festivities. “And one song is all you’re gettin’! Back to work, all of you!”

The loud little lady commanded the whole room. The adventurers dispersed under her glare.

“Fran, you’re with me,” said Old Jill.

“Hm.”

“Fran! You really helped us out today,” said Old Bar. “Feel free to hit me up if you run into trouble. I’ll lend you a hand personally!”

“Thanks, Old Bar.”

Fran looked a little sad to have missed the celebration, and Old Jill noticed as they entered the meeting room.

“What’s up with you? Don’t tell me you wanted to party with those morons?”

“Hm...”

Old Jill sighed. “And here I thought you weren’t going to get along. Guess you’re just a high-rank like the rest of them.” She shook her head, exasperated.

Fran was a weirdo, like all the high-ranked adventurers in the world. Old Jill gave her a wry smile, but there was kindness in her eyes. She was ultimately fond of the morons under her care, too.

“Anyway, good job on the quest,” she said. “I’m a satisfied client.”

“Hm.”

Despite their local ace getting beat up, the Guildmaster looked content. They worked out Fran’s reward and marked her quest as cleared. Now we were just waiting for the payment to go through.

Before we go, I told Fran, there’s something I wanted to ask.

We asked Old Jill about the boy we ran into while gathering necroweed. She didn’t know who we were talking about at first, but then realized who it was after we described him.

“That boy? He’s a prodigy. Going to be our youngest E-Rank yet, I wager. I believe he’s thirteen this year.”

Which made him much younger than the average sixteen-year-old E-Rank. Still, I couldn’t work out why he wanted to kill Fran. I understood why you might hate

someone who was better than you. Resentment, envy, anger—all were within the realm of possibility, and yet...

“He wanted to kill me.”

“Hmm... and yet you’ve never met him before?”

“Hm.”

“Beats me. I’ve never heard a thing about that boy’s past. You might have better luck just asking him if you run into him again. He works in the area.”

I guessed we’d just have to see him again.

“What’s his name?”

“Sierra. Probably an alias.”

“An... alias?”

“We all have our reasons, kid. Adventurers, especially.”

“True.”

Sierra, the boy with the murderous aura. Who was he?

INTERMISSION

SIERRA × ???

YOU CALMED down, partner?

“Sorry, mister. I lost my cool.”

I didn't think you'd actually use my power. I don't think it would've been enough to beat the girl, either. But if people found out you were strong enough to take down a Lake Killer, you would've been the center of attention.

“Yeah. That might attract people who are looking for you.”

I guess our fate's tied to that Fran girl's, in the end. But you have to remember that that was a different Fran. You've never met her before this. Don't forget that.

“I know. This one's innocent. But still...”

Can't hold back the anger, huh?

“Yeah.”

I know how you feel, but we're going to see her again. Next time she comes to the lake, she'll be with Winalene.

“On Magic Academy business.”

That's right. The Academy always has a field trip to Lake Vivian this time of year.

“Do you think... Winalene will take Romeo with her?”

Definitely. The things that cursed elf did to Romeo...

“Calm down, mister. Your murder is showing.”

Tch.

“Would be great if we could just stop Zelyse and the others.”

But we just can't seem to pin them down.

“I know they’re going in and out of the center of the lake.”

But we can't get there. Not with the guardian in the way.

“Yeah. All we can do is wait for them to act.”

So annoying.

“Anyway... I’m gonna go gather more necroweed. I should get promoted once I turn this quest in.”

Yep. Should make it easier to gather intel.

“It won’t be like last time. That’s why we’re getting stronger.”

Yeah, you’re right. Next time...

“Yeah. Because this time—”

“We’re going to protect them.”

CHAPTER 3

LADYBLUE

THE DAY after we finished the sparring quest, we left the Trade Fleet and headed northeast in a straight line. It was the fastest route to the Magic Academy.

I didn't think we would just happen to run into the Trade Fleet like that.

“Hm. That was neat.”

“Woof!”

I've never seen so many ships docked in one place.

Looking at Lake Vivian as we left really drove home just how big it was. It might even be been bigger than Lake Biwa... not that I'd know for sure, considering I never saw Lake Biwa in person. The most I'd seen of it was as the backdrop for Japan's Birdman Rallies...

In any case, Lake Vivian was definitely big enough that we couldn't see the other side.

“Woof, woof!”

“Run through the waters, Jet!”

“Bark, bark!”

Jet deliberately took a route over the waters, splashing through the lake as he ran. Fran and I got totally soaked in the process, but she seemed to enjoy it. She asked him to do it again.

“A rainbow!”

“Awoo!”

After splashing about, we took to the skies and headed north. Belioth was mountain

country. Seeing all the variety of height and depth made for a breathtaking trip.

“...?”

In the middle of our sky joyride, Fran noticed something in the distant clouds.

What's up?

“What's that?”

Huh? Oh, it's finally here! That's a sky isle.

Fran had spotted a gigantic mass of clouds hovering higher than all the others. Within it was the shadow of an island.

“A sky isle...”

That's right.

We had explored one such sky isle once with the necromancer, Jean. This isle lacked a dungeon, however. I'd checked that out all the way back in Alessa.

“Does that mean there aren't any strong monsters?”

Quite the contrary. That is where the S-Rank haunt called the Sky Dragon's Bed is located. It's one of the most dangerous spots in the world, home to A-Threat monsters.

If anything, it was more dangerous than some dungeons. No one knew how it came to be, but there was a great waterfall which rushed down from the island. According to the island's explorers, the river it originated from was about a hundred meters in width, but the water that spilled from the island never reached the ground, dissipating before it got the chance. There were similar waterfalls on Earth which lacked a basin, like Angel Falls. I could only assume that a similar phenomenon was happening here.

The water from the waterfall probably became the clouds surrounding the sky isle. Within those clouds lay a powerful dragon called the Sky Dragon.

“Sky Dragon?”

Correct. It is speculated that only ten are in existence.

But the sky dragons didn't do much harm to the kingdom. Apparently, they couldn't live on land and so had to stay in their giant clouds. Still, combat data gathered by adventurers infiltrating the Sky Dragon's Bed showed that their breath attack had enough reach to destroy highways on land.

There aren't many accounts of people slaying them, so we don't know how strong they really are.

It was only an A-Threat because *all* the other dragon types were A-Threats. Pretty much a placeholder. And so only A-Ranks and above were allowed to explore the Sky Dragon's Bed. Though honestly, most of them got knocked out of the sky by the monsters living in the sea of clouds before they even got to the sky isle.

Even if they managed to get there, adventurers didn't bother challenging the sky dragon. No—their objective was its *den*. Adventurers gathered scales, whiskers, beards, and whatever they could get their hands on before escaping.

There was a possibility they'd be attacked by several sky dragons, and they wouldn't have an escape route if that happened. The haunt was unfavorable to say the least, and actually picking a fight with a sky dragon might as well be suicide.

If you're lucky, you might be able to catch a sky dragon flying through the clouds.

“Really?”

Yeah.

“What's it look like?”

Apparently, it has a slender, serpentine body that's a hundred meters long.

The sky dragon wasn't a western-style dragon, but eastern. Unlike their warrior-like draconic counterparts, these serpentine dragons possessed more powerful magic and Skills. They were similar in all other respects, but this one difference was huge.

On a clear day, you can see them shine in the distance because of their golden scales.

“Hm... I can't see a thing.”

“Arf...”

They're still super rare, after all. But we should be able to see that huge cloud from anywhere in Eastern Belioth. Maybe we'll see a sky dragon next time.

Fran and Jet carried on, looking up at the Sky Dragon's Bed. They were so fixated on it that they stumbled, slowed down, and even screwed up the altitude to the point where Fran almost fell off Jet. And not once did they see a sky dragon.

But at least they were having fun. Even their mistakes felt fresh and new. Fran had a lot of leftover energy from the training she'd undergone, making her battle junkie tendencies even worse. These relaxing episodes were important as a counterbalance.

I can see a town ahead.

"Is that the Magic Academy? It's huge."

No, no. The Magic Academy is the tower at the center of it... though, yeah, it is pretty huge. Anyway, surrounding it is an ordinary city.

It looked as if the town had developed around the Magic Academy. Kind of like a university town.

That's Ladyblue, the city containing the Magic Academy.

"Blue? Doesn't look blue to me."

The town is named after Winalene, who is renowned as the most powerful ocean mage in the world.

"I see."

You had to be really famous to have a town named after you. I just hoped that Fran wouldn't be rude to its namesake!

Fran and Jet increased their speed as we got closer to the city. Seen from above, Ladyblue was a messy sprawl, its roads enmeshed with all the complexity of a spider's web and a total disregard for city planning. I'd originally intended to memorize the roads from above, but I quickly gave up. There was no way I was going to commit this maze to memory.

We got inside and found that it was even more complex at ground level. We should

have been able to reach the important buildings by sticking to the main street, but...

Why do I feel like we just made this exact mistake?

“Hm?”

Remember back in Granzell’s capital when we didn’t stay on the main road? We got lost.

“Something smelled good.” Fran answered my question with a tasty waffle in her hand.

“Worf!” Jet was chewing on three waffles at once.

We *had* been planning to stick to the main street... but Fran followed her nose and took a sudden turn down another road. Fortunately, we still managed to find her food stall in the end.

The capital of Granzell was filled with a regular labyrinth of roads, and Ladyblue was no slouch in this respect. But the buildings here were different enough to give the city its own unique character. Granzell’s capital had a Mediterranean look to it. Ladyblue, on the other hand, looked like an old English town—not that I’d ever been to England. But it definitely looked the part.

I once saw a documentary about The Beatles featuring downtown Liverpool and the surrounding countryside. This town looked a lot like that. Buildings made of red brick, countryside with forests and streams left intact... it all invoked a feeling of nostalgia. Granted, now wasn’t the time for getting sappy about a Beatles doc.

We’re completely lost.

“Hm.”

You asked the old lady at the store for directions, right?

“I did.”

Why didn’t you follow them?

“It’s more interesting this way.”

I see.

“Hm!”

The road Fran took had crawl spaces, cramped steps which would wear out the elderly, and green tunnels made of overhanging trees—enough to light the adventurous fire in a child’s heart. Fran and Jet enjoyed themselves as they explored the city. You could even say that they got lost on purpose.

Well, it’s not like we’re in a rush. I wanted to stop by the Adventurers’ Guild first, but it’s not like we have to check in.

Besides, I was beginning to enjoy our little adventure myself. The apartment buildings faded and gave way to houses, and I enjoyed seeing how each one decorated its lawn differently. Each house had its own English garden.

We continued our trek through town when Fran suddenly came to a stop and pointed.

“Teacher, check it out.”

What is it, Fran?

“That building’s crazy.”

Fran was pointing at a unique building a short distance away from us. It really *was* crazy.

The three-story house had a tree growing out of it. And it wasn’t like they just decided to have a rooftop garden, either. No, there was a hole in the roof from which the giant tree stuck out. Looking at it closely, there were branches growing out of the second- and third-floor windows. Had the tree just grown *into* the house?

That wasn’t the only thing that surprised us. There was actually laundry being dried there. Someone was really living in the house.

We got closer to it and found yet another surprise: a sign in front of the building that called it The Old Evergreen. Apparently, this was an inn. Was it actually still in business? Who would pay to stay in a place like this?

“Let’s go, Jet!”

“Woof!”

Fran, wait!

Fran charged the inn with shining eyes. We didn't even know what this place *was* yet!

“Wow.”

“Woof.”

Fran and Jet, now medium sized, looked at the giant tree from the lawn. The tree looked like a camphor, with branches spread so wide over the inn that it made for a second roof.

Satisfied with the sight, Fran moved to open the door to the inn. The wooden door was old, but well-cared-for. “Wow.”

At this point, I'd lost count of all the shocks we'd gotten.

“The tree's in here, too.”

Of course. I understand your surprise, though.

The tree's trunk was much thicker than I'd thought. The inn was quite sizable, but most of its space was dominated by the tree itself, which stood dead center as if enshrined there. The floor was a wood deck, uneven and bumpy to accommodate the growth of the roots. Clearly, the tree's needs came first.

“Oh, are you a guest?”

“Who are you?” asked Fran.

“I asked you first.”

“Fran. Adventurer.”

“Ah, I see.”

As Fran was pinned at the entrance, a small old elf lady came to talk to her. When did she get here? Had she always been here and we just hadn't noticed?

“I'm the owner of this inn. Will you be staying with us?”

“Hm! One night!”

Wait, you wanna stay here?

Hm!

We hadn’t even found the Adventurers’ Guild yet, but Fran had fallen in love with the place.

I think this was my first time seeing an old elf. Elves spent most of their lifetime in a youthful state, but they aged similarly to humans in the last hundred years of their life. Most elves retreated into themselves at this time and fell into a long, deep sleep to prolong their life, which meant an elderly elf working in town was quite the rare sight.

“That’ll be five hundred gold. Breakfast and dinner included.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and I must warn you. Misfortune will befall you if you harm the great tree. I hope we’re clear on that.”

The great tree, huh? I wondered if it was a rare species or something. Fran asked and was told that the tree was home to a spirit the old lady had formed a contract with.

“They are very kind, as long as you don’t cause mischief,” she said.

“Do you think I’ll get to see them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, maybe not. You’ll have a better chance if you’re a good girl.”

“Then I’ll be a good girl.”

The old elf laughed. “I’m happy to hear it.”

She led us to our room, which was surprisingly ordinary. Clean bed, simple interior. My fear that the room would be overtaken by branches was unfounded. It seemed the old elf didn’t just commune with the spirit in the tree—the spirit actually mapped its growth to the dimensions of the inn. This kept the guest rooms clear of greenery... but the gigantic root was just a given.

“It’s a good room.”

“Woof!”

You seem to really like this place.

“Hm! It smells good, like we’re in the forest.”

For a girl who grew up with nature like Fran, an inn with the atmosphere of a forest made her feel right at home in the big city. She sat on the bed and took a deep breath.

Before long, we left The Old Evergreen and resumed our journey to the Magic Academy.

So this is the Magic Academy, is it? It’s big, all right. Tall.

“Pointy.”

“Woof.”

We’d thought about dropping by the Adventurers’ Guild beforehand, but we were much closer to the Academy than I thought. We looked for a vantage point to get a better view. Climbing a narrow staircase five hundred steps long, we found a spot which overlooked all of Ladyblue. The Academy was very close.

We somehow managed to get lost on our way there, so things took longer than expected, even though the inn was only about three to four hundred meters away. Going by air would’ve trimmed that journey down to five minutes, admittedly, but I didn’t want to rob Fran and Jet of their fun.

Waffles were the local delicacy in Ladyblue, and we found a lot of good shops. Not only were there savory fillings like ham and cheese, but some of the waffles were made with some truly savory batter. Ladyblue looked like it had some interesting cuisine. Maybe I’d try to whip up some food myself if we had the downtime.

As for the freshwater fish curry Fran wanted to eat, I had actually come up with a few straightforward recipes for her. Given the great variety of fish in the lake, we’d left with a ton of ingredients.

First, there was eel curry. Peppers were pretty cheap in Belioth, so I used quite a few on some *kabayaki* grilled eel. Imagine *hitsumabushi*, but with curry. I thought I had gone too far this time, but Fran lapped it up no problem. Curry really was the greatest dish ever made.

Next, I made carp curry, which turned out to be regular fish curry. It was nothing new, and I think I overdid it with the spice to cover up the muddy taste of the fish... but it turned out to be a big hit with Jet all the same. Refining this recipe might be worth it.

Let's look for the entrance.

"Hm."

We now stood before the outer walls of the Magic Academy. Even from here, the spires within were visible. There were over ten of them, each as slender as an office building. There might even be more once we got inside.

Castles, fortresses, and military installations aside, buildings weren't usually built this high. At first, I thought they did it in order to save space—but that didn't seem to be true. We still couldn't find the entrance, despite walking for some time. Now that I thought about it, the Academy did look like it occupied a quarter of the city when viewed from the outside. Ladyblue itself was big enough to be considered a city, so the Academy was probably bigger than an average town.

I thought of Kierlazen and imagined the Magic Academy dwarfing the town.

"Should we... go up? Someone might come get us."

"Woof."

Was Fran trying to break in so security would come fetch us? Jeez, that was pretty extreme! She really did have a lot of pent-up energy. What if I let her do it? She was starting to look bored, and there were no signs of a break in the walls...

No, still a bad idea. We were going to be here for a while, so we'd best not cause trouble.

N-no!

"No?"

No!

“Okay.”

So why was she grinning? It was faint, but I could see it. *Anyway, no means no!* It’d be hard for us to move around if Fran got a reputation as a troublemaker from day one.

Besides, this was no ordinary wall. There was an aura of mana around it, so it was probably enchanted with security magic. Fran knew this, of course. She *wanted* to take advantage of it by tripping the barrier and summoning security.

However, now that I had Mana Command SP, I felt a second mana signature. The wall’s security magic concealed another enchantment. I couldn’t tell what it was, but springing it could only cause trouble. We weren’t going to be spell-test dummies, thank you very much. Best stick to the road.

And that is that, Fran.

“Hm. All right.”

We kept following the wall until we found a part that wasn’t a wall... though it wasn’t a gate, either.

“Is that the one?”

It looks like an entrance. But why is it so small?

We’d finally made it to an entrance of the Magic Academy, but it was *tiny* compared to the wall. It was probably something akin to a service door.

Looks like we found the back door. A staff entrance, maybe.

“What now?”

We could keep looking for the main gates, but let’s check this place out first. And have Aristea’s letter ready.

“Okay.”

Jet... I guess you’re fine the way you are.

“Woof.”

Better to have him out in the open than hidden in the shadows. Cut down on introduction time.

“Hey.”

That's “excuse me”!

“Excuse me.”

Back door this might be, but it was still manned. Fran called out to the man inside.

“Yes? How may I help you?”

He was a gentle-looking middle-aged man. Could someone like that really work security? But the Academy was very stringent with their hiring process.

“I'm here for a quest.”

“Oh, are you an adventurer? Strange that we would outsource...”

“Hm?”

“Oh, excuse me. May I know the nature of your quest?”

It looked like we were on the right track. Fran gave the guard Aristea's letter of introduction.

“Dueling classes. Details are in the letter.”

“If you'll excuse me, let's see here... Huh?”

The guard looked startled as he read the letter. I couldn't blame him. Its contents were probably something like “I'm writing this letter to inform you that the person carrying it is the instructor the headmistress is looking for.”

And Fran didn't look anything like a dueling instructor.

Still, Aristea's name should have been on it, and she was a known instructor in the

Academy. What's more, the letter rested in an envelope carefully produced by the Academy.

"Do you have your adventurer's card?"

"Yeah. Here."

"Let me just verify this."

After examining it, the guard turned to a small window by his side and started talking to somebody on the other side. He then turned back to Fran.

"May I borrow this letter for a bit?"

"Hm. Sure."

"Thank you."

The guard handed the somebody the letter and returned Fran her card. "Someone else will come to see you. I ask for your patience." His attitude completely changed. He'd treated Fran like a child earlier, but now she was honored like a guest.

Fran got the letter back and waited in front of the gate. I wondered who would come get us. We waited for about five minutes until we saw a man appear behind the gate.

"This is the one, Professor," said the guard.

"Hello, there," the Professor said. "Sorry for the wait. Are you the adventurer Aristea mentioned?"

"Hm."

"Mind if I see her letter?"

"Sure."

"Uh-huh..."

The new arrival was a young, shallow-looking half-elf with a flirtatious air to him. He looked like he was in his late teens, but his elvish blood meant he was probably older

than he looked. He read Aristea's letter of introduction, though his frivolous appearance made it look like he was only skimming.

"Hmm... well, whatever. Right this way."

He sounded dismissive as ever, even after reading the letter. But judging by the security guard's treatment of him, he was well respected. Best do as we were told.

We went through a door and down a passageway with low ceilings. The outer walls were thick enough that the path into the Academy was like a tunnel.

I watched as the man led Fran inside. He had a lot of mana, but his footwork was amateur, leading me to believe he was some kind of specialized researcher. I didn't know his rank, but the security guard had called him "Professor," which at least made him a lecturer.

"I am Coltandilou," he said. "Just call me Colt."

"Adventurer Fran. This is Jet."

"Wolves are great, aren't they? They're obedient. They make for fabulous fighters and lookouts. You can even snuggle against them for warmth at night."

"Jet's the best."

"Woof, woof!"

He laughed. "I can see you're great friends."

We followed Colt out of the tunnel and were greeted with a sight far stranger and more majestic than I could have imagined. Not only were there grasslands and ponds on the campus, but forests and high mountains as well. Those must've come in handy for classes.

Looking further, I also saw a snow-capped mountain that was a mere ten meters tall. I felt mana emanating from it, so it was either made of or maintained with magic. In front of the forest was a pond with a canal leading inside. Given the size of the forest, there might be an even bigger pond inside.

The Magic Academy sure lived up to its name.

At the center of all this unnatural nature stood a gigantic construct. The towers visible from the outside, and the interlocking pathways and buildings, all seemed to connect to this one superstructure.

“Whoa.”

Colt nodded. “Pretty neat, huh? It’s still under construction, so it’s only going to get bigger as the years go by. And it all started with that little tower over there.”

He pointed to an old, shabby-looking tower in the middle of the other towers. It was about fifteen meters tall, with walls so blackened that their original color was lost and vines creeping all over. The windows were too small to see what was going on inside.

The old tower stood alone, unconnected to the rest of the superstructure. I couldn’t believe that the Magic Academy had sprouted from something so tiny.

“Huh. When was that built?”

“It’s been there for over two thousand years, they say,” said Colt. “It was originally the headmistress’ laboratory.”

A high elf laboratory—not a book you should judge by its cover. There was an enchantment on it that preserved its current state. Who could say what wonders hid within such ancient stone?

“Anyway, that place is off-limits to everyone save the headmistress and a select few others. *We’re* headed this way.”

“Hm.”

Colt led us down another tunnel to a small building right by where said tunnel ended. Well, I say small, but it was still three stories high. It was just small in comparison to the rest of the Academy.

“This is the guardhouse. They have equipment which can verify your identity. We just need to authenticate your adventurer card. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Hm. No problem.”

“Sorry about this. I’m not much of a fighter, but I can sense your magic. I know there’s

more to you than meets the eye, but that's exactly why we need to make sure you are who you say you are."

Meaning he wouldn't have needed to bother if Fran had been a weakling.

Colt touched the now-familiar crystal to Fran's adventurer card. This magical piece of equipment was pretty much this world's equivalent of a card reader.

"Thank you, that'll be all."

"Hm? That's it?"

"Yep. You're good."

"You're not verifying the letter?"

That kind of bugged me, too. If the recommendation turned out to be fake, then it didn't matter whether Fran was a real adventurer. They should at least have needed to verify the handwriting or seal, right?

But Colt had merely skimmed the letter. He clearly hadn't taken the time to read the whole thing at the entrance. Had he identified the handwriting and scanned the letter for fingerprints in that short amount of time?

But Colt only laughed as he returned the letter to Fran. "Sorry, sorry. We finished verifying the letter, too. It's written on special paper, see. All it needs is a special fluid to check its authenticity."

The Academy had specially provided Aristea with the stationery she needed to write her letter.

"The letter is real and you're a high-rank adventurer," he continued. "I don't see any problems here, do you? Although, there *is* still an interview..."

O-oh? An interview? No... of course there would be an interview. Even if Fran was filling a temporary position, this was still a mammoth institute. Could she handle this? Interviews sounded like something Fran would be awful at. I guess she *did* have Royal Etiquette.

All she needed, then, was for me to guide her through the process. I didn't get a job

during an employment ice age for nothing. Granted, that was a lifetime ago, and I didn't remember half of The Keys to a Successful Interview, but I was still more experienced than Fran. This would be easy. Probably.

Just as I was getting all enthused, we were told the interview would be conducted at a later date.

"Really sorry. The headmistress is supposed to interview you personally, but she's away from the Academy at the moment. I think she'll be back tomorrow or the day after."

"The headmistress? You mean the high elf?"

"That's the one. She's not here right now."

The headmistress herself would be interviewing us?! Considering the size of the Academy, she must have taken time out of her busy schedule. No wonder she didn't know when she would be coming back, considering how much was on her plate.

"Okay. So what do I do now?"

"Do you have a place to stay? We can provide accommodations if you don't."

"I do."

"Oh, where are you staying?"

"The Old Evergreen."

Fran's answer startled Colt. "R-really? There?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. But the owner is known for being difficult. She won't let you stay there if she doesn't like you. I'm impressed."

"She was just a regular old lady."

"Woof."

The owner was a kindhearted old elf lady, as far as Fran and Jet were concerned. Were we really talking about the same person?

“I-I see. Well, okay. I’ll send someone for you once the headmistress returns.”

“Okay.”

Once Fran cleared the interview, she would officially be a lecturer for a respectable academy—not that we had any ambitions of becoming a lecturer for a living. But it was still a challenge, and Fran and I were enthused to tackle it.

The Adventurers’ Guild is next.

“Hm. Say, where’s the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Right, I suppose you would need to check in. It’s hard to explain—let me draw you a map.”

“Thanks.”

A map was very much appreciated. It would take a while before we got used to this town.

As one might expect of a teacher, the map Colt drew us was quite detailed, showing both main roads and backstreets along with clearly designated landmarks. The Adventurers’ Guild could be easily reached by sticking to the main road, but Fran and Jet, preferring a challenge, went down the first alley they came across to continue their exploration. Jeez, just because we had a map didn’t mean they had to *try* to get lost!

Still... Ladyblue was beautiful, so I understood getting a little sidetracked. Killifish were swimming in the waterways and potted plants decorated the walls by the road. Flowers bloomed on overgrown gates, attracting pretty little butterflies. Everywhere you looked, there was beauty.

And, maybe due to our proximity to the Academy, there were no signs of the city’s underbelly. Presumably, any suspicious characters were dealt with by the Academy.

As we snacked from stall to stall along the way, we eventually took an exit back to a main street. The Adventurers’ Guild should’ve been nearby. According to the map, it was a mere hundred meters away... but we saw no building that fit the bill.

The guild was *supposed* to be big enough to be visible from afar. Choosing to trust the map, we kept walking until eventually we found it. It had a sign on the outside and everything.

But Fran tilted her head when she saw it. "It looks kinda plain."

"Woof."

She'd been expecting the guild to match the grandiosity of the city. The Adventurers' Guild, however, was an ordinary red-brick building. It was big, but not gigantic, and it didn't stand out compared to the rest of the architecture.

Let's go inside.

"Hm."

"Woof."

She opened the door and found the interior to be as ordinary as the facade. Everything was standard-issue Adventurers' Guild stuff, from floor to ceiling to reception area. It could've been a guild at any other town. There were your usual adventurers thinking about what quests to take, your average adventurers wasting their time negotiating with the receptionist for better material prices, all the usual suspects.

But there was one group which stood out from all the rest.

"Kids?"

I think they're a little older than you. Probably Academy students.

They wore leather cloaks of good make, adorned on the shoulder with emblems depicting raging waves. The design looked familiar... Right, I'd definitely seen it on the Academy banners and emblazoned on the back door.

And in addition to the students at the counters, there were others at the quest board. The ones not wearing Academy cloaks were probably rookie adventurers. Apparently, students were allowed to be adventurers here. Was that even allowed? Guess it must've been, considering how flagrantly they were wearing their school emblems inside the guild.

Doesn't explain why they're doing it, though.

Experience grinding? Gold farming? Good old-fashioned fieldwork? All these questions would be answered once Fran became their instructor.

There are a lot of weird requests.

There are a lot of requests period. A lot of mundane stuff, too.

That one says exorcism.

Is that a ghost extermination? Sounds like something else...

This was a big city with a lot of errands and chores on its quest board. There were combat quests too, and requests for people to exterminate both rats and crows. A condemned building hosted an exorcism job, another job required killing a blood-sucking monster... It was all so outlandish that it made me wonder if the targets even existed, especially because the listed rewards were super low.

And one about... finding a missing acquaintance?

Probably kidnapped by a mysterious stranger...

Funny you should say that. This one says "Catch the mysterious stranger."

And look at this one. "Catch mysterious stranger wandering at night"?

Was Ladyblue facing an epidemic of mysterious strangers? There were other mysterious stranger quests, too, though the only description that carried through every one of them was that the stranger was dressed in black. Judging by the low rewards, it was all too apparent that the guild didn't take them seriously.

Anyway, let's check in.

If Fran passed her interview, we'd be staying in this town for a while, which meant she'd have to register at the local guild to let them know of her stay. While not required, registering was highly recommended. Knowing the locations of all the high-rank adventurers in the area came in handy in an emergency.

"Hey."

"Hello and welcome to the Adventurers' Guild. What brings you here today?"

"Hm. I'm just checking in since I might be staying here for a while. Here's my card."

"Oh, I see. Let me just verify that for you." The receptionist took Fran's card and was immediately startled. But her professional smile soon returned to her lips. "I-I'll go get my superior. Please wait a moment."

"Okay."

She had probably thought Fran was a rookie posing as a high-rank. Still, I appreciated the receptionist's unwavering smile. Their ability to keep up a smile was basically how you judged the level of any given receptionist. This one was intermediate.

Fran waited in front of the desk and soon enough we felt someone come up behind us. I thought they wanted to speak to the receptionist, but they stopped right behind Fran.

"Excuse me," the someone said.

"What?"

A blonde beauty, slightly older than Fran, had called out to her. She wore an Academy cloak. A powerful enchanted sword hung at her waist. But the girl had one feature in particular which left me captivated.

W-wow! Blonde drills! She has blonde drills!

The girl wore her blonde hair in straight rolls. I had never seen one up close before. She had the air of a rich and cultured girl, too.

Blonde drills and exposed forehead! Is she gonna do that "Oho ho ho!" noblewoman laugh too? Please! C'mon, pleaaaase!

I couldn't hold back my excitement.

Teacher, what is it?

I, uh... It's the hair, you know...

Her hair? It's blonde.

D-don't mind me. I just don't get to see this kind of hair too often.

Uh-huh.

Made sense that Fran wasn't interested, but this was the most excited I'd been since learning about the existence of maids and butlers in this world.

I Identified her. Carona River, sixteen years old and an actual noble. You'd be punished for having this kind of hair if you were a commoner. She was an E-Rank who could use fire and water magicks, but both only at level 3. Her melee skills weren't anything to write home about, but she had Everyday Magic and Presence Sense, quintessential Skills for fieldwork. The rest of the students had these basic survival Skills too, so maybe it was taught at the Academy.

E-Rank she might be, but she was obviously an E-Rank on the rise. There was always a demand for magic users.

“What?”

Fran put her guard up and looked at the blonde. She could tell that Carona wasn't hostile towards her, but there was a hint of frustration and annoyance in the noblewoman's voice.

“No, not ‘what.’” Blonde Drills sighed. “Students of the Academy are required to wear their cloaks while embarking on quests. Your attire is breaking school protocol.”

She had mistaken Fran for a student of the Academy and was warning her of her breach of school policy.

“Where is your cloak?” she asked.

“Don’t have one.” Fran could've been a little more articulate. She made it sound as if she didn't have one with her at the moment.

“Then I cannot let you go on like this. Return to the Academy at once.”

Still misunderstanding, Blonde Drills grabbed Fran's arm to drag her out of the guild. Fran clearly didn't know whether to push her away or not; the student's heart was obviously in the right place, but...

Instead, Fran braced herself and held her ground. “Hrmp.”

“What’s this? You’re quite strong! But please, stop resisting and come quietly. You might get a scolding later. You don’t want that, do you?” Blonde Drills looked at Fran the way you would look at a stubborn child, but she hadn’t raised her voice so far—maybe she was nicer than she looked.

“...Mrgh.”

“...Hrngh.”

As Fran and Drills continued their quiet test of strength, a man emerged from further within the guild. He was a handsome guy, maybe in his late twenties... or maybe not, because he was an elf. Still, he definitely had the air of a seasoned veteran, with combat proficiency as a fighter and more mana than the average mage. He was also great at concealing his presence, making him a true all-rounder.

The man quickly walked to the receptionist and they talked in hushed whispers. “The alarm went off. What’s the emergency?”

Apparently, reception could buzz the Guildmaster if there was an emergency. Very useful in case of robberies. Not that anyone would be stupid enough to rob an Adventurers’ Guild.

“A high-rank adventurer says she’ll be staying in town for a while.”

“Yeah? What rank?”

“B, sir.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s that girl over there.”

The receptionist pointed at Fran, whom Drills was currently trying to convince to return to the Academy. The Guildmaster took one look at the situation and figured out what was going on.

“Sorry, do you have a sec?”

"And you are?" asked Drills. "I'm sorry, but we're in the middle of something."

"I've got some business with that girl."

"Oh? What kind of business? I am the girl's guardian." Drills stepped in front of Fran to cover for her, an upperclassman protecting her underclassman.

The Guildmaster looked quite young, after all—young enough to be mistaken for a thug who might pick on a child adventurer. Drills was low-rank, so she didn't recognize who he was.

"Her guardian? Really?" he repeated.

"...No?" Fran broke in.

Drills blinked. "Huh?"

Fran hesitated, not wanting to embarrass Drills. Things had spiraled out of control because of her lack of communication skills to the point that the Guildmaster was involved. Drills—I mean, Carona—looked so startled when Fran pulled away from her that I just felt bad for the girl.

"Figures. The name's Kinavarro. I'm the Guildmaster here."

"Huh?" Carona looked from the Guildmaster to Fran and back.

"Hm. Adventurer Fran."

"What?"

"Didn't think we'd get a nickname bearer in these parts. Glad to have you on board."

"Whaaaaaat?!" Blonde Drills was so shocked that Fran bowed her head to her.

"Sorry."

Sorry about the awkwardness, Blonde Drills. She stayed pinned to the floor as Fran climbed the stairs. There she remained as Fran entered the office and left her behind.

"Have a seat."

“Hm.”

“And don’t worry about that nice young lady. I’ll talk to her later. Make her feel better.”

He’d read Fran pretty well for a first meeting. No wonder he’d made Guildmaster—the guy was observant. Maybe even observant enough to notice my existence.

“You’re not mad at her?” asked Fran.

“Ha ha ha! If anything, I’m impressed. Not every day someone would stand up for her underclassman to protect her from a creep. And besides, the whole thing was a silly misunderstanding. That being said—” The Guildmaster took a long look at Fran. “To the untrained eye, you *do* look like a helpless little beastgirl in need of protection. Hard to gauge how strong you are from your gear, too.”

Fran’s gear did look like it wasn’t much more than a frilly set of armor.

“Your sword stands out...” he continued, “but it could be another piece of junk someone bamboozled you into buying. Rookies like buying flashy gear. Wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened.”

Carona had thought of Fran as either an underclassman or a rookie adventurer trying to fake her way through with fancy gear. What an unflattering first impression!

“Anyway, what’s the famous Black Lightning Princess doing here? I hear you’re planning to stay with us for a while, too.”

His rough, casual speech only added to his charm. It just made him look like a bad boy elf. Elves really had all the luck.

“I’m working as an instructor at the Magic Academy.”

“For real?”

“Maybe,” added Fran.

“Maybe? You don’t know if you’re getting the job?”

“Hm.”

“You lost me, Fran.”

Fran gave him a rundown of the situation. An acquaintance had ties to the Magic Academy, said acquaintance was looking for a dueling instructor for the Academy, and Fran turned out to be a suitable candidate. So she came to Ladyblue, introduction letter in hand.

“I see. So that’s what happened.”

“I went to the Academy today, but they said the interview will have to wait.”

The Guildmaster groaned. “The interview’s no easy thing.”

“Really?”

“Yep. There are only about thirty Academy-appointed adventurers in Ladyblue.”

“Academy-appointed?”

“That’s right. They’re adventurers the Academy entrusts with their students.”

A portion of Magic Academy students were allowed to operate as adventurers. Of course, they needed to fulfill certain criteria before they could register. There were also very strict rules regarding what quests they could take. They weren’t allowed to take E-Rank quests alone, and an Academy-appointed adventurer accompanied them to keep students from dying in the field. Said appointees earned a sizable yearly salary in exchange for their services, making the position highly sought after in Ladyblue.

“Student adventurers have already passed the Academy’s stringent tests. You rarely get troublemakers.”

That’s why the job wasn’t considered so much as babysitting a bunch of brats as it was coaching newbie adventurers. These were valuable newbies, too—ones who could use magic and actually wanted to learn. Combine that with the hefty salary and the regular quest rewards, and it was easy to see why the position was so popular.

But not everyone could get Academy-appointed. The Academy ran thorough background checks on all candidates under whose protection they’d be placing their students, starting with their personality and abilities, then moving on to family and personal history. Finally, only adventurers who passed the headmistress’ interview

could become Academy-appointed.

This interview was notorious for being incredibly difficult.

“She’ll kick you out in a heartbeat if she figures you’re of no use to her, introduction letter or no. Happened to one of the nobles, once. Created quite the fuss. Stuff... *happened*. Said noble’s house no longer exists.”

No longer exists?! What kind of “stuff” happened, exactly?

“I’ll say this: she’s terrifying.”

“You know the headmistress?”

“I’m an elf and the local Adventurers’ Guild Guildmaster, whaddya think?”

They were both very strong and of the same race. Of course they would be in touch with each other.

Fran asked the Guildmaster what kind of person the headmistress was. He folded his arms and scrunched his face. “She’s nice, for the most part. But piss her off and you’ll be sorry. Seriously, do *not* make her angry.”

“All right.”

The Guildmaster was quite fearful of the headmistress—Winalene the high elf. He was practically begging Fran not to cause any trouble.

“Is she strong?”

“Of course. She’s a high elf.”

“I heard she’s an ocean mage.”

“The world’s greatest. This one time, she destroyed an intermediate dungeon during a stampede all by herself.”

Apparently, Winalene had done so by just staying at the dungeon entrance. For three days straight, she used her incredible magic to create water, flooding the dungeon and drowning all the monsters inside. Powerful indeed.

“What else?” asked Fran. “She’s an elf, can she use Spirit Magic?”

“Who knows?”

“Hm? You don’t know?”

“When you get to her level, you can pretty much batter any problem with Ocean Magic. I’ve never seen her in melee combat, never seen her use spirit spells. Identify doesn’t work on her, either.”

“She has Identity Protection?”

“No, she’s just so damn strong that it doesn’t work.”

The same thing happened when I tried to Identify a Godsword. A millennia-old being with strength that far surpassed an S-Rank adventurer would be difficult to Identify.

“As a headmistress, she loves her kids,” added the Guildmaster. “I don’t think you’ll have a problem with her.”

We spent a little time talking about local delicacies and then left the Guildmaster’s office.

The Guildmaster took one final look at Fran before she left. “*Do not* upset the headmistress. Hear me?”

“Hm. Got it.”

“I mean it.” He looked worried. What kind of rumors had he been hearing? “Also, since you’ll be working at the Academy, does that mean you’re not taking any guild quests?”

“Hmm? I don’t know yet.”

“Fair enough. There are just a lot of quests that only an adventurer your level can get done.”

“I saw some weird ones earlier.”

“Weird? Oh, you mean the exorcisms and monster exterminations? Don’t worry about those. The Academy has its own Seven Mysteries. The kids go crazy over it from time

to time. They're just jumping at shadows, mostly."

"Mostly? So some of that stuff's real?"

"We're talking about a Magic Academy, remember? They have labs where they do all sorts of crazy experiments. Sometimes, one of the test subjects escapes and causes trouble. Weird trouble."

The Academy usually handled these cases by themselves, eliminating the need for high-rank adventurers like Fran.

"If anything happens, anything at all," he said, "let me know. Seriously."

We returned to the first floor under the Guildmaster's pleading eyes.

Someone was waiting for Fran downstairs. "Excuse me..."

"Hm?"

Blonde Drills—Carona—called out to her, wearing a pained expression. "I sincerely apologize for what happened earlier. I didn't know you were a high-rank adventurer. I was terribly rude to you."

The receptionist had told Carona about Fran's identity and now she was very embarrassed. Despite looking like an arrogant rich girl, she didn't hesitate to bow her head deeply right then and there. She was quite well-mannered.

"I'm not mad."

"R-really?"

"Hm."

Carona heaved a sigh of relief. High-rank adventurers must seem intimidating to their juniors, and even though Fran looked young—or perhaps *because* she looked young—she must've seemed like a genuine monster to Carona.

"The Guildmaster said you did good," said Fran.

"Huh? Me?"

"Hm. He said he was impressed by how you stood up for an underclassman to protect her from a creep."

"I, uh..." Carona looked away, not knowing what to think. Not only had she mistaken Fran for a low rank, but the Guildmaster was also teasing her for thinking he was some random creep. Nevertheless, she appreciated the compliment. No wonder she was speechless.

Fran, I think you should change the subject.

"Um... did I look like an Academy student?" asked Fran.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were a fundamentals-course student who was unaware of the school's policies."

"Fundamentals course?"

"Y-yes. There are many courses in the Magic Academy, but everyone starts with the fundamentals course to learn magic."

The first order of business in the Magic Academy was learning how to use magic. Students could use any means possible to achieve this goal, and every six months, those who succeeded could transfer to a course of their choosing. Students unable to graduate the fundamentals course in three years would be expelled. Harsh, maybe, but not unreasonable—this *was* the Magic Academy, after all.

"As long as you remain enrolled in the fundamentals course, you are not allowed to register at the Adventurers' Guild," she said.

A necessary measure, considering they'd just be magicless child adventurers. Still, every year saw basic students rush to the Adventurers' Guild because they heard other Academy students were there, without bothering to learn the details.

"There are also students who make trouble for the guild because of their selfishness."

And one troublemaking student could reflect poorly on the entire Academy. Carona, who took great pride in being a student there, wasn't going to let that happen. I'd thought she might be a member of the disciplinary committee or the student council president, but I guess she was just nosy.

Carona went on to tell Fran several stories about students who broke school rules. And what did you know? Fran actually listened intently! What a huge step for her!

“Carona, we have to get going.”

“Of course. Again, I deeply apologize for all the trouble I’ve caused. I will take my leave.”

“Hm.”

“I don’t know if I may be of any assistance, but should you require it, do not hesitate to ask. I come to the guild once a week.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” Drills bowed, joined her friends, and left the guild.

Teacher? said Fran, watching her go.

Yeah?

Now I get why you were interested in her hair.

Huh?

It kept bouncing every time she moved.

And here I thought you were listening attentively. You were staring at her hair?!

It was funny.

I supposed it was fine. Carona hadn’t noticed—and she’d actually managed to make a good impression on Fran, to boot.

What now?

We’ve visited the Academy and the guild. That’s pretty much it for today.

Then it’s time to eat! Let’s look for good food!

Woof!

They'd been eating ever since they arrived in town... and it still wasn't enough.

Should we walk around again?

Heh heh. I have a plan.

A plan, you say?

Hm. I'm not the Fran you know.

All right.

Fran looked confident. Smug, even. She was using her brain for something other than fighting: searching for good eats. What was her plan? To use Jet's nose to sniff out locations?

As I pondered, Fran made her way to reception. "Hey."

"Y-yes? How may I help you?"

"Tell me where I can get good food."

"What?"

Considering Fran's grave expression, the receptionist had probably thought she was going to file a complaint. She paused, wondering if she had really just been asked for restaurant recommendations, but soon regained her footing and marked several locations on the map we got from Colt.

This is the plan, Fran?

Yeah. If you don't know, ask someone who does.

And boy, did she look smug! But considering how bad Fran was at communicating, this was amazing progress.

Th-that was amazing, Fran.

“Heh.”

“I-is something wrong?” asked the receptionist.

“Hm? No.”

“I see. I’ve noted down the stores for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Woof!”

Fran thanked the receptionist and left the guild, ready to explore Ladyblue with her detailed map.

“There’s a place with good stew ahead!”

“Woof!”

This map is really detailed. We’d be lost without it.

The receptionist was born and raised in Ladyblue and knew of all the hole-in-the-wall shops and famous tourist traps. She’d also marked out detailed routes we could use to best get around town, plus vantage points with beautiful scenery we could stop by on our way to the restaurants and food stalls.

Could we really have this for free? This information was as good as a guided tour, if not better.

We explored the town to our heart’s content, absorbing how it was different from all the other ones we had visited.

“It’s pretty here, too.”

“Woof.”

No guards here, either.

There weren’t any guards in the twisting back alleys, outskirts, or slums. While there was still a visible difference in the income of the districts, none of them looked like

slums. There weren't any suspicious mafia types around, either. No thugs shaking you down for money. No robbers mugging you at knife point.

I figured only the school district would be so calm, but apparently the whole city was like this. Seeing this kind of safety in a city this large was rare, to say the least. And because there were no gangs around, the city required fewer guards and soldiers to keep it safe. Ladyblue had less than half the guard force of your average town.

It's a really safe town, I guess.

"Hm. You can see a lot of kids, too."

Now that you mention it, yeah.

Children didn't play outside if the streets weren't safe. Their parents would expect the worst and keep them inside. Here, kids were free to go wherever they pleased. They ran around the backstreets, enjoying the safety of Ladyblue.

We bought some baked sweets for the receptionist at the guild to thank her, and she explained to us why the city was so safe. Simply put, Winalene rooted out criminals and their organizations whenever they showed up. Eventually, the crime lords just left Ladyblue alone.

Winalene's methods were quite intense, to say the least. For example, she wouldn't just eliminate a drug dealer. No, she'd also take out the organization they belonged to, and even their whole supply chain... nobles and foreign entities notwithstanding.

After Winalene caused a few international incidents, Belioth began to protect the autonomous region. They needed to increase their defense budget, but it was better than Winalene going berserk every now and again. Maybe she'd had this goal in mind the whole time.

Regardless, it made Ladyblue the safest town we'd ever been to by far.

Likes kids, intense, elven...

Sounds like Amanda.

They do sound alike.

Now that I think about it, Amanda hadn't said a thing when Aristea brought up the Magic Academy. It wouldn't be strange for Amanda and Winalene to know each other. Still, she surely would've mentioned something if they were acquaintances.

I wonder what she's like.

One thing was for sure: she wasn't someone to anger.

As I considered just how cautious we might have to be around Winalene, Fran and Jet thought about other things. They scanned the area, but there weren't any objects of interest around.

"No strangers."

"Woof."

That's what you were looking for?!

Not that I could blame them, given how odd the mysterious stranger had sounded. According to the sightings, they were anywhere from five meters tall to one meter short. They hopped across rooftops and stuck to walls like a lizard. They sucked people's blood and also feasted on animal flesh. They had red eyes, horns, long fangs... and these were the *less* outlandish physical descriptions. The stranger was a boogeyman, an amalgamation of the imagination of children. But always—*always*—the stranger's body was described as pitch black.

And Fran and Jet were hoping to see them.

If we haven't found them by now, I reckon it's not going to happen.

"Hm..."

The stranger was probably just a rumor that had grown legs. Still, it did pique my attention. As we walked around town, I sometimes detected traces of undead mana—so faint that I only noticed them by complete chance. The strength of the mana, or lack thereof, led me to believe that it was left by a weaker undead.

It might have belonged to the ghost mentioned in one of the quests. The sewers of a city this size would be a real breeding ground for undead. Alessa's hidden undead came to mind, but the residual mana was far too weak. We couldn't track it down with

Mana Sense or Jet's nose. Must've been a lesser ghost... not that we could report it. We lacked concrete evidence, after all.

Let's head home for now. You must be starving.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

With all this information in hand, we returned to the inn to rest. Aside from physical tiredness, there was also the mental fatigue from being in a new town.

The sun had completely set by the time Fran reached the inn—it hadn't been marked on the map, so we'd gotten lost for a while. The look on Fran and Jet's faces when they confidently went down a road only to find they were dead wrong... It was rough.

When we finally made it, though, they gobbled down the dinner the old woman had prepared for them.

"Nom, nom!"

"Scarf, scarf!"

Is it good?

"Hm!"

Fran still had room for dinner after everything she'd eaten that day. The two of them still had their healthy appetite. The old lady had made dinner for Jet too, and at no extra cost. She hadn't tailored the menu to him—he got the exact same thing as Fran. Either she didn't worry about animal diets (kinda like old-fashioned Japanese moms) or she knew that Jet was a strong enough monster to take it.

Dinner was cheesy gnocchi made of wheat and potatoes, and tomato soup with ground meat. We also had some bread, scotch eggs, and salad. Jet's portion was served in a deep bowl with all the different foods mixed together. It didn't look too appetizing like that, but Jet happily scarfed it down. Everything in the dish complemented each other, after all.

"Hrm..."

Jeez, and now Fran was mixing her food too?! Talk about bad manners! And she really didn't have to be so jealous of Jet. Then again... maybe it didn't look so bad after all?

"How do you like it?" asked the old lady.

"It's great!"

"Bark!"

"That's good to hear. Let me know if you want more. There's lots to go around."

Fran proceeded to have seconds and thirds, but the old lady didn't even flinch. If anything, she happily loaded up her plate.

Were we going to have to pay extra? Fran and Jet were eating enough food for ten people, but the old woman didn't seem bothered by their wild appetites one bit. She smiled the way a grandmother would when serving dinner to her grandchild.

"You've got a mighty appetite."

"It was good."

"I see. Would you like some herbal tea to wash it down?"

"Sure."

"Coming right up."

The tea was a medicinal green, but Fran slurped it down. Contrary to its appearance, it had a refreshing aroma. Fran stared up at the old tree as she drank, looking all the way up to where it met the ceiling.

"Is there really a spirit in this tree?" she asked eventually.

"Indeed there is. The spirit of the evergreen."

"Why was the inn built around it?"

"It's a long story—"

And it really was. I had to prop Fran up with a telekinetic chair because she got bored halfway through. With the help of some sweets, she managed to get through the entire thing.

Simply put, there was once a tree in which resided a spirit. This tree was three thousand years old and was famous throughout the city for being the spirit's home. Of course, fifteen hundred years ago, no one was aware of the spirit—just that the tree was strange and enchanted. But the tree slowly got weaker after alchemists and pharmacists harvested its sap, branches, and bark.

The ones who saved the tree were the inn's original owner and Winalene, who'd been a high elf even back then. What they did was simple enough. They bought the land and sealed it off from those who would try to harvest the tree. The inn was built later, because the tree spirit enjoyed watching over people.

And so the inn grew to be a strange place whose only guests were people whom the tree approved of.

“So the spirit approves of me?” asked Fran.

“That they do. You wouldn't have been able to enter this place, otherwise.”

We didn't even feel the spirit's presence, so we couldn't tell. Spirits really were strange beings... and fearsome ones, too. Given our inability to detect them, a powerful spirit could get a sneak attack in on us at any time. Sure, we'd notice them *then*, but if they chose to remain hidden instead, they would be nigh impossible to find.

Fran thanked the innkeeper for the food and returned to her room. She looked around again, scanning her surroundings. I understood how she felt.

Looking for the spirit?

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

They checked the branches that extended to the third floor and examined every knot and hole, though they avoided touching the tree itself so they wouldn't accidentally harm it. But try as they might, they couldn't find the spirit. Eventually, they just gave up.

Anything on your end, P.A.?

I am unable to detect the presence of spirits.

No luck from P.A., either. I'd thought she could give us a lead given all her talents.

“A spirit...”

“Ruff...”

Fran and Jet lay on the floor, dejected. They had taken to sleeping in the same bed recently. It wasn't a problem since Jet could shrink himself.

“Night, Teacher.”

Good night.

“Zzz...”

She fell asleep as fast as always, gone less than ten seconds after closing her eyes. But would Jet be okay in this position? Fran had both her arms *and* her legs wrapped tight around him. He was practically a body pillow at this point. It looked painful, but Jet was blissfully asleep.

Suddenly, Fran's eyes darted open. Was I watching them too intently?

But Fran's eye fluttered, not to me, but the bedroom door.

Wh-what is it, Fran?

“Arf?” Jet rolled off the bed after she woke up and looked at her, perplexed.

“I... felt someone's gaze.”

A gaze? Did you feel it, Jet?

“Woof...”

“Or... I think so...?”

“Woof?”

Fran herself wasn’t sure. Had she just had a strange dream? Jet and I hadn’t felt anything. We used all our detection Skills to scan the inn but the only people inside were us and the old woman.

There were small bugs, sure, but they wouldn’t have been able to wake Fran up like that. Even if there was an ability that let you spy through a bug’s eyes, we’d be able to detect its residual mana. No such spell was used here.

Maybe it’s the spirit. The owner did say they enjoyed watching over people.

“I see.”

Try as we might, we couldn’t detect a thing. Finally, Fran went back to bed.

“Good night...”

Good night.

“Spirit...”

It was going to take a while before she fell asleep.

It was the day after she sensed what we thought was the spirit.

You look like you didn’t get much sleep. You okay?

“I’m fine.” She’d spent the night trying to sense the spirit. Still, she came up dry.

Even though she was rubbing her eyes, it didn’t slow her down during breakfast. This was one of those moments where she really did remind me of a cat.

Breakfast was toast and vegetable soup with meat. There was also assorted fruit and a hefty serving of meatballs. A heavy, hearty breakfast, but Fran gladly ate all of it.

“Trouble sleeping?” asked the innkeeper.

“Hm...”

“You okay? I can fix up the bed if you find it uncomfortable.”

“I felt someone watching over me.”

“Is that so?”

Fran told the old woman about the gaze she’d felt the previous night.

The old woman laughed. “Looks like the spirit likes you.”

“Really?”

“Really. They wouldn’t have watched you to the point of being noticed, otherwise.”

Guests needed the spirit’s approval to stay at the inn, but that didn’t necessarily mean the spirit *liked* them. Even among the tenants, the spirit only took a liking to a select few people. Were they some kind of spiritual tsundere?! *I’ll let you stay at the inn, but it’s not like I like you or anything!* Apparently, the spirit sometimes fully revealed themselves, but that was even rarer.

“What should I do to get the spirit to like me?”

“Who knows? Just keep being a good girl, I suppose.”

Well, that was ambiguous. I guessed Fran could be a good girl by not harming the tree and getting along with the old woman.

Just as we finished breakfast, the door to the inn opened and an elven man stepped inside. He wasn’t very handsome, for an elf. He reminded me of Furion, an absolutely average adventurer we’d explored the Spider’s Nest dungeon with. I guess plain-looking elves were more common than I thought.

“Excuse me, I heard an adventurer named Fran is staying here.”

“Hm?”

I thought the inn had a new guest, but he only had business with Fran. He approached her and smiled. “You must be her.”

“Who are you?”

“My apologies. I’m from the Magic Academy.”

Meaning... what, exactly?

“The headmistress returned early this morning,” he continued. “I’ve come to ask you when you would like to conduct the interview.”

“You’re asking me?”

“Yes. The headmistress said she can conduct it today or tomorrow.”

Winalene was back in town. I’d thought she would assign us a date, but she was letting us pick. Of course, we’d probably fail if we made her wait too long... and I wanted to get this done that day if possible.

Teacher, can we do it today?

Not a problem for us, of course.

Sure, why not?

Even if we waited till the following day, we would only spend the rest of this day sightseeing. Best to get it over with.

“I’ll do it today,” said Fran.

“Understood. What time will you be arriving?”

“I get to choose?”

“Yes.”

“Then... after lunch.”

“Very well. I shall inform the headmistress.”

As Fran watched the elf go, she muttered to herself. “Was that guy approved by the spirit, too?”

The elf had seemingly walked through the door without a problem.

"Elves can use Spirit Magic. That's why they can come into the inn," said the innkeeper.

"Elves are amazing."

"You might be able to learn it, too, young lady. One day."

"I'll do my best."

Monsters which used Spirit Magic were rare. Fran might have better luck learning it by herself.

Excited, Fran finished her breakfast faster than usual and hurried out of the inn.

No snacking today. We can't afford to be late.

"Hm. I know. I have it covered. I've got a plan so we won't get lost."

Really?

Fran knew she couldn't take any detours today—and she'd apparently hatched a plan to keep us on track to our destination.

I'm impressed! Suffice to say, I had high expectations.

"Hup."

"Bark, bark!"

Be careful, now!

Fran's plan boiled down to "If you get lost on the streets, don't use the streets!" She flew over the rooftops and made a beeline for the Magic Academy. Any guards who saw her would definitely find her behavior suspicious. If we got brought in for questioning, we *definitely* wouldn't make the interview.

But either we got lucky or Fran's stealth Skills worked well, because no one stopped us. We made it to the Academy without a hitch. The guards were startled when she descended from the sky. Who wouldn't be?

It was quite the thrilling trip!

We entered through the back door again. I thought about using the front door, but it would be faster if the guard recognized Fran. Of course, we were prepared to use the front door if he told us to, but he called Colt right away when he saw Fran. Outsiders wouldn't bother with the back door to begin with, after all.

"Hey. It's been a day."

"Hm."

"The headmistress told me to lead you to her office."

We went through the same tunnel again and Colt gave Fran some advice. "The headmistress is usually gentle, but she has no mercy for enemies of the Academy. Take care that you don't anger her."

"Okay."

Everyone was telling her not to upset the headmistress. Did she have a short temper?

You have to be careful with her, Fran.

Hm. Fran nodded. Winalene was a high elf. We had no intention of making an enemy of her... but you never know what the future holds.

We passed through the tunnel and went past the guardhouse. Colt took us into the school grounds, setting his eyes on one of the high towers.

Students were everywhere in the courtyard. They'd been absent yesterday, probably because we'd come at a bad time. It might be recess right now.

Most of them wore cloaks like Carona, and mage-like robes. As we watched them from a distance, we could feel their eyes watching us right back. Fran wasn't wearing a cloak and she was being escorted by faculty, so she stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Who's that?"

"A new student? But what's she wearing?"

“Must be an adventurer. They’re allowed to enroll, too.”

“Yeah, but...”

As Fran watched the students watching her, she suddenly stopped.

“Is something the matter?” Colt turned around, startled.

“...”

Fran couldn’t hear him. Her attention was fixed on someone who had just left one of the buildings. “Why... is *he* here?”

I was shocked, too. What was he doing here? I tried to stop Fran from doing something rash, but—

“Awaken...! Flashing Thunderclap!”

Fran, wait!

I was too late. Fran had already entered combat mode.

Crackling with black lightning, Fran ran straight into the schoolyard.

Her initial excitement at seeing the Academy was gone, replaced by hatred and anger. She audibly gnashed her teeth and called the name of her nemesis.

“Theraclede...!” Murder was in her voice, but she kept her full rage contained. Her mana was overflowing from Awakening and Flashing Thunderclap. But she kept her intent to kill hidden from her quarry to get the drop on him.

Even as she was overwhelmed with anger, Fran remained calm.

She was going to calmly kill Theraclede.

“Sword God Form!”

Urgh...!

This was bad. Fran was angrier than I’d thought. I didn’t think she would use Sword

God Form without asking me! This wasn't like her at all!

There was no stopping her. Her eyes were set on ending the life of the scarred-up man in front of her.

His Malice was faint, but still traceable. That, paired with his physical appearance, confirmed the man as Theraclede.

After finally noticing Fran's hate-filled gaze, he turned to her at last.

Things appeared slow to us, since we were in hyper speed, but it had only been a few blinks of an eye since Fran Awakened.

We were halfway to our target now.

Fran increased the density of black lightning surrounding her. Aware that she had been spotted, she knew speed was going to be more important than stealth.

She increased her speed and turned into a bolt of black lightning.

"Black Lightning Strike."

When Fran reappeared, she was right behind Theraclede.

"Die!!!"

Fran's pent-up murderous intent overflowed. Even I had never seen this much bloodlust in her before.

She unleashed a furious slash, but her attack was calm and beautiful in spite of her rage. The perfect cut of Sword God Form sliced through the air and into Theraclede's neck.

There was no way of avoiding it. It was over. I could feel Fran's confidence in Sword God Form.

Theraclede reacted, sensing Fran's intent. He turned around and barely pulled his head away, but that wasn't going to cut it.

Whatever happened, there was zero chance of Theraclede defending himself against

the attack. Too late for Skills and magic to come to his rescue.

My blade embedded itself in his neck, was about to cut through it, and just as the sensation began to sink in—

Kaboom!

“Gah!”

Argh!

A shockwave assaulted me and Fran from the side. It wasn’t that powerful, but it was enough to throw off the trajectory of her attack. Only something so precisely timed could break Fran’s balance.

Fran tumbled through the air, spun, and landed safely.

Who attacked us just now? Try as we might, we didn’t detect our attacker until they had struck... but now we knew there was something behind Theraclede.

But what? All I could tell from the mana, the aura, the surrounding atmosphere... all I could be certain of was that there was *something*...

Fran noticed it, too. She kept a watchful eye on the space behind Theraclede. Did she actually see what it was? Either way, her eyes went back to Theraclede.

Fran?

“I’m going in.”

What?

Without a moment’s hesitation, Fran launched another attack. She ignored the mysterious being that had attacked us and doubled down on killing Theraclede.

Still, she put up a barrier as a precaution. Had she figured out what we were dealing with?

“You little brat!”

"Aaaah!" Fran rushed in, not bothering to hide her murderous intent, and attacked Theraclede in Sword God Form.

"Haaa!"

"Agh!"

She took off his left arm, but the texture felt odd, harder than flesh should be. Now that I thought about it, Kiara had cut off his left arm when they'd last fought. It still hadn't regenerated—he was probably wearing a prosthetic.

The divine element was fatal to Fiends. Being in Sword God Form, I was currently charged with divine mana. We were primed to take him out.

If the attack landed, it might spell the end for Theraclede.

But our attack didn't go as well as I'd hoped.

Another shockwave came, but I could actually feel it this time. Two layers of a water membrane fell between Fran and Theraclede, so dense that it twisted my mana flow. It was as good as a mana barrier.

But Fran paid no heed and attacked anyway. She was going to cut through the membranes.

And then they exploded.

"Blurgh...!"

Fran!

The membranes had been forcefully compressed with magic.

All of the pressure released at once in a violent explosion. It was as if a bomb had gone off underwater. I teleported Fran out of the flood, saving her from drowning. But deep down I knew she didn't care about drowning, so long as she could kill Theraclede.

She hadn't given up, but I was at my limit. Any longer and I would break.

I'm sorry, Fran. I can't...!

Eighteen seconds before Teacher's durability is exhausted.

“Huh?!”

Our voices finally snapped Fran back to her senses and she realized that she had been using Sword God Form. She quickly turned it off.

“Teacher... I...”

Never mind me!

Fran looked like she was about to cry, but we had bigger problems at hand.

An overwhelming pressure fell upon us. But it didn't come from Theraclede. For some reason, he wasn't generating much of it at all. It was like he didn't want to fight.

This pressure was coming from the building behind him... and it was so great that it raised the hairs on Fran's body.

“Who dares cause trouble in my beloved academy?”

The source of it was a beautiful blonde elf. Her eyebrows were knitted together in anger. Although she looked like any other frowning elf girl, the menacing aura rolling off of her was more akin to a dragon.

“Uh...”

The water membranes bore this woman's mana signature. It had eaten through my durability in Sword God Form and disrupted Fran's attack. She was the one who'd cast it.

I didn't need to identify her to figure out who she was. Immense mana. *My beloved academy.* Powerful Ocean Magic.

Fran whispered her name. “Winalene...?”

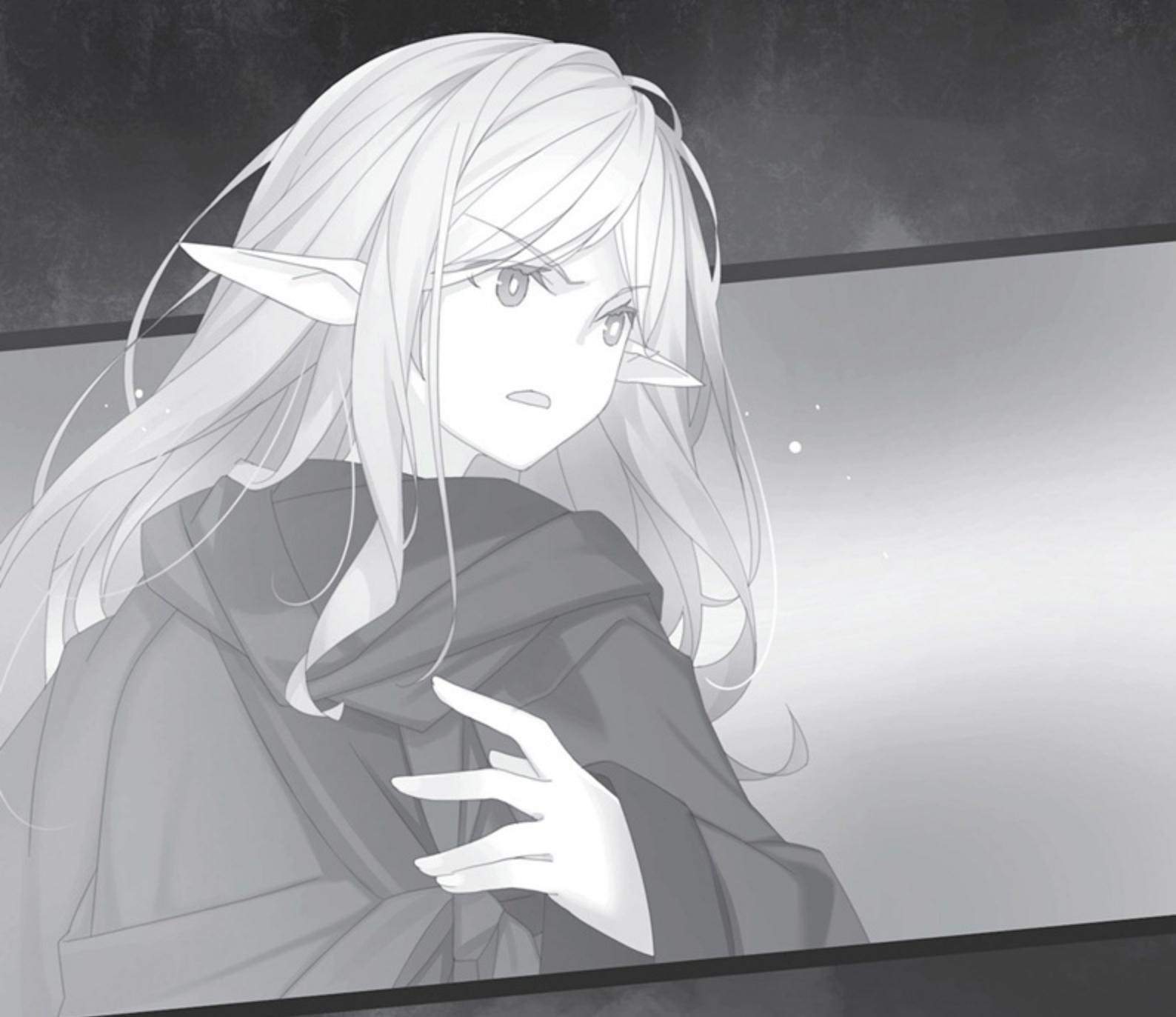
“Yes, I am Winalene. It looks like we have an adorable guest. I take it you are Fran?”

“Hm.”

“If only we could’ve met under better circumstances. I have many questions for you... but first, your punishment.”

“Wha—!”

Winalene stared at Fran with menacing violence.



What she was emitting was only a fraction of her mana. She probably didn't even mean to intimidate us with it. But when Winalene shifted gears, we felt a physical change in the air. It felt like gravity itself had multiplied.

Fran braced herself, a bead of sweat trickling down her chin.

"I'm sorry. But I can't stop the punishment of hostile entities even if I wanted to. Don't worry, it won't kill you." Winalene shook her head and then started muttering to herself. "I, Custodian Winalene, will proceed to take measures against the outsider—no, that's too much. Special job candidate? Not good enough. I will proceed to take measures against a special job candidate and prospective short-term transfer student, for violence against temporary staff and a guardian of a student under special protection. It's going to be a bit harsher than regular punishment... but you *did* try to kill that thing, after all."

The change in atmosphere was palpable.

Mana gathered around us. Although it wasn't hostile or malicious, there was a ton of it. It flowed into Winalene, powering her up.

However, Winalene seemed uninterested. Contrary to the pressure building around her, she seemed to lack motivation, as if she didn't even want to fight.

"I'm going to restrain you. I permit you to fight back, but only against me. This is for your benefit. But I must warn you, I am the strongest in the Academy."

"..."

Fran continued to glare.

Winalene sighed. "And you're so motivated. This is going to be a pain. Divine Water Creation—Aquarius."

Winalene summoned a powerful ball of water faintly imbued with divine element. As its name suggested, Divine Water Creation created water imbued with the divine element, all controlled by the ocean spell Aquarius.

I'd read about Aquarius back in the Adventurers' Guild archives. It was a low-level ocean spell which allowed its user to manipulate bodies of water around them, but it could transform into a thousand different forms in the hands of a master.

Winalene could use it to its full potential and beyond, and she wasted no time doing just that. I could no longer sense the mana and divine element of the water ball. Still, Danger Sense kept blaring at maximum alarm.

It didn't really lose its element, of course. Aquarius just hid it. The water looked like an ordinary water spell when in fact it was one of the most powerful such spells available, loaded with divine element. It would kill anyone who wasn't prepared.

Now I knew why the water membrane had eaten through my durability. It had been made of divine water. We'd fallen right into Winalene's trap.

"Here goes." The next moment, the water ball burst into a rain of bullets. Fran managed to avoid them, but Winalene created more to cover her exit.

"Tch!" Fran tried to cut the water ball down. "Huh?!"

What?!

She let loose a quick strike powerful enough to split a mid-level monster in half... and it bounced right off the ball. Violently, too.

Using Air Hop, she regained her footing and dodged it. She took an offensive posture and got ready for a Pressurized Quickdraw as the ball came back to attack her. "Haa!"

"Oh?" Now it was Winalene's turn to be surprised. She widened her eyes as Fran's attack cut the water ball in two. She was expecting me to shatter and Fran to be blown away.

"Such power... it's brilliant. Oh, why did we have to fight like this?"

Winalene really didn't want to fight. It felt like some kind of force was compelling her to do so, no matter what she herself wanted...

Fran, the only thing I get from Identifying her is her name! We don't know what she's capable of!

"Then we'll just have to beat her fast. My turn!"

"Light Magic? You're multi-talented!"

Fran used Solar Ray. Its powerful beam was supposed to swallow up Winalene, but the water membrane got in the way, disrupting and dispersing it. We'd foreseen this, counting on Winalene to defend against the blinding flash.

"Black Lightning Strike—Skycutter." While maintaining the light spell, Fran moved behind Winalene. She put her whole weight into her next attack.

Fran's intention had been to get close enough for a Skycutter.

A regular opponent wouldn't have been able to keep up with her speed. They'd only notice her when it was too late.

But Winalene reacted with ease. "You're fast!"

The water membranes came down to shield her just like they had with Theraclede. The explosion washed Fran back, preventing her from making a second attack.

But Fran had seen this trick before, and had come up with a strategy to deal with it.

Teacher!

On it!

Honestly, I didn't know whether fighting Winalene here was a good idea. Unlike Theraclede, Fran didn't want to kill her even if she did have some frustrations. Honestly, we were in the wrong for initiating a fight in an area filled with non-combatants.

Winalene didn't want to kill us either, and it was probably better for everyone involved if we turned ourselves in.

But Fran was on fire and Winalene had allowed her to resist. She wouldn't be satisfied if we gave up quietly. Better to let her vent to her heart's content.

Besides, it wasn't like I didn't have frustrations about being steamrolled myself. As Fran's sword, my job was to grant her victory.

I used Dimension Shift at Fran's cue. The water was probably set to automatically explode on impact.

We used the spell to phase through the water and we phased back in once we hit Winalene.

Fran's body made contact with the water membrane and it exploded, washing her away. But she still had a smile on her face.

Her attack had landed.

"And Timespace Magic...!" Red liquid flowed down Winalene's side. Fran's Skycutter had swung true. "You're much stronger than I thought. How many centuries has it been since I last struggled in a fight?" Winalene groaned. "I'm sorry that I said you could fight back. I underestimated you too much. I'm going to have to keep damaging you to satisfy the spirits... and I'm afraid this is going to hurt," she whispered.

"Hm?!"

As soon as Fran heard her whisper, she appeared in front of us. I'd thought she would get away to heal herself!

The high elf was using some kind of body-enhancing Skill. It increased her blood pressure, causing blood to gush out of her side... but that had been her intention all along. Her blood turned to vines which entangled Fran.

Winalene could control her blood, either because it was liquid or because it was part of her. Her magically charged blood was far stronger than regular water. Barriers weren't enough to peel it away. The vines squeezed, twisting Fran's arm. They crept up towards her shoulder, growing branches to fortify themselves.

They were going to take out Fran's sword arm.

She tried to use Mana Thruster to blow the vines away but it was too late. Winalene's water ball had closed in and rammed her right in the solar plexus.

"Gaagh!" With her arm locked by the blood vines, Fran couldn't escape. She was knocked in the air, dislocating her right shoulder.

But she wasn't down for the count. She raised her left leg and kicked Winalene in her right side.

"So persistent!" The water armor protecting her skin took most of the damage, but she

could still feel the blow. She winced and coughed up blood, her body bending forward in pain.

That wasn't the only thing Fran had in store for her, either. "Take... this!"

The black lightning covering Fran's body traveled through her leg and into Winalene—the same black lightning which had gravely injured Gaudartha.

But Winalene's expression remained unchanged. Her water armor had diverted the black lightning's current into the ground. The perfect countermeasure. It was as if she'd seen black lightning before. Had she actually put up the armor for black lightning instead of general protection?

"And now, it's over."

"Wha—?"

For some strange reason, Winalene let go of Fran's arm. She scrambled to put some distance between them, but her feet couldn't move.

"You look like you're just about done," she said. "I think we'll end up using too much strength if we keep fighting. Personally, I would like you to submit. How about it?"

Winalene had asked Fran to surrender. If we did, we would be able to end the fight without grave injury.

But Fran couldn't bring herself to give up. "I'll fight."

Fran roared and generated a ball of light behind her. This wasn't an offensive spell. The only thing it did was create light. The light cast Fran's shadow over Winalene, lengthening enough to engulf her. And *that* was what Fran wanted. From the shadows, a gigantic mouth opened and swallowed Winalene's feet.

Jet began his ambush at his full size.

"Grrr!"

"That's where you were hiding, eh?!"

Winalene quickly jumped away, so Jet only got her below the knees. The Aquarius

counter kept him from clamping down too hard, and the water kept his mouth open, too.

“Blargh...!” As Jet spluttered up water, he retreated back to the shadows. But he’d done his part.

He couldn’t tear both of Winalene’s legs off, but they were heavily damaged. Blood gushed from the bitemarks and I was sure that some of her bones were broken.

That was the work of Dimension Fang, a Skill he got after evolving. It ignored defenses, cutting through Aquarius’ protective layer. If the water hadn’t gotten in the way, he definitely would’ve taken her legs off... but this was still a great opportunity.

Fran and I launched our final attack.

“Haaaa! Kanna Kamuy!”

Double!

Honestly, I was down to the very last dregs of my durability. Sword God Form had drained me, as had the divine water explosion. Knowing this, Fran elected to use magic. She wasn’t good at it, but she had gotten better with training.

She couldn’t cast it instantly, but it didn’t take her too long, either. It took her as much time as Jet bought for her to get ready. Now we were ready to cast our ultimate spell.

Winalene’s legs looked completely healed by now, but she was still in no position to avoid the attack.

However, she had other ways of dealing with it. “Divine Water Creation! Yamata no Orochi!”

Winalene was a master of magic. She’d sensed Fran’s spell and launched a spell to counter the pillar of lightning.

An eight-headed serpent slithered towards the sky. The snake clashed with Kanna Kamuy, discharging its electricity.

BZZZZZT!

The lightning dissipated and faded before it could hit the ground.

Neither spell won, in the end. Though the water serpent had succeeded in dispersing the lightning, it had been vaporized by the lightning serpent.

I think that was what Winalene wanted. She'd cast her spell in such a way that it would cancel out Kanna Kamuy without damaging our surroundings.

We'd managed to put up a decent fight at close range, but when it came to magic, we weren't even close. Winalene had proved to us that she had the upper hand. The chasm between us was staggering.

"Your combat senses are well honed. Kanna Kamuy, Skycutter... you're a bit *too* strong for your age, I reckon. I will ask you again: will you please submit?"

I had a feeling that Fran's consent was necessary. Winalene was currently compelled to fight by a powerful force. The only way she could stop was either by incapacitating her opponent or by their own submission.

"I would damage everything around us if I were to go all out against you," Winalene continued. "I'll restrain myself, but I'll let you go immediately. I promise."

Teacher?

I think we should listen to what she says. I don't think she's lying...

Essence of Falsehood didn't register her words as a lie. But considering Winalene was too strong to be Identified, the same could be said for the lie detector.

Still, Fran seemed to believe her. That fight had worked a lot of rage out of her system.

"Or do you plan on beating me so you can kill that thing?" she asked.

"..."

Winalene and Fran both looked at Theraclede. His whole body was drenched with the blood from his neck wound. He'd lost a lot of blood—he wasn't looking good. Still, he just knelt there quietly and didn't make a fuss.

"I know of your ties with it, but I can't let it die yet," said Winalene. "If you kill it, then

I really won't be able to hold back. I beg of you, submit."

Although Winalene seemed to have the upper hand, she genuinely wanted to avoid any further conflict. Fran could feel it, too. I couldn't see a future where we won if we kept fighting. On the surface, it might've looked like we were putting up a good fight, but Winalene wasn't even using her full strength.

"All right... I submit." Fran nodded, her face a study in frustration.

"Thank you." Winalene exhaled a sigh of relief. "Huh. The Bertotti are still chattering..." Her eyebrows were knotted again. "What? The wolf? Oh, fine."

Who was she talking to? Winalene turned from her invisible conversation partner to summon the water ball again. "Apparently, the wolf hasn't been punished enough yet. This is going to be a bit rough. I'm sorry."

Winalene shot the ball at Fran's feet as if to restrain Fran.

But the water ball spread over the ground like a sheet. At a glance, it just looked like Fran was standing in the middle of it. What was it doing? Fran and I watched until bubbles eventually rose to the surface. Suddenly, something jumped out of the water.

"Blurf!"

"Jet?"

Jet was vomiting water, his legs flailing like he was drowning. Actually, he really *was* drowning. The water had somehow infiltrated his hiding place in the shadows. Unable to teleport, Jet had no way of escaping. As he jumped out of the water, another water ball came at his head, encasing it.

"Burgh...!"

The ball expanded, sealing Jet inside. He looked pitiful as he desperately tried to gasp for air. The first few gulps were all he was going to get.

Still, Jet wasn't giving up. He made himself gigantic, intending to outgrow his water prison.

But Winalene was one step ahead. "That won't work."

The water ball expanded to keep up with his rapid growth. He was still stuck, and in a worse position than before. Large amounts of water were being forced down his mouth.

“Oorf...”

Just as Jet was beginning to truly drown, Winalene snapped her fingers. The ball changed shape, exposing his face and nothing else.

“Give up.”

“Ruff...”

The water ball was draining Jet’s mana. Getting out of his water cage would be difficult no matter how hard he struggled.

“That settles it, wolf. Punished and restrained. You’re next. Stay put, now.”

“Hm.”

Winalene waved her fingers and the water beneath Fran’s feet rose up to engulf her. It looked like she was encased in blue slime.

The water receded from her head, leaving her face exposed like Jet. The pressure was tuned so that it was strong enough to restrict her but not enough to harm her.

They both looked silly with their faces sticking out of the water. They hung their heads in frustration.

But Winalene was still frowning. “They’re not fighting back, they’ve been punished and restrained, so why are the Bertotti still alarmed? What? The *sword*? The sword is hostile?”

She was talking to invisible people again. They weren’t using mana like telepathy... but wait, what was that about a sword?! I felt a chill run down my spine as Winalene turned her attention to me.

The water holding Fran stirred as she struggled.

“Uhh, Mr. Sword?” said Winalene softly, making sure that no one watching could see

her doing it. “Assuming you are a mister, I suppose. Do you intend to resist?”

She knew. There was no point hiding myself now.

“Then again, even if you were sapient, it’s not like you could—”

I won’t resist.

“Huh? Was that...?”

The sword. We’ll talk using telepathy, please.

A talking sword? What a wild bunch. Three legends walking around my Academy together. Well, we’ll have time to talk later. Will you come quietly?

Yes.

“Hostile entities neutralized. Ending defense protocol.”

The mana surrounding us dispersed. The offensive mana coming from her softened, too. The pressure vanished and the noise of the Academy returned. When had that sound disappeared, anyway? It had all happened so fast that I hadn’t noticed.

“All right,” said Winalene. “Fran, you have some history with that thing, correct?”

Fran’s body was still trapped in water. “Hm...”

Winalene sighed. “I’ve had my hands so full with that thing that I haven’t had the chance to read your dossier. If I’d known, I would’ve taken precautions.”

“Dossier?”

“Yes. Our investigation department compiles dossiers on all our candidates before their interviews. You’re pretty famous, so we began collecting rumors about you early on.”

Before the interview? The Academy must have a dedicated department keeping tabs on notables just in case Winalene needed information about them.

“I’ve been looking for that thing since the day before yesterday,” she said. “I finally

caught it this morning and spent the whole day sealing it. We were about to take it into isolation..."

Because it—Theraclede—had preoccupied her, Winalene didn't have time to learn of Fran's history. Theraclede was in the middle of being quarantined when Fran caught sight of him.

"It told me that it had crossed over from the Beastman Nation. I'm assuming that has something to do with your grudge?"

"Hm." Fran nodded and stared at Theraclede with dark eyes. Kiara had told Fran not to avenge her, but she couldn't just ignore Theraclede. Not when he was right there.

Fran let her murderous intent subside. But Theraclede still stood there behind Winalene, not even attempting to escape. What had she done to him after she captured him?

"Like I said earlier, I can't have you killing it yet. It's treated as a temporary staff member at the moment. It's under my protection—that's just how it works. I understand if you disagree and I'm not asking you to understand everything all at once."

"Hmph..."

"But even if you wanted to take vengeance, I wish you would've picked a better spot."

"Huh?"

"Look around you."

All around us were students who'd fallen back on their butts, watching the carnage from afar.

"Fortunately, I set up the barrier quick enough to minimize the damage..." said Winalene. "But your murderous aura... they could feel it."

She'd had set up a barrier to prevent the battle's sheer force of intensity from reaching the students, but they were still terrified by what had happened before the barrier went up. Fran's mana and murderous intent were definitely to blame.

Before Winalene had arrived on the scene, Fran must have seemed like a dragon to these students. A mysterious being who showed up out of nowhere, wielding vast amounts of mana, dripping with murderous intent... Most of the students had simply fallen down, too overwhelmed to run. Fear and horror were plain on their faces as they stared at her.

"Ah..." Fran swallowed.

"Good thing most of our students are used to this kind of thing. You would've caused a widespread panic if this happened in the city."

"I'm sorry." Realizing how blind she had been to her surroundings, Fran remorsefully lowered her head. It had dawned on her how terrifying she must have been to non-combatants.

"Oh? You're apologizing already?"

"Huh? I mean, I did something bad..."

"You're such an honest girl. Anyway, what shall we do with that?" Winalene turned away from Fran and approached Theraclede.

Even if it was partially blocked, my blade had still cut into Theraclede's neck. Sword God Form had imbued me with divine element when I hit him, too. The wound wouldn't heal. The best he could do to stem the bleeding was apply pressure with his hand. Red blood seeped between his fingers.

"Don't move. Divine Water Creation. Aqua Heal." Winalene created another ball of water and waved her hand. The small sphere covered Theraclede's wound and gave off a faint glow. Within seconds, the cut began to close and heal rapidly.

Divine element was supposed to be super effective against Fiends. Maybe the healing worked because Winalene had also used divine water. Divine healing for divine wounds. Made sense.

Once he was fully healed, Winalene spoke. "Get up."

"Yeah."

Winalene glared at him icily. Theraclede quietly nodded, as if he didn't even mind. He

then looked at Fran. Quietly, without fear or anger.

It seemed impossible. Was this really Theraclede? He was so different that I doubted my eyes. Theraclede had been as violent and vicious as hellfire. This man was as calm as a quiet sea.

Earlier, I could've sworn that this man was Theraclede, but now I wasn't so sure. Maybe it was just someone who looked a lot like him.

He behaved nothing like the Theraclede we knew.

Fran didn't share my doubts. She glared at him as soon as he looked at her. This was bad. I could feel her anger rising again. Fortunately, Winalene noticed it, too.

"We won't be able to talk with this thing around. Colt, take it to Tower Three. They already know you're coming."

I had completely forgotten about Colt, as if he'd evaporated when Winalene arrived on the scene.

"Are you sure I can escort it alone?" he asked.

"I've sealed it and it's already under contract. The Bertotti are keeping watch, too. You'll be fine. Besides, it won't do anything stupid with the boy still under treatment. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah." Theraclede simply nodded.

"I'm going to have a chat with Fran."

"Understood."

I didn't know the details, but Theraclede was being held back with some kind of magic. Even Colt would be enough to escort him to isolation.

"And get the other staff to tend to the wounded. No one is heavily injured, but consider classes canceled for today."

Fran hung her head as she listened to their conversation. Her hatred of Theraclede had hurt the students and she was truly regretful of her actions.

"On your way," said Winalene.

"Of course," said Colt. "Come along, Theraclede."

"All right." Theraclede obeyed and followed Colt. He really had changed; perhaps even metamorphosed. Was it purely because of Winalene's magic or—

"Fran, we have much to discuss." Winalene stepped into Fran's line of view, blocking her from glaring at Theraclede as Colt took him out of sight. "I'm going to set you free now, but please don't try to escape. I'm sure you have questions for me, too."

"Don't worry. I won't run."

"Woof."

"Thank you. I'm releasing you now." Winalene snapped her fingers and the water restraining them disappeared. "Follow me."

Back on their feet (and paws) again, they followed Winalene to a place where they could speak in private. Fran came to pull me out of the ground and jogged to keep up.

Winalene didn't keep a close eye on her, probably because she knew Fran wouldn't run. Three minutes later, we arrived at her office.

She motioned Fran to sit on the couch. "Allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Winalene, headmistress of the Magic Academy."

"B-Rank adventurer Fran. This is Jet."

I'm Teacher, an Intelligent Weapon.

"Teacher. Is that your name?"

Yeah.

Winalene's reaction was much more subdued than most. She wasn't as shocked as others were when they learned of my existence.

She soon told us why. "I think it's been a thousand years since I last had a proper conversation with an Intelligent Weapon."

Y-you know others like me?

“Naturally. I’ve been around for quite some time, you see. As for how many I’ve met, I suppose I could count them on both hands.”

As expected of a high elf! It made sense that she’d met other Intelligent Weapons, now that I thought about it.

“But you’re only the second I’ve ever actually talked to,” she continued. “Most Intelligent Weapons end up losing their minds. You’re rather human for one of them, too.”

“Losing their minds?”

“Imagine being able to speak but not communicate. A mind would come apart inside a sword.”

I see...

It was like Fanatix said. A mind wasn’t meant to live inside a sword. The likelihood of insanity was high, as Winalene had just confirmed. Would I be okay? Would I go insane...?

I felt a chill run down my steel.

In any case, though this wasn’t Winalene’s first experience with an Intelligent Weapon, Jet was a different story. She kept staring at him as he sat next to Fran in his miniature form. Her gaze made him plenty nervous.

“What’s wrong with Jet?” asked Fran.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. I’ve just never seen this species of wolf before. But never mind that. Questions?”

“Will Colt be all right with Theraclede?”

“Yes. I’ve sealed his Malice with my magic and his actions are restricted. The spirits are watching him as well.”

Theraclede’s reduced Malice was a result of Winalene’s tampering. On top of being

watched by fairies, he was also restrained by something like a slave contract.

"His words aren't restricted," she continued, "but he's being quite polite for the sake of good behavior. His real self resurfaced when you attacked, but he didn't fight back, did he? That's because he can't fight as long as he's on school grounds."

The only thing Theraclede did when we attacked him was to try and defend himself. He'd had plenty of opportunities to fight back after our initial attack had failed.

What's he even doing here?

"It all began two days ago."

Winalene had received word of a dangerous criminal entering the autonomous region. While he wasn't notorious here, there was quite the price on his head in other countries. A group of adventurers had attempted to capture him near the border, but they were beaten back. Even though no one died, the difference in strength was staggering.

It was then decided that Winalene should be called for assistance. I'd thought she would handle everything given her legendary status, but she was rarely called in for incidents not involving the school.

"We couldn't train the next generation if I was running off all the time to settle every squabble."

In other words, the matter had to be grave indeed for them to call her.

Winalene had used her magic to track down Theraclede and captured him after a brief fight. But then she'd learned of Theraclede's companion.

"A child named Romeo?"

"That's right. Romeo Magnolia. He is currently in my custody."

Romeo was still with Theraclede. Being a lover of children, it was easy to see why Winalene would take him into custody; Amanda would've done the same thing.

But Fran tilted her head at that. "So why did you tell me not to kill him?"

Because killing Romeo's guardian would traumatize him, right? But the circumstances weren't so simple.

"That's the problem. You see, Romeo and that thing are bound by something like a master-servant contract. If one of them gets hurt, so does the other. A dangerous bond."

"Did Theraclede do it?"

"The opposite. I think Romeo unconsciously formed the contract with him. It might be because of the Magnolian blood running in him..."

Is that even possible? He's still a young child. And what's this about Magnolian blood? I knew he was a noble, but was there something special about his house?

"I'm sure you've heard of Goldicia."

"A continent destroyed by Trismegistus' monsters, currently sealed by a barrier," said Fran.

"Well, there are certain families in Goldicia who protect fragments of the Evil One. Magnolia, Wisteria, Camellia—these three houses possess a special bloodline which allows them to commune with the fragments to use their powers. They used that power to seal the Evil One... but they were annihilated by the drakes and the fragment was taken away."

Trismegistus the great sinner. The legendary alchemist created an army of monsters from a fragment of the Evil One. That must have been what the three families were protecting.

And Magnolia?

"Romeo is part of House Magnolia. His blood surges with the power of that line."

Was Romeo's blood the reason why Murelia and Theraclede were strangely attached to him? Being able to unconsciously control high-level Fiends was a powerful ability, and Romeo might eventually become stronger than anyone could imagine.

"Anyway, as long as the contract exists, Theraclede cannot be killed without doing harm to Romeo. And that's not all."

Romeo's body was beginning to be polluted by Malice after being with Theraclede for so long. Exposure to powerful Malice could cause Malice Intoxication, and this was a particularly nasty case. Not curing him of the disease would have long-term effects, but the contract made it too dangerous to separate the two. In the end, it was decided that Theraclede should be brought to the Academy as Romeo underwent treatment.

"I sealed Theraclede's power so he could stay at the Academy until Romeo was cured. He's currently a temporary staff member. Let me explain why."

"Hm."

"First, this school is protected by powerful guardian spirits and their thralls. There are several hundred of them guarding and watching over the school."

So the shockwave that deflected Fran's initial attack...

"Was a great spirit tasked with protecting Theraclede. They weren't protecting him, *per se*. They were just trying to prevent violence from being committed in the Academy by an outsider."

That was why I couldn't see it! A great spirit must be pretty powerful, too. If something with that kind of stealth capability attacked us, we wouldn't be able to see it coming.

But Fran had vaguely seen them, it seemed, or maybe just felt them. Considering what had happened at the inn, maybe she could see spirits.

Did you see them, Fran?

"I saw... something weird."

"Oh? You might have what it takes to be a shaman, Fran."

I knew it!

"You think so?"

"There's a possibility. How about this?" Winalene pointed her finger at the ceiling. I felt a faint movement of mana, but I didn't know what was going on.

Fran, on the other hand, saw something. "It's fuzzy?"

"I guess you can't quite see their form. You can certainly feel their presence, though."

Fran might have some shaman potential in her. I decided I would love to get our hands on the Skill, if possible.

"What do I do to learn it?"

"Let me think... I guess the most you can do is be aware of spirits and engage with them. Some people say you should be pure-hearted, but that's only because some spirits like those who are pure of heart. Most of them, though, do not care one whit for human morality."

"They don't?"

"No. Think about it. Do you think spirits would waste their time interpreting human laws and values? The same is true for the Academy's guardian spirits. They don't think about good or evil when protecting someone. The thing that matters most is the safety of their contractors—those related to the Academy. Next in line is the safety of high-value personnel. They will not allow violence, no matter the reason."

The web of spirits wasn't the only thing the defense system was made of, though.

"I, too, am part of the Academy's defenses."

"Huh?" Fran and Jet tilted their heads.

"Put simply, if the guardian spirits deem an entity as hostile," Winalene explained, "I must take action against them. That is why I attacked you earlier."

If an outsider attacked the Academy, Winalene was forced to battle them because of the contract. And she couldn't *stop* battling until the spirits deemed the punishment to be sufficient.

"The spirits cannot be deceived. There have been times when I have been forced to kill someone against my will."

The spirits saw all, and those of them with psychic abilities could tell whether someone was truly sorry for their actions. Basically, faking an apology to postpone your payback wasn't going to cut it. If anything, that sort of behavior *increased* the severity of the punishment.

This punishment was determined in accordance with the offender's status and their degree of hostility. If a hostile organization harmed a student, it would be eliminated entirely. Winalene would not stop until every last member was dead. This had happened once before, starting with a crime syndicate and adventuring party, and eventually moving up to nobility and a trade association. Not one soul had survived the onslaught.

But not all punishments ended with torrents of blood. An academy graduate raising his fist in the heat of an argument, for instance, would merely need to formally apologize.

Still, the Academy itself could be in the wrong and the spirits would carry out the punishment all the same. All that mattered was to uphold the contract. Be it saint or sinner or entire kingdoms—all were subject to the contract.

“Letting a Fiend into the Academy was impossible without giving them a job title. The spirits weren’t satisfied with it just being Romeo’s guardian, so I had to sign it up as temporary staff.”

“He can *work* here?”

“You mean considering all his crimes?”

“Hm.”

“Like I said earlier, the spirits don’t care about human designations—and they call the shots. Besides, if we’re strictly talking body count, I’ve killed hundreds of times more people than it has.” Winalene shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve traveled the world a very long time and seen a lot of battlefields. I’ve stood alone against entire nations. There are still places that want my head for my actions.”

Winalene had, after all, killed an entire noble’s house worth of people for messing with the Academy. That must’ve been a small army, at least.

“Yet here I am. Headmistress of the Academy. The title doesn’t mean much. The guardian spirits don’t care about what you did in the past.”

And because Fran attacked Theraclede, currently a member of the Academy, she’d activated the punishment.

"Now, there is something I myself must apologize for."

"What is it?"

"In order to lighten your punishment, I had to trick the Bertotti by putting you into the Academy system. You are currently a 'special job candidate and prospective short-term transfer student.' You weren't an outsider trying to kill a member of the Academy, but a fringe member of the Academy who had a feud with another fringe member."

Ah, so she'd used that loophole to get us out of trouble. Because of Aristea's letter, Winalene recognized us as being related to the Academy, and the effects of that recognition were immediate. Aristea's letter had proven to be vital. It turned attempted murder into assault, which only required Fran to be restrained, to be sorry, and to apologize.

I wondered why Aristea hadn't told us about the Academy's quirky defense system. Maybe she just hadn't felt the need—it wasn't like she'd expect Fran to deliberately cause trouble or be hostile to Winalene. Didn't it go without saying to be polite to your potential employer? If you were going to an interview at a large corporation, "Don't punch the receptionist" and "Don't spit at the boss," were not helpful pieces of advice, true as they might be.

Winalene probably would've filled Fran in had she passed the interview, or maybe it wasn't important enough to even bring up. Either way, Aristea probably knew that her letter of introduction would prevent a multitude of mischief.

But there was still one more thing.

We attacked you earlier. It actually hurt you, right?

Winalene's side was cut by Skycutter and her legs were gnawed by Jet. Wouldn't the spirits add to our punishment for that? She did say something about having to damage Fran. I was beginning to understand what she meant.

"Remember how I permitted you to fight back? That gave you formal permission."

So it had turned into something like a sparring match? She must have said it as a precaution because she knew Fran wasn't going down without a fight.

"But I really thought I made a mistake after that. You were far stronger than I had

expected, though I hadn't taken Teacher into account. Though I gave you permission to hurt me, the spirits deemed that you were resisting more than I had permitted. For that, I am sorry." Winalene bowed her head.

Attacking Theraclede had warranted being restrained, attacking Winalene had warranted being attacked by her in turn, and terrorizing the students had warranted an apology. Which left one outstanding issue.

You said Fran was a special job candidate and prospective short-term transfer student. Does that mean she has to go through with it?

Winalene sighed. "And therein lies the problem. I had no intention of buttering Fran up to work at the Academy. 'I'll make you a faculty member of my prestigious Academy, and you're going to like it'—those are not words I had planned to utter. But now, the Bertotti are only letting Fran off because of her job title."

What if she refuses?

"Then you won't be dealing with just me, but with all the spirits of the Academy."

Talk about an offer you can't refuse!

"Don't worry. You won't be able to quit immediately, but temporary staff may work here for merely two weeks. That's why I added 'short-term' in your position."

Winalene did what she had to do, but I still felt a bit ambivalent about it. Probably because the position was forced upon Fran. Plus, she was going to be an instructor *and* transfer student? She would need to live the student life, then. Would she be all right?

But Fran quickly nodded. "Okay. I'll be a special...?"

"Special job candidate and short-term transfer student."

"Yeah, that."

Are you sure about this, Fran?

"Hm? I was going to work here anyway. It's the same as if I'd passed the interview."

Fran accepted Winalene's offer. She didn't seem to hold anything against the

headmistress, either.

"I can keep an eye on Theraclede while I'm here, too," she added.

True.

Whether or not she could actually carry out her vengeance was a separate matter. Still, she wasn't going to let him out of her sight.

"Also, there are lots of spirits here?" asked Fran.

"That's right. There's no place in the world that has the Academy's spirit population density."

"Great. I can learn Spirit Magic here."

"Phew... I'm glad to hear it. Thank you. Ari shouldn't get mad at me now. I'll throw in a bonus to your pay as an apology. Is there anything else you want?"

"I want... to fight you."

"What? With me? I mean, I don't mind..."

Winalene had been Fran's sole reason for coming to the Academy. She wanted to see the world's strongest high elf in action. She'd already had a taste, but it wasn't enough. Winalene hadn't been at full strength when she restrained Fran and Jet. Fran wanted more.

Clearly not quite so battle-crazed, Winalene gave her a wry smile. "So cute and yet so greedy."

"Hmm?"

"In time. For now, I look forward to working with you."

"Hm. Glad to be on board."

CHAPTER 4

THE MAGIC ACADEMY

“ALL RIGHT. Let me introduce you to everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“We have to get you acquainted with the staff. Wouldn’t want to start rumors of some strange girl wandering the Academy. Come on.”

“Hm.”

Winalene got up and exited the room to give a tour of the place. “We are currently in the teachers’ tower where all the faculty offices and laboratories are located.”

She gave us a brief explanation of how the instructors worked in the Academy. Academy staff got private offices and research facilities, but there was also a large room for everyone to congregate. There, instructors could prepare for their following classes and conduct simple meetings. It sounded like a Japanese teacher’s lounge.

“You know, you’re the first person in Academy history to cause this much of a ruckus on her first day of work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people who’re here for an interview would be scared stiff, since they know who I am. What kind of candidate shows up and starts blowing up the courtyard?”

True. Angering Winalene might put more than your career in mortal peril. In that light, what Fran had done was crazy.

“Besides, no one would dare cause trouble if they knew I was around,” she said.

“I see.”

“I usually make candidates wait for an hour before conducting the interview. Some

people get upset and leave."

"You make them wait? Why?"

"If you can't wait for an hour, you don't have the patience or fortitude to teach at the Academy."

Standard fare for interviews on Earth. I'd endured a lot of it when I was job hunting. The anxiety of waiting combined with a high-pressure interview made for a dreadful combination. Sometimes this was an organic result of large-scale interview processes, and sometimes companies deliberately made you wait. Anyone who'd lived in a time where employers have the upper hand knew the feeling.

"There are plenty of impatient nobles who brag about their positions. Being a teacher is no walk in the park. You don't always get good students—there are plenty of brats in the mix. They'll eat you alive if you don't have patience and fortitude. And detachment, I suppose. Some kids will always have mush for brains, but it's still your duty to try your best with them."

"Hm?" Fran tilted her head. I also sensed something off about Winalene's words.

"What? You look confused."

"Do you even like kids?"

Brats and mush for brains?

There was something about the tone of her voice. Sure, she was saying things the child-pampering Amanda would never say, but there wasn't *any* love in Winalene's words. She really thought of the dumb brats as dumb brats.

She smiled wryly. "My position as headmistress seems to make people misunderstand. And I suppose I can't blame people for wondering that, seeing as I've formed a contract with the spirits and remain bound to the Academy. But no, I don't hate kids. I like honest, cute, and strong children. Like you." Winalene winked at her, but her wry smile remained. "I can't possibly love all children unconditionally, can I?"

Why be headmistress, then?

"Allow an old elf her private reasons. Which reminds me, you know Amanda, don't

you?"

"Hm."

Winalene had quickly scanned through Fran's dossier earlier. Amanda definitely would have come up. "Comparing me to her, are you?"

"You two know each other?"

"You didn't ask her?"

"Hm."

Winalene chuckled. "I should've known. One of her ancestors happens to be my child. I suppose you could call her my descendant."

Wait, they were blood-related? Amanda didn't say a word about that.

"Not that she'd mention it. The girl hates me."

"Why's that?"

"Questions, questions. Things happened—let's leave it at that. That said, it does irk her when people say I love children. I suppose it feels like an insult to someone like her, who really loves all children."

Was that really it? Regardless, I didn't pry. If she was being this vague, Winalene must've really wanted to keep it to herself.

Students started to stare at Fran as we continued on our way.

"Who is that, and why is she with the headmistress?"

"Maybe a noble or something?"

"You know the headmistress doesn't give a fig for formalities. She's kicked royalty in the butt before. Literally!"

"Hang on, *that's* the headmistress? I've never seen her before."

“Dude, she gave a speech at the entrance ceremony.”

I thought everyone would’ve heard about the incident by now, but the students didn’t recognize Fran. They spoke in hushed tones, but they were loud enough for us to hear. Apparently, some of them didn’t even recognize Winalene.

“My subordinates run most of the day-to-day routine,” she explained. “The only times I meet the students are for sparring matches with the advanced learners and important ceremonies.”

The long and storied Academy had complicated education systems in place to match its intricate defense protocols. By this point, there weren’t many things that Winalene handled personally. As headmistress, she didn’t teach classes, either.

Now that I thought about it, I didn’t think I could remember the face of my principal. At best, all I could recall of my high school principal was his hair. Even if the students were aware that their headmistress was a high elf, few knew what she looked like.

“Besides, students don’t tend to notice me when I’m in plain clothes.” Winalene was wearing a robe which perfectly concealed her executive position. It was made of exquisite material, but you had to look closely to notice. She was also holding back her aura, which was a given—*not* doing so would cause a real ruckus.

Fran looked at Winalene and gave her an affirmative nod. “Hm. You look real plain.”

“You know, some people might take that the wrong way.”

“Hm?”

She sighed. “The ones without pretensions are always the most annoying.” Winalene shrugged in defeat.

The tour continued. She brought us into a room which was much larger than I expected—at least five times larger than a standard teachers’ lounge. The room housed a hundred people seated at neatly arranged large wood desks. Only half of the desks were occupied, making the effective capacity somewhere between two hundred to two hundred and fifty.

We followed Winalene to an assembly podium where she could see the whole room.

“All right, everyone, listen up!”

She clapped her hands. At once, all eyes were on her.

“This is Fran, an adventurer. She’ll be with us for a while as a special job candidate and prospective short-term transfer student. The wolf next to her is Jet, her familiar. He’s quite smart, and he can change sizes. I hope you’ll get along.”

“Yo.”

“Woof.”

Fran and Jet bowed their heads. The reaction of the faculty was cleanly divided.

Some understood, but most people just seemed confused. The majority of the teachers here couldn’t sense Fran’s strength. Only the ones who looked like former adventurers or the ones dressed as mages showed any sign of detecting anything odd about her. Then again, it wasn’t like a schoolteacher needed combat experience or anything.

The pudgy man standing closest to us stepped up to represent the faculty. He wore a business suit, looked to be in his fifties, and was a tad out of shape. He didn’t have much mana, either, so he was probably a civilian.

“I understand how she could be a short-term transfer student,” he said. “Her age shouldn’t pose a problem. But special job candidate? How are we to treat her?”

He wasn’t looking down on Fran, but he was clearly confused. A student who was also a teacher was rare even by Academy standards.

“Fran will be an instructor for the advanced and special combat classes.”

“What? She will not be enrolling in those programs?”

“She’s our new dueling instructor.”

Murmurs broke out.

“A dueling instructor...”

“Don’t you have to at least be a D-Rank for that?”

"You need to be a C-Rank to teach the advanced and special combat classes."

Apparently, the classes Fran would be teaching only accepted the strong, and that applied to both student and teacher. To the regular teachers, Fran didn't look like she was suitable material.

"Don't worry. Fran is a B-Rank and a nickname bearer. And I can confidently say that her combat abilities are better than an A-Rank."

"What?! It must be true if you say so, and yet—"

Winalene chuckled. "I haven't bled on school grounds in centuries."

Murmurs turned to loud stirring. Winalene bleeding was a huge shock to everyone present.

"The headmistress has a contract with guardian spirits to protect the Academy, right?"

"Yeah. She's much stronger while on school grounds."

"But she managed to hurt the headmistress?! You've got to be kidding me."

Winalene was an undefeated legend to them. The mere thought of her struggling in combat was inconceivable.

Some thought the headmistress was joking, but most believed her... which was why they were glaring at us just then. I didn't blame them, either. Winalene was the world's most powerful mage, an immortal high elf. As founder of the Magic Academy, she was a hero with many devotees. Devotees don't like it when their hero bleeds.

Not knowing what had transpired, the pudgy man seemed shaken. "And... how did that happen?"

"It's a long story. Suffice to say, I will personally vouch for Fran's strength."

"U-understood."

The man's gaze was different now. He'd been looking at Fran like a curiosity, a strange girl the headmistress had dragged in. Now there was awe in his eyes. The only reason his awe didn't turn to fear was Winalene's guarantee.

“What class will she be in?” he asked.

“Special combat.”

“You are certain?”

“It’s more convenient, since she’ll be teaching there, too. There shouldn’t be a problem with her keeping up. Her magic is also top notch.”

Combat ability wasn’t the only thing necessary to enroll in the special combat class. Students needed to be proficient in magic.

“And her talents are sufficient for a transfer student?”

“To say the least. Frankly, I doubt if she can learn anything in the class. A shame. Fran’s magic proficiency is great enough that I could make her head of a course.”

“What?! But that... She must be very strong!”

The stirring was now a full-blown ruckus. Some of the faculty members barely concealed their shouting. I guess that position was reserved for the truly powerful.

Teacher?

What is it, Fran? Attention getting to you?

Hm? I don’t care about that. I want to learn Spirit Magic.

Fran wasn’t bothered by the faculty’s reaction at all. If anything, she had been thinking about what she wanted to learn as a transfer student.

Sure. You should ask Winalene if there are classes for that.

“Hm. I want to take classes where I can learn Spirit Magic.”

“Oh, right. You were interested in that,” said Winalene. “You can take Spirit Magic as an elective.”

Apart from the special combat curriculum, students were free to take electives for subjects they wanted to learn. Spirit Magic was one such offering.

“It’s not part of special combat?”

“The fundamentals of magic are learned in fundamental courses. But if you want to learn Spirit Magic, you’ll have to take it as an elective.”

“Uh-huh.”

I guess that made sense. You needed to have the potential to learn it, after all.

“But there’s still no guarantee that you’ll be able to learn Spirit Magic,” said Winalene. “It seems that you have a knack for seeing spirits, but that doesn’t mean they’ll get along with you.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Each spirit was unique in their personalities and tastes. Contracting with them was a highly individualized process, which was what made Spirit Magic so hard to teach. Non-elves who possessed the talent were rare, and few could unlock the full potential of their power. Spirit Magic was also notorious for its volatility, making it even more impractical.

Making Spirit Magic part of the regular curriculum was impossible. It only made sense that people like Fran would have to take it as an elective.

As an aside, elves who attended the Academy would usually be initiated into the art of Spirit Magic by their respective villages or parents. Coming from a mostly individualistic culture, elves were advised to train to improve beyond the basics in their free time. This meant they didn’t really take Spirit Magic classes at the Academy.

“But you should still take special combat,” continued Winalene. “One of the instructors there is a druid. You should ask them about it.”

“Hm. I’ll take it.”

“Very good. Now, let’s get you signed up.”

I wondered what the classes would be like.

Winalene passed out some magically charged papers to some of the teachers. I guess she wanted to take care of all the transfer student documentation while we were here. I took a peek, and there was something that looked like Fran's student number as well as documents acknowledging her temporary transfer. The documentation was as necessary for the faculty as it was for the spirits.

"I'd take you to see the instructor offices, but I still have work to do."

Winalene the headmistress was as busy as could be. It was actually odd that she should be the one showing Fran around. She called a woman to her and instructed her on what to do next.

"H-hello! I'll be taking over for the headmistress! It's nice to meet you!"

"Hi."

And so we left the faculty lounge, led by the woman who would be our tour guide.

"R-right this way!"

"Hm."

"Woof."

Our guide was Ines, a dueling instructor like Fran. The woman looked very nervous. Every time she looked at Fran, there was fear in her face. Her abilities put her around D-Rank, but her instincts were still sharp enough to sense Fran's strength—hence the nerves.

Wouldn't someone who lacked combat prowess be a better guide? Too late now.

"Th-that is Tower Eight. The advanced class classrooms are on the ground floor."

The special combat class was currently away, making it a good time for Fran to be shown the classes she would be teaching.

We left the teachers' tower and walked to one of the course towers which was a little distance away.

As we walked, Ines explained that each tower served a purpose. There was the

Research Tower for lecturers, a manatech storage tower, a Living Tower for the staff to unwind, etc. These towers were off-limits for students.

It kind of felt like a gigantic university campus, with dedicated research facilities instead of just classrooms. The tower we were headed to was primarily used by the combat courses for training and simulations.

"Th-the special combat class you'll be transferring to has its special classrooms here. You'll be using it quite a lot."

"Okay."

Ines' nerves had calmed down some after talking to Fran for a while. "Now, regarding Advanced Classes..."

As the name suggested, Advanced Classes were where advanced students learned. There were many courses in the Academy, most of them highly specialized. Students not pursuing a specialization belonged to the General Course. Advanced students of the general course studied in Advanced Classes. There was a huge age range within the Academy's student body, so they'd done away with age grouping.

"Adults and children study together?"

"At times, yes. While there is an age limit, a ten-year age gap is not uncommon here."

First, students enrolled in the Fundamentals Course to learn magic. Only those who succeeded there would get to go to the next step. Those who failed after a certain number of years would be expelled. The ability to use magic was non-negotiable, for obvious reasons.

Next came the Basics Course, more commonly called the "low-grade" course by students. Students learned subjects unrelated to magic and the basics of using magic in a classroom setting. This took two years.

Pass that without a hitch and you got to the Practical Courses. Congrats, advanced student! You now had access to the General Course, Adventurer Course, Mage Course, Special Combat Course, and even Fire Magic Course and Water Magic Course.

And these weren't even the most specialized courses.

Once a student committed to a class, they were free to take up activities like clubs and seminars.

Seventy percent of your classes were compulsory within your course, and the remaining thirty percent were electives. Students were also allowed to apply to another course once they graduated from a practical course, making it possible for them to learn a myriad of different courses as long as they had the motivation. I was surprised to hear of students taking ten years to graduate and transfer between courses. Still, the average graduation time of a student was five years.

“Ever since the last special dueling instructor quit, we general instructors have had to cover for them,” said Ines. “We really appreciate your help.”

“There’s a difference between general and special instructors?”

“Yes. Special instructors must showcase overwhelming power. Not anyone can do that.”

There were beings of extraordinary power in this world—beings you could never defeat, no matter how strong you were. The task of a special combat instructor was to teach students how to deal with such creatures without freezing up, so they could escape when a chance presented itself or even work up the courage to negotiate with them. It was a job which required instructors to beat the tar out of their students, which in turn required extraordinary strength.

“I see. Why not have Winalene do it?” Fran wondered.

I agreed. The job description sounded like it would be a perfect fit.

“The headmistress is bad at holding back. Or rather, she’s so strong that even holding back would be too much for the job. A dragon can’t gently lift a puppy with its claws no matter how hard it tries. It’s something like that.”

Although Winalene had never hurt a student by accident, she often went overboard when dealing with bandits. The teachers did all they could to prevent her from sparring with the students. But they’d had no luck finding a suitable candidate for the last few months, so they’d been forced to make do with having the students fight multiple instructors at once or try to damage a heavily armored Winalene.

“The results were mixed, at best. Even if you’re just going to be with us for a short time,

we really appreciate your help.”

We were led to a classroom in the back of the first floor where twenty students sat at their desks. “Lidua, may I have a bit of your time?”

“O-of course, Instructor Ines. And this is?”

“I will explain. Lady Fran, this is Lidua, our history teacher. Everyone here is an advanced student.”

“Hm. Got it.”

The students stared at us in disbelief. But they seemed to be more shocked with Ines than Fran.

“D-did Drill Sergeant Ines just call that kid ‘Lady’...?”

“No way. Is that really her?”

“The drill sergeant’s lost her marbles!”

Ines wasn’t acting like her usual self and the students couldn’t believe their eyes.

“Drill sergeant?”

“D-don’t mind them!” Ines snapped. “I can hear you, you know! And I remember your names!”

“Eeek!”

Drill Sergeant Ines, huh?

“Now. This is Lady Fran. She is the special dueling instructor who will be training you runts!”

“Hey.”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

Another chorus of shouting, but Ines shut them down. Guess this was what she was

usually like. “*Quiet!*”

“...”

Amazingly, the students hushed up immediately.

“You may not be able to tell, but Lady Fran is the real deal. She starts teaching you tomorrow. Look forward to it.”

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

Fran’s smug look and Jet’s miniature size didn’t inspire confidence. The students didn’t think she was stronger than Ines.

“And this is Jet, her familiar.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Woof, woof!”

“The pleasure is ours, ma’am!”

The students bowed a greeting. Although they couldn’t read her strength, they could certainly read the room. Any show of doubt would summon the wrath of Hurricane Ines. Still, the senior instructor could tell they didn’t fully believe her.

“Lady Fran, may we trouble you for a demonstration?”

“Hm. Sure.”

Ines probably wanted her to flash the kids with a bit of Intimidate, but Fran had something else in mind. She was still thinking about the students who’d been spooked by her murderous intent earlier.

“Hm.”

Fran No Cast a ball of light and sent it up to the ceiling, attracting the gaze of the class. By the time they looked back down, Fran was nowhere to be seen. Murmurs spread

across the classroom. It all happened in the space of a moment.

Then there came a sharp knock from the back of the classroom. The students snapped their heads back to find Fran knocking on the wall while concealing her presence. No one had noticed her standing there. Some of the kids in the back fell out of their seats from sheer surprise.

What she did was simple: she'd distracted the students with light, cut her aura, and quickly moved to the back of the classroom. The students couldn't figure out what had happened, but it was more than enough to convince them of her abilities. In a real-life battle, they'd be sliced to ribbons by now. Also, the advanced students knew the difficulty of No Cast and Conceal Presence. Any notions about Fran's lack of ability had been effectively dispelled.

"Looks like you runts can tell how strong Lady Fran is. She starts tomorrow. Let's get going."

"Hm."

"Thanks for your time."

We went around, doing the same routine five times, and finished our introductions.

Our last stop was the teachers' lounge. They were just as shocked as the students were. *Ugh, come on!* Ines must've been the leader there too, because they were confused to hear her talk so politely to Fran.

Dueling instructors aside, the teachers of Combat Fundamentals and Combat Strategy weren't strong enough to gauge her strength. The Special Combat Class would return tomorrow from their excursion, so Fran's introduction as a lecturer-student could wait until then.

Our next destination was a set of three towers located in the middle of campus. The other towers were built far apart from each other, but the foundations of these three were connected. Passageways linked their upper floors together as well. Apparently, these towers served as accommodations.

"I will introduce you to the Special Combat Class tomorrow. Can you find the instructor lounge again?"

“Hm. Sure.”

“Oh, and one other thing. I’ve been instructed to show you your quarters in the dorms.”

They even had a dorm ready for her. However—

“Dorm? I’m already staying at an inn.” Fran was enjoying her stay at The Old Evergreen.

“But dorms are much more affordable—though I suppose that isn’t a factor for you, Lady Fran.”

Ines remembered that Fran was a high-rank adventurer. B-Ranks made more money than the average merchant. A single quest could be worth several times Ines’ monthly salary.

“Is it a five-star establishment?”

“Hm? It’s not that expensive.”

Nothing fancy, but very comfortable. There was a spirit inside of it, too, and Fran needed to be with spirits as much as possible for the time being. Staying at the inn could be highly beneficial for anyone studying Spirit Magic. Then again, considering how many more spirits were in the Magic Academy, maybe this was the better option...?

“Ines, are there spirits at the dorm?”

“Huh? Spirits? Hmm... I know there are, but I’ve never seen one.”

“Not even once?”

“You can’t really see lesser and intermediate spirits without Spirit Magic. But spirits of immense power like a greater spirit should be visible to all.”

“Really?”

“That’s what I’ve been told, at any rate.”

True. A ton of people saw the greater spirit Klimt had summoned.

“But the Academy spirits are also very good at concealing themselves. I think they’re harder to see than most for those without Spirit Magic.”

I supposed it would be harder to pick up Spirit Magic here... or would it make for better practice, since Fran would have to try harder to sense them? We knew they were around, after all.

“Hmm.”

“And the dorm is very convenient since it’s right next to your workplace. Food is also provided.”

“Food?”

“Arf?”

That got their attention. It was the most important factor for them.

“Uhh, yes. The menu varies day by day.”

Ines was clearly startled by Fran’s sudden excitement—she’d been disinterested before, but now her eyes were gleaming. Ines told Fran and Jet about their most recent menu selections.

“Breakfast is usually the same, but lunch and dinner vary. You get lots of it, too.”

“Is it good?”

“Arf?”

“The taste? I’m not one to notice... but it’s not bad.”

It wasn’t *super* tasty, then. Still, Fran was interested in the cafeteria’s cooking.

“I wanna try it. Then I’ll decide.”

“You’ll decide where to stay based on the food?”

“Of course.”

“Woof.”

“I-I see. Then we’ll go to the cafeteria. They should still be serving lunch.”

“Hm.”

The cafeteria was massive, big enough to fit a thousand students. The teachers’ cafeteria was much quieter, though it served the same food.

“You call this cramped?”

“Only because the student cafeteria is ten times bigger, I suppose.”

Still, the teachers’ cafeteria could fit a hundred people. It was neat and pristine, not that Fran or Jet cared about that. For those two, it all hinged on the food.

“Wait here.”

Ines jogged to the counter and talked to a lady wearing an apron. She pointed at us, making it clear that Fran and Jet were the subject of the conversation.

“Today’s menu is beans and ground beef, cheesy baked potatoes, fish pie, and fruits,” said Ines. “Are there any foods you do not prefer?”

“No.”

“I shall return with your order.”

“Make it a large.”

“Very well. They’re willing to prepare Jet’s portion as well. Will a bowl suffice?”

“Hm. Thanks.”

“Woof.”

Ines went and came back with all of the day’s menu items. Fran’s large soup and potatoes were almost twice as much as Ines’s portion. “You can have seconds for soup and potatoes.”

It didn't look bad, but Fran and Jet seemed ambivalent as soon as they sniffed it.

The food was hastily prepared without much seasoning—one whiff was all they needed to make their choice. Either their noses were insanely keen, or the food was that obviously slapdash.

Sure, there was lots of it, and tons of vegetables for nutritional balance... but it wasn't much in the flavor department. It was, first and foremost, designed to satisfy the stomachs of starving students.

"Let's eat."

"Woof."

"Munch, munch..."

"Nom, nom..."

Fran's excitement disappeared after a single bite. She looked as disappointed as a child whose expectations were betrayed. *Way* sadder than I thought the situation entailed.

How is it? I asked, though I could tell by looking at their faces.

It's okay...

Woof...

Not bad, but not good. There was lots to eat, but they didn't want to eat all of it. Academy food was designed to keep you fed and healthy. They made thousands of meals a day, so I guess flavor took a bit of a back seat.

"What do you think?" asked Ines.

"Hm. I'm not staying at the dorms."

"Woof!"

"I'll just walk from the inn."

"V-very well..." Ines looked perplexed at Fran and Jet's determination to stay at the inn.

You could tell from her expression that she could hardly believe they'd made the choice all based on the food.

But hey, food was serious business to these two.

"U-understood," said Ines. "We shall arrange an Academy Pass for you."

"Thanks."

"Woof."

Ines took us to General Affairs, where Fran got both her student and teacher's handbooks. Her name was clearly printed on both. Magic probably made things easier, but the process took as much time as a one-day service back on Earth.

"Is there anything else you'd like to see?"

Now that we were finished with visiting the essential locations, we were free to decide our next destination. We asked Ines to take us to some spots which captured our interest.

First stop: the bizarre snowy mountain located smack-dab in the center of the Academy.

"Wow."

"Bark, bark!"

A gently sloping sheet of white snow stretched before us. It reminded me of a ski resort.

"We conduct winter hikes and the basics of snowy combat here," said Ines.

"Can I go in?"

"Of course."

"Come on, Jet."

"Woof!"

Fran and Jet ran to the snowy field after getting Ines' permission.

This wasn't their first encounter with snow. There was snow in the Demon Wolf's Garden, too. But the fact that everything outside the snowy mountain looked normal made for a strange and exciting sight.

Almost instantly, Fran's legs were buried up to her knees. The snow was soft and freshly fallen. I'd figured they'd collected the snow in the winter and preserved it, but I wasn't quite right. That method would've made for much harder snow than this. Pile all that old snow on a mountain and you'd get solid ice, kinda like the clumps you got from shoveling the driveway.

Satisfied and covered with snow, Fran and Jet returned to Ines.

"How did you make this?" Fran asked, sounding exhausted.

"We use Frost Magic to create and maintain it."

Magic was used to manufacture snow each day. Frozen snow melted into water which would then be converted back to snow. It was something only a school with hundreds of mages could do. Frost Magic was rare, but there was a good number of users if you included the students.

"That said, we can only do it at this time of year," said Ines.

That is, when the temperature wasn't too high. In summer, the place would be treated like a regular forested mountain and be used for hiking practice.

We then visited the rest of the locations used for onsite training: the stone mountain, the lake, and the swamp. Most of these spots were maintained and preserved by spirits and mages.

"That's basically all of the training courses," declared Ines. "Is there anything else you'd like to see or shall we call it a day?"

"Hm. Where's Theraclede?"

"I'm sorry, but I have been instructed not to take you to him for the time being. You will be able to see him with the headmistress once things settle down."

"Well... all right." That was reasonable. Fran *had* just attempted to murder him earlier in the day, so she didn't look super surprised or disappointed. "What about Romeo?"

"That will also be difficult. He is still asleep."

Romeo had been sickened by Malice, but that probably wasn't the only reason he was asleep.

"Can I go see him?"

"Um... you see..." Ines seemed evasive. "I'm sorry. I lied about him being asleep. He was already awake by the time you came to the staff lounge."

"Huh? Why would you lie about something like that?"

"I have been told not to let the two of you meet."

"Why?"

"He is... afraid of you, Lady Fran."

When Fran attacked Theraclede and cut a gash into his neck, the students weren't the only ones hit by her murderous intent. Someone else was harmed, and far more severely: Romeo, the boy whose powers linked him with Theraclede. Winalene had said that hurting one would hurt the other, so when Fran wounded Theraclede...

The realization hit her like a truck. Her jaw dropped. "Is he hurt?"

"Yes. Not to the same extent—only a tenth of the damage went through. But the boy is only three years old..."

A scratch might as well be a scar at that age.

"Is he okay?"

"We quickly healed his wounds, but he seems to know who inflicted it."

Thus his fear of Fran. Ines knew that if Fran found out she had indirectly hurt Romeo, it would leave her rattled. She'd wanted to keep the information secret, but Fran's questions had left Ines no choice but to tell the truth. If Ines had lied, Fran would

merely ask about seeing him the following day.

"I'll... be going now," said Fran.

"Understood."

Fran's shoulders were slumped as she walked to the gates. Ines watched with concern—she was the adult here, after all, and Fran was still the child.

"I heard what happened," said Ines. "You could not have known about Romeo's circumstances, Lady Fran. Don't beat yourself up too much."

"Thanks." But the gloom didn't lift from Fran's countenance. Reason wasn't much of a consolation when the fact remained that she had nearly killed a three-year-old.

At least he's okay now. Be grateful for that.

"Hm..."

"Arf."

"Thanks, Jet."

Jet went to lick her hand and it cheered her up a little. Still, even Fran's vengeance was drawing farther away from her. As long as Winalene couldn't undo Romeo's contract, Theraclede was basically untouchable. Fran's rage could kill Romeo.

Winalene was right. It was a dangerous bond indeed.

* * *

"Munch, munch..."

"Nom, nom..."

Night fell, dinner came, and Fran was still gloomy. Not depressed, exactly, but she lacked her usual energy. She was unexcited as she ate. Her spoon moved slowly and she couldn't focus on her food.

For dinner, we had meat-loaded stew and *ankake* potatoes, along with three types of

bread: black, rye, and butter roll. There was salad with oil-marinated fish, homemade pickled vegetables, and cheese pasta. It was practically a feast, and the taste was top notch. However, Fran was eating it at the same pace as the cafeteria food.

This was unusual, to say the least. Usually, good food would be enough to make her forget all her troubles.

Beside her, Jet looked worried. He matched his eating pace with hers, chewing through his food and stealing glances at his master.

Still thinking about Romeo?

“Hm...” Fran’s countenance darkened at the sound of Romeo’s name. She still felt horrible about hurting him. As much as I told her not to think about it, she couldn’t help herself. Finally, her spoon stopped moving.

The old innkeeper noticed and called out to her. “Something bothering you, young lady?”

“Hm.”

“I won’t pry. But I don’t think brooding is going to fix the situation.”

“Well...”

“We elves have a saying: A sprout is harder to put out than a forest fire.”

“Huh?”

I guess the saying was unique to elves.

“Even if a forest gets burned to ashes,” she explained, “new life grows in its place. Every tragedy has an aftermath, and the aftermath matters. There will always be things you can’t take back, always things that you will lose forever, but you must take them in stride. Life grows on, and so will you.”

You could see why elves, long-lived as they were, would have such a philosophy. Their long lives were bound to be fraught with hardship and pain. Brooding over it all would crush the soul. The best one could do was stop worrying and learn from whatever happened. At least, I think that’s what she was trying to say.

"Hrm?" Fran folded her arms and tilted her head, trying her best to understand. I knew what the innkeeper was talking about, but I doubt if Fran did. It was a difficult concept for a thirteen-year-old.

"It... doesn't seem like you get it quite yet," said the innkeeper. "Even we elves only truly understand this truth as we age."

"I'm sorry..."

"I'm the one who should apologize. I didn't mean to preach at you. But would you mind one more piece of advice?"

"Hm."

"Food is only good when you have the sense to focus on it."

"Oh! True."

The innkeeper had said what she could to console her, but this one really hit home. It resonated with Fran. They looked at each other and nodded.

"I'm being rude to the food if I'm thinking of something else while I'm eating!" said Fran.

"That's what I'm talking about."

"Hm." Fran began eating with her heart and soul. It wasn't perfect, but she was already looking much better. A faint smile graced her face, and I hoped her usual energy would soon return.

Suddenly, Fran's hands stopped. Had she just been putting up a facade? But the innkeeper stopped what she was doing, too, and they both stared at a particular spot in the room.

"Oh? What's wrong?"

"Um... spirit?"

Apparently, the spirit of the old tree was standing (floating?) near the doorway where Fran and the innkeeper were looking.

The innkeeper noticed Fran's gaze and her eyes widened. "Can you see them, too?"

"There's... something there, right?"

Guess not. But the old woman's eyes widened and she laughed at Fran's answer. "Ho ho ho. The spirit must really like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if you had potential, the spirit wouldn't let you see them if they hated you. Yes, the spirit is watching you, and they are concerned that you are in low spirits."

"Oh!"

"There have been times where they ejected guests they didn't like, but it's been decades since they opened up to a non-elf."

"Opened up?"

"Yes. They seem worried about you."

Fran's eyes widened at that. We'd only stayed for a night. I assumed the spirit must have been swayed by Fran's sheer cuteness. I could see it happening. Fran was so cute that even spirits fawned over her. "But I haven't done anything."

"The spirit likes pure and kindhearted people."

Or maybe it wasn't her cuteness. I didn't understand why the spirit was so interested in Fran, but they must be quite sensitive if they could sense Fran's purity. Not that I could see them myself.

Fran activated her detection Skills to try and catch a glimpse of the spirit, but she only looked confused.

What's up?

I can't sense them, even with all my Skills.

Still nothing. Seeing her do that, the old woman gave Fran a piece of advice.

“You can’t see them through ordinary means.”

“No?”

“You’ll need either Spirit Magic or Spirit Sight to see invisible spirits. If you have the potential for these Skills, the most you can do at the moment is feel them.”

We just needed something to fully develop the Skill. The fact that Fran even sensed them meant there was a Skill to develop. But this was something that elves didn’t know how to teach, since they could see spirits from when they were born.

“Spirit?” Fran called out to the location where she thought the spirit was.

“...”

Predictably enough, no answer came.

The old innkeeper smiled. “That’s good to know, Master Spirit.”

“What did they do?”

“They were happy and wished you well.”

“Wished me well?”

“They gave you a power to exorcise evil, though it is only temporary.”

“Wow. Thanks, Spirit.”

“On a whim, they have returned to the tree. But they are always listening.”

“Oh.” Fran cast her gaze where she thought the spirit had been. She had felt their presence for a split second, but it was impossible for her to follow their movements. The spirit might have been intensifying their presence so Fran could feel them.

“They’ll be back. They’ve done so much for you already.”

“Can’t wait.” At this rate, Fran might pick up Spirit Magic just by staying at the inn.

The next day, Fran and Jet were walking to their first day of Magic Academy.

You didn't feel the spirit anymore after yesterday?

"Hm."

The spirit might have been satisfied with their brief interaction at dinner last night. Fran hadn't so much as stirred when she fell asleep.

How's movement in that thing?

"Not a problem."

The outfit does a lot of damage for sure, but do you like it?

"Hm? It's low defense but easy to move in. Don't think it increases damage, though."

It's a figure of speech. I mean it looks cute and pretty.

"Huh?"

Well, it wasn't like I'd expected Fran to start crooning about how cute she looked.

Her current outfit was her brand-new Magic Academy uniform. Special combat training aside, she'd have to wear this for her lessons in the classroom. In a school as big as this, you needed to have a way to quickly tell students apart. The mammoth school sold uniforms in all sizes and they could be bought right on campus.

Fran got a standard uniform for free as part of her instructor package. The clothes were lined on the inside with expensive fabric, probably the same used by nobles. As for the special combat uniform, it had the navy-blue emblem emblazoned on the shoulder and chest of the blazer, along with a white-striped red necktie. The skirt was a checkered pattern of dark blue and white.

The rest of the uniform was student's choice, so I picked out a white shirt and gray sweater vest along with white socks and black loafers.

Yes, this was very much my thing. No, I don't have a problem. I could've gone with something more fantastical like a cloak or a robe to go over the rest of her clothes... but I decided to stick to my Earthling roots. Especially when it better highlighted

Fran's prettiness!



Still, I wasn't expecting an Earth ensemble to work so well in this other world. Ultimately, the uniform didn't look too different from one you'd find on Earth. Maybe there was some grand, multi-dimensional schoolgirl archetype? Anyway, she looked cute!

You would've been perfect with high pigtails...

It was so close to perfect, but Fran's ultimate cat ears got in the way of the ultimate hairstyle! I compromised and went with low pigtails instead, which still looked gorgeous.

"Teacher?"

What is it, Fran?

"Why did you shrink yourself?"

Well, it would look weird if you slung me over your back.

"Huh?"

I wasn't about to ruin the delicate balance of Fran's blazer by having her stick an undignified sword on her back, so I shrunk myself to the size of a dagger and hung myself inside her blazer. Nowadays, I could maintain my transmogrified shape for long periods of time. The length of a school day wouldn't be a problem.

All she needed now was a schoolbag, but schoolbags were far too impractical. They'd just get in the way since we already had Pocket Dimension. Still, only that final piece could complete the look! Maybe I could have Fran carry one, anyway. But—

"Teacher...? You're acting weird again."

Fran was staring at me with the same blank eyes she'd had when we went shopping for her uniform the other day. Were my ulterior motives bubbling to the surface?

Ha. Ha ha ha. What are you talking about, Fran? I'm not being weird at all.

"You just are."

Ugh... Anyway, look! We made it to the gates.

“Ah. Hm...”

Phew. I *think* that distracted her.

Get your handbook ready.

“Okay.”

The guard would let us inside once he saw her teacher’s handbook, so...

“Hang on there, little miss!”

“Hm?”

“Arf?”

That was what I’d expected, but the guard stopped her as she was passing through the gate. Unlike the quiet middle-aged man posted at the back door, this security guard was more tense, probably from a lifetime of adventuring.

He approached Fran, slightly concerned. “You’re a student, right?”

“Hm.”

“But you have a teacher’s handbook with you.”

“Hm.”

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

He thought it was very suspicious for a student like Fran to have a teacher’s handbook. “And yet the spirits aren’t responding. Wait... cat ears. Wolf familiar? Oh! May I have your name, little miss?”

“Fran.”

“Knew it. Sorry for slowing you down, Ma’am. They told me you were coming, but I needed to make sure.”

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Either handbook would've sufficed, but we should've been clearer about it. It was our first time through, after all. Honestly, probably would've been easier to just show him Fran's student handbook.

“Do you know the layout of the school?” he asked. “It's your first day at work, right?”

“I'll be fine.”

We had already confirmed where we needed to be.

Fran left the guard and continued walking, but she soon tilted her head.

“Hm?”

What is it, Fran?

“I'm being watched,” Fran whispered, and she was right. The students around her were staring. I thought they recognized her from the incident yesterday, but there was no fear in their eyes. It wasn't completely void of ill intent, either, but most of it was just jealousy and irritation.

“Who's that cutie?”

“S-she's so adorable...!”

“Excuse me! You wanna quit staring?!?”

All eyes were on the mysterious beauty.

Hah! But of course they would be! Fran's new uniform took her cuteness to a whole new level. The rest of the students couldn't keep their eyes off her.

Rejoice, boys! She is the ultimate mysterious transfer student! I'll forgive you for crushing on Fran, but don't think I'll let you go out with her! You'll need to clear a hundred trials *and* defeat me before I even *consider* considering it!

But it was only a matter of time before they found out the mysterious transfer student was also the new drill sergeant...

While Fran was used to the hostility and derision of adventurers, this was new territory for her. She was quite bothered by it.

Ignore them for now. You might have to get used to it, though—people might look at you like this for our whole stay.

“Okay.”

In any case, I made a mental note of all the boys ogling her.

Amidst the staring, Fran walked quickly through the Academy. She was heading to the dueling instructors’ lounge from the previous day.

The gazes changed as she got closer. Students to whom she’d been introduced were getting closer. Their stares were less curious and more tinted with fear and awe.

Although the intensity in the air was even greater with these students than with the oglers, Fran was much calmer. She was more used to this sort of thing. Her time with adventurers had taught her a lot.

She made it through the stare gauntlet and to her destination without a hitch. Honestly, I was expecting some annoying noble to come up to her, or a cocksure genius, or an arrogant teacher. And I was ready for Fran to blow them all out of the water. This was Fran we were talking about, after all.

But there were no weirdos in this spirit-watched Academy.

The door rattled open.

“Morning.”

“Good morning, Lady Fran. I see you are in uniform today.”

“Hm.”

The prep lounge was smaller than the staff lounge. The windows were smaller and the room didn’t get adequate ventilation. There were ten adults, all wearing adventuring

leather armor. They were dueling instructors, wearing their usual work getups.

The muscular ex-adventurers gave the already cramped room a stuffy atmosphere. I lacked a nose, but it felt like I could somehow smell their sweat. It was kind of like being in a gym.

Ines got up to fetch Fran. Having been introduced to her yesterday, the rest of the instructors also got up to salute her. It just made the room even stuffier than before.

“I’ll lead you to the special combat class.”

“Okay.”

“Right this way.”

She took us to a classroom on the second floor of one of the three towers.

The room looked like any other average classroom. Inside were twenty nervous students. They knew that Fran was coming. Those with ears especially close to the ground knew that they’d be visited by a beautiful instructor-student.

But there was nothing notable about them, aside from their anxiety. No intimidation from the other side of the door to scare us away. No mana scrambling to rattle us. No inhuman mana or Malice. It really was just an ordinary classroom of ordinary boys and girls.

I’d thought they would be something special, considering this was called the *Special Combat Class*... but why? They were still students, and Fran was overwhelmingly more powerful than them. In fact, I should have tempered my expectations even more. After all, Ines had said she could take several of them at once. They might be strong for students, but they were still just that: students.

The name “Special Combat Class” evoked images of freaks with super rare Skills, every last one of them a problem child. Real light novel protagonist energy.

“We’re supposed to be dueling today,” said Ines, “but we’ll take some time to introduce you to the students. They might have questions, but feel free to ignore the ones you do not wish to answer.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s go.”

“Hm.”

The students saw Ines coming through the frosted glass and quieted down. Their eyes immediately fixed on Fran as she followed Ines into the classroom.

“She really is a child...”

“S-she’s so pretty! I’m losin’ my cool, man!”

“So Caro was telling the truth!”

I’d thought they would’ve asked the other classes about Fran, but I guess they hadn’t had the chance to yet.

“So it *is* you! I knew it!” Within the noisy classroom, one of the students suddenly stood up. We were just as surprised as she was.

“Carona?”

“Y-yes! You remembered me.”

“Hm.”

Before us was Carona—she of the blonde drills and exposed forehead. Apparently, she was also in Special Combat, and she had told her classmates about her encounter with Fran.

It probably went something like this. The students heard about the lecturer-student from the other classes → Carona gathered from the information that it was Fran → Carona told her classmates about her. Her classmates hadn’t fully believed her, though. A Black Cat girl who turned out to be a super powerful adventurer and who was on friendly terms with the Guildmaster? It sounded fake.

But unless there was a conspiracy between Carona, the other classes, and Ines, they were compelled to believe that the little Black Cat at the front of the classroom was their new special combat dueling instructor. And she was every bit as strong as everyone said she was.

"You know her, Lady Fran?" asked Ines.

"We talked a bit at the Adventurers' Guild."

"I see. Quiet down, all of you!"

Ines was as effective as ever—

"..."

—and all of the students shut their mouths.

"Allow me to introduce Lady Fran, our new special dueling instructor! Lady Fran is a B-Rank adventurer, but her abilities are comparable to an A-Rank! The headmistress has personally vouched for her. She is also a nickname bearer. I'm sure you've all heard of the Black Lightning Princess."

Most of the class nodded their heads. They weren't faking it to satisfy Ines. They really had heard of Fran's exploits.

"Looks like you've done your homework. If you hadn't, I would've given you a one-hour lecture on the importance of gathering intel."

They really were being trained as adventurers. But considering Carona hadn't recognized Fran at first, was that any use? If nothing else, she must have known her name, race, and nickname. No... information wasn't enough. You needed strength and perception to figure out someone's identity.

Ines would know that, too. Regardless, the students needed to be taught the importance of information gathering.

"Are there any questions for Lady Fran before we begin?"

If this were Earth, this would be the part where the mysterious transfer student would be hounded with questions... mostly about whether she had a boyfriend and her taste in men.

There was no such silliness here. Fran was their instructor and a high-rank adventurer. The class didn't want to risk upsetting her by asking careless questions, and thus remained silent... but they also knew that it was rude *not* to ask questions. They were

caught in a bind.

The students looked at each other. A strange tension hung in the air.

Finally, Blonde Drills broke the silence. "Y-yes!"

"Carona? Go ahead."

"Miss Fran, since you will be acting as both teacher and student, how will the arrangement work?"

"I'll answer that question," said Ines. "She will be treated as a special combat student for the most part, but she will act as an instructor during special combat, advanced classes, and several other classes."

"Understood. Thank you."

We had been informed of this arrangement before. When Fran wasn't teaching classes, she would be a regular student.

But Fran didn't have a credit quota to hit, so she could sit out most of her classes. It wasn't like she needed them. The Academy offered Trap Dismantling and Goblin Disassembly, among other useful adventuring subjects, but Fran had mastered those a long time ago.

The students asked Fran about what weapons she used and what her go-to spells were, working to gather as much intel as they could before the duel. Whether or not the info would come in handy was a different story.

"Time for us to get moving!" said Ines. "Get to Training Ground Five. I expect everything to be ready by the time Lady Fran and I get there!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Come with me, Lady Fran. We'll use the instructors' locker room today. Feel free to use whichever one you want tomorrow."

"All right."

Fran changed into her usual gear and headed for the training grounds. Unfortunately,

her hair was back to normal. She found the pigtails awkward to move in. Pour one out for those pigtails, man.

The grounds were located some distance away from the three towers. It was a big empty field which, when stretched enough, looked like it could fit a Tokyo Dome or two.

The special combat students were waiting for us on the battlefield, each geared up for the occasion. Their gear was similar to what Carona had worn at the guild: leather and metal armor with a cloak or robe bearing the Academy emblem over it.

They stood in formation, exhibiting their level of preparation. Seeing that no one was talking, Ines gave a satisfactory nod.

“Lady Fran will now give you a demonstration of her powers!”

Newly appointed instructors were expected to prove their strength to the students by showcasing it.

“What do you usually do?”

“Mostly we attack training dummies with magic and weapon arts.”

Sometimes they would spar with one of the other instructors. They were also free to use large-scale spells in the wide-open space.

“I see.”

The class was watching us with great interest, partly to gauge what we were going to do and partly just due to excitement. With everything they already knew about Fran, we had to give them a show that wouldn’t leave them disappointed.

“I can use Earth Magic to make targets for you.”

What do we do, Teacher?

Let me think.

First impressions were crucial here. The more extravagant, the better. Couldn’t have the kids thinking Fran wasn’t as tough as the stories made her out to be. Time to give

them a show.

"Whenever you're ready, Lady Fran."

"We look forward to your demonstration, Ma'am!"

"Okay." Fran walked onto the grounds. We were ready to blow their socks off.

Let's start with this.

"Hm!"

Our first order of business was to make a target. Fran stretched out her hands over the ground and cast a spell on it.

Shouts soon erupted from the students as the ground beneath their feet shook and rumbled. Suddenly, a fifteen-meter earthen spire shot from the turf.

"H-hang on, that's definitely land magic."

"The Black Lightning Princess doesn't just use thunder magic?!"

"Maybe she's a mage and not a swordsman."

Most of the students thought that she was a swordsman who happened to be able to use thunder magic. She *was* dressed like a swordsman, after all, and beastmen were known to be weak at magic.

The class realized the extent of her magical strength when she used land magic.

But Fran was just getting started. "Awaken. Flashing Thunderclap."

"Whoa! I've never seen black lightning before!"

"Eeep!"

"Such mana... and she's still a child..."

The faces of the students paled when Fran cloaked herself in black lightning. They were only talking to help themselves cope.

This might've been enough to demonstrate her might to everyone, but we were barely getting started.

Follow my lead, Teacher.

Of course!

“Haaa!”

We'll show them something they won't forget!

We started with a flurry of Thunderbolts—two from Fran, four from me. Six bolts of lightning crashed into the spire, leaving a gaping hole. They weren't enough to destroy it, but it sure looked good and sounded loud.

“Next!”

On it!

Thunderbolt was just the appetizer. Now, Fran and I simultaneously cast Thor's Hammer. Several magic circles appeared in the air, and thick columns of lightning struck through them. Our hammers merged together and engulfed the earthen spire.

The class braced themselves as the cacophony of wind, thunder, and light assaulted them. Some screamed and closed their eyes, but at least no one was physically blown back.

About twenty seconds later, the students opened their eyes and were greeted with a sorry-looking spire.

“Ha... ha ha...”

“She did that with one cast?”

“That wasn't a grand spell, right?”

The earthen spire was smoldering, its face a puddle of molten rock. Parts of it had evaporated. The rest had broken away. It was an unbelievable display of magic for the class. All they could do was laugh as their faces got paler.

But Fran wasn't finished yet.

The kids looked around, realizing that she had disappeared. They sensed an accumulation of mana overhead. That was when they spotted Fran in the air. Everyone strained their necks to get a look at her.

"We'll finish it with this."

Go for it.

"Hm!" Fran unleashed a fully charged Pressurized Quickdraw. To give the students a full picture of her abilities, we had to show off her swordplay, too.

Her sword struck so quickly that the students could barely see the flash.

The earthen spire was cut cleanly. It fell to the ground with a thud.

The students could only watch in silence. It was all so amazing that they couldn't even grasp *how* amazing it was. If you asked them about it, they'd probably say something generic—something like "it was beyond crazy!"

"Phew."

Good job.

"Hm."

I teleported us back to our starting position to conclude—or we'd *planned* to conclude, until a certain someone complained.

"Bark, bark!"

"Hm? You wanna show off, too, Jet?"

"Arf!" Apparently, Jet had wanted a part of the action. His tail drooped when he saw the ruins of the earthen spire.

"You sure?"

"Woof!"

Indulging Jet's desires, Fran took to the skies again. She maintained her height with Air Hop and cast two spells.

The first was a land spell that created a five-meter slab. She cast a light spell over it, creating a light source that cast a shadow beneath the slab.

"Awooo!" Jet howled, summoning a jet-black circle ten meters in diameter from Fran's shadow. This was the Bottomless Shadow, a spell that created a horrible shadow field which swallowed everything in it.

It had plenty of weaknesses, however. For one, it wouldn't work without shadows. Also, it was slow in swallowing its victims, making escape relatively easy. It was hard to control, rendering Jet immobile for its duration. And even though it had "bottomless" right there in the name, there was a limit to how many objects it could suck in. On top of that, objects swallowed could not be retrieved, potentially annihilating valuable materials and crystals. Finally, it consumed a huge amount of mana.

The spell looked impressive, but it was actually highly impractical. It was absolutely unusable in high-speed combat. Really, it could only lock down enemy movement for a short time. It could help with slow enemies, work well at night... or take out the trash, like we were using it for now.

The shadow field gobbled up the remains of the earthen spire, swallowing every trace into its bottomless pit. A minute later, nothing remained.

The grounds were just as they had been when we'd arrived.

The students stared slack-jawed when they saw that Jet was as much of an outlier as Fran was.

After a few moments of silence, Ines rushed to our side, her face feverishly flushed.

"Th-that was spectacular, Lady Fran! I've never seen such magic and swordplay before in my life! You have my deepest gratitude! Jet's magic was spectacular too!"

Her voice rose a few octaves as she heaped praise on Fran and Jet, thrilled by Fran's display of power. She was gushing, even though she already knew about Fran's power. As for the students, they were downright stunned into silence.

But this wasn't the end of the day's lesson.

According to the schedule Ines had laid out, the class would spar with Fran after her demonstration. She'd requested the practice match be a painful one for the students.

The guardian spirits would not object to this. Injuries incurred during classes didn't trigger their alarms. As long as there was no malice involved and no real attempt to murder students, physical violence was allowed. The only exception to this was violence outside of classes, or violence where the perpetrator was just a student.

Would the class be able to duel Fran in their current state, though? Maybe they needed a break. They looked physically and mentally exhausted from sheer shock.

That was when Ines showed us why they called her a drill sergeant.

"I would like to proceed with the sparring match as scheduled. Will that be all right?"

Things would continue as planned, but she looked a little worried about Fran.

"How long will you need to rest?" asked Ines.

"Rest?"

"Yes. Will thirty minutes be enough? We have stamina potions and mana potions as well." She thought Fran would have to rest after casting all that powerful magic. With the kind of mana she had spent, a break was to be expected. It was several mages' worth of mana.

But Fran shook her head with a cool expression on her face. "I'm perfectly fine."

"I-I see... yes, I can see you've already stopped sweating. Amazing..."

Ines was genuinely surprised to see that Fran didn't need a break. It hit her again how much of an outlier she was. You could see the admiration growing in her eyes. I half-expected her to start calling Fran "Boss."

"Then we shall proceed with sparring."

"Okay."

The students started shouting, their faces turning pale. We might have gone a bit overboard. Still, the role of a special combat instructor was to teach students to overcome fear in the face of the strong. If anything, this would be good for them.

Ines quietly cast her gaze on the students. "All students, prepare for battle!" she declared.

"A-all of us?" a boy stammered.

"Did I stutter?" Ines chided. "Aren't you paying attention?"

"S-sorry, Ma'am! All of us it is!"

With that, the rest of the class entered the grounds without complaint and formed a circle. Their fear of Fran had undercut their fear of Ines. They still looked pale, but they could still move their feet.

The class split into parties of five to six, all of which would cooperate with each other, and began to talk tactics.

"Very good," said Ines. "They are in your hands, Lady Fran. And don't worry about injuring them. Our nursing teacher Dedden will patch them up."

Dedden nodded. "Yep, the name's Dedden! I'm an expert in Recovery Magic so I can reattach a missing arm or two or three. The kids will finish the class in one piece!"

"All right," said Fran with a nonchalant nod that really freaked out the kids.

Three arms? I guess she just meant she could take care of a lot of people. But now the class was probably seeing visions of dismemberment in their near future. I mean, the odds weren't low.

"You may begin!"

With that, the sparring match got off to a rather quiet start. The frontliners were armed with swords and shields. They didn't move a muscle. I thought they were planning to jump us, but it turned out they were waiting for the backline's support spells. The buffs increased their physical and magical defenses in an effort to guard against Fran's magic.

Was it just a precaution against getting one-shot? They'd be wiped out with an area-of-effect move if they stood there when a battle began. And even with their increased defense, would they be able to react in time? Increasing one's defense wasn't a bad option against fast opponents, but it only worked if you could see what your opponent was doing. If they were too fast to see, strengthening your defense was a waste of time.

I suppose you could focus on counterattacking if you had Gaudartha-levels of defense. But at the students' magical skill level, it was pretty pointless.

Still, it *was* a sparring match, so it wasn't a terrible strategy. We weren't about to use the abilities from our demonstration in the sparring match because, uh, we didn't want the class to instantly die. We'd dodge and heal as best we could, but holding back our attacks was a necessity in this setting.

The students were prepared for this and concluded that a little extra defense wouldn't hurt.

But didn't that fly in the face of the exercise? I thought we were simulating a real live battle. Was it legitimate to game a realistic simulation to the students' advantage? At least they did their intel homework, but...

As for Ines, she looked outright angry. This behavior was unacceptable.

"Lady Fran, give them a dose of despair," she said. "Feel free to crush their spirits while you're at it."

"Okay."

And here I'd been thinking we'd go easy on them. Ines wanted the exact opposite.

Fran nodded and stepped into the grounds. The students remained fixed in place. They'd thrown the idea of area-of-effect spells out the window, choosing to simply hold their ground. The frontline would slow Fran's approach while the backline pelted her with attacks. A cliche maneuver.

With bloodshot eyes, the students watched Fran approach. Their spells were cast and their bows were drawn. Whatever Fran did, they were ready to react. Their expressions brimmed with fear, but deep beneath that fear was a touch of motivation.

The purpose of this lesson was to get students used to overwhelmingly powerful

opponents so they could escape if they encountered one in real life. I felt a bit sorry for them—after all, retreat wasn't an option that day. But standing their ground to fight would be more beneficial for them in the long run since they'd get used to the taste of despair. If they ever met a freak like Fran in the wild, they'd find it easier to stay composed and get away.

The students understood this; they knew they had no chance of beating Fran after her demonstration. To make matters worse, they didn't even have a win condition to aim for—nothing like landing a hit on Fran, surviving for ten minutes, or escaping to a designated location. There was only an *end* condition, and that ending was gonna be a beatdown.

Despite all this, the students were resolved to not go down without a fight. I was impressed.

What should we do?

Anything you want, Fran. I'll follow your lead.

We could wipe the whole lot of them with an area-of-effect spell, or give them an up close and personal beatdown. Either would work just fine.

Fran scrunched her face and gave it some thought. Was she dissatisfied with the students? After a brief moment, she decided on an approach and continued walking toward the students at her slow pace.

You're on defense, Teacher.

What's the plan?

Hm? Straight charge.

When there was only thirty meters left between them, the students made their move. They weren't about to let the force of Fran's presence dictate the match.

The backline launched volleys of arrows and spells in unison. The sky filled with elemental attacks, each representing a particular student's specialty. But even at close range, their aim was all over the place. Only half of them were on track to hit Fran, while the rest spread out around her. Then again, maybe they'd done that on purpose to cover her escape routes. They were thinking their tactics through, for sure.

Normally, one would either escape or defend with a barrier. But Fran chose neither option. She just walked on, watching the volley descend.

She's going to get hit, the students thought. But instead of celebrating, they were confused. They weren't expecting the attack to hit at all. They would've been pleased if it held off a high-rank adventurer for a few seconds.

Their sudden success had surprised them.

But of course, they were mistaken.

"Hmph!" Fran wasted no time in swinging me. She cut down the arrows and dispersed the spells before resuming her walk.

The students murmured—

"She cut down the arrows?"

"Of course she cut down the arrows, you idiot! Instructor Ines does that all the time! Look at what she did after that!"

"S-she cut through our spells, too."

"Is it her sword?"

"Her eyes! She only deflected the spells that would hit her!"

Panic ran through the class, but Fran's steady approach snapped them out of it. They got back to casting their spells and nocking their arrows.

At fifteen meters, the class let loose their second volley. The spells were mostly wind and water this time—difficult elements to discern.

The frontline also moved in at their mark. They planned to attack Fran while she was defending herself. The backline delayed their attacks slightly to force Fran to defend herself for a longer period, giving the front line more time to attack.

As soon as she started deflecting spells and arrows, the frontliners made their move. Four swordsmen attacked her from all four directions while spearmen poked at her from between them. Surrounding the dogpile was a second unit of students watching

for an opportunity to exploit.

Everyone coordinated their attacks perfectly and their aim was true. The large party was used to taking down singular monsters together and this was the fruit of their training.

But they weren't fighting a monster. They were fighting a master swordsman.

"Wh-what?!"

"Impossible!"

"She's reflecting it?"

Fran walked on, the students' attacks bouncing off her with every step... or so it appeared to them. Actually, Fran was swinging me so fast that she blocked every attack too quickly for them to see. The class thought she had used some kind of reflect spell.

The same thing happened with the spearmen. Their swords and spears were deflected upward, so that they looked like they were raising their weapons in triumph. Fran wasted no time in exploiting the opening.

"Hm. That's four."

"Oorgh!"

"Gah!"

Two collapsed immediately after Fran punched them in the gut. But they were luckier than the two behind them, who got kicks to the solar plexus and were sent flying several meters. The attack wasn't going to make them faint, either. No, the focus was more on getting them... *acquainted* with the taste of their gastric juices.

We deliberately kept them awake. That way, the students would be forced to decide whether or not to heal themselves, which would slow them down. The sight and sound of their allies in pain also planted the seeds of fear. There were other reasons, but I'll keep those to myself for now.

As expected, the second line hesitated and backed off. In that time, Fran finished off the spearmen.

She used Mana Thruster, firing pellets of mana at her enemies. She held back, but getting hit in the gut with them made the spearmen squirm and cry as much as the swordsmen did.

In the space of a few moments, over half of the frontliners were down. The students watched in horror, further opening themselves up to attack. Fran neutralized the rest of the front line with more Mana Thrusters. The whole thing took less than ten seconds.

“F-fire! Fire!”

“We can’t just keep attacking like this...”

“You think we have a choice?!”

“Wait! Don’t waste your ammo!”

Panic spread over the backline. Some fired random spells, some tried to escape, some tried to institute a change of plans.

At ten meters, after realizing that none of their attacks were landing on Fran, half of them began to escape... or rather, to *try* to escape.

Fran shifted gears and suddenly closed in on the students.

The rest of the battle was one-sided. Although the backliners could handle themselves at close quarters, they were nowhere near as good as the frontliners. Fran gave everyone gut punches, sending them all down.

But although both front and backliners were on the ground, no one was unconscious. All part of the plan.

“Hey... I’m just going to keep hitting you if you keep laying on the ground.”

“Wha—?”

“Huh?”

Question marks popped over the students’ heads. As they grimaced from the pain, they tried to figure out what Fran meant.

Then they understood.

“Everyone, back on your feet! The match isn’t over yet!”

“I’ll attack again in ten seconds.”

“Get up, get up!”

“Damn it!”

Fran had only hit each of the students once. She’d sent them flying, of course, but they still were mostly uninjured and no one was unconscious.

Which meant the battle was far from over. I felt a little sorry for them, but like Ines said, we were going to show them despair.

Fran proceeded to run roughshod over the students, who had somehow managed to ready their weapons. The peaceful faces of the ones who got knocked out said a lot about their state of mind.

But again, Ines showed us why the kids called her a drill sergeant.

“Thanks to you runts getting beaten up so quick, we have plenty of time for round two! Look alive and get ready, boys and girls!”

She said this just as the students Dedden was tending to regained consciousness. The despair in their faces was so apparent that I felt bad for them. Not bad enough for me and Fran to go easy on them, of course.

An hour passed. The walloped students stood at attention with morose looks on their faces. They had been completely beaten down by Fran and could do nothing to retaliate. Yet beneath the sadness, there was a vexation that suggested they wanted to do better; knew they could do better.

I was amazed they could still make that face after such a beatdown. These kids were made of tougher stuff than I’d thought.

“That concludes today’s class! Remember to maintain your equipment!”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“And Carona...”

“Yes, Instructor?”

“Show Lady Fran the students’ locker room.”

“Very well.”

It’s a good thing Carona was there. The rest of the class looked downright terrified.

Then again, so was Carona. She hadn’t been exempt from getting gut-punched and blown away by a Sword Art like the rest of her classmates, but having talked to Fran before, she would have an easier time doing so again off the battlefield.

“Follow me.”

“Hm. Thanks.” Fran followed Carona’s lead, but they walked in silence. Par for the course for Fran, but Carona looked tense.

Eventually, Carona dared to break the silence. “Umm... Miss Fran?”

“Hm? What?”

“What did you think of us?”

A vague question, possibly posed because she could no longer take the silence.

Fran tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“I know we’re nothing compared to you, Miss Fran, but—”

“Hey.”

“Y-yes?”

“Cut the ‘Miss.’ Just Fran is fine.”

Carona looked worried when Fran interrupted her, then relieved when she realized that it was nothing serious. But now, her worry was replaced with confusion. “But Miss Fran—”

"We're in the same class, so we're equals. That's what Winalene said. Noble or common, weak or strong... none of that matters in the classroom."

The Academy was special like that. All students were equals under the spirits, regardless of birth or rank. Nobles weren't allowed to throw their political weight around and the strong were prohibited from violently oppressing others.

On the other hand, the weak couldn't use their weakness as an excuse to slack off and the commoners were required to leave their hatred for nobles at the door.

It was a setting I frequently came across in light novels, but I had some reservations about it. Even if they were equals in the Academy, they would no longer be once they graduated. Wouldn't it be better to teach students how to deal with people of different social standings?

Winalene had given me a wry smile before explaining.

When the Academy was founded, policies were set up to keep problematic nobles from enrolling. For better or worse, the good nobles saw no problems with having their children learn alongside commoners.

As the Academy grew in renown, nobles who wanted to tear down barriers between noble and common folk started enrolling their children, as well as nobles who wanted a mage in their houses. Word spread, and now thirty percent of the student body was made up of nobles and those related to them. Equality soon permeated the Academy, creating an institute where a commoner beating (and sometimes injuring) a noble didn't make the school newspaper.

The school's influence extended to Belioth, where nobles continued their generosity towards commoners even after graduation. This made enemies of nobles, sure, but with Winalene, the world's most powerful high elf, backing them, they could do little more than complain.

What all this boiled down to was this: Fran and Carona were equal despite their difference in strength. For Fran, the only time they weren't equals was when she was acting as an instructor. As students, that fell away.

"A-all right then, Fran."

"Hm."

“Were we weak?”

That was a difficult question. They were weak compared to Fran but pretty strong compared to the general populace. Each was as strong as an E-Rank and their teamwork was pretty good.

The students would have no trouble taking down an ogre. The matchup just happened to be horrible. But Carona didn’t feel that way. Whatever confidence she might have had was destroyed today.

“We enrolled in the special combat class because we feel that fighting is our calling,” she continued. “My goal is to become an adventurer. Others wish to become guards, knights, or mercenaries, among other combat occupations.”

“Hm.”

“But we were helpless against you. I’m not saying we thought we could win, but... we couldn’t even scratch you. Do I really have any business being an adventurer?”

Carona was looking at the floor. She no longer knew where her abilities placed her in the world.

“Hm. You were weak,” said Fran.

The ruthlessness of her words left Carona shaking. It was one thing to know the answer, and another entirely to hear it out loud.

“You took too much time casting,” Fran continued. “You took too long making decisions. Your levels are too low.”

“Yes...”

“Carona, you were too far in front for a mage.”

“Yes...”

“You might be confident in your physical strength, but the best you can take on right now are goblins. You need a lot more training before you can be an adventurer.”

“Uhh...”

Jeez, did Fran really have to make her cry?

Still, it was the truth and Fran carried on. "You can't even get away from strong monsters right now."

"Yes... you're right. We really are... weak."

"Hm."

"Then I guess we should just—"

"But everyone's weak in the beginning. You guys just need to train."

Carona stopped crying and looked at Fran. "You think we can get stronger? Us?"

"Of course. Everyone can. You just need to train."

"R-really?"

"Hm."

She could tell that Fran wasn't just trying to make her feel better. Hope now shone through Carona's eyes. The fact that Fran, a Black Cat, was saying it lent it more credence. She was living proof that even the weakest of the races could become monstrously strong through training.

"I'll work harder. I'll train and train and train."

"Hm. Good luck."

"Thank you."

It was a little stiff, but Carona finally smiled at Fran.

They talked a surprising amount after that. Fran had broken the ice between them, and they chattered on about the iffy quality of Academy food and which cafeterias were the best.

Smiling all the way, they reached the Girls' Locker Room.

Yep. That's what it said on the placard outside, in big bold letters: Girls' Locker Room.

F-Fran! This is bad! Leave me outside!

Why?

Uhhh...

I was in! Me, a middle-aged sword-man in the forbidden garden! Not that I'd look, I swear I would never! Even without eyes, I'd be closing my eyes! I'm a gentlesword with standards!

“My butt... that’s gonna bruise.”

“Did your tits get bigger again?”

“Hey, hands to yourself, sister!”

Wasn’t looking at all, I swear! I just can’t help hearing things, okay? I couldn’t shut my ears if I wanted to! Sure, there was a way to block it out with magic, but that would raise more eyebrows. I *had* to sit there and listen to all of this!

“Didn’t know you had a mole there. Kinda lewd.”

“No, don’t you look!”

Agh...

Teacher, why are you shaking?

It’s nothing. Just hurry up and change so we can get out of here.

Huh?

To all the boys in all the worlds, I’m sorry. But this one was completely beyond my control!

You’re acting weird.

Urgh!

No! Fran was going to end up thinking I was a creep!

As Fran wondered why I was rattling, she and Carona entered the locker room.

It was pretty big, about the size of a locker room at a fitness club or pool. The other classes were there, too, and a hundred women were currently getting dressed.

Or, uh, so I gathered from staring at the floor! I counted over a hundred people because that's what Presence Sense said! But I couldn't do anything about the clothes littering the floor!

As I was freaking out, Carona raised her voice. "Oh."

"What is it?"

"I just remembered when we got here. Do you have your clothes with you?"

Fran had changed in the instructors' locker room before class started. Normally, that would have been where she left her clothes. "Don't worry. I have them with me."

"Timespace Magic? Amazing!"

We'd kept her clothes in the ever-handy Pocket Dimension. Carona's eyes widened when Fran pulled her clothes out of the void. She'd seen a lot of Fran's magic: fire, wind, earth, thunder, light, and now time-space. Six magicks were a lot, and Carona couldn't conceal her surprise, though she was a little subdued about it. I think she was getting used to surprises.

"Carona?"

"My apologies. Do you know how to use the lockers?"

"Ines filled me in."

"Ah, but I suppose you won't need one with your Timespace Magic."

The next class was Monsterology, where students were taught how to carve monsters up, among other things. As for her instructor gig, Fran would need to teach an advanced class right after that.

“Let’s get changed. I’ll lead you to the classroom.”

“Okay.”

Fran and Carona started changing. The sound of rustling fabric was very naughty even if there was nothing inherently wrong with it. As I waited for the heart-pounding clothes change to finish, Carona gasped.

“Oh my.”

“Hm?”

“I wasn’t expecting the skin of a high-rank adventurer to be so smooth.”

Adventurers racked up many scars over the years of their career. In Fran’s case, I usually healed her immediately after she got hurt, making it harder for scars to form. She had a few marks here and there but nothing that stood out.

“Do you have a particular regimen you follow?” Carona asked.

“Regimen?”

“Beauty products and the like.”

I suppose she did. The (male) maiden of Ulmutt, Elza (given name Bardische) had given her a special whitening-smoothing serum. She applied it on her skin, giving extra attention to her face, arms, and legs.

Fran thought of it as a huge chore at first, but she got used to it and stopped complaining. She didn’t really use it while training back in the Demon Wolf’s Garden, but she was back on her nightly skincare regimen. We would have to ask Elza for more once we ran out.

“I have a serum.” Fran took the cream out of Pocket Dimension and handed it to Carona.

“My goodness, but this is...!” Carona was more surprised by the cream itself than by the actual Pocket Dimension.

“What?”

"This is an Elza whitening-smoothing cream! A limited edition, a downright mythical product!"

The logo on the bottle was that of a woman and an axe. Huh. You know, I'd never realized that Elza had an actual brand.

Carona's exclamation attracted the attention of the other girls in the locker room, even the ones in Special Combat who were afraid of Fran. All eyes were on the bottle in Fran's hand.

Elza said he'd made it himself, so I'd assumed it was just one of those homebrew skincare products. But apparently, the serum was downright artisanal.

Still, Fran was uninterested in beauty products and didn't try to conceal that. "Uh-huh."

"Wh-where did you get this...? This isn't something an ordinary noble could acquire. Women of higher nobility often stake out the marketplace and buy the entire supply at the first sign of stock. Rumor has it that this is the queen's favorite brand."

For Fran, the serum was nothing but another chore to deal with. Unimpressive stuff.

"I got it from an acquaintance in Ulmutt," she said.

"I see. Ulmutt is where this product is produced, and you were there during your travels. I can see how you got your hands on it."

Carona didn't ask if she could have some, and I don't think it was because of the price. No, she simply couldn't bring herself to ask Fran, especially not after her display of strength.

The other students didn't look like they'd ask, either. They seemed to have reservations around Carona. Because she was a noble? No, it was probably because she was in Special Combat. Well, at least we weren't going to make a scene. But just as I sighed with relief, Fran proceeded to cause just that scene.

"You can use it."

"Huh?"

"Here." She handed Carona the bottle of serum.

"A-are you sure?"

"Hm. The others can use it, too, if they want."

"Wha—!" The entire locker room shook. Students hearing the conversation from afar rushed to join the chaos. Even Carona's frightened classmates approached. A whole wall of people swarmed her. And the sheer pressure in the air? I'd rather be surrounded by a horde of goblins.

"A single bottle of this costs thousands of gold. Easily above ten thousand by the time it gets to retailers..."

"It was a gift," said Fran.

"Oh! I forgot you were a nickname bearer! That kind of money must be a pittance to you! Nothing at all like my impoverished barony!"

Carona caved, both to the allure of the serum and the stares of the girls surrounding her that were practically begging her to get on with it and pass the bottle around. Fearfully, she squeezed the serum onto her hand and carefully applied it on her skin.

The girls passed the bottle around, excitedly applying it. The bottle was gone in a matter of moments.

But there hadn't been enough for everyone. The girls looked at Fran with pleading eyes.

Fran produced another bottle and gave it to them. "Use it."

"You're the best! Thank you!"

I guess we were down yet another bottle.

Fran, make sure to leave some for yourself.

Hm...

Fran?

Everyone's so happy.

I knew it! You're getting them to use it all up so you won't have to be bothered using it every night!

“...”

I never thought it had annoyed her *that* much. But it was too late to take it back now; the girls would resent Fran if she did. Still, that would be the last giveaway.

Fran, why are you getting out another bottle?!

“Use this, too.”

“Nice! Thank you so much!”

“This feels so good!”

“Ah ha ha! Thanks!”

“Hm.”

Everyone thanked Fran with a smile. Her classmates even got up to shake her hand. The barrier of fear was gone. They'd accepted Fran as one of their own.

Ehh, what can you do? Maybe it was better to think of it as an investment so she'd be accepted by the female students. In under three minutes, we had three empty bottles on our hands.

Guess we'll have to ask Elza for more.

Now that we knew it was a luxury item, we'd insist on paying for it next time... though with its apparent rarity, could we even buy it off him if we wanted to?

Hrm... Fran seemed annoyed.

Fran?

Hmph...

She turned away from me! Was she going through a phase? A *rebellious* phase? P.A., say it ain't so!

Carnivorous beastmen do not have a rebellious phase.

Wait, really?

Rebellious phase: A phase in adolescence where an individual lashes out or commits antisocial acts. Usually a product of an imbalance between physical and mental growth.

That's about the gist of it, yeah.

It was the age where kids stopped listening to their parents, ignored their families, and ran off with other people's bikes.

Beastmen mature at a faster rate than humans and are more excitable than humans and elves. Beastmen—particularly those descended from carnivores—enter the rebellious phase at the age of five and exit it at the age of forty, meaning they spend over half their lives in the rebellious phase.

So?

The rebellious phase is the norm for beastmen and therefore cannot be defined as a phase.

They spent their whole lives being rebellious? Guess that explained the Beast King's behavior.

“Hrm?” Fran grunted as the locker room clamored over the serum. She was still getting dressed.

“I-is something the matter?”

“How do I do this?” Fran lifted a drooping strip of cloth to Carona. Of course! I’d forgotten to teach Fran how to do her necktie! I’d tied it for her that morning, which was more difficult than I’d expected. I had tied plenty of neckties when I was alive, but never on someone else.

Romantic movies always had that scene where the wife does the husband’s necktie, but it was impossible to do without practice. At first, I’d told Fran to face away from me so I could tie it as if it were my own, but doing it in third person was still a difficult task.

I should've just loosened her tie instead of undoing it completely. Carona would've just needed to tighten it for her.

"Come, I'll do it for you."

"Hm."

She chuckled. "This reminds me of the time someone else did my necktie for me. I was new to the Academy, then."

Carona stood in front of Fran, her hands akimbo. She tied Fran's necktie for her, straightening her collar and shirt as she did so. Carona was a proper lady.

"There we go."

"Thanks."

After Carona fixed Fran's necktie for her, someone else approached her in a huff.

"You! You said you were an adventurer?"

"Hm?"

"Hand over the serum this instant! It is wasted on a commoner like you!"

Ugh. I'd been wondering when we'd run into *that* sort of noble here.

"You want some, too?" asked Fran.

"That's not what I mean! Hand over the whole thing this instant! I don't enjoy shouting, you know. Chop, chop!"

I'd figured she was a bit of an awkward noble whose requests sounded like orders, but nope, she turned out to be another rotten noble. This was definitely a shakedown, and I wondered how the spirits would punish her.

As I thought about how to handle the situation, Carona stepped forward with a stern expression on her face. "You are not allowed to throw your weight around while you're at the Academy, noble or no."

"What? Why are you acting like you actually care?" the girl spat.

Carona looked at her with pitying eyes. "Because I do care. Do you not remember what was said at the entrance ceremony? Who you are doesn't matter in the Academy."

"Hah! It's a big school, but what can it do against the influence of a marquis? If anything, the school should be grateful that someone as noble-blooded as myself deigned to transfer here!"

So she was the daughter of a marquis, a high-ranking noble whose land probably rivaled that of a queen. She couldn't believe that her status held no sway here, but it was true. The spirits guarding the Academy didn't care whether you were a prince or a pauper.

"The fact that you would even say those words..." said Carona. "You must not be from around here."

"I am the daughter of Marquis Renge, chief retainer of the mighty kingdom of Vassar—"

That was as far as the daughter of Renge got before another student jumped at her from behind, pinned her hands behind her back, and covered her mouth.

"Wh-what do you think you are doing?!" the spoiled girl stammered.

"I should be asking *you* that, Lady Culda! Have you gone mad?!"

"How dare you?! Unhand me this instant, Salutta!"

"Your father told you to live quietly at the Academy and be obedient to its rules!" shouted the girl called Salutta. "Have you forgotten?"

The daughter of the marquis struggled to break free. "No! I've been perfectly obedient to the Academy's staff and this daughter of a high-ranking noble!"

"Remember, your father wanted you to obey all of the Academy's precepts!"

"Are you telling me that I, a daughter of a noble, must be considerate to a mere commoner? How absurd!"

Salutta seemed to be the girl's servant. While nobles weren't allowed to have servants constantly accompanying them, their servants were allowed to enroll and room with them. A girl raised in the lap of luxury couldn't be expected to become independent overnight.

"It's the truth!" said Salutta. "Things will go from bad to worse if you keep this up! It will even have repercussions for the house! Now, come along!"

"Let go of me! *What* repercussions?! When my father hears of this absurd school—"

"Aah, stop that! Spirits, she doesn't mean it! She doesn't know what she's talking about! Please, don't hold it against her!"

"Mrgh! Hrgh!"

Salutta was quite the competent servant. She was at least stronger than a Special Combat student. She must've been sent as a babysitter and guard for her lady. Culda wasn't getting out of her servant's restraints any time soon or getting her hand off her mouth. Actually, could she even breathe? Her face was getting purple.

But even with her hands occupied, Salutta bowed an apology to Carona and Fran. She knew just how bad things could get for those who caused trouble at the Academy.

"I deeply apologize for the actions of my mistress. It won't happen again, I promise. Will you please forgive her?"

"Salutta, what are you—mmf!"

"Be quiet before I knock you out!"

"Hrrgh!"

Carona sighed. "Well, Fran?"

"Hm?"

"Will you forgive her?"

Carona had turned to Fran because she was the one Culda had initially picked a fight with.

Fran wasn't the least bit interested. "Do what you want."

"Thank you very much."

"So can I put on my skirt now?"

Throughout the conversation, Fran had been skirtless. Back in the day, she would've just gotten clothed while ignoring them completely. The fact that she'd actually stopped what she was doing to listen was a huge step for her!

"Y-yes, of course. You two are free to leave as well. Though I don't suppose we'll meet again."

"Yes... you're probably right."

Were they going to be expelled? Considering Culda had only attempted to take Fran's belongings, her sentence was unclear.

Carona shrugged her shoulders as she watched the two leave. "Foreign nobles get a lot of prestige out of just graduating from the Academy, but you still get people like that from time to time."

"Uh-huh."

"The spirits will alert the instructors if it happens again. You just need to be patient for a while and wait for them to show up."

Carona was telling Fran that she wouldn't bend to the demands of pushy nobles. However...

"Okay. I'll be patient and not beat them up," said Fran.

Carona gave her a wry smile. The girl standing before her was a nickname bearer, after all. She could afford not to play nice even with an entire kingdom.

"You... worry me for different reasons, Fran."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing. Let's get going."

“Hm.”

We returned to the classroom and found everyone already seated.

The boys froze when they saw Fran in uniform, and not because she was cute. No, the sparring match had traumatized them. The girls, having bonded a little with Fran, didn't have it as bad. Some were even waving to her. Still, in a class with a male majority, the classroom was dead quiet.

How rude of them to stare at Fran like she was a vicious monster! All she'd done was beat them half to death! You can't get far in the adventuring world if you can't take some sort of pleasure in getting beat up by a pretty girl!

“...”

“.....”

“Hm?”

“This way, Fran.”

The class continued to sit in silence even after Fran took her seat. The boys held their breaths as if they were faced with a wild animal and focused on her location.

Meanwhile, the girls wore strained smiles. Half of them seemed to get where the boys were coming from while the other half thought they were being embarrassing.

The silence was broken by an old man who stepped into the classroom. “You're all mighty quiet today. Is something wrong?” I guessed he was the teacher of the next subject.

“Oh, uhh... it's nothing, sir,” said one of the students.

“Are you sure? Let's get started, then. I believe we have a transfer student today.”

“Me,” said Fran.

“So you're the lecturer-student I keep hearing about. We don't get a lot of beastmen at the Academy.” The old professor looked at Fran intently when her hand shot up. He hadn't been at the staff lounge when she was introduced. “All right. Let us begin

Monsterology."

As its name implied, Monsterology covered monster ecology and biology, as well as the valuable materials you could harvest from them. Dissections were conducted, sometimes—in the case of larger monsters—with the whole class participating.

The old man seemed to have an idea as he read through Fran's profile. "It says here you are an adventurer. Do you have experience with butchering monsters? How about we take a break from today's subject so you could tell us more about it? It's not every day that we get to hear tales from a professional adventurer."

"I don't mind."

"Excellent! The firsthand testimony of a high-rank is priceless!" The professor was more excited than the students, his eyes glowing with curiosity. He must've been a researcher as well as a teacher. "Let's see, where shall we start? How about this: What is the biggest monster you've field-dressed so far?"

"Size-wise?"

"Yes!"

"Hmm...?"

"Perhaps the larger beasts are too cumbersome?"

"That's not it. I've just carved so many I don't know what the biggest one is."

"O-oh! But of course. In that case, what is the biggest one you've butchered recently?"

"One of the monsters in the Demon Wolf's Garden."

"Indeed? I hear that the Garden is home to a great variety of monsters. Which one was it?" The professor was leaning in now. He seemed more interested than the kids were.

"The Invisible Death."

"Wh-what?! But the Invisible Death is a B-Threat! You're saying you killed one?"

No one was paying attention to the class anymore. The students had blank looks on

their faces.

When the professor noticed, he stopped what he was doing and remembered his duties as a teacher. "Yes," he said, clearing his throat, "I suppose I should explain what an Invisible Death is."

Lacking textbooks, the professor wrote his explanation on the blackboard. As far as monster specialists went, the old man was very knowledgeable. But there are some things you can only learn through experience, and Fran helped him out where he was lacking.

Take the creature's active camouflage, for example. He knew that it refracted light, but he didn't know the practical extent of its offensive and stealth capabilities.

The lecture continued, with the professor in conversation with Fran. The class did their best to keep up, but they were having a hard time. The Invisible Death was so strong that it felt unreal. They were struggling to grasp the sheer variety of abilities at its disposal. Despite the professor's best illustrations and diagrams, the students were at a loss.

"Excuse me, Professor Moray?"

"Yes, Carona?"

"May I please fetch the Encyclopedia of Monsters? As enlightening as this lecture is, I'm finding it difficult to keep up. It will only take fifteen minutes."

The class usually referred to the Encyclopedia of Monsters (currently kept in the school library) during their lessons. The sudden change of schedule meant that they didn't have the encyclopedia at hand.

"We have an idea of its overall size," said Carona, "but its unique scale structure is difficult to imagine..."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Scribblings on a blackboard can only go so far," the old professor conceded thoughtfully. Still, he didn't want to waste precious lesson time to get reference material.

Fran produced a crystal shard the size of her hand from Pocket Dimension and set it on the teacher's desk with a clunk. "Here."

"C-could it be?! Is this the scale of an Invisible Death?"

"Hm."

This was one of the scales the beast had fired at us. Fran had taken it out of storage because Carona said she didn't understand. We'd defended ourselves by catching them with Pocket Dimension, so we had a lot of these left.

"A-are there other parts?"

"I have all the parts."

"A-are you saying you have a whole Invisible Death in there?!"

"Hm? No," said Fran. "I have two."

The old professor let out a frenzied cry. "Wargh?! M-may I see one of them? Please? Th-the class would learn a lot from it!"

He definitely just wanted to see one with his own eyes.

"There's not enough space here."

"Then we'll move to a different location! Right now! Grab your things, everybody! We're going to the dissection room!"

The professor pelted Fran with questions all the way to the dissection room, which was bigger than I'd expected, with fairly high ceilings. Then again, the room was designed to dissect everything, including large monsters. Magic circles were drawn on the ground to catch bodily fluids spilled during a dissection. Nothing would be wasted there.

Fran laid out the carcass of an Invisible Death in the center of the room. This one was whole—it was the one we'd defeated before our training began.

The monster was gigantic, over ten meters in length. Its pillar-like body dominated the room. Both students and teacher were left awestruck and incapacitated by the sight of the battle-scarred beast. Even those who knew what to expect were amazed by what they saw.

Blood and guts spilled from the cracks of the monster's shell, giving off a strong odor that underscored the reality of it all. I had to give props to the students—none of them gagged or wrenched their faces in disgust. Their experience with butchering and dissection was paying off.

"Here it is," said Fran.

"By the gods... what a specimen...! T-take notes, everyone! You might never see a B-Threat up this close in your lives ever again!" the professor shouted. He proceeded to indulge his curiosity as the students spread out to sketch the creature from various angles. "Can you tell us more about this monster, Fran?"

Carona led a group of female students in front of Fran. "We'd love to hear about it, too."

"Hm. Sure."

"Thank you."

"I'll start with its most annoying bit. This tail? There's a hole in it. It uses it to—"

"I see—"

"And then—"

"I would never have guessed—"

Carona and the girls oohed and aahed and gasped at Fran's explanation of the Invisible Death. Seeing their reception, Fran got into it and carried on. By her standards, she was chatting up a storm.

Seeing their discussion, the boys slowly approached. Eventually, they too started asking questions. They understood that there was no need to be afraid of her—or not *that* afraid, at least.

Everyone listened intently as Fran told them about her intense battle and how she eventually prevailed. We ended up veering pretty far off topic from Monsterology, but at least Fran was getting friendlier with her classmates.

CHAPTER 5

THERACLEDE UNDER THREAT

WE DON'T HAVE dueling classes until noon, so it's all going to be regular classes this morning.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Someone's excited. Having fun with the classes?

I could see why Fran was excited, but why Jet?

“We have Cooking today!”

Ah, of course.

Say, Fran?

“Hm?”

Do you know what other classes you have?

“Hm...?” Fran tilted her head and gave me a blank stare, as if to say, “No, but what does that matter?” She didn’t mean anything bad by it, she just genuinely believed that she didn’t need to remember what she was taking.

You must have caught a glimpse of the other subjects if you know you have Cooking today. Do you really not remember?

“Hm.”

Well, this *was* Fran we were talking about. Students would be doing the cooking in Cooking class—could Fran really be satisfied by what they made? Given this was Special Combat, they were probably going to cook up simple meals for the battlefield

or the outdoors... not exactly meals that would please her palate.

Do you know what Cooking class is about?

"We're definitely eating something," said Fran, proudly puffing out her flat chest as she told me this glorious fact.

I then proceeded to tell her what Cooking would actually entail. Her face gradually darkened as it dawned on her that it was nothing like she expected. Jet's tail also drooped. He was hoping to get some tasty table scraps, but student cooking was dubious at best. Fran and Jet dragged their heels the rest of the way to school.

"Morning!"

"Morning..."

The guard didn't stop us this morning, greeting Fran with a smile.

Not many others greeted her, since she wasn't known throughout the school yet. Some of the girls from the locker room recognized her, however, and they gave her a slight nod.

"Good morning, Fran."

"Morning."

Carona was already in the classroom by the time we got there. Fran sat next to her. They weren't quite friends yet, but they were on friendly terms.

Jet was the size of a small dog that day. He plopped himself down next to Fran's seat. Powerful monster though he was, the cuteness of his form captivated the females. Even Carona was smiling at him.

"Jet is so cute..."

"You think so?"

"I do," said Carona. "I can't be afraid of him when he looks like this."

Jet was still holding out hope for table scraps at the Cooking class. Hence the puppy

form—he figured it'd help him beg.

The first class of the day wasn't Cooking, though. No—in this class, students learned about the diverse races of this world.

"Good morning. I shall begin by saying that you honor me greatly by gracing my classroom, Black Lightning Princess. You really have evolved..."

The lecturer was a deer beastman by the name of Holial. He bowed respectfully to Fran, but was a little over-familiar in the way he came up to shake her hand. Still, the admiration in his eyes was genuine. He clearly felt blessed to meet an evolved Black Cat.

"Since you are here today, let's talk about evolution. Until last year, it was said that Black Cats were the only beast tribe unable to evolve, but that has been proven false. Lady Fran, you were the one who provided that proof!"

Wait, didn't Winalene know about Black Sky Tigers? Why hadn't she told others about their evolution?

Over the course of centuries, no one had been able to figure out the evolution requirements of Black Cats. In fact, not a single Black Cat had managed to evolve. Eventually, people just concluded that it was impossible. Still, I found it strange that Winalene would have remained silent about the Black Sky Tigers.

Was it an effect of the divine punishment visited on them? It seemed absurd that the people of the Beastman Nation would have so completely forgotten about Black Sky Tigers. Maybe there was some kind of supernatural seal on their memories, or an enchantment that prevented the spread of any information about Black Sky Tigers. The gods had a great deal of influence over the people of this world, after all.

But the curriculum had changed, starting this year, when it was discovered that Black Cats could evolve—into one of the Ten Ancestors, no less—once they fulfilled certain criteria. Fran could only smile. The public image of her tribe was getting better.

"You changed the course of history itself! And the rest of you are very fortunate to be classmates with Lady Fran! There aren't that many beastmen attending the Academy, and the ones that do aren't evolved. Have you seen what her evolved form is capable of?"

Carona and the others gave him a knowing smile. For them, Fran was a fearsome instructor rather than an historic figure. Still, they had to admit that they were fortunate to know her in person, even if that came with the *unique* experience of getting beaten up by Fran in her evolved form.

However, Fran was drawn to something else that Holial had said.

“There aren’t many beastmen at the school?”

“Not really, no.”

How could a school of this size be lacking beastmen? Then again, we really hadn’t seen that many on campus. Were beastmen discriminated against in this country? In this school?

“Why’s that?”

“Simply put, this is the Magic Academy. Beastmen aren’t good with magic.”

Not discrimination, then. Beastmen weren’t exactly the best at magic.

“Beastmen with magic like yours are exceedingly rare, Princess,” continued the professor. “I myself do not possess it.”

“But you’re a teacher here.”

“One does not need magic to teach academic subjects.”

For subjects unrelated to magic, the only ability the faculty needed was the ability to teach.

“To elaborate, most beastmen do not have a lot of mana. This is a racial tendency—we have even less than the average human or dwarf.”

I’d known dwarves were bad at magic, but not that beastmen were even worse.

This world was home to a multitude of races. Elves and magi were well versed in magic. While inferior, humans, dwarves, mermen, and ogrekin could still use magic. Beastmen, insectoids, and birdmen weren’t very good at it.

"There is also the matter of temperament," he continued, "and this is the bigger hindrance."

"Temperament?"

"Yes."

Fran tilted her head, but I knew what Holial was getting at.

"Magical training is very dull. There is much tedium involved and you don't get to see visible progress for large swaths of time."

"Hm."

"Being generally impatient, most beastmen fail to acquire magic."

And that was the root of their incompatibility. Not all beastmen were impatient, but most did fit that stereotype. Those beastmen who could use magic tended to be innately talented, learning it quickly or based mostly on instinct. I guess you could say their instincts were sharper than most.

The Beast King and Mea came to mind as models for this type of beastman.

"Also, most beastmen end up going into the combat professions. They begin training at age five or six, most of them apprenticing by age ten. They start working by age fifteen at the latest. This is why education never quite enters the beastman consciousness. Anything they need to learn must be immediately useful and practicable in their chosen field."

If you wanted to be an adventurer or a soldier when you grew up, more training hours were definitely beneficial.

"There is also the problem of geography. Mages occupy a higher social standing here in Belioth, in the same way our neighbors treat their adventurers. There is no discrimination here, but most beastmen naturally gravitate toward Granzell."

Might as well start your career in Granzell where the grass was greener for adventurers.

But it wasn't like beastmen had zero aptitude for magic. In fact, their main advantage

lay in the fact that each tribe had their own affinities for particular types of magic.

Unlike humans, who had affinities for several types of magic, a beastman's affinities were set. A Blue Deer like Holial would be drawn to water, earth, and forest magicks. These affinities allowed beastmen to shorten their training time.

"Still, our limited mana pool makes it difficult for us to perform as mages," said Holial.
"However, we make great Spellswords."

All that being said, magic acquisition was still difficult for beastmen. Can you imagine Fran or the Beast King doing the same dull routine over and over again? Impossible.

Holial carried on with his lecture after the detour into the magical affinities of beastmen and returned to the subject of evolution. "All right, Carona. What is the one race in the world that cannot evolve?"

"Humans, sir."

"Correct."

Holial proceeded to sum up their previous lesson, probably for Fran's benefit. His summary sounded like natural and cultural anthropologies mashed together with mythology and folklore. It was a strange tale, but it was the true telling of the genesis of the world.

Put simply, after the gods were finished creating the world and the nature upon it, the Great Gods worked together to create humans. These humans were then used as a template by the gods, who each created their own races to be their mortal servants.

Beastmen and insectoids served the beast god. Elves served the forest god, and the land god was attended to by the dwarves and ogrekin. Each race had special powers bequeathed upon them by the gods, allowing them to evolve.

Though it might seem that humans missed out on these gifts, the Ten Great Gods who created them made them balanced all-rounders with no glaring weak spots. Combined with their reproductive capabilities, they were the greatest race to walk the earth. They couldn't evolve because they didn't *need* to evolve.

That last bit was a little controversial, though. And it wasn't like the human king ruling over Belioth was going to start bellowing "We humans are the greatest jack-of-all-

trades race in the world!"

On the other hand, you had the common Beastman Nation belief that magic was prissy and unreliable, and the great and mighty beastmen had no need for it. Holial smiled bitterly as he recalled how each tribe would declare itself the greatest of all.

"Now, let's talk about evolution. First, the humanoid races will naturally evolve given enough levels. There are also mutations, which we will discuss alongside this subject."

Ogrekin didn't evolve, they mutated. While evolution could be achieved solely by leveling up, there was also a mutation that occurred when certain conditions were met. At least, that was how I understood it.

"Evolution works the same for beastmen, dwarves, elves, even drakes."

But sometimes, individuals would undergo evolution or mutation and gain special powers. Urslars was a Calamity Ogre, a race so rare that it was practically mythical. While not always the case, these special evolutions were usually stronger than their regular counterparts.

"There are outliers, even among these special evolutions. These are usually referred to as divine regressives or ancestor regressives. Some researchers even use the term 'quasigod.'"

Quasigod? Sounded intense...

"As the name suggests, these evolutions are believed to regress a being to the state in which their race was originally created by the gods. Although these beings are technically considered regressions, for the purposes of today's discussion, we shall treat them as evolved. As far as I know, the high elf is an example of a divine regressive."

The biggest difference between a divine regression and a normal evolution was a change in race. An elf might evolve into a wood, leaf, or grass elf, but they would still be an elf. An increase in stats wasn't enough to be considered a divine regression.

Things were different in Winalene's case. She had not only become a high elf, but apparently a Demigod?!

Wow, she's actually a god, said Fran.

Wait, seriously? Winalene?

Surprised as we were, Fran and I were also slightly off the mark. Demigods weren't quite gods but beings whose powers were second only to the gods that made them.

"This is all personal conjecture, of course. There aren't many of them in recorded history. I am only going by the literature we have and the headmistress' account."

Having gotten used to Fran's presence, the class was asking questions now.

"What other divine regressives are there besides high elves?"

"Good question. To my knowledge, a dwarf becomes an Elder Dwarf and a magus becomes a God Magus. We don't know any who are still alive or whether they even existed, but there is enough evidence to suggest such a thing is possible."

"What about unconfirmed races?"

"There is the Shinryu, the divine regressive of the drake. Any detailed accounts of these were lost with the destruction of Goldicia, but traces of evidence can be found in the oral tradition of drake cultures."

Shinryu. The name sounded familiar. Back in the capital, Velmeria had had a Skill called Shinryu Form when she was possessed by Fanatix, the Sword of Mad Faith. The Skill had given her tremendous power. Had it turned her into a Shinryu?

"As for beastmen, there is a being called the Godbeastman in the traditions of the older tribes."

Fran's ears perked up at that. "Godbeastman?"

"Yes. A being of supreme power whose strength transcends that of the Ten Ancestors. It is said that they can defeat a Godsword with their bare hands."

The class didn't seem as convinced as Holial.

"What...?"

"Come on, Teach, that's crazy."

The Academy had classes on Godswords, so they knew what the weapons were capable of. The students probably thought Holial was tooting his own race's divine regressive horn.

Fran and I disagreed. I had seen Velmeria fight Urslars and his Godsword to a standstill, and although Winalene had yet to reveal the extent of her powers, we felt she could easily take on a Godsword user.

If this Godbeastman is as powerful as Winalene and Velmeria...

"Hm. They could definitely beat a Godsword."

The student's overheard Fran's whisper, and so did Holial.

"Can you tell us more, Princess?" Holial asked.

"Hm. When I fought Winalene, she was at least as strong as a Godsword user."

"You've... seen a Godsword before?"

"I've seen Urslars fight with one."

"I see. So you've seen both a Godsword *and* a divine regressive!"

The classroom's murmurs grew louder. Fran's encounter with an unleashed godsword came as a shock to them and they pelted her with questions.

I thought Holial would be upset with the way we'd derailed his lecture, but he happily joined the students in their barrage. Considering these subjects were literally the stuff of legends, I couldn't blame the guy.

At last, Holial's class ended and it came time for the class Fran was waiting for: Cooking. Which wasn't held in the kitchen or the cafeteria, for some reason. Instead, we found ourselves out on the turf in our uniforms.

The typical blue slime vinyl sheet was spread out on the grounds with monster carcasses laid out on top of it. The creatures looked like one-meter-long raccoons, but their furs were frazzled and messy. They stank, too, vaguely smelling of rotten eggs.

This was a monster called the Skunk Raccoon. Its meat had a hideously horrible odor

and wasn't really worth cooking. Adventurers took its crystal and venom sacs and discarded the rest of its carcass. Its fur was of such poor quality that it didn't sell for much.

Also, you had to carefully prepare and cook it to make it taste even halfway decent. Ugh, was this our main ingredient for today?

A large woman stood in front of the slime sheets. Her name was Yafi and she used to be an adventurer.

"Today, we're going to simulate cooking a monster you just killed on the field!"

We weren't just going to cook it—we would need to carve it up, too.

"Use your knowledge of butchering skunk raccoons to cook it. You are free to make any dish you want!"

I knew it. They'd really given us an awful ingredient to work with.

"You'll split up into teams and work to prepare your raccoon! Make sure there's enough for the whole team!"

This was practice for emergency situations, like if you happened to lose all your foodstuffs out in the field. Adventurers would need to hunt down game and cook it on the spot, no matter how bad the taste. Sensing disaster, Jet slinked away into the shadows.

"You must be Fran. What shall we have you do? Do you have experience carving or cooking monsters?"

"I'm used to both."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Hm."

"I expected nothing less from a solo high-rank. Where shall we put you, then?"

Carona volunteered. "Will my group suffice?"

The other members of her group looked pensive but welcoming.

“All right. Fran, you’re with them.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t feel like you need to hold back. You are free to use whatever seasonings and spices you have in your arsenal.”

“Really?”

“Sometimes, you may end up in the same party as people you disagree with. Even so, that is no reason to hold back on using your supplies.”

“I see.”

“Unless you can learn to cooperate with these people, you can’t call yourself a first-rate adventurer.”

Yafi had a point. Some quests required multiple parties to work together. Solo adventurers who were masters of a certain location would need to temporarily party up.

“Also, I would like to get at least one decent meal out of this ordeal.”

And there was the real reason! Still, I wasn’t going to do anything that day. Carving aside, the food would definitely end up delicious if I had any input on its preparation. I wanted Fran to give it her best shot on her own steam.

“Let’s do our best, Fran.”

“Hm. Of course.”

“These are our teammates.”

“I-I’m Rels. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Marchess.”

“Osleth. Good to see you.”

Rels was tall, gaunt, and lanky. A magus who was in Mage class and not Special Combat.

Macho Marchess looked very stern. The opposite of Rels, he was a tank. He looked like such a musclehead that I couldn't believe he could use magic. Maybe he dressed this way on purpose, to catch enemies by surprise.

Finally, the nice guy waving his hand at Fran was Osleth. A bit older than everyone else, he was in his early twenties. The Magic Academy didn't have an age limit, so you had these age gaps from time to time. I wondered which age group actually progressed through the ranks faster.

This was Carona's cooking group. I wondered if they were also her adventuring party—the one we'd seen in the guild—but that wasn't the case.

"We are not allowed to form our own parties when taking on guild quests," she explained. "The odds of forming a party with your old classmates after graduation are pretty slim, after all."

You could lose out on adaptability if you kept teaming up with the people you were used to. To prevent that from happening, Special Combat students rotated their parties on each quest.

"I know you have Disassemble, Fran, but how are you with cooking?"

"Hm... okay, I guess? Nothing compared to Teacher, though."

"Your teacher? What kind of person is he?"

"Teacher is the strongest. He can do anything."

"I-I see. But he must be quite something if he made you who you are today."

If Fran was crazy, Carona must've been thinking her teacher had to be crazier. Hey, powers aside, I'm much more reasonable than Fran is! I'm not the crazy one in this relationship!

"So, how shall we do this? We don't mind following orders."

"All right."

To think that Carona would let Fran take the reins despite not knowing how she cooked... she was quite the gambler. Then again, maybe letting the highest-rank adventurer be in charge was common practice. Her friends didn't seem to have any objections, either. If anything, they happily agreed, Osleth in particular.

"Boy, am I glad to have you," said Osleth. "No one on our team can cook, you see."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. I can cook a little bit, but everyone else is terrible at it. Unsurprising, considering they're nobility and all."

Our other teammates were children of minor nobles. None of them were completely destitute, so they each had a servant or two. Though they had been working hard since joining the Academy, cooking was not their strong suit.

Meanwhile, Osleth was the son of a military captain—a commoner. He had been helping his mother in the kitchen from a young age and had no problems cooking.

"Not that I'm great at it, but I'm at least better than these three are. I have the Skill unlocked, too."

It was decided that Fran would be team captain and Osleth her lieutenant. The other three would help where they could.

"Do we have seasonings?"

"Yes. Each team has their own supply."

"Lay it all out. And the cooking utensils, too."

"Very well."

Yafi said we were free to use whatever seasoning we wanted, but Fran wanted to make the best of what the team already had.

"What about us?" asked one of the nobles.

"First, we'll secure our main ingredient. We have to get the best one."

"But they're all similar sizes of the same monster. Can it really make that much of a difference?"

"There's a clear difference in freshness. Some have been left out for longer."

"How do you tell?" asked Carona.

"The smell, fur, cloudiness of the eyes. Tongue color, too."

"I see."

Fran took Carona and the others to pick the best of the skunk raccoons. After inspecting them, they found a young carcass that was relatively fresh and soft. It didn't smell as bad as the others, either.

The other teams chose the bigger, less smelly raccoons. The problem with the bigger ones was that the older a raccoon got, the tougher and stinkier its meat became. The few corpses that *didn't* stink were actually traps laid by the school—those raccoons had been cleaned with their own poison gas, which got rid of the smell, but the poison seeped through to the meat and made it taste horrible. The poor souls.

Before Fran started prepping the skunk raccoon, she first considered the team's available seasonings and the dish they would make.

"Fran, are you sure we don't need to start carving up the raccoon?"

"Yeah, the other teams have already started on theirs..."

Fran shook her head. "Don't worry. A monster this size won't take long to carve."

"Good to hear."

"We're in good hands."

Carving up the skunk raccoon would only take three minutes if Fran gave it her all, but the same could not be said for the other teams. They were having an awful time of it. With no understanding of the monster's anatomy, their work was slow and clumsy. Prepping the whole thing would probably take them thirty minutes.

Then again, I guess we owed our superhuman carving speed to the blessing of

Disassemble. The students were actually doing better than I had when I first came to this world. I felt nostalgic for all the spilled blood and guts when I'd first started trying to harvest materials.

"Is this all the seasoning we have?"

"Huh? Yes..."

"Hrm." Fran grunted doubtfully at the sight of Carona's inventory. It wasn't a sound she made very often.

Not that I blamed her. The only seasonings on the table were rock salt, peppers, and two kinds of herbs, along with a seasoning oil containing diced mushrooms and salt. This was all the group had.

The seasoning looked amateur, and the aromatic herbs weren't very aromatic (or tasty). These had all been picked in the nearby fields and turned into seasonings in previous classes.

"You're not allowed to buy anything for class?" asked Fran.

"We can, but we don't know anything about spices."

Everything they had cooked so far tasted fine as long as it was tossed with herbs, seasoned, and properly cooked. But this approach wouldn't work for the skunk raccoon. The meat would be burnt to a crisp before you could get rid of the smell.

"Okay. We'll figure out the seasonings."

It looked like Fran would have to resort to using her own.

"Do you have something that would work?" asked Carona.

"A lot of things, actually."

"Right. You have Pocket Dimension, after all."

With that, Fran and her team started carving up the raccoon.

Although she could have sliced and diced the whole thing instantly by herself, Fran

took the time to explain her methodology to her team as she worked. This was a place of learning, after all, and Fran knew she couldn't do everything by herself. But as they were in the middle of carving, a cry broke out from one of the other teams. Everyone started covering their noses.

"Hurgh!"

"What is this smell...?!"

"It stinks, it stinks, it stinks!"

"Aaaaah!"

That team had accidentally damaged the raccoon's venom sac. While not lethal, the poison stank to high heaven.

You'd think that this was the cause of the skunk's stinky flesh, but not so. The skunk raccoon had chemical compounds in its blood which made it immune to its own poison. Those compounds produced the antiseptic smell in the raccoon's flesh.

The poison, on the other hand, had a sulfuric smell. It spread everywhere when the venom sac was punctured and acted like tear gas.

Our team wasn't looking so hot, either. The three boys aside, Carona's expression was unbecoming for a girl of her stature.

Even Fran's face twisted when she got a whiff of the gas. But she quickly blew the smell away with a wind spell and put up a barrier around them to keep it out.

"Y-you saved us."

"Th-thanks..."

"Talk about a stink that can raise the dead..."

"Man, everyone looks terrible."

A riot was breaking out around us, but Fran wasn't one to care. Now that the smell around them was gone, she resumed her carving lecture.

“First, you stick the knife in here.”

“Huh? Oh, right.” Carona and the others remembered that they were trailing behind the other teams and focused on Fran’s lesson. It helped that the screaming of their classmates was blocked out now.

Undistracted by the chaos outside, Fran’s team finished carving the carcass in about ten minutes. They didn’t do anything silly like puncture the venom sacs, either.

“It’s amazing how you carved that.”

“I-it’s so clean.”

“Anyone can do it once you know how. Also, what do we do with this?”

“Perfectly salvaged crystals must be submitted to the teacher.”

The teachers would take the crystals to the Adventurers’ Guild as payment for the lessons. The carcasses were provided by the guild, after all.

“We’ve prepared the meat, but how do we cook it?”

“It s-smells kind of w-weird...”

“Color’s bad, too.”

“And it’s all... fibrous. How’s this gonna taste?”

The team looked apprehensive about the meat in front of them.

Fran nodded in agreement. “Hm. It stinks and it’s bad. Grilling isn’t gonna work.”

“Oof... what do we do with it then?”

“Whatever we can. For starters, we’ll use this.” Fran took out an assortment of curry powders I had blended. There were several varieties, each made to suit the ingredient and cooking method with matching aroma and spiciness.

When in doubt, use curry. I remembered hearing something about how special forces operators always had curry powder on their person. No matter how bad the

ingredient, sprinkling curry powder on top would make it better.

“What’s this?”

“Curry powder Teacher made. It’ll make any ingredient taste amazing. It’s the pinnacle of cooking.”

“I see. So the name of the dish is ‘curry?’”

“Hm. It is the ultimate dish.”

“Sounds amazing. It’s got a unique aroma. Is it a blend of different spices?”

Osleth was the only one who tasted the curry powder. To those uninterested in cooking, it was just another exotic spice blend.

“Wait,” said Carona. “Curry, you say? Isn’t that the new dish taking Granzell by storm?”

“Teacher made it.”

“Are you telling us that your teacher is also the Master of Curry? I heard that he is actually a master chef... but did he not also teach you adventuring?”

“Teacher is perfect,” said Fran, looking very proud. “He teaches me everything—cooking, combat, magic. Absolutely everything.”

“Goodness, is that so? Is he a renowned adventurer?”

“He’s not an adventurer. Teacher is Teacher.”

“I see...”

As we were talking, Osleth finished his assessment of the curry.

“I can’t quite figure out how to use this thing. Do we just use it as a dry rub?”

“That can work, but we’ll do something else today.”

Fran decided on their dish, but their method of cooking was different compared to the other groups. While the others cooked their meat in a frying pan over a campfire, Fran

made a stove out of earth magic.

She took her dwarven-made knife and pan out of her Pocket Dimension. First-rate stuff—in price and performance, they were the equivalent of Earth's specialty showcase products. The spices and milk she used for preparing and deodorizing the meat were also first class.

Fran also used fire, wind, and water magicks to create a pseudo-pressure cooker to tenderize the meat till it'd melt in your mouth. The pressure cooker looked simple, but adjusting the heat and maintaining pressure took fine work. No one here could tell, of course, but if a master mage saw it, they might think it was a waste of mana and effort.

They carried on cooking, with Fran giving orders.

To think that Fran would actually cooperate in the kitchen...! Before, she would've done everything by herself. I was so touched by her growth that I felt like crying. If only I had eyes!

Fran's team finished their cooking and submitted it to Yafi. She looked impressed with the array of food they had cooked up.

"Well, well, well. Not a whiff of raccoon musk on this one! Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you didn't use skunk racoon meat at all!"

The porcelain serving ware they'd served up their dishes on made it look like it had been prepared in a real kitchen, not outdoors. The other teams were equally surprised.

"What did they make?"

"Beats me..."

"It looks good, though. And they made it so quick..."

But the cooking wasn't the only thing that impressed the students.

"Did you see how fast she carved up that thing? It was unreal!"

"I eavesdropped on her advice. It was super useful."

"That's a pro adventurer for you..."

"And she totally cooked it all with magic."

"Man, I hope I can be as good as her someday..."

The gulf between their abilities was clear, even when it came to field cooking. Exhausted, the students looked at Fran enviously. Their fatigue was both physical and mental, after all that stink. About half the teams had damaged the venom sac of their skunk raccoon while carving it. Having to smell a stink strong enough to knock you out wears on you after a while.

"This looks delicious." The tone of Yafi's voice said it all: nothing had been good so far. The dishes had all been variations of salt-grilled skunk raccoon smothered in herbs and the occasional salty skunk raccoon soup. What's more, half of them were tainted with punctured venom sacs, making the flavor a moot point.

And yet Yafi ate them all for the sake of grading her students. Even Fran was looking at her with some respect.

The only dish that looked halfway decent was made by a team that usually did well in Cooking. The cook was a handsome, dark-skinned young man with platinum blonde hair who had come from another continent.

Azalea, the desert kingdom, was well-known for using a variety of spices in its cooking. This time, the young man had made Azalea soup and tortillas filled with grilled meat. It looked a bit like curry soup, but upon closer inspection, it was more of a spicy stew. The filling of the tortilla was thinly sliced meat reminiscent of a kebab.

Both used spices and coconut milk to cut the smell, but it wasn't perfect, since they hadn't properly bled the meat when butchering the carcass. Yafi merely called it "Acceptable."

Now it was Fran's turn to step up to the plate.

"Here goes."

"Hm."

"Did you tenderize the meat before mincing it? And is this cheese on top?"

"I took as much fat from the rib as I could, tenderized it until it was really thin, then

added some special spices before grilling it.”

Basically, she’d made a Salisbury steak with curry powder and then melted some cheese on top of it.

“And how does it taste—” Yafi cut the patty with a fork and slowly put it in her mouth. After a few chews, her eyes widened. “Delicious! I’d pay to eat this! Such a complex flavor... spicier than Azalean cooking, but... I can’t stop eating it!”

Yafi launched into an unexpectedly detailed analysis. I’d thought she was just a former adventurer who got stuck teaching the kids outdoor cooking, but she actually knew her culinary stuff.

“Is this jerky?” asked Yafi. “You made it in such a short time.”

“It was made with magic.”

“You sure are handy with it. Your use of marinades and spices really brings out the meat’s unique flavor. It would be perfect with a beer.”

“I made a pâté out of it, too. You slather it in this crêpe and eat it.”

“Another strange dish. And—goodness, it’s also delicious. I can’t believe it.”

Fran managed to mask the odor by turning it into paste and using spices, which was the benefit of maxing out your Cooking. She picked dishes that I had made in the past and reproduced them here.

“And lastly we have this strange soup... it *is* soup, isn’t it? It’s rather gloopy.”

“This is curry, the greatest dish in the world.”

“S-sounds intimidating. Let’s have a bite, then...”

Fran’s final dish was curry with a ton of fillings. She didn’t have rice, so she just replaced it with more soup. The spicy red curry was cooked in the pseudo-pressure cooker until the meat and vegetables inside it were tender.

Yafi took another bite, and her eyes went still wider with surprise. “Such complex flavor! It’s spicy, but I could keep eating it until it was all gone...”

She had only eaten a few bites so far, saying she wouldn't be able to grade on a full stomach, but Yafi was clearly hooked. Fran's team definitely scored well.

"L-let's have some, too." Carona and the others had resisted eating Fran's cooking until Yafi graded it. They'd allowed themselves one single bite each after they'd finished cooking.

"Hm."

"F-finally."

"It looks great."

"Let's eat!"

"Woof, woof!"

Jet emerged from the shadows to get his portion, but he looked like he was playing his excitement up a bit, probably because he didn't want to hurt Fran's feelings. Try as he might, he was betrayed by the way his tail wagged. Fran wasn't upset with him, though; she didn't look like she was enjoying the food, either. To a curry lover like Fran, the results were unacceptable.

Still, her teammates thought it was great. Fran might not have felt it was good compared to my cooking, but it was really far above your average meal.

Meanwhile, the rest of her classmates were eyeing us with envy. In this class, you were required to eat everything you made, and the other teams were having to force their awful food down their throats.

The Azalean hunk was the first to speak up. "H-hey... do you mind if we have a bite of your leftovers?" Being a good cook himself, he was interested in this new dish.

"Sure."

"Really?! Thanks!"

At once, everyone raised their hands.

"What? Then I want some, too!"

“And me! Don’t forget me!”

There wasn’t going to be enough to go around. To those poor souls who lost the rock paper scissors battle... better luck next time!

At the end of the trying Cooking class, Fran’s team got a high score. They’d made the most and the best out of what they had.

After Cooking, Fran went to the cafeteria for lunch, as did Carona and the others. The meal they’d had at Cooking class wasn’t going to be enough for athletic students like them. As for the other students, they needed to wash the stink out of their mouths.

As everyone happily ate their school lunches, Fran took out her own meal.

The Academy allowed students to bring their own food if they wanted to. Students who didn’t live in the dorms usually brought food in from outside. Fran’s meal was, of course, curry. She wasn’t satisfied with the skunk raccoon curry they’d made earlier. Still, to think that she would wash the taste of curry out with more curry...

Is it, uh, good?

“Hm. Now this is the stuff.”

“Woof!”

Fran nodded to herself as she scooped more curry into her mouth. Jet was in full puppy mode, making a mess of curry around his muzzle.

Carona watched them with great interest. “That’s the same curry we cooked in Cooking class, right?”

“Hm? It is, but it’s different.”

“So... it’s not curry?”

“It’s curry, but nothing like the one we made. This is the real deal. That last one was terrible.”

“Really? But it was delicious.”

“Hm. Try some of this.”

“Oh? Th-thank you. If you’ll excuse me...” Carona reservedly brought her mouth to the spoon Fran had stuck out. “D-delicious! You’re right, this is nothing like the one from earlier!”

The day was full of surprises for Carona. The curry Fran made in Cooking class might’ve been tasty, but the ingredients weren’t great and it didn’t pair well with curry powder. Compared to that, the one Fran was eating was made with the finest ingredients and no compromises. It truly was the ultimate curry.

Fran looked very proud when she saw how impressed Carona was. “Heh heh.”

“Did your teacher make this?”

“Hm!”

“Are you sure he’s an adventurer? Maybe he used to be a chef.”

Fran was very pleased by all the praise for curry, that greatest of dishes. She took another plate of curry from Pocket Dimension and set it before Carona.

“M-may I? Really?”

“Hm.”

“Thank you so much!”

Carona smiled and thanked her, her eyes shining with gratitude. Although she’d finished her cafeteria meal, there was room for more.

“Let’s eat.” She used her cutlery with a noble’s grace—but she was a very *enthusiastic* noble. Her spoon moved without pause, scooping up curry off the plate.

“I-is it really that good?” asked Osleth. “Do you mind if we have a taste?”

Coming from Cooking class together, we were sitting at the same table as Osleth and the boys. They couldn’t hold back their hunger after seeing Carona’s enthusiasm, and Osleth finally asked if they could try some.

Fran was usually stingy about sharing curry, but friendship had sprouted between them after their short time in cooking class. She readily gave everyone a portion, complete with pickles on top.

“This is great!”

“Super tasty!”

“Nom nom!”

But if she was liberally giving the boys curry—

“Gulp...”

“Slurp...”

Despite eating their fill, the classmates from Cooking in the cafeteria were starting to look like a pack of ravenous animals. They glared at Fran’s table with murder in their eyes. Having eaten far worse fare than Carona and her group, they longed for delicious food.

In fact, the aroma of the curry had attracted the attention of the whole cafeteria, not just her classmates.

“Hrm...”

“Ruff.”

Although Fran and Jet could laugh while surrounded by monsters, they were really feeling the intensity of the starving students.

“I guess... you can have this.”

Fran, no—

“Uooooooh!”

As soon as Fran took out a pot from Pocket Dimension, the students let out an earth-shaking roar. It might as well have been a war cry.

Th-they're gonna riot!

Fran didn't even have enough time to hand the curry out. We were on the verge of a curry-induced riot! I was ready to put the pot away, but Osleth, Marchess, and Rels organized the crowd into a line and served them their curry.

"This was kind of our fault, anyway. We'll handle it."

"He's right."

"Wh-who knows what might happen if we let them be?"

The Special Combat class aside, other students fell in line. Curry provisions proceeded to be handed out in an orderly fashion.

"It's hundreds of times better than cafeteria food!"

"Hundreds? Not even close!"

"You're right! It's thousands of times better!"

Fran looked sadly at the empty pot of curry as praise erupted all around her. The kids loved it. However, there was someone in the cafeteria who wasn't so pleased at the turn of events, and it wasn't Fran or her group.

"Scuse me, beastgirl. Mind if we have a chat?"

"Hm?"

"Mind telling me what you're doing without my permission?" The man sounded like a common street thug. Above his bulging eyes and throbbing veins sat a white chef's hat. "The name's Noritz and I do the cooking here. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Uh-oh. He looks pissed.

Head chef Noritz looked like he was ready to throw down, but it turned out that he was genuinely curious about curry. He'd sounded mad, but all he really wanted was a taste of Fran's curry. It isn't cute when a middle-aged man tries to be roundabout.

As much as he wanted to eat the curry, he was still upset by the sudden ruckus and

hurt by what the students had said. Still, the unique aroma had drawn his attention to the new cuisine.

All these conflicting emotions had forced him to be roundabout.

"Ahh. It's delicious! And you're using a ton of spices, of course!" Noritz analyzed the curry Fran gave him as he ate it. "Yeah, there's no beating the original. You're two to three steps ahead of the commercially available recipes."

"You know about curry?"

"Of course. I bought my recipe from the Lucille Trade Association. It caught my attention since it was developed by a silver-rank chef instead of gold."

Noritz was also a member of the Chefs' Guild. While not a large organization, most chefs from large restaurants were members. He had bought the curry recipe upon learning that it was developed by a silver guild member.

"I was shocked. But the cost of making it according to the recipe..."

Noritz's number one focus when making a meal was nutritional balance followed by volume. Flavor came last. He wasn't trying to make bad food, but he had to work within the constraints of his budget.

He might have managed something if he were only making curry for a single household, but he literally had thousands of mouths to feed. Whatever adjustments and compromises he made, however small, would compound rapidly.

"How much did it cost to make this, by the way?"

"It was—"

Noritz held his head in his hand when Fran told him of the cost and all the ingredients that went into it. Monster bone broth, liberal amounts of monster meat, magical plants, and that wasn't even half of it. They weren't items that would fit the budget of a school cafeteria.

Noritz had tried to make his own cheap and cheerful curry, but he just couldn't get it right. Cutting back on expensive spices changed the flavor so much that it tasted like mildly spicy soup.

Spices were expensive in Belioth—or rather, they were much cheaper in Bulbola. Using the prescribed amount of them would hike up the cost pretty fast.

Fran sympathized with Noritz as she watched him fret. After all, he really just wanted to feed the students delicious food.

“Can’t we help him, Teacher?”

Hmm...

Noritz’s problem was that he was trying to reproduce the recipe he’d gotten from Bulbola. He was fixated on it being the only version of curry.

“I have an idea,” said Fran.

“What? You mean you’ll help me out?”

“Hm.”

“Hey, thanks! So what do we do?”

“Lend me your kitchen.”

“All yours!”

Did you think of something, Fran?

We’ll see the spices they have so you can make something delicious out of them!

She’s throwing it on me?!

Hang on, I don’t know what seasonings they have—

Don’t worry! I know you can do it, Teacher!

I felt the full weight of Fran’s trust. Well, I wasn’t going to let her down!

After checking the pantry for ingredients, I began guiding her as she cooked. It wasn’t the smoothest process, but I thought it turned out pretty good. Fran and Jet had first dibs, and it was very well received.

Then came time for Noritz. "This... is curry, but it isn't. It's cheap, but still tasty."

"That's mapo curry rice," said Fran.

"Mapo? Funny name."

"It's a little different from curry but it's good."

We made mapo curry that used fewer imported spices and more pepper. Peppers were actually pretty cheap in this country, since they grew everywhere.

Noritz hadn't thought to use it as a substitute ingredient in curry. It just never crossed his mind. He didn't think that a lot of cheap pepper could replace exotic spices. Besides, they smelled different.

I honed in on locally available peppers and sauces, adjusting the sugar and seasonings to make a mapo style curry. It had a different kind of spiciness from regular curry, a sort of ethnic flair. The students would love the novelty of it.

"If you change the seasoning and consistency, you can put it in steamed bread or stuff it in a roll."

"I see! And you can put whatever filling you want in it! Now this is a revelation!"

We then taught him curry fried rice as well as how to incorporate curry into his pre-existing menu. With Noritz's skill, he'd be able to make the cafeteria even better.

"Thanks. I'll show those punks what cafeteria food is made of. Now, about your compensation..."

"Hm? I don't need any."

Fran had only wanted to make it up to him for the commotion she caused. Besides, it was also good for the students. And if she asked for payment, all the belt-cinching and budget-pinching Noritz had been doing would be for naught.

When she told him that, Noritz cried that he would pay for it out of his *own* wallet.

At the end of a heated negotiation, it was decided that the Academy would draft an introduction letter to a trade association they were in touch with for Fran. Good

timing, since we needed a lot of pepper down the road.

We finished our business at the cafeteria and left. That was when we ran right into an unpleasant encounter.

“Wha...!”

It was a boy with brown hair, three or four years old. He was smiling as he ran into the cafeteria, excited for his food, but he stopped when he saw Fran.

“Oh...”

They stared at each other. His smile faded and turned into a glare. His eyes brimmed with rage and a hint of fear. His gaze... seemed familiar.

They kept staring one another down until a woman accompanying the boy touched his shoulder. “Come on, Romeo. You’re blocking the way.”

“S-sorry.”

“We’ll go inside and get you some food, okay?”

“Okay.”

The woman (probably his caretaker) bowed an apology to us. The boy, Romeo, continued glaring at Fran.

So that's Romeo.

“Hm...”

Look, don't worry about it, Fran.

Those eyes... I've seen them somewhere.

Whose, Romeo's?

“Hm.”

Apparently, Fran wasn’t bothered by Romeo glaring at her.

Do you remember where?

“Hm...”

This was our first meeting with Romeo. Had Fran mistaken his fear and hatred for the emotions of someone she'd fought in the past?

“But where...?”

A few days had passed since Fran came to the Academy.

Although Fran was still feared as an instructor, the students were getting used to her as a fellow learner. They exchanged greetings when they saw her, maybe slipping in a request that she take it easy on them if she was teaching dueling class that day. They ate the new and improved lunch menu together and assisted each other during classes.

As for Fran, she seemed to be enjoying the student life. She didn't just nap through classes, either. She was fully attentive during classes involving spirits and magic, though she still dozed through the classes that didn't interest her.

Look, I tried my best to wake her up at first. But when she started using Skills to block me out, I ended up letting her be. The last thing I wanted was for Fran to hate school because I wouldn't stop hovering over her.

It wasn't just boring classes leaving her dissatisfied, though.

You know you can't go all out, Fran. This is a school, after all.

“Hm...”

“Woof...”

Fran and Jet were getting frustrated over not being able to use the full extent of their powers.

There's going to be an excursion for Survival class soon. You might be able to beat up some monsters.

“Really?”

No promises. If nothing else, you'll be able to spar with Jet outside of town.

“Ooh, I see.”

“Bark, bark!”

So make sure to hold back during the next dueling class.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

It was actually a custom for the Special Combat class (along with some other classes) to go on an excursion this time of year. The destination was the ridges of Lake Vivian. There, students would be able to practice aquatic combat.

For those from Belioth, it was a good opportunity to visit a local landmark. For those from the outside, it was a rare opportunity to train in a unique environment.

Fran would be the chaperoning instructor.

Looking forward to it.

You'll be working as a bodyguard, too.

The adventurers of Lake Vivian would also be on payroll, though the students themselves were pretty sturdy. They wouldn't be in any immediate danger, surely. We'd take a carriage there. Three days to get there, three days to stay, three days to get back.

And once that ends, so will your job as instructor.

“Hm...” Fran looked slightly glum at that. Academy life wasn't just drudgery; it had its fun moments. As much as she wanted to get it over with, part of her was going to miss it.

Fran?

"Yeah?"

If you want, you could work full time at the Academy. Make it official. You can just enroll as a student, too.

This was Fran's first experience with school, her first time interacting with lots of people her age. If Fran found a place for herself here, staying was an option.

But Fran shook her head. "I'm... good."

Are you sure?

"Hm. It's fun here, but being an adventurer is more fun. Besides, I can't get stronger if I stay here."

You can get smarter. It's a bit roundabout, but it's just as valid a way to get stronger.

"Even so... I thought about it when we were talking about evolution."

The lecture?

"Hm. After hearing what Holial said, I thought it'd be really nice if everyone could evolve."

By "everyone," she meant all the other Black Cats. Fran was still fighting for the sake of her tribe, fighting to lift their curse. Hearing Holial's lecture had renewed her resolve.

I'm guessing you're ready for whatever comes.

"Of course."

The path to lifting the curse would not be straight and narrow, but wild and paved with thorns. The Black Cat tribe would need to defeat an S-Threat or greater Fiend on their own. This was the requirement.

So far, no Black Cat had been strong enough to help with the cause. The Black Cats of the Beastman Nation would have started training by now—they were probably out hunting Fiends this very moment. But it would take time for that training to bear fruit. What's more, an S-Threat Fiend wasn't something you could simply defeat by power

leveling. You needed to be strong in every sense of the word, with experience coursing through your blood and training stamped into your very flesh. How long would it take for the tribe to get there?

Fran would either have to go at it alone or look for help from the weakest of the beast tribes. Then again, there had been outliers like Kiara. She'd become powerful through an Extra Skill called War God's Favor. Perhaps more Black Cats with her power level would begin to appear.

Regardless, we couldn't rely on a bunch of *mights* and *could-be* saviors.

"I have to get stronger. Much stronger."

Can't argue with you there.

Either alone or with others, Fran would have to get even stronger than she already was.

Anyway, let's go shopping today. We need to stock up on peppers, too.

"Hm." Fran gathered herself and got ready to leave the school. Adults dressed in ostentatious formal attire passed by, neither students nor instructors.

The mood of the Magic Academy was a bit different that day, and we had the entrance ceremony to thank for that... not that it was all that big of a deal there. After all, new students enrolled in the Academy once every four months, so they didn't feel the need for much fanfare. Only the students and a few teachers participated. Even Winalene wasn't in attendance. Mundane stuff.

Fran was told that she didn't need to attend, either. She could have if she had wanted to, but of course, she declined. Fran was the type to fall asleep during her own entrance ceremony, so I can only imagine what would happen if she attended someone else's. No need to throw a wet rag on some freshmen's first day.

The ceremony had ended and the teachers were now leading the new students on a tour of the Academy. The excited chatter of freshmen brightened the campus air.

Freshmen are always so optimistic, no matter what world it is.

They're like this in your world, too, Teacher?

Pretty much. The only difference is the crazy age gap.

The age demographics were all over the place. Ten years old at the youngest, over twenty for the oldest. Most of them were around Fran's age, ranging from twelve to fourteen.

It was the kind of age gap you would see in a part-time school, the only difference being that the kids and adults shared the same classroom. It was like if grade-schoolers were classmates with university students. This wasn't a strange arrangement in this world, however. The adults weren't embarrassed and the kids didn't think it was weird. That being said, they still congregated with their own age group, just like on Earth.

The eyes of the freshmen gleamed with wonder as they took in all the marvels of the Magic Academy.

As we watched them pass, one of them called out to us. "Fran?"

"Hm?"

"I knew it was you!"

Fran turned around and gave the person a rare look of surprise. "Carna? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question." Carna, the girl we'd encountered while crossing the Granzell border, stood before us in an Academy uniform. Apparently, she was a freshman too. "Did you not attend the entrance ceremony?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"I didn't see you inside. But you must have enrolled—you're here, after all."

"Hm. I did." Even if Fran's enrollment would be a temporary affair. "They said I didn't need to attend."

"Is that so?"

"Hm."

"Either way, I'm glad to see you again. I thought you had a sudden change of heart since I didn't see you at the ceremony. That was the only explanation, I thought—your abilities are, of course, more than enough to get you in."

Fran and Carna weren't on the same wavelength. Mainly because Carna thought Fran was a freshman like her.

We'd only told Carna that the Magic Academy was our destination. Considering that they were the same age, her misunderstanding was understandable.

"I look forward to studying with you," said Carna.

That figured. But then—

"Oh...? But your uniform is quite different from mine."

"This is the Special Combat class uniform."

"Special Combat?" Carna repeated. "Is that not one of the Advanced Classes...?"

"Hm."

"Are you not starting with Fundamentals? Even if you skip that, there is still Basics to go through before you get to Practical..."

Carna finally realized Fran's strange circumstances.

We explained a bit, and she finally understood that Fran wasn't a freshman.

"I see. I didn't think that you would be an instructor here, although your abilities more than qualify you for the role."

"This entire time, you wanted to come to the Magic Academy?"

"Huh? Well, yes..." Carna had kept her destination a secret because she didn't know whether she would be accepted by the Academy. Rejection was always a possibility. "I have my, ah, circumstances..."

Hmm. Circumstances that could have gotten her rejected by the Academy. Circumstances she wouldn't tell us even if we asked.

But Fran wasn't interested in that. "Where'd the other two go?"

"You mean Dianne and Shera?"

"Hm. Those two."

As ever, Fran didn't bother remembering the names of Carna's servants.

"Shera is looking for a job in the city. Once I graduate, we will return home together."

It would take years before Carna graduated. Shera would be paying quite a bit for accommodations in that time, so she was looking for a job in Ladyblue to cover some of the costs.

"What about the knight?"

"I don't know about Dianne. Her task was to get me safely to this place. But she said she would also be staying in Ladyblue for the time being."

"I see."

"I know she's a knight errant, but she hasn't decided on where to go yet. I don't know whether she's gone off today, either. Apparently, she couldn't come to the ceremony because she had an appointment."

Either way, I was glad she wasn't around.

"Oh, I must be going now," said Carna. We could hear the teacher calling for her. "I apologize for taking your time." She started to hurry back to the group, then stopped. "Um...!"

"Hm?"

Carna paused for a moment, a thoughtful look on her face. "We'll see each other again, won't we?"

"Hm. See you around."

"Yes! See you again!" Carna smiled with relief when Fran nodded and waved at her. She must've figured that she was bothering her since Fran hadn't smiled once during

the conversation. But Fran was just as happy to meet Carna again as vice versa.

Looks like you got another friend.

“Hm.”

Hopefully it would ease Fran’s mood. She’d been acting more irritable lately, sometimes even getting aggressive for no reason. She went overboard during one of her dueling classes till a student cried, pulverized some out-of-town adventurers who picked a fight with her... some real random acts of violence. She must have had a lot of pent-up frustration at that point. Hopefully she could vent more outside of school hours.

You don’t have classes today, so how about we go to town and get some good food?

“Hm.”

“Woof, woof!”

I was really grateful for Jet at times like this. His barking said, “Good food? Awesome!” and his levity was infectious. I could feel Fran’s steps getting lighter.

By the time she was in town, she was set on walking and eating.

“We’ll check out the west side today!”

“Bark!”

We had yet to set foot in the western quarters in Ladyblue.

Girl and wolf happily walked the unknown roads of Ladyblue. Getting lost was a given in this town, and they made the best of it every time. In fact, they got lost at every opportunity, taking every unfamiliar alleyway.

They knew from experience that delicious food waited at the end of these strange paths, even if finding their way back was difficult. As they enjoyed the fruits of their latest expedition—freshly baked waffles—they suddenly came to a halt.

“Weird mana signature.”

“Grr!”

A gigantic and aggressive mana signature had spiked up in the distance. We looked up and spotted a fountain of reddish-black mana bursting into the sky. From here, we couldn't get a clear picture of where or what it was.

Fran Air Hopped to the rooftops to get a better view. We could hear shouting from afar now, and it did *not* sound like a good time.

“Let's go!” shouted Fran.

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet chased after the mysterious mana. It was going to be dangerous, but there was no stopping them. Their eyes blazed, dead set on venting their frustrations on whatever was causing trouble.

They ran over the rooftops together, scaring the living daylights out of residents poking their heads out their windows to see what the commotion was about. Eventually, Fran reached the site of the anomaly: a small square in Ladyblue that was packed with people.

Fran looked confused as she gazed down at the square from twenty meters overhead.

“What is that thing...?”

“Woof.”

I felt the same way.

People cleared the square, unveiling three monsters standing in the center, all bipedal humanoids... and not the kind that could blend into a crowd. They had animal heads with muscular bodies, and stood three meters tall. They were also covered with fur. How could such monstrous beasts have snuck into the city?

The one standing closest to us was a man-bird covered with black feathers. Its head was that of a rooster, its arms were transformed into wings, and its legs and feet had been reshaped into talons. The only thing human about the chicken man was its muscular body.

There was a race of birdmen in this world—a type of beastman that could acquire avian features when they awakened—but this man-bird was clearly a monster. I could even sense a crystal within its body.

To the right of the man-bird was a man-bull of similar size, bipedal and covered in red fur. Crowning its head were a pair of one-meter horns. Though it was similar to a Fiend called the minotaur, a minotaur had human limbs. This creature had hooves for hands and feet, and lacked the Malice of a Fiend.

Behind them stood a monster more foreboding than the rest. Unlike the others, this one wasn't covered in fur or feathers. Its skin was smooth, and it looked like a statue of a woman clad in armor. Although this knight moved slowly, its mana far surpassed the others.

At first, I thought it was a golem monster in the same vein as a Gray Golem, but its appearance and internals were not the same. Similar, maybe, but this thing was clearly superior. Where on earth had it come from?

“Huh...?”

Fran?

Fran also thought something was wrong with the golem. Unlike me, she focused on the creature's face. “I think... I've seen that face before...”

Huh?

I looked at the golem's face again. The face of a woman without defining features... and yet it did seem familiar. But how? Was I just seeing things? The face on the golem was feminine, but its features were so scrambled that it could've belonged to anyone.

Now wasn't the time to worry about that.

“Let's go save him!”

Next to the monsters was a man who'd failed to get away in time. He stood still, face twisted with fear. Anyone would be frozen stiff if monsters suddenly started showing up in a city center. But there was something odd about him, too.

Fran, wait! Something's not right!

The man's fear wasn't just directed toward the monsters. I perked up my ears to hear his mutterings.

"Why is this happening...? I don't wanna be a monster... but I have to or he'll think I'm a traitor... aaah, no! Why is this happening?!"

Traitor?

The man cursed someone under his breath. With a final vengeful scream, he thrust his hand into his gut.

Mana slowly gathered around his palm, initiating a change within the man. A crystal broke through his stomach, peeking its face out into the world. The man pulled his hand out of his belly to reveal his prize: the bloodied crystal.

"Gaaaaah!" With a painful cry, a torrent of mana surged out of the crystal. Reddish-black, just like the one we'd seen when we sensed the anomaly.

The ominous mana twisted the man's body, breaking and snapping bones into place as he expanded in size. His clothes and adornments ripped away from him.

Ten seconds. In a mere ten seconds, a new monster was born.

"Shhhqueak!" The man-rat shivered as steam rose from its body.

"He turned into a monster!"

"B-bark!"

Did the other monsters go through the same thing? Were there others like them in the city? Maybe this situation was worse than I'd expected...

Identify...?

I thought of getting whatever information I could, but no dice. The results of Identify were scrambled. No name, no stats. But I'd seen this happen before, when I Identified Fanatix in the capital. Were they remnants of the Fanatix replicas? They looked like monsters, though, and they didn't repulse me the way the replicas had.

These other monsters were similarly scrambled. Man-bird, man-bull, golem. I couldn't

get a read on any of them.

"What should we do, Teacher?"

Hmm...

What now? Attack? Fighting there would cause a ton of collateral damage if we weren't careful. Lead them somewhere deserted? I doubted the monsters would give us that luxury.

"SQUAWK!"

"Eeeek!"

The man-bird had locked onto an escaping civilian. It snapped its head toward him and lunged, strands of slobber dripping from its open beak. Its eyes were filled with the instinct to slaughter. It might have been human once, but it had lost all its reason.

"Look out!"

"SQUAWK!"

Fran jumped and fell between the man-bird and its prey.

"BAWK!"

"Tsch!" Fran deflected the man-bird's kick with me. The kick was so pointed and impressive as to be beautiful. Apparently, the man-bird had Kick Mastery. It flapped its wings to regain its balance and attacked again. The combination of the monster's abilities and martial arts was horrifying.

Fran grabbed the fallen man's collar and pulled him up by the neck, circulation be damned.

The kick hit a tree behind her, tearing into its trunk and roots. Very sharp indeed, but that wasn't all: the area surrounding the talon began to blacken, turning into stone.

Careful, Fran! This thing's no ordinary chicken man!

"Hm." For some reason, Fran nodded happily. Was she getting excited now that she

finally had a real challenge? As she'd grown stronger, so had her tendencies as a blood knight.

"Jet, toss—I mean, take him to safety!"

She was about to tell Jet to toss the poor man, too! She was only focused on fighting the monster in front of her.

Fran tossed the now-suffocating man to Jet and readied herself again. The man-bird roared upon seeing her prepared to fight.

"Caaaw!"

The man-bird chased Fran to the air with bloodshot eyes. Those wings didn't look like they could carry its weight, but a little magic went a long way. It made a beeline for Fran, but it wasn't fast enough to catch her.

"Squawk!"

"Too slow."

"S-squawk?!" The man-bird looked pretty surprised that she'd dodged, probably having expected her to be easy prey.

Fran threw the man-bird off-balance by deflecting its attack with me. She slashed downward, aiming to open up its left rib. Fran was planning to finish it then and there, but the man-bird dove, narrowly escaping death.

I heard the breaking of bone, but I hadn't gone all the way through. The man-bird continued plummeting until it crashed into the stone pavement beneath. It was vomiting blood, but still breathing.

Still, it was dying, and Fran readied me to finish the job.

But there was interference.

"Moooo!"

"SQUEAK!"

These guys look like muscleheads, but they can use magic!

The man-bull's wind spell and the man-rat's thunder spell flashed before Fran. While they lacked strength, there was enough coordination for them to be dangerous. But where was the golem? It had suddenly disappeared—

“Kyaaaa!”

“Waaaah!”

Screams and rumbling sounded in the distance.

The golem had moved from its original location and was now in front of a general store. Was there something inside that had caught its interest?

I scanned the store: there were people left inside. They probably hadn't found a good opportunity to escape. But there was also something else... the presence of another person, vague but definite. Like someone was concealing themselves with manatech. Perhaps a noble in disguise.

“Goooooh!”

This is bad!

The golem had ducked its head to force its way through the door. The people inside were in danger.

“Come on, Teacher!”

Teleporting us in!

Attacking the golem from here might hurt the people in the store. We would first need to get them to safety. We teleported inside to find frightened men and women huddled up against each other. With them was a boy we recognized.

“Romeo?”

“Hn!” Romeo was there. Theraclede too, but I couldn't sense any of his usual ferocious power. His powers had been sealed by the manatech placed on him. Theraclede must've been the source of that vague presence I'd sensed.

Measures needed to be taken every time Romeo left the school. With Romeo being innocent in all this, the pair were allowed to go out from time to time with Winalene's permission. When they did, Theraclede had to be restrained... but that also meant he couldn't protect himself.

"..."

"..."

Fran and Romeo stared at each other the way they had at the cafeteria. A strange tension hung in the air, but now really wasn't the time. Behind us, we could hear the golem breaking into the store.

Fran, we have to move!

"Right!"

But we were faced with a problem. The store didn't have a back door, and the front door was blocked by the golem. Meanwhile, we needed to evacuate the store owner, the two women shoppers, Theraclede, and Romeo. The door wasn't going to fit all five.

Then we'll have to use the back!

Unfortunately, this was our only way out. After confirming that there was nobody on the other side of the wall, I used Aura Blade to cut out a pretty perfect rectangle, if I do say so myself. I pushed it out with telekinesis, bringing down the wall of the store and the building behind it.

It looked like someone's house. We were *definitely* breaking and entering, but this was an emergency. I promised to pay for the damages later.

"Everyone, this way!"

"R-right!"

"Come on!"

The people were shocked by a little girl who suddenly appeared and carved an opening into the wall. But the groanings of the golem reminded them of the situation they were in. They got up and got going.

The owner and the shoppers ran through the makeshift exit without complaint.

Romeo didn't move, though—he kept glaring. Did he resent her help?

Theraclede, a conflicted look on his face, picked him up. "I... Thanks."

"Hmph. Just hurry up and go."

"Right." Theraclede bowed his head and ran.

All that was left for us to do was defeat the golem. However—

"Goooorgh!"

"Huh?"

No wonder we didn't see it move!

Just when we thought we lost sight of the golem, it reappeared before Theraclede. This thing could teleport! It reached out to Theraclede and Romeo. Were they the targets? I'd thought the monsters just wanted to kill Fran!

"Ugh!" Fran immediately jumped toward Theraclede and grabbed his arm. If it were up to her, she would've flung him out of harm's way so hard it'd hurt. After all, that would've saved him, technically. But she couldn't do it. Not when hurting Theraclede would hurt Romeo.

She pulled him back as gently as she could and took his place. She would protect Theraclede—or rather, Romeo—even if it hurt her. Fran had really regretted harming Romeo in the first place. Maybe she wasn't consciously thinking of making amends, but she was sure acting like it.

"Goooorgh!"

"Haaaa!"

The golem's punch collided with Fran's kick. The dull crash was followed by the sound of cracking, from the golem's fist or Fran's bones or both at once.

Fran was blown away by the force of the impact. She crashed through the store shelves

before finally slamming into the wall.

“Ack...”

Fran, are you okay?! Greater Heal!

I'm fine!

The barrier had absorbed most of the damage. The impact had just knocked the wind out of her.

She got back on her freshly healed feet and started casting a spell. “Stun Bolt!”

“Goooooh!”

Fran attacked the golem to distract it, but it remained unfazed. It reached for Theraclede, completely ignoring Fran.

I quickly used telekinesis to lift the two of them up.

“M-Mister!” cried Romeo.

“It's okay, Romeo,” said Theraclede. “Just hold on.”

“O-okay.”

Romeo yelped, startled by the fact that they were suddenly floating. This was probably all a bit too much stimulation for a three-year-old, though Theraclede had done a good job talking him down. Romeo squeezed Theraclede’s arm, and his shivering came to a halt. They looked like father and son, which was pretty weird, given Theraclede was part of the picture.

In any case, we tossed them to the front of the store. Bit of a rough landing, but they’d live. Fran had just broken her bones for them, after all, so they’d better appreciate it!

Teacher, where's the crystal?

I can't get a read on it!

“In that case...!” Fran readied me and flanked the golem to cut it in half. She lifted her

sword and brought it down, making a vertical cut so fast you couldn't see the sword flash.

Before the two halves could regenerate, she made another horizontal slash. Then she started dicing. She rained slashes on the golem, slowly turning it into rubble. Ten seconds later, bits of golem were scattered all over the place.

Still, the golem persisted. It walked forward, its wounds healing. The monster was more dangerous because of its immortality than because of its strength. And the creature wasn't the only threat we had to deal with, either.

"Squawk!" screeched the man-bird.

"Kyaaaa!" Romeo cried out at the same time.

I could hear the other monsters outside, too. We teleported away from the golem to find Theraclede and Romeo blocked off by the other monsters.

Dammit!

We couldn't fire our spells with them so close to Theraclede, but teleport wouldn't get us there in time, either!

Fran ran as fast as she could, but the man-bird's talon was already descending.

"I won't let you!" Fran kept running. As long as they didn't die, we would figure something out. Still, we didn't know whether Theraclede could survive even a single attack in his current state. We had to place our hope in the small chance that he could.

But then something completely unexpected happened right before our eyes.

"Squawk!"

"Ku ha ha ha! I have arrived!"

Something fell from the sky, crushing the man-bird to bits.

The monster erupted into cracking bone and sloppy flesh. Blood splattered everywhere.

“Huh?”

What?

Fran and I were startled. Neither of us saw *this* coming.

The man-bird had been turned to a bloody paste after it was squashed by the mysterious figure. The black humanoid swung his fist and obliterated the man-bull, and he grabbed the man-rat by the neck and lifted it off the ground. He was shorter than the man-rat, but he had no problem keeping its feet in the air.

The man-rat resisted with jolts of pale blue lightning but to no avail. The figure completely resisted shock and paralysis.

He *looked* human—more human than the man-bird and the others, at least—but he clearly wasn’t. His skin was charcoal-black. The horns of an ogre crowned his head and sharp fangs jutted from his lips. His two-meter body was naked, but he had no genitals. It was smooth as a doll down there.

Which was fine by him, I suspect, because he wasn’t even alive.

“An undead...?”

“Oh? You know what I am, child?”

Definitely an undead.

A Wiseogre Draugr, to be precise. An elite undead, but there was something more to it. His speech reminded me of another undead we had met in the past.

“Ah... Black Bone Brigade.”

“I didn’t expect you to know that name! Who are you, child?”

“Fran. Adventurer. I’ve fought one of you before.”

“You did well to survive the encounter! Though I must say they are unworthy of the name Black Bone if they cannot deal with a little girl such as you. Who was it?”

“Ice Man.”

At the sound of that name, a look of surprise came over the face of the pitch-black undead. He'd been grinning as he looked down on Fran, but now his face was grave.

"Oh? I didn't think I would hear the name of my missing comrade here. I take it you defeated him?"

"Hm."

"Ku ha ha ha ha! Well, my deepest apologies! You are no ordinary child!" A whole array of emotions flashed through his face, an unusual amount for an undead. Rage for his fallen friend, excitement in the face of a powerful enemy, and finally, joyful exuberance.

"Excellent! I will become much stronger by consuming the warrior who defeated Ice Man! I will drink your blood and feast on your flesh!"

The undead lacked the ability to sense his enemy's strength, and he wasn't much in the detection department, either. Although he could enhance his physical strength, his weapon arts and masteries weren't that high. He was a musclehead among muscleheads, the kind who brute-forced his way to victory. On the flip side, he had lots of Regeneration and Enhanced Physique to make up for that.

"I shall give you the privilege of knowing my name! I am the mighty Charred Man! Eighth Seat of the Black Bones, though I suppose recent events have made me Seventh!"

Charred Man enlarged his body. Though not as drastic a change as Jet, he gained a good meter in height, making him stand over three meters tall. He already dwarfed the man-rat he was choking out. Actually, that man-rat was looking pretty limp by now. Was it dead yet?

As for the size of Charred Man, he hadn't had any size-altering Skills when I Identified him. Was this one of the functions of Undead Manipulation? Maybe he had unique ways of using his Skill that Identify couldn't pick up.

I'd joked about there being hidden undead before, but I didn't think one would actually show up! The mysterious stranger—the one described as pitch black—must have been Charred Man. Surprisingly, his size and appearance matched the descriptions on the quest board pretty well.

"What are you doing here?" asked Fran.

"Scouting out the high elf! That thing's a real piece of work! Wouldn't want to get on her bad side!"

Huh. So after getting information on Winalene, they'd decided that it was best to stay out of her way.

"But enough talk. Have at you! Or so I'd like to say, but you—over there! Don't think you can run!" Charred Man cast a glance at the slowly retreating Theraclede.

"Hrh!" Try as he might to conceal his presence, Theraclede was still caught. He stopped in his tracks, his instincts telling him it was fatal to proceed.

"You bastards need to get lost!" Theraclede snarled.

"Gooooh!"

Just when the golem teleported in front of Theraclede, Charred Man gave it a massive punch. At once, there was a hole where his fist was and the golem went flying into the wall of the general store. The front door was now in shambles. Charred Man was as strong as his undead compatriot Ice Man.

"Theraclede, right?" said Charred Man. "How did a brawler of a man turn into such a little wuss?"

"You know me?"

"I've heard the stories! Apparently, Zelyse wants you. I bet it'd piss him off something crazy if I got to you first, though! Ku ha ha ha!"

"Zelyse?"

"That's right. These three schmucks? They're Zelyse's lackeys." Charred Man dangled the man-rat by his neck.

Crystals turning people into monsters had reminded me of the alchemist, but I hadn't thought he would be directly involved! Charred Man was part of Raydoss' Black Bone Brigade and the monsters were servants of Zelyse the alchemist. Both were after Theraclede, but what was the relationship between the two groups?

"Is Zelyse in Raydoss?" asked Theraclede.

"Who knows? He's been seen around Raydoss, but I don't know where he is."

Hm. It didn't seem like he was affiliated with Raydoss.

"You're not allies?" Fran cast a glance at the remains of the man-bull.

Charred Man smirked. "Hah! As if we would be allies with that seedy alchemist! If anything, we hope to one day crush him!"

The kingdom of Raydoss wasn't a united front by any means. Rival dukes and politicians engaged in turf wars, and the allies of today easily became the enemies of tomorrow.

"Anyhow, let's get to killing! Winner gets the man! Usually, I'd prefer to fight for a princess, but here we are! Ku ha ha ha!"

"Jet, keep the golem busy!" said Fran.

Charred Man had made Fran his target. He wasn't about to grab Theraclede and run. Meanwhile, Zelyse's monsters were relentless, especially the golem. It wouldn't go down even after Fran had cut it to pieces. Its teleportation ability meant it could kidnap Theraclede at any time.

"Woof!"

We'll take Charred Man.

Identify says he's a melee specialist. Stay sharp.

Got it.

Fran nodded and smiled. Charred Man returned her grin. The two blood knights were getting along just fine.

"Hunh!"

"Squeak...?!"

Suddenly, he flung the man-rat at Fran. He probably just wanted to keep her busy, but Fran cut through the man-rat anyway. Its body split in half, its innards spilling onto

the pavement like a trash bag full of alphabet soup.

But Charred Man didn't care about the man-rat's survival. All he needed was for it to occupy Fran for a fraction of a second. He took out a small bottle, raised it high into the sky, and crushed it. Its contents trickled down his arm and onto his whole body.

"Ku ha ha ha! HERE WE GO!"

"It's just like what Ice Man did!"

"Hah! KU HA HA! I knew Ice Man used the evolution potion!" He let out a maniacal laugh.

Ice Man was an undead Black Bone we'd fought at the Demon Wolf's Garden. He had used a special potion to strengthen himself, moving up an entire threat level. Charred Man was doing the same thing—in fact, it was probably the same potion.

Though Charred Man looked mostly the same, his strength was staggering. He was much more intimidating now, mana billowing out of him in gusts of wind. He was no longer merely a strong opponent, but a walking embodiment of death. A being whose very presence brought despair to the living.

The worst part about the potion was its instant reaction. In video games and anime, enemies took their sweet time powering up. We had run into foes who did just that in this world, but the Black Bone Brigade's evolution potion worked instantaneously. It was the perfect enhancement item.

Charred Man readied himself, and the very air trembled. "You look absolutely calm in the face of all this power!"

"I've seen scarier things than you."

"Ku ha ha! I see! Very good! That makes you worth killing!"

"You're the only one dying today."

"Come and make it happen!"

The two moved at the same time.

“Haaa!”

“Draaaah!”

Clang! I clashed with Charred Man’s gigantic hammer-like fist and a metallic ring sounded as I bounced off his hand. His already-formidable fist was even more resilient after the infusion of mana. It was so hard that direct contact with the blade of a sword didn’t leave a scratch. I said “hammer-like” earlier, but really, it was pretty much a literal hammer.

“Ku ha ha!”

“Hrm!”

Blade clashed with fist a few more times before Fran and Charred Man stepped back with such grace that it almost seemed choreographed.

“That’s no ordinary sword!” he roared.

“Greatest sword ever made.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re lying. Let’s see how you handle this!”

Charred Man bellowed and crimson flames covered his fists. The flames probably functioned in a similar way to Elemental Blade. He bumped his fists together, and the fire exploded out in a burst.

So that was how it worked, huh? I was betting he wouldn’t just use those flames for offense, either.

“Let’s see what you got!” Charred Man exploded the flames behind him and used the force of the explosion to accelerate. But he wasn’t done. The explosions continued to pop and boom until we lost sight of him.

“Shyaaaa!”

“Hm!”

He’s coming from our side!

The chain of explosions had allowed him to make sharp curves to flank us. He slid around the battlefield, making hard turns with his side explosions and quick advances with his rear explosion. He even used smaller explosions for intricate spins and whirls.

His twitchy movement was hard to track and he was right in front of Fran before we noticed... but Fran wasn't going to just sit there and take it.

She stuck me out as Charred Man's fist was about to hit her, planning to use the impact to get some distance. As expected, she was blown away, but it didn't stop there.

Charred Man's fist exploded when it clashed with me, and Fran's body was engulfed in crimson flames.

Fran!

I'm... fine! Fran Air Hopped as she tumbled through the air and landed safely on her feet.

"You don't look too bad after getting hit by that! Not bad at all!"

Fran's arms were painfully burned, but I'd healed them as fast as I could.

Charred Man smiled. "I didn't think you could move like that, either."

"Says the one who dodged it."

Charred Man shrugged, unsettling plumes of black smoke from his shoulders. Explosive acceleration had come at a cost. The bursts of explosive energy had wounded him, as shown by the missing chunk of flesh in his side. The technique was a double-edged sword only usable by a regenerating undead who was prepared to die.

"Next time you're going down! Here we go!"

"Bring it on!"

Both combatants shifted gears, initiating a high-speed battle impossible for regular civilians to track.

Black lightning and flames lit up the square and shook the infrastructure.

A melee battle would be better for Fran. Charred Man was blowing up chunks of himself every time he moved. He would rack up a lot of self-damage as the fight dragged on, and Fran would get used to his movements over time.

But the battle continued into a stalemate, and the two fighters stepped back again.

“Worried about someone?”

“No.”

“Mua ha ha ha!”

Neither Fran nor Charred Man wanted to kill Theraclede; both needed him alive. Still, there was a marked difference in how they fought. Fran was dead set on not harming Theraclede at all in order to protect Romeo. Meanwhile, Charred Man just needed him alive, and half-dead was good enough.

Because Theraclede was right beside them, Fran couldn’t go all out. But she was reaching the limits of her strategy. Although he wasn’t gravely injured, shockwaves and rubble had covered Theraclede with scratches. Romeo was definitely feeling some of it. Also, Charred Man’s explosions had set the street trees on fire. If the fight dragged on, that fire could spread.

Teacher, I’m going for it.

Got it.

“Flashing Thunderclap! Sword God Form!”

Overshadowed by the Sword God, Fran leapt at Charred Man. As always, her movement was quiet and graceful. Charred Man couldn’t react in time when she suddenly appeared before him. He had been toying with her, thinking that she couldn’t go all out.

“Gah! You little brat!”

“Hmph.” Fran easily dodged his fist and lopped off his left arm. The mana-reinforced arm had been harder than steel, but now I cut through it like tofu.

Being in Sword God Form, I was also imbued with divine element.

“You’re not moving like you were before! And I can’t heal myself!”

Charred Man tried to step back, but we cut off his legs before he could. Sword God Form allowed us to read our opponents like a book.

“Oooogh!”

“It’s over.” Fran swung me over the fallen Charred Man. Her eyes were cold, identifying him as nothing more than prey to be slain. She cut him down without passion or hatred.

But Charred Man wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Nuooooh!” He fired an explosive spell at Theraclede and Romeo, who had backed away into a corner of the square. While the spell’s approach wasn’t particularly fast, there would be no trace of them left if it connected.

Seeing it, Fran immediately deactivated Sword God Form. The Sword God was only concerned with defeating the opponent, and she knew that remaining in it would lead her to abandon Theraclede.

She turned into black lightning. Using Black Lightning Strike, she managed to step in front of the explosion and put up a barrier.

“Uaaaaah!”

Nooooo!

I put all my energy into telekinesis and barrier, but I couldn’t absorb all of the explosion. Still, I was going to protect Fran! And Theraclede, too! An explosion of wind and heat blew over us. It was much stronger than I’d expected. My telekinetic hold dissipated and my barrier immediately broke. At this rate—

“Uoooooh!”

Then, I heard the sweaty roar of a man behind us. It was... Theraclede? But what was he doing?

“Manifest Malice!”

Is Theraclede really going to...?

The force of the explosion weakened as the Malice behind us grew stronger. While not enough to completely nullify it, we would be able to use barrier against it now.

In the end, Fran and I managed to come out of Charred Man's explosion relatively unscathed. But behind us, Theraclede had crumpled to the ground. He had forced himself to use his Malice to save us.

"Mister!" Romeo screamed, crying within Theraclede's arms.

"It's all right... Besides, this is all I can do..." In his sealed state, his power could only do so much. Theraclede didn't look like he could move now. Still, he wore a smile on his face to comfort Romeo.

"You... saved us."

"For Romeo..." he said.

"Hmph."

Charred Man was shocked to see us all in one piece. "The hell was *that*?! Fine! See how you like this!"

"Stop it!"

"Not a chance in hell!" Still lying on the ground, Charred Man conjured up countless fireballs, each primed to explode. Without hesitation, he spread his fireballs all over the square and directed them toward us. Though slow, each bomb was a force to be reckoned with.

He's going to blow the place sky high!

"Then I'll have to take it all down!"

Come on!

Where others would give up, Fran pushed on. She used Black Lightning Strike to destroy the fireballs, one after another, while I targeted the distant ones with spells and telekinesis. Knowing that her sword wouldn't be enough, Fran started focusing on

spellcasting. A red line trickled from her nose, probably from overusing Double Mind.

But Fran fought through her nosebleed and eventually prevailed against the fireballs.

“Urgh...”

You did great, Fran!

After Double Mind came a splitting headache from overusing it. She’d also used a lot of mana, to the point that she’d have been dry to the point of incapacitation if she didn’t have me.

Fran’s hard work had prevented our surroundings from blowing sky high. However, it turned out that we had only delayed the inevitable.

“Ku ha ha ha! Not done yet!”

Bastard!

Charred Man cast another volley of fireballs, even more than before. “Good luck cutting all those down!”

It was impossible! There was no way—

“I won’t let you! *Aaaaargh!*” Fran roared, just as I was on the verge of giving up.

Her emotions flowed through me. Despair first, and then the hope that overwhelmed it. Above all else soared the determination to save everyone.

What was I thinking, despairing when Fran was working so hard?

I was a sword. Fran’s sword. And a sword had no right giving up before its user!

Oooooh!

What was this feeling? I felt strangely aware of my entire body. My human senses were dulled, replaced with the senses of a sword. It felt like I had been a sword ever since I was born.

Transmogrify.

My guard transformed into hundreds of threads and split in all directions. The metal threads, glowing with mana, looked like a meteor shower as they raced through the air. I knew exactly where each thread was, and was surprised to find that I could calmly control every last one. This might've been the first time I'd used such an attack without borrowing P.A.'s power.

Most amazing of all, it was effortless. The strange pain I used to feel when overexerting myself was gone. It was as if I had suddenly reached the pinnacle of swordhood.

"No way..." Charred Man watched dumbly as countless steel threads defused all of his floating bombs. Served him right! "In that case—"

"It's over!" roared Fran. "Haaa!"

And with that, Fran rushed Charred Man and plunged me into his chest.

"Aaargh! Child...!"

She let loose a surge of black lightning, prepared to spend all of her mana if it came down to it. Her health and mana started plummeting, but she showed no signs of stopping.

"Gyaaaaah!"

But I was worried, even as I lay buried in his heart. Would this be enough to take him down? Without divine element, Charred Man was quite resistant to black lightning, since he was an undead. I could feel his mana draining, but we might run out of mana before he did.

Suddenly, Fran's body started glowing with green light.

I was surprised, but soon relaxed. The light wasn't hostile to us. If anything, it was a purifying light. The green glow coursed through my blade and into Charred Man's body.

"Argh! Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

And just like that, it was over. Charred Man's scream was cut off as he burned to ashes. With his body destroyed, the black lightning had nowhere to go.

Fran immediately cut Flashing Thunderclap. Together, we watched the remains of Charred Man sweep away in the wind.

Fran and I stood for a few moments in shocked silence until she whispered: *Spirit?*

Spirit? Did the spirit do that?

I felt them.

P.A. cut in: *We have reason to believe that it was the spirit's blessing.* Which reminded me of the great tree spirit's "well wishes." The old woman said they would protect us from evil, but I hadn't thought it would work to such an extent. But even with Charred Man gone, Jet's growling reminded Fran that the battle wasn't quite finished yet.

"Jet!"

"Grrr!"

I'd noticed because I had helped Jet with one of my steel threads, tying the golem's legs and pulling it down to let Jet get hold of it. He held the golem's four limbs under his paws and caught it in the shadows.

Jet, we're coming over!

"Grr!"

Huh? You want to finish this by yourself? Are you sure?

"Bark."

Jet was set on finishing the golem solo. But how was he going to deal with a creature that kept regenerating even after being cut into pieces?

Jet then used his new spell, Bottomless Shadow. With the enemy under his feet, he could activate the spell using his own shadow. Huh, I hadn't considered that: all he needed for the shadows to devour his enemies was to pin them below him. The golem struggled as Bottomless Shadow swallowed it.

A minute went by, and the gigantic humanoid mass slowly sank into the shadows. No matter how tough it was or how fast it could regenerate, there was no coming back

from the shadow realm once it was gone. It really was a horrifying spell.

“We won.”

Yeah!

“Grr!”

Hostile threats neutralized.

It was a difficult battle considering where and what we’d fought. If it weren’t for the spirit of the Great Tree, Fran and the city might have suffered more damage. It was too close for comfort.

“You okay, Jet?”

“Woof!”

Jet sniffed Fran as we approached him, but he seemed fine. Tough as it was, the golem had been no match for Jet.

“And... Theraclede?”

“Ruff!” Jet’s nose pointed to where Theraclede and Romeo were standing nearby.

Fran approached them, but she stopped once she got to a certain distance and began to fidget. It wasn’t like she was trying to stay out of reach of Theraclede’s blade or taking care not to raise their guard.

No, she just didn’t know the proper distance at which to hold a conversation, that’s all.

A strange silence fell upon the square. After all the explosions, the silence felt deafening.

Fran broke it with a blunt question. “You hurt?”

“No. You saved us.”

“Hmph... that’s mutual.”

“Guess so.”

It felt like two introverts trying to make conversation. Neither knew what to say.

“And... the kid?”

“Him? He’s... all right.”

“I see.”

Romeo had been glaring at her, but his expression softened when she asked about his well-being. The burden Fran had chosen to shoulder grew lighter now that she’d successfully protected him.

“You should go back to the Academy.”

“You’re right. Though I don’t know about leaving this alone...”

“Hmm.”

What now? More of Zelyse’s monsters and Charred Man’s allies might be on the way. Should we just split up here? As we stood on guard for undesirables to show up, Romeo’s caretaker returned. She had gone to one of the food stalls when the anomaly occurred. As Fran explained to the caretaker what had happened, Theraclede turned to Jet and patted his head.

“Thanks.”

“Woof.”

“Go on and say thank you, Romeo.”

“Okay. Thank you, Mr. Wolf.”

“Woof!” Jet gave Theraclede the cold shoulder, but he was a big friendly dog with Romeo. He gave him his most lovable face and fluffed his head with his tail.

Romeo’s smile finally returned. After all the terrible things that had happened today, it was a real relief. It’s nice when kids smile, y’know?

Good for you, Fran.

Hm.

Fran looked at Romeo with the gentlest of gazes. While she still couldn't forgive Theraclede, she wanted to protect Romeo. She heaved a great sigh of relief and finally surveyed her surroundings.

"I'm worried that someone else might have gotten hurt."

The ruined buildings themselves were the least of our problems; the real worry was that people might be trapped inside them. We followed Fran's lead and launched a search and rescue. As expected, we found injured people in the houses and went around healing them.

As we did so, the city guard arrived to investigate the commotion. This was going to take a while. Even though we did what we had to do to protect Theraclede, we'd still fought in a city square, causing heavy damage. I mean, just look at the gouged pavement and broken glass scattered everywhere!

The guardsmen hesitated, wondering if they could or should arrest Fran.

Fortunately, Fran's new position came in handy. The Academy's dueling instructor carried a lot of weight here and they immediately rolled out the red carpet for her. They listened to everything she said and believed her. They probably would've dragged a chair out of the rubble if she said she was tired.

Besides, there were still the remains of the humanoid monsters as well as the testimonies of the people in the shop and Romeo's caretaker. The caretaker turned out to be someone pretty high up in the Academy and she promised that any repairs would be paid for out of the school's coffers, easing the minds of the upset civilians.

All in all, the whole thing was finished in about an hour. Someone from the Academy would come by later to calculate the damages. What a relief. I'd figured we'd be stuck there all day.

We would still have to be present during the Academy's examination of the monsters, but that was still a few days ahead.

Fran and Jet walked toward the Academy, the burning sunset lighting up their features.

Fran's face seemed strangely sadder than usual, and I wondered if it was just a trick of the light.

Fran?

Hm? What?

I...

Fran had been restlessly longing for a difficult battle, and she'd gotten what she wanted, along with a little redemption in the eyes of Romeo. At first, I'd thought it was just the blood knight in her wanting a good challenge. She hadn't come across one ever since she completed her training.

But maybe that wasn't all she wanted. I didn't know whether she herself knew, but maybe she was longing for something more. That's what I thought, anyway.

If there's something on your mind... you can tell me, okay?

Teacher...

Yeah?

Fran hesitated, silently making shapes with her lips. In the end, she kept her peace.



It's... nothing.

All right.

Hm. Thanks.

Fran whispered and smiled. But there was loneliness in that smile.

A few days after the ambush...

“Here you go. Tonight’s your last night here, so I made you something extra.”

“Wow.”

“Woof, woof!”

It was our final night at The Old Evergreen.

Tomorrow would mark the beginning of our Academy survival trip. Fran would be relieved of her instructor duties at the end, so we would need to settle the accommodation bill. Hearing that, the old lady prepared an even greater feast for Fran and Jet than before.

Fran and Jet wolfed down the mega-sized pasta and grilled meat. I thought they’d slow down after eating ten people’s worth of food, but they just kept going. In fact, I was worried whether they’d even be able to walk the next day after eating so much! Hell, I was also worried about the inn’s costs at this rate.

“Munch, munch, munch!”

“Nom, nom, nom!”

The old woman smiled as she watched Fran and Jet eat. “Always great to see that appetite of yours.”

The old woman looked up. Jet and I followed her gaze, but we just saw a plain old ceiling.

But the old innkeeper saw something else. "Oh, dear. The spirit is sad."

"They're there?"

"Yes."

Fran looked up at the same spot. She focused on the ceiling, squinting her eyes from time to time.

"Can you see them now?" the old woman asked.

"No." Fran shook her head. "But I can tell that they're there."

"Oh? So you can feel them now?"

"Hm." Fran sat up straight and relaxed her body. She turned off the various Skills she'd unconsciously had running in the background, paying particular attention to her detection Skills. The amount of information coming into her mind dwindled.

She diverted all the energy of her five senses into her vision. When she widened her eyes, she reminded me of a cat staring into nothing. The Ferengel-Staden phenomenon, they called it, not that there was anything to it.

I watched over Fran, remembering what we had learned a few days ago in Spiritology, one of the two special classes at the Academy that taught about spirits. The other class was the self-explanatory Lectures on Spirit Magic, which offered lectures and exercises for the development of Spirit Magic.

Spiritology, on the other hand, was offered to students who could already feel the existence of spirits but lacked Spirit Magic. It taught fundamental facts about the nature of spirits and offered exercises to improve your ability to perceive them.

Fran had taken up Spiritology. She was quite interested in the subject too, seriously committing to her studies. We'd learned that Spirit Magic was more unique than we initially thought.

First, the Skill level was not proportionate to the strength of the spirit. Spirit Magic only conveyed your ability to communicate with spirits. The higher the level, the better your perception and discernment of spirits, as well as your ability to share mana with them. But spirits were flighty beings, and your communication skills and

discernment only helped if you actually got along with them.

Even at level 1, someone could gain massive power if a Greater Spirit took enough of a liking to them to form a contract. Conversely, someone good at Spirit Magic but hated by spirits would find it difficult to form a contract with *any* spirit. Meeting a powerful spirit you also got along with basically came down to blind luck.

These factors deeply affected elves, among whom were many powerful druids. Elves were, fortunately for them, naturally well-liked by spirits. What's more, the long-lived race knew the gathering spots of spirits thanks to ages of experience and knowledge. Finding a compatible spirit and forming a contract with them was a mark of a great shaman. Even so, the process took so much time that the elves developed a saying about it: "You meet a spirit once every hundred years."

Basically, even elves wouldn't be able to use Spirit Magic if not for their extended lifespans. But that also meant it was perfectly possible for humans to form contracts with spirits.

In Fran's case, she could already sense the spirits. All she needed to do was deepen her bond with them to one day learn Spirit Magic. The spirits of the Academy actually helped during classes to provide students an opportunity to practice their spirit perception. But even after taking the class, Fran still lacked the perception necessary to unlock Spirit Magic.

"I... still can't see them."

I see.

"Ruff..."

Fran stared intently at the spot where the spirit was supposed to be, but she finally slumped her shoulders and sighed. She had been sensing the spirit's presence every day she was at the inn. But in the end, she still couldn't see them.

Seeing her look discouraged, the old innkeeper spoke gently to her. "Don't worry, sweetheart. You'll be able to talk to the spirit of the evergreen one day. They already like you so much."

"Really?"

"I'm sure of it. In fact, I guarantee it. Besides, you couldn't even feel the spirit's presence when you first got here, remember?"

"Hm."

"And look where you are now. I've never seen a human develop so fast."

She was right. Fran had only been conscious of Spirit Magic for ten days. If that was all it took to learn the craft, the world would be filled with shamans. If anything, it was impressive that she could feel the presence of spirits without relying on my abilities.

"Thanks," said Fran. "We won because of you, spirit."

That's right. It was the spirit's power that finished off Charred Man.

"Hm." Fran bowed her head deeply.

Thank you. I didn't know whether they could hear me, but I thanked them, too.

"It's been such a long time since the spirit and I enjoyed ourselves so much. Come again any time."

"Hm." Fran nodded and smiled. The old woman's words were a great comfort to her.

I may not be able to talk to them yet, but one day for sure! she said.

That's the spirit. I hope it's sooner rather than later.

Hm!

EPILOGUE

ZELYSE PAST AND PRESENT

“AWW, they got poor Dianne.”

“And we gave her the strongest one, too. She turned out a lot weaker than I thought, though. Not that the other three weren’t pathetic in their own ways, eh?”

“Maybe things would’ve worked out if they hadn’t been up against Fran. The other three just ran off and started doing random things, but good old Dianne actually tried to capture Theraclede.”

“Actually managed to remember her orders, that one. She could do simple tasks, but her cognitive abilities were suspect at best. Still, it was the hellion crystal of a C-Threat Earth Titan, with some other stuff thrown in the mix. I was expecting a better showing than *that*.”

“Once a fallen knight...”

“Aha ha ha! Oh, you’re awful! You’re the one who found her, you know.”

“I told her she could return to the Crimson Flags if she helped me with this mission and she accepted at once! I didn’t even get a chance to tell her she’d never regain her human form!”

“Her, a Red Knight? But she was so weak.”

“Oh, she barely made it in the first place. They just stuck her with menial tasks since she was the daughter of a superior. She sure thought of herself as a knight, though. She got kicked out after causing trouble, at which point I picked her up and snuck her into Morley’s place.”

“Why’d they kick her out?”

“She leaked information about the Crimson Flags to the Duke of the South.”

"Yikes. Last I checked, those two didn't get along."

"And they still don't. It's a well-known feud across Raydoss, but good old Dianne told them everything when she heard it would be for the glory of the Raydossian empire."

"Aha ha ha! They are so screwed! They've gotten so good at brainwashing the people that they washed the brains right out of their knights!"

"No hellion crystal could've helped improve that raw material. Not to mention the enemy she was up against."

"I wasn't expecting Fran to be at the Magic Academy. I'm even more surprised that she took out a Black Bone. Has that happened before?"

"The Black Bone wasn't there before, though Fran was. She was with Winalene."

"You know, what surprised me most was Dianne meeting Fran along the way!"

"I didn't see that coming, either."

"It didn't happen for you?"

"No. The whole thing ended without Dianne ever making contact with Fran. Also, I sacrificed her for the creation of an enchanted sword instead of sticking a hellion crystal in her."

"Which means history has diverged. Well, there goes another pawn."

"It's all right. There will be others."

"I guess, but I still have to increase the quality of the hellion crystals."

"I think you need to focus on better surgical procedure and contracts, rather than the raw quality of the hellion crystal."

"Contracts, hm? You're saying that embedding hellion crystals in them without letting them know what's really going on..."

"Reduces the power of the contract significantly, yes."

“So even if they consent, they need some understanding of the contract itself for the contract magic to take full effect.”

“Probably. It weakens the link with the hellion crystal, thereby creating a weaker monster. I think subjects being turned into monsters without becoming hellions might be the result of a defective contract.”

“What now? Recruit criminals with the promise of freedom?”

“I wouldn’t trust criminals to listen carefully enough. They won’t have anyone we can take hostage, and they definitely won’t follow orders.”

“We’ll leave the hellion crystal improvements for later. I think it’s time we took matters into our own hands.”

“No, no! We’re so close to finishing our plans for Lake Vivian!”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Let’s just stick to the plan for now.”

“Indeed. We’ll concentrate on the great monster.”

“That’s right. It’s going to be fun! And remember our dream!”

“You’re right! With the success of this plan, our name—Zelyse the alchemist—will be carved into history! Oh, I can’t wait!”

“Aha ha ha! Yes, yes, yes! We shall be forever remembered as the mastermind who destroyed an entire kingdom!”

AFTERWORD

THANK YOU for your purchase.

And welcome to another afterword written by an author who messed up his page count. I'd usually be complaining, but things are a bit different this time! I'd usually waste pages by making dumb jokes, but I actually have something to talk about today!

That's right! We got an anime!

I got to sit in during a recording and talk a little bit with the voice actors. Teacher is brought to life by the voice of Miki Shinichirou, who's been voice-acting ever since I was a kid. I'm a big fan of his work and he was very candid, kind, and modest in the studio. When we exchanged greetings, my heart skipped a beat. And I'm a guy!

Fran is voiced by Kakuma Ai. She's a rising star of a voice actress who has voiced other *Let's Be Novelists* title adaptations. But me? I'm an old-time fan. She's very cute and bubbly, very unlike Fran. When we exchanged greetings, I couldn't help thinking, "Oh my God, it's Kakumashi!"

There are too many voice actors and staff who worked on the *Reincarnated as a Sword* anime to list here, but I am thankful for each and every one of them. This is such a gigantic milestone for me, an otaku-turned-writer. Again, thank you.

Thank you to my editor, I-san. You've helped me more times than I can count.

Thank you to Llo-sama. The illustrations in this volume are so great that my heart's a-hoppin'!

Thank you to Maruyama Tomowo-sensei. The characters in the manga are so cool that it almost feels like the original is holding them back!

Thank you to Hinako Inoue-sensei. Spin-off Fran is super cute. So soft and squishy. I love it!

And thank you to my friends and family, to everyone involved in the publishing process, and to my dear readers. This series only got made into an anime because of

your support, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

READ ME <<<<
RIGHT-TO-LEFT

EXTRA CHAPTER
Fran in' Animation?

STORY: Yuu Tanaka

ART: Tomoko Maruyama







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