

11
NOVEL

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. On the right, a young woman with dark purple hair and cat-like ears is shown from the waist up. She wears a light pink top with a black corset and a long, flowing skirt. She holds a large, ornate sword with a blue and gold hilt. On the left, a smaller character with blue hair and horns is visible, wearing a dark blue and black outfit. The scene is set against a backdrop of a cloudy sky and a dark, rocky landscape.

Reincarnated as a **Sword**

WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka
ILLUSTRATED BY
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as a sword 11







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Seven Seas Entertainment

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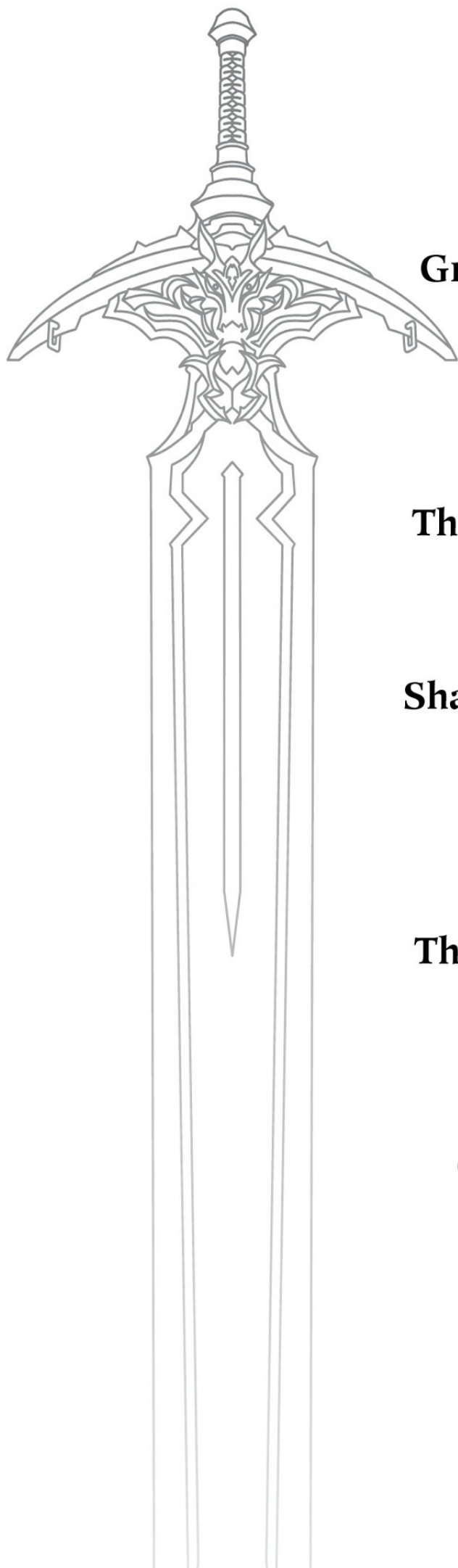
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Chapter 1:

Granzell Homecoming

OCTOBER 3587

“So THIS IS THE BLADE excavated from the ruins... It appears broken, but—”

Heh heh heh...

“What? Who’s there?”

Mwa ha ha! It’s us!

“Arghhhhh! M-my head...! Who are you?! Show yourself...!”

Boy, you’re thick. I’m right here, buddy. We’re right in your hands!

“Th-the sword...? Aaargh! Stop! What are you?!”

Me? Us? Good question... I was hoping you could tell us who we are.

“I don’t know...! Stoooooop!”

Dammit, you’re still awake? We’ve gotten weaker... I guess that would happen after getting destroyed, after all. So much for being a mighty Godsword.

“A Godsword...?”

That’s right! Our name is... Huh? What was it again? Last thing I remember was beating the crap out of Holy Order...

“Why can’t I let go?!”

Ha ha ha! That’s because I’m not letting you go! We’ll be commandeering that body of yours!

“Gaaaaah!”

Heh heh heh! Hey, this guy’s a noble! And a marquis, too? This is great!

“ ... ”

First, we'll have to fix our broken body.

"Fix."

That's right! We'll need to feed on other Godswords to do that, which means we need those Godswords!

"Other Godswords."

Ha ha ha! You barely seem human at this point. We'll have to adjust to this body before your people catch on. I'll have to modify it otherwise!

"Modify."

Quiet now.

"..."

All you need to do is sit back and enjoy the ride! We are the many made one. The one made many. Now, you are part of us! Not to worry, I'll put your authority as marquis to good use! Mwa ha ha!

Our return from Chrome was uneventful. We didn't have much to do on the boat because they treated us like guests, and we were moving so fast that it kept us safe from monsters. A few days of relaxation and we would be back in Jillbird.

I wondered why all of their ships couldn't go this fast, and it basically came down to cost. This vessel was equipped with the latest propulsion manatech, and running it required over ten high-rank magicite each day.

The whole system also took up more than half of the ship's mass, leaving it with only a fifth of the carrying capacity of a regular vessel. It was very handy for transporting very important items and people, but it was commercially unviable.

We landed in Bulbola without much resistance. It felt weird, considering how much trouble Fran seemed to attract every time she got on a boat. We had been boarded by pirates, attacked by a Midgardsormr, and even encountered the Leviathan. I kept my guard up throughout the whole trip just in case, but my worries were unfounded. I guess we were just unlucky the last few times.

“Anything else you need?”

“Hm. Thanks for the ride.”

“Give us a call if you ever stop being an adventurer. We’ll have a seat ready for you at the trade association.”

I don’t think the captain was just making conversation. He really liked us after we caught a fish monster on the way to feed everyone, but I think the core of our appeal was our Pocket Dimension. It was the dream skill for all merchants, considering its ability to solve storage problems once and for all. There was a limit to how much item pouches could store, and they were priced according to their capacity.

I guess Fran was settled as far as job security went. I couldn’t imagine her being a merchant, though. Fran doing accounting? I don’t think so. She would probably solve her negotiations by physically beating up her clients, too.

We got off the boat and walked down the familiar streets of Bulbola.

So, where to first? I’m thinking we should check in at the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Hm. They might know where Garrus is.”

Good point. We might as well drop by the Blacksmith’s Guild while we’re at it.

“And then the orphanage.”

We had quite a few friends in Bulbola. One of them was the former A-Rank adventurer and owner of the Dragonhead restaurant, the thread user Phelms. There was also Colbert and the three girls who helped us run our food stall. I figured we ought to say hi to them if we saw them in the guild, unless they were out on a quest at the moment.

We should get some spices at the Lucille Trade Association, too.

“Hm. Very important.”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet were both in agreement. Curry was like fuel to them, and it was an ingredient to their success in battle. I’m not kidding. If we ran out of the stuff, Fran and Jet’s motivation would go through the floor and leave them at

half their fighting capacity. We definitely needed to top up our spice reserves.

And the Dragonhead?

“We’ll go there after we check in.”

Of course.

Fran wasn’t about to pass up a delicious meal.

She set her course for the Adventurers’ Guild and we began walking down the streets of Bulbola. We didn’t stay there for long, but seeing the ruins couldn’t help but remind me of the things that happened here. I guess returning to a town you haven’t been to in a while might make anyone nostalgic.

I noticed that people were staring at Fran, which was odd considering they were civilians and not adventurers. Was it because they finally saw how beautiful she was? Did Jet’s scarred eye possess a menacing attraction? Was I oozing the powerful aura of a discarded Godsword?

The answer to all three of those questions was a resounding no.

“Oh, are you the girl from the Black Tail?”

“Hm?”

“I knew it! That curry bread you sold was so delicious, I still dream about it!”

I had heard about how the love for curry was spreading throughout Bulbola. It seemed to have developed into a full-blown obsession by now. Our curry bread had won the cooking contest, and news spread quickly after we sold the recipe to the Lucille Trade Association. People began buying the recipe, and those who couldn’t buy it recreated the dish by taste. The city of chefs managed to create curry that could rival the original.

All this served to popularize curry, and now you could have it just about anywhere. The originator of the recipe—the “Master of Curry”—became the talk of the town.

“Master of Curry”... Wait, that’s me!

Colbert was definitely to blame for the nickname. People also began talking about the Disciple of Curry and the Beauty of the Black Tail—Fran. A lot of

people still remembered her from the contest.

I didn't know that curry could cause this much of a commotion. But I didn't sense any malice in their gazes; if anything, they were filled with respect and gratitude. Fran was also magnanimous enough to see that her popularity did no harm and resumed her walk through the town. The only thing she would say to any random admirer was "The Master of Curry is the best."

They love you, Teacher.

They love curry, actually. I mean, look at all this.

Curry flags were flying above every food stall we passed. Entire rows of food stalls sold curry-flavored foods and nothing more. It all reminded me of the al fresco food courts we had on Earth.

Honestly, I was a little worried. It felt like they were focusing too much on one spice.

Won't people get bored of this trend...?

This is a dream come true!

Woof!

I guess to you it would be.

We weren't going to reach the guild any time soon.

I see some curry kebabs over there.

It smells good!

Arf!

Fran immediately bought five sticks (to start). The meat looked like tandoori chicken with yellow curry powder spread on it.

"Yum, yum."

"Munch, munch."

How is it?

"It's...okay."

"...Ruff."

Meaning it wasn't great. It was basically a grilled kebab with fish sauce and curry powder thrown over it. There was no recipe development here. Just a quick hop on the curry bandwagon.

There were a lot of solid chefs in Bulbola, but the port city was also home to trend-hoppers out to make a quick buck. The cost of spices in general was also much higher because of the curry boom. I had seen this dark side of trends back on Earth, too. People paid a premium for items in high demand, which resulted in a crash once the prices got too steep. Then they would then move on to the next big thing, leaving the old trend in the past.

It would be really nice if the people of this world could develop their own takes on curry... But then would curry suffer the same fate?

"Give me three."

"Coming right up!"

How's the soup?

"...Hm."

"...Woof."

And another miss. Their spirits were beginning to be dampened, but they couldn't help but be attracted by the powerful aroma of curry. Fran carried on to the next stall and bought another portion, just a single serving this time.

"One."

"Sure thing!"

"..."

"...Arf."

Not a word was uttered. Fran never lost her spirit in her days as a slave, but now she wore the glazed eyes of a dead fish. Jet had curled up, expecting nothing from the next stall.

"One."

"Here you go."

"...!"

The final stall sold steamed meat buns with curry filling. Fran broke it open, but it wasn't quite like the curry buns I had seen on Earth. The Terran varieties were mostly filled with minced meat. The meat in this bun was chunky. It appeared to be sprinkled with curry powder before being haphazardly wrapped in dough. It wasn't exactly a curry bun...it was a curry—*inspired* meat bun.

Fran's hopeless expression changed after a single bite. The light came back to her eyes as she devoured the bun in three bites. She then proceeded to order more, as if lashing out against the mediocre curry foods she had to eat before this one.

"I'll take thirty!"

"Uhh...thirty? Three zero?"

"Hm!"

The girl at the food stall was shocked at first, but proceeded to cook up thirty steamed buns after Fran paid for them. She stacked one on top of another on a plate before finally creating a mountain of curry buns.

"Yum."

Fran was deeply satisfied with the buns.

Teacher, you need to learn how to make these!

Arf, arf, arf!

She liked them so much that she asked me to learn the recipe. I made a note to experiment later on.

Once Fran was a good distance away from the stall, people immediately flocked to it. That was its prize for being approved by the great curry evangelist. Curry would never die as long as there were stalls like these crafting delicious dishes. I wished the honest chefs of Bulbola the best of luck.

Okay, we need to get to the guild.

"Munch, munch, munch!"

"Yum, yum, yum!"

Fran was in a good mood by the time we reached the guild. Which was good,

because otherwise there could've been a bloodbath if someone picked a fight. She was a lot more famous now, and there were fewer idiots who would knowingly annoy her, but there were still some more hapless individuals.

Fortunately, we didn't need to worry about ignorant adversaries. The Black Lightning Princess was now famous for easily defeating an A-Rank adventurer. The Disciple of Curry was also famous for taking in Colbert as an apprentice, and anyone who offended her would be banned from all the curry houses in Bulbola.

So the rumor went. A rumor which perhaps became exaggerated with time, but it helped our case nonetheless. I wasn't going to go out of my way to disprove it, that's for sure.

We went up to Gammod, the Guildmaster who fought against Linford with us.

"It's been a while."

"Hm."

"So how have you been?"

"I made a new friend."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Her name is Mea..."

We talked with him for a while before getting into the meat and potatoes of why we came here. I was hoping the Guildmaster would know where Garrus was, considering his influence.

"We've been trying to dig up information on his whereabouts since you left. Unfortunately, it hasn't gone too well."

"Oh..." So, the dwarven network didn't know where he was.

We then hit up informant/adventurer Reggs to compare notes, but even he came up dry.

"If nothing else, we know he hasn't returned to Bulbola."

Reggs' vast urban network was not to be scoffed at. If he said Garrus hadn't come back to Bulbola, then that was the truth.

We went to the Blacksmith's Guild, but nothing surfaced. There was one bit of information which piqued our interest, however.

"Marquis Aschtner's been buying up smithing materials lately. He's the one we suspect of taking Garrus away."

Apparently, the marquis started collecting smithing metals soon after Garrus disappeared. That certainly raised eyebrows.

"He can keep it on the down-low all he wants, use all the fake names and middlemen... That won't be enough to trick us."

It was vital that we attended the auction at the capital now. Hopefully we could just meet Garrus there. Otherwise, Marquis Aschtner might be holding him prisoner.

It's a shame we can't figure anything out about Garrus. Let's head to the orphanage for a change of pace.

"Hm."

The suggestion cheered Fran up. It had been a long time since we last saw the orphans, and they probably missed her and Jet as much as we missed them.

The orphanage now had a proper gate at the entrance. The place was looking a lot better since coming under Amanda's care. The gate was guarded by a former adventurer, and it looked like this beastman knew about Fran. He gladly let her in, and the children warmly welcomed her.

"Hey, it's Fran!"

"Fran's back!"

"And Jet's with her, too!"

They immediately swarmed us, fluffing Jet's fur despite the new scar on his face. He expanded to his original size, lay down, and wagged his fluffy tail. The kids loved how affectionate the direwolf was. It was a nice change of pace for him, since people were usually too scared to approach, and he was very happy to play the part of the lovable giant canine. I was afraid that some of the kids would be frightened by his sheer size, but everyone was all smiles. The children of this world were built different, that's for sure.

The clamor soon attracted the adults at the orphanage. They feared the worst as they stepped out, weapons in hand. Io was an amazing cook, famous for her exquisite Garbage Soup. Charlotte was an adventurer who used a special dance in battle. She played an important role in the fight against Linford.

“Fran, is that you? And Jet! It’s been so long!”

“Woof!”

Charlotte had returned to the orphanage after she lost the tournament in Ulmutt. Amanda contacted her after Fran told her about the sorry state the orphanage was in. She and Io couldn’t be thankful enough for that.

Charlotte then breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad it was you.”

“Why?”

“Well, you see...”

Charlotte’s alarm had not been without reason. Two days ago, a wanted man had appeared on their doorstep.

“He was wearing a disguise, but I knew it was him. He was tall, with scars all over his body. What’s more, I saw him up close when we fought that giant Fiend. I’ll never forget the look in his eyes.”

A hulking wanted man with scars on his body who fought Linford with us? Only one person fit that bill.

“Theraclede...?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he come here?”

Theraclede had brought a three-year-old boy with him, undoubtedly to drop him off. The man was still intimidating, but he wasn’t quite as menacing as the bounty on his head made him out to be.

“He said an acquaintance had entrusted that boy to him, but he wasn’t equipped to raise him. He said he couldn’t stand kids. He was even willing to pay us to take the boy away from him...”

“The boy looked so tired. They must have had a rough journey.”

“What was his name?”

“I think it was Romeo.”

I knew it! But why would Theraclede fulfill Murelia’s dying wish? Especially after he betrayed her?

“Where is he now?”

“We didn’t end up taking him in.”

“Why not?”

Theraclede had come in when Charlotte was away, and was greeted by one of the orphanage directors. When Theraclede gave Romeo to them, the boy immediately started crying. They gave the boy to Io, but he wouldn’t stop crying until she finally returned him to Theraclede. Then, Romeo’s cries turned to smiles and laughs.

Theraclede tried to sneak away, but still the boy wailed. The director suggested to him that he might as well try to care for him a little while longer, since sneaking away wasn’t going to work. If things didn’t work out, he could feel free to leave Romeo in their care.

Having failed to leave the toddler, Theraclede departed with Romeo in his arms. Charlotte happened to come across them as she returned to the orphanage.

“He was nothing like I remembered him. He’s so much calmer now.”

“Theraclede?”

“Yeah.”

It was an unbelievable tale. Theraclede, the man whose very life was founded on violence, had saved a three-year-old after presumably rescuing him from his captors. He took Romeo to the orphanage in Bulbola, planning to leave him under its care. But the most surprising thing of all was that the three-year-old seemed to *enjoy* being under *Theraclede’s* care.

“We couldn’t just leave him be, of course...”

They had reported Theraclede, but he managed to escape. I doubted if

regular guardsmen could even touch him. Any conflict with him would only result in casualties on their side.

“What is he plotting?”

Maybe he just wants to fulfill Murelia’s last wishes after betraying her.

There’s no way he’s dragging that kid around for nothing. What if he wants to sacrifice him?

I thought he had just gotten attached to the boy after having him around for a while. The boy certainly was attached to him, if nothing else.

I looked at Fran and remembered our first meeting. What if Theraclede and Romeo had a similar moment? Maybe that’s why Romeo refused to be left at the orphanage.

But that was pure speculation on my part. Maybe we should look into Theraclede’s whereabouts as well. Fran was my top priority, but a child dying out of negligence wouldn’t sit well with me, either.

Where could he be...?

The somber mood didn’t last long. The faint aroma of curry caught Fran and Jet’s attention and they immediately whipped their heads toward the kitchen. Io noticed her drooling guests.

“We’ll have food ready in a minute.”

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

They nodded vigorously. Curry was on the menu today, and the children lined up to get their fill. They sat down and waited for the rest of their friends to join them at the table. Even Fran knew that it was good manners to wait for everyone before she started eating, and they all spent about five minutes just talking and laughing with each other.

“Please, help yourselves.”

Fran took a spoonful of curry before Io could finish her sentence.

“Yum, yum. Delicious.”

“Woof!”



She instantly smiled. “The aroma is rich and slightly sweet. Rice and roux become one to deliver an exquisite dish.”

Io’s curry was so delicious that it made Fran talk like a food critic. And she had only used two spices! How did she do it? If Io developed her recipe further, she could give me a run for my money. I couldn’t fall behind!

“Thanks to you, we have so much to eat now that we can have seconds. Would you like some?”

“Yes!”

“Woof!”

“Hey, no fair!”

“I want seconds, too!”

The rest of the children followed suit. They laughed and said, “More!” The fact that they weren’t shy about asking for more meant that there were always seconds for those who wanted it.

Before we left the orphanage, we gave the orphanage a gift of the ingredients we’d collected along the way.

Everyone looked really happy.

“Hm!”

Fran was smiling too, and there was now enough pep in her step to make her skip every now and again. As an orphan herself, she was very happy about how the children were doing. I had given Io ten extra spices to cook with. She might end up outshining my curry, but Fran would be able to enjoy a delicious meal the next time we visited.

Next stop, the Dragonhead.

“I can’t wait.”

We soon reached the restaurant and it looked pretty much the same as last time. The old gentleman welcomed us as we went inside. I say “old,” but he really didn’t look his age. The adventurer-turned-chef was still dashing enough to make the ladies swoon.

“Hello, Fran. It’s been a while.”

“Hm. How are you?”

Phelms stepped out of the kitchen, and the ladies who were eating let out cries of admiration. The old man still had it. His cooking wasn’t the only thing that attracted diners to his establishment.

“Are you eating in today?”

“Hm!”

Phelms chuckled. “Allow me to cook for you, to make up for the last time you came when I wasn’t around. Is your familiar with you?”

“He’s in the shadows.”

“You can call him out if you want. We all fought that Fiend together.”

“Arf!”

“Yes, yes, it’s been a while.”

Fran didn’t even get a chance to summon Jet. He had missed out on eating in the Dragonhead the last time we came here, and he wasn’t going to let that happen again.

“So, what will you have?”

“One of everything.”

“Ha ha ha. Very well.”

Phelms knew about Fran’s voracious appetite and returned to the kitchen without a word. His apprentice cooked for us last time, but today we were going to taste the master’s delicacy.

The waitress from last time served us the Dragonhead’s signature dish, Dragon Bone soup. However, the broth had a yellow tinge to it this time.

Fran sniffed it. “Smells good.”

“This is Dragon Bone Curry Soup. Our latest dish.”

“Wow.”

Phelms had incorporated curry into his cooking. The old man was already

exploring the possibilities of the spice! He must have been confident with his recipe if he was willing to incorporate it into the Dragonhead's signature dish.

How is it?

"Munch, munch, munch."

Very good, apparently.

"What do you think?"

"It's great. The acidity is a nice touch."

"Woof, woof!"

"I see. Well, I'm very glad to know that you like it!"

Phelms' curry was more Thai than Indian. I was amazed he could make his way to Thai curry just from using my Indian curry as a base. He was as formidable a cook as he was an adventurer!

Fran was in high spirits up until the tenth course; it was the monster meat she had tasted before. She took a bite out of it, nodded, then tilted her head.

What's wrong?

It's good, but not as good as Phelms'.

Something was off with the flavor. She kept chewing with her head tilted.

And what do you think of it, Jet?

"Urf?"

Jet felt much the same way. He couldn't help shake the feeling that something was different about this dish.

"Umm...is it to your liking?" Phelms' apprentice asked. He had cooked this dish. I couldn't help but admire Fran's and Jet's palates for being able to tell the difference.

"I would like to hear your honest feedback, if possible."

"Okay."

Fran let him have it, as I feared. She mentioned how his cooking had gotten better since her last visit, but also pointed out everything that prevented his

dish from tasting like Phelms'. Fran was a straightforward girl, and if you asked her how she felt about something, then she would hold nothing back. Still, the man diligently took notes as he bit back his tears. He had what it took to be a chef.

We left the restaurant after the huge meal.

"That was great."

Can you move? You look stuffed.

"I'll be fine."

"Woof."

Jet had retreated to the shadows, his bloated stomach restricting his movement. Fran could still walk, but I wasn't sure if she could run. Fortunately, we were in no hurry to reach our final destination: the Lucille Trade Association.

The trade association immediately let Fran through the door. She was probably important enough to be recognized. Then again, this wasn't our first time visiting. The receptionist bowed her head to greet her.

"Hello, Miss Fran. How may we help you today?"

"Is Rengill here?"

"Let us check for you. Please wait," the receptionist said, and the courier boy behind her immediately left, presumably to inform Rengill of Fran's visit.

"Right this way."

The receptionist led us to a sofa in the center of the lobby, where a maid brought us tea and cakes. They worked fast. Fran had only been in the building for a few minutes!

These weren't your run-of-the-mill refreshments, either. The tea was served in an actual teacup resting on a saucer, and the cake had rare decorations on it. There were other merchants sitting in the room, and their teacups were much simpler. The association really rolled out the red carpet for Fran.

Fancy as they were, tea and cakes were a welcome familiarity after our trip to the Beastman Nation. I just couldn't get my head around steak as a snack...

Do you still have room, Fran? You've had a lot to eat today.

Hm? Of course.

Fran happily spooned cake into her mouth. And here I was about to store it in the Pocket Dimension for later consumption.

You don't have to force yourself.

There's always room for dessert.

At least she was enjoying herself. I was a little worried because of how much Fran had indulged herself lately, but all that activity prevented her from putting on any extra weight. I would have to intervene otherwise.

Our guide came to us as Fran was enjoying the delicious cake, and she led us to Rengill's office as soon as she took her last bite.

"Ah, I see you're back in Bulbola."

"Hm. I just came to say hello since I need to get going soon. Also, I want to buy some spices."

Spice prices might be inflated at the moment, but we were filthy rich. We could buy anything we wanted after that prize from the Beastman Nation.

"We'll hand you the goods on the way out."

"Hm."

Captain Rengill knew about Fran's Pocket Dimension, so he didn't need to worry about transport. We ended up asking him about Garrus *and* Theraclede, but he didn't seem to know the whereabouts of either.

What Rengill did know was the current circumstances of a certain Marquis Aschtner.

"I hear the marquis is going through dire straits."

"Why's that?"

"Does the name Seldio Lesseps ring a bell?"

"A little."

"Good. Seldio was Aschtner's bastard, in the technical sense of the word, and

the Adventurers' Guild issued a warning against him. There were rumors that he was involved in some shady activity—rumors which were confirmed upon the man's death."

We were the ones who killed Seldio back in Ulmutt. Marquis Aschtner's illegitimate son had been tasked with finding Godswords, and Fran was forced to put him down after he went berserk in a dungeon. The episode was triggered by a drug given to him and his party...by his own father.

The drug, if you could call it that, was administered through a sword stuck into their backs. The guard suggested that the weapon was an estoc. Both Seldio and Solus had gone crazy because of it. I didn't know how it drove them insane, but I was pretty sure that it was the cause of their madness. I just hoped we would never encounter it again. Still, I feared that there were more of those swords if there was enough to go around for Seldio and his party.

Old man Dias actually did his job. He must have been the one who reported Seldio's activities and exposed Aschtner's sketchy dealings after taking down Seldio's supporters.

"Wouldn't that worsen relations between the guild and the marquis?"

"And so it has. But the state has sided with the guild on this matter, and the marquis now has to make restitutions."

The state definitely wanted to avoid souring its relationship with the guild, so it opted to shift all the blame on Seldio. What's more, there was the eyewitness testimony of a trustworthy A-Rank adventurer and the hard evidence of the drugs.

Seldio's attendant had also admitted to being assigned to search for Godswords by Marquis Aschtner. This was no longer a matter of private scandal, but an offense that was grave enough to warrant an investigation by the state.

"Their finances have not been doing well as of late. We have some deals, and all of their payments are sufficiently delayed."

"I see."

We prodded further, but Rengill didn't seem to know that Fran was Seldio's

immediate cause of death. Dias really kept a tight lid on the flow of information. Still, people were bound to talk, and it was difficult to keep her involvement completely under wraps. Maybe Marquis Aschtner knew already. We had a hunch he was responsible for Garrus' disappearance, but we might also be dealing with a man who hated Fran. We would have to be careful.

Our next stop was Ulmutt. We could probably find out more about Seldio there. Now that I think about it, our trip to the Beastman Nation was arranged by Ulmutt's Guildmaster, Dias. We were to look into the details of a missing Black Cat adventurer, Kiara.

That was the pretense, at least, but we'd actually managed to find her. The least we could do was inform him about her passing.

We'll get Dias to fill us in on the details.

Hm.

We collected our spice purchase from the Lucille Trade Association, and made haste for the city of Ulmutt.

They're staring at us.

Hm.

We arrived in Ulmutt on schedule thanks to Jet's efforts and were heading toward the Adventurers' Guild when we realized that Fran had become the center of attention. People stopped in their tracks when they noticed her walking by. Most of them were adventurers. Apparently, they still remembered her tournament record.

But new adventurers had come to the town since then.

"Why is everyone staring at that girl?"

"What, you don't know?"

"Uhh, know what?"

"That right there is the Black Lightning Princess."

"What?! R-really? But she's just an ordinary beastgirl!"

“This is the problem with you damn rookies...”

I overheard several exchanges like that one. Greenhorn adventurers had trouble believing that Fran was all she was hyped up to be, because they weren't strong enough to gauge her powers.

We were hit with a nostalgic scene when we reached the guild.

“That's a real good sword you have there, girl.”

“Come here for a sec.”

Crooked adventurers waited outside the guild to shake down unsuspecting rookies. Honestly, they looked more like bandits than adventurers. One of them had a skinned head and the other two had mohawks. All wore fur vests. Why would they wear fur? As protection against the cold? In *this* weather? Either way, they definitely weren't about to offer friendly advice.

They were in their forties, and very weak, despite their age. They probably spent most of their years on gathering quests and small extermination quests to make a living. If they were adventurers, they weren't the adventurous type.

There was nothing wrong with making a living from simple quests as an adventurer, of course. There were a lot of good and decent people who did just that. Unfortunately, these three were neither good nor decent.

“We're talking to you. Over here.”

“Come on now!”

The men surrounded Fran to edge her toward an alley to the side of the guild. They looked like they knew what they were doing. This must have been how the burly men intimidated rookies into doing their bidding.

“Heh heh. Ulmutt's filled with kids nowadays.”

“You can say that again. Hey, what are you just standing there for?”

“Get going!”

Ulmutt's dungeons were much weaker after the dungeon master Lumina used their resources to help Fran evolve. Their monsters were weaker now and ended up as lower-quality materials. Guild income was down, but they'd set up

a rookie training center to make up for their losses.

And with rookies came stupid thugs who were all too eager to prey on them.

“What are you, deaf?! Get—Hurk!”

“The hell are you—Gah!”

“Wha—Blargh!”

Fortunately, Fran was in a good mood after lunch and took them out with a single punch each. She would’ve pulled me out if she were annoyed.

Regardless, they were all coughing blood on the ground.

I think you misjudged your skill output a bit.

Hm. That was a bit too strong.

Fran had intended to leave them with only a few broken bones at most, but they had at least five broken ribs and were suffering from internal bleeding. Their pestering had broken her focus.

Still, the third thug was doing slightly better compared to the first two, so Fran must have gotten a handle on her skill usage by then. The first man was about eighty percent dead, while the third was only seventy percent of the way there. Still, the fact remained that they were all gravely injured when all she wanted to do was knock them out. But I believed in the power of positive reinforcement.

I think you did a good job on the third one.

Hm. I’m getting the hang of this.

It was much more important to celebrate Fran’s accomplishments than criticize her failures. A hundred more of these encounters, and she would be a pro at knocking out dumbasses. I hoped we would run into more of them so she could practice. It probably wouldn’t happen any time soon—not in Ulmutt, at least. There were several witnesses, and rumors tend to spread faster than light.

Eventually, the men’s groaning attracted someone from inside the guild.

“What is all this ruckus?”

“Elza?”

“Frannie? You’re back! It’s been forever!”

The muscular adventurer sported her signature red afro and thick makeup. Her clothes were as loud as ever. This was the B-Rank adventurer Bardische—Elza, I should say.

She squirmed and wiggled like a woman but her strength was the real deal. If A-Ranks were as powerful as heroes of yore, B-Ranks were the cream of the crop of average adventurers.

As out of the norm as her behavior might be, Elza was actually a nice person deep down. She was a salacious masochistic drag queen who would tag anything that moved, but she took good care of Fran when she came to Ulmutt the first time. That being said, I didn’t trust her to babysit her for a single day.

“I’m so happy to see you again!”

“Hm. Long time no see. Is Dias in?”

“Oh, sure he’s in. By the way, are you the one who beat these boys up?”

“Hm.”

“Ugh, this is what happens when you can’t gauge someone’s strength... Well, you reap what you sow! Eric! Cain!”

“Ma’am!”

“What do you need?”

“Could you take these boys to the infirmary for me? Get some of the others to help you. I need to talk to Fran.”

“Right away!”

“You got it!”

Elza commanded respect from the adventurers of the city. They knew they were helpless to resist her. Adventurers swarmed in to carry the idiots away.

“Anyway. You said you wanted to meet the Guildmaster?”

“Hm.”

“I’m afraid he’s in a meeting with Old Aurel at the moment. Do you mind waiting?”

“That’s perfect, actually. I want to see him, too.”

“Oh, that’s great. I’ll go tell them that you’re here.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, anything for you, sweetheart!”

Elza winked as she went away. I could feel the cold steel of my blade shiver in response.

What’s wrong, Teacher?

N-nothing. Are you okay after that?

After what?

...Forget I said anything.

...?

I fought the urge to rattle in my scabbard for the next five minutes. I just couldn’t handle Elza’s big presence.

We were led to the Guildmaster’s office, where two old men were having tea. One of them looked like an old noble with slicked-back white hair. He was up there in years, but he still cared how he looked, as shown by his neatly trimmed beard.

The other man was also crowned with white hair, but he was better built than his friend. You could tell that a muscular body was hidden beneath his coat. His eyes were as sharp as a mafia don’s.

“It’s been a while, Fran,” Dias grinned.

“Good to see you back in Ulmutt, Fran,” Aurel laughed.

The human and White Dog had known Kiara when they were all adventurers in Ulmutt. These two had sent Fran on a quest to locate their missing friend in the Beastman Nation.

They weren’t the only ones in the room, however.

“Fran! You’ve returned!”

“Did the doll just talk?”

A figurine was placed on the table where the two men sat. It was well-detailed and stood at a height of twenty centimeters. I recognized the voice that came out of it.

“Is that Lumina?”

“Indeed. She is possessing the doll at the moment.”

Lumina was Ulmutt’s dungeon master. Dungeon masters couldn’t leave their dungeons, but apparently there was a loophole that could be exploited. Looking at it now, the doll looked a lot like Lumina, too.

“What are you guys up to?”

“Oh, we were just talking about how to manage the dungeon going forward.”

Dias, Aurel, and Lumina were the three heads of this town, and they were all gathered here today. That was great for us. We didn’t need to tell them about Kiara separately.

Lumina’s figurine walked over to us.

“And how have you been doing?”

“Hm. I’m here to report the results of my Personal Quest.”

Dias immediately stiffened. He could already tell that something happened while Fran was in the Beastman Nation.

“So you have information?”

“Hm. I met Kiara.”

“What?!”

“R-really?!”

“G-go on.”

Everyone was on the edge of their seats, grim anticipation on their faces. I took it as a sign that Fran could make her full report to Aurel and Lumina, since Dias hadn’t dismissed them.

“She was in the Beastman Nation.”

“As we expected.”

“Specifically, she was in the capital...”

Fran told the three about meeting Kiara and the battle that had ensued. Dias, Aurel, and Lumina made for a wonderful audience. They cheered when Fran told of how she met Kiara, clenched their fists with anticipation at the coming of the monster army, and cheered again when Kiara came to save Fran.

Fran didn't tell them everything, of course. She kept quiet about my existence and meeting Aristeia, just to name a couple. Dias and the others probably noticed that she was hiding something. Still, none of them pressed her on the matter because she was telling them the truth.

Fran grew more somber as she got to the end of the dungeon arc. It was enough to tell her audience that something bad had happened. She told them of Kiara's death, and each felt differently about it.

“Kiara...”

Dias was restless. He stood up, sat down. Finally, he sunk into his chair and sighed deeply as he looked up at nothing. He continued folding his hands, but he was clenching them so tight that his knuckles turned white.

“I see... She didn't change a bit... Even to the end.”

Aurel looked similarly defeated. He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes. But he looked more satisfied compared to Dias. As a fellow beastman, he knew that Kiara had gone out the way she'd wanted to.

Lumina clenched her teeth, but she still looked happy somehow. “So she managed to evolve... And into a Black Sky Tiger, at that.”

She was the one who understood Kiara most. Although she had lost her friend, she was ultimately happy that Kiara had spent most of her years in peace before finally evolving.

Silence reigned the room until Aurel looked up and broke it.

“You said...Kiara smiled at the end of her life.”

“Hm.”

“Do you think that smile was real?”

Fran nodded. “Yes.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

It was difficult for anyone to accept that their long-lost friend had finally been found, only to die in a distant land. But Aurel only nodded as if to repeat his last statement to himself.

“Theraclede...” Dias muttered. He was filled with rage despite his quiet expression.

“Stop it, Dias. Kiara said not to take vengeance for her.”

“You’re right. I know it’s stupid, and I’ve been a Guildmaster long enough to see adventurers die over the years. I know how people like you like to go out.”

He knew that not everyone wanted a peaceful death. Kiara and Aurel both lived for the thrill of the fight, and their ideal death was one on the battlefield.

“But I...am not a nice person. I’m shallow, underhanded, resentful, and I definitely bear grudges...” Dias said powerlessly. Yet there was a dark strength behind his eyes that he couldn’t help but notice. He didn’t know what he was planning, but he wasn’t going to forget about Theraclede any time soon. Still, he forced his lips into a smile, mainly because he didn’t want to worry Fran.

“Anyway, I thought that Kiara lived through hell in the Beastman Nation. The fact that she was comfortable for many years is consolation enough for me.”

He didn’t need to use his skills to know that he didn’t quite mean what he said, but no one said anything about it. Fran knew that nothing she said could cheer him up.

“I would’ve liked to see her one last time... But at my age, you start getting used to seeing all your friends die.”

“Ha ha ha! You said it! Besides, you were with her during her final moments when we couldn’t be. Thanks for that.”

“He’s right. You managed to spread the requirements to Black Cat evolution,

as well. Thank you.”

The three urged Fran to talk more about her time with Kiara, and she was more than happy to oblige. She had loved and respected the old Black Cat, and she was around people who would listen to what she had to say about her. She went on talking for quite some time, even gesturing with her hands in her excitement.

Eventually, Aurel and Lumina left, leaving Fran alone with Dias. She had some questions for him.

“Tell me about this man named Seldio.”

“You sound like you don’t remember meeting him.”

She really didn’t. Her only memory of him was fighting someone nasty in the dungeon. His name and face were completely forgotten. Seldio just wasn’t worth remembering for Fran.

“Have you ever met Aschtner?”

“No.”

But we’ll be going to the capital after we leave Ulmutt. For the auction.

“Hm.”

We asked Dias what he thought about Garrus’ disappearance. The blacksmith had gone missing shortly after taking on a top-secret assignment from Marquis Aschtner.

“I didn’t think he’d gone missing. Last I heard, he was headed for Bulbola.”

Apparently, the marquis is gathering smithing materials.

“Is he now? And you say he put Garrus on the job? My, that *is* suspicious.”

Marquis Aschtner was collecting rare metals, searching for Godswords, and had commissioned Garrus for...something. It had to be related somehow. We still didn’t know what to make of the sword in the back of Seldio’s neck, so the situation was quite concerning.

We promised to meet Garrus in the capital. I don’t know whether that’s possible now, but we’ll probably run into the marquis sooner or later. If you have

anything on Seldio that would help, we'd love to hear it.

"I see."

Dias had finished interrogating Seldio's servant. She was sure to know something we didn't.

"Oh, she was very cooperative. Told us everything we wanted her to say."

That was a gruesome way of putting it. Fran didn't understand what he meant, but I had a feeling Dias was an expert at leading suspects during interrogations. He must have used her testimony to blow the whistle on Seldio.

"Things wouldn't have worked out so smoothly in the past."

"Why not?"

"There is a certain Count Olmes who is a part of the marquis' faction. His son was a living lie detector, and he made use of him every chance he got."

A skill that could see through lies? That sounded familiar.

"His name is Baron Allsand and he was based in Alessa. You came from there. Ever heard of him?"

So it *was* that idiot baron! He's the one we stole Essence of Falsehood from! Count Olmes was August Allsand's father, if I remembered correctly.

"He had a skill that could detect lies a hundred percent of the time. What do you think would happen if he abused such a skill?"

He'd be free to commit perjury whenever he wanted.

"Correct. If he heard the true testimony of Seldio's servant and declared it a lie, everyone would take his word for it."

August had used the same trick to entrap Fran once.

"But one day, the baron lost that skill of his. He was nothing but a spoiled brat without it, and Count Olmes never let him see the light of day after that. Without the baron, he no longer has a way of dismissing testimonies against himself."

I was only thinking of protecting Fran when I stole Baron Allsand's Essence of Falsehood. I didn't think it would come up now.

“Combined with the hard evidence of the drugs he used on Seldio, he has nowhere to run. Seldio held the title of a baron, so House Lesseps will have to bear the weight of his crimes.”

House Lesseps was a branch family of the Aschtners. Its downfall would severely affect the marquis’ power.

“While we can’t pin everything Seldio did on the marquis, it will certainly raise eyebrows. Their guild conspirators are a different matter. Let’s just say that you get axed if you cooperate with Seldio.”

Here Dias ran his thumb across his neck. He was definitely using the phrase in its literal sense. The man might look like any other old dandy, but he had been running the guild for years. He knew how to be ruthless when guild politics got out of hand.

“We did our best to hide your involvement with his death. Elza made sure to tell everyone present that you didn’t do it. That being said, it’s hard to keep this kind of thing under wraps for long.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“Which is why we started spreading rumors.”

What kind of rumors?

“That Seldio’s killer is actually a male human. Or that I was the one who had him assassinated. Or Forlund was the one who killed him. And so on and so forth. Of course, we planted the obvious rumor of the Black Lightning Princess being involved with his death somehow, but you’re a celebrity around these parts. People tell tall tales about celebrities, and those tall tales are just that.”

Dias was hiding a tree in the middle of a forest.

“The subsequent investigation and interrogation garnered more attention than Seldio’s death, probably because Forlund and I were directly involved with it.”

Will you two be all right?

“Ha ha ha. We’ll be fine. We’re A-Ranks, remember? We have enough clout with adventurers and governments. Messing with us means picking a fight with

the whole guild. The marquis isn't stupid enough to do that."

I hope you're right...

"In any case, it's difficult to keep Fran's involvement completely under wraps, so do be careful when you run into Aschtner."

"Hm. Got it."

We left Dias and made our way to our final stop in Ulmutt: Lumina's dungeon. Fortunately, we could teleport to her to save time. We had informed her of our impending visit before she left Dias' office, so she was prepared to welcome us.

Our first subject was the details of the Murelia incident. We already told her everything we could about Kiara, and we figured she would want to know our encounter with the other Black Cat.

Lumina's reaction was more subdued than we expected—she looked nostalgic and filled with remorse as we told her the story. She had expected Murelia to have died a long time ago. Five hundred years was nothing to scoff at. She was also aware that her former master was driven insane by the Evil One.

"Oh, Lady Murelia..."

Lumina shed quiet tears as an emotional whirlwind tore through her. Once she had regained her composure, we left Fran and Jet to their steak and tea so we could talk in private. I hovered over the table since I couldn't sit down.

Sorry, but there's something I wanted to ask you.

"Something you couldn't share with Fran?"

Not exactly...

I told her about my conversation with Murelia about the dungeon. Apparently, I wasn't affected by the seal placed upon her by the dungeon master because I was a servant of the Goddess of Chaos.

Do you remember how you couldn't tell Fran about the evolution requirements? Maybe you're free to talk if I'm the only one here.

"I see."

You might be able to share information if Fran isn't around. Do you mind if I

ask a few questions?

“Very well. Go ahead.”

What is a servant of the Goddess of Chaos?

That’s what the goddess and Murelia called me, and I still didn’t know what it meant. All I knew was that I was now involved with the Goddess of Chaos somehow.

“Well...a servant of the gods is a creature which the gods create and then imbue their power into.”

Does that sound like me to you?

“I do not know... But if you are such a servant, then it is very likely that you are involved with the dungeon somehow.”

You think so?

“Unlike the other gods, the Goddess of Chaos is only involved with this world through the dungeons. Dungeon masters possess Chaos Magic to operate the dungeons, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of the Goddess of Chaos creating anything on her own. As far as I know, her servants are the dungeon masters, along with all the creatures under them.”

So I was either a dungeon master or something created using the power of a dungeon. I definitely wasn’t the former. Maybe the mysterious soul inside me was one who was a servant of the Goddess of Chaos.

So we’re back to square one...

I thought for sure that I would learn something from Lumina, but the dungeon master didn’t know, either.

Isn’t there anyone else I can ask about the goddess...?

It would be really nice to just ask her in person, but I didn’t think you could invoke the gods for a simple chat.

Chapter 2:

Life in the Capital

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since we left Ulmutt.

“Is that the capital?”

It should be. It sure looks big enough to be one.

“It’s huge.”

“Woof!”

The capital unfolded below us as Jet ran across the morning sky. I’d thought Bulbola was big, but this city was downright gigantic. The capital of Granzell possessed a certain dignity that the port city lacked.

The capital was also larger than the Beastman Nation’s capital, Bestia. Its walls were on a different scale. They dwarfed the trees surrounding it, and I figured they were probably over fifty meters tall. Perfect for a world filled with monsters.

The walls weren’t only formidable—they were decorated with elaborate spires and roofs. The combination of beauty and strength was perfect for the kingdom’s capital.

The city was located a little bit to the east of Granzell’s center, southeast of Alessa and north of Ulmutt. This used to be the center of the kingdom back when Granzell was founded, but history had resulted in the center shifting slightly east.

Two hundred years ago, there were talks of moving the capital closer to the sea. It petered out after they realized how much money it would take to build a new city at the scale of the old one.

Take us down, boy.

“Woof.”

“Hm.”

As always, we would land close to the city before proceeding to the gates on foot.

There was a long, serpentine line to get into the capital. Judging from what we'd seen from the air, it was even longer than the line to get into Ulmutt. Dias had warned us about auction season crowds, but there were a lot more people than I'd anticipated. The line was formed as close to the walls as possible, as a straight line would stretch too far away from the city for it to be safe. Guards were posted along the line to maintain the peace.

Let's get in line. We're in for a long wait.

"Hm."

We spotted the back of the line and landed somewhere close. The front of the line disappeared by the time we touched down.

As in Ulmutt, people hawked their wares to those waiting in line, but the capital did things on a grander level. There were enough shops here to make a village marketplace. I mean, they had actual *shophouses* instead of temporary stalls. Granted, they didn't look as permanent as shops in the city, but they at least had a storefront. I wondered if they were set up specifically for auction season. The people in line had enough time to browse their wares due to how slowly the line moved. What's more, they could signal a shopkeeper if they saw something they wanted to buy from far away. Most of the storefronts reminded me of the stores in Japanese train stations, perfect for buying things on the go. The wares differed from store to store, and they were varied enough to entertain us for the time being.

"I can see the back of the line."

That took a while.

A quick head count suggested that the number of people in line was close to three thousand—not including residents, nobles, and registered visitors. They had their own gate, and I shuddered to do the math that included them.

The people in our line consisted of first-time and annual visitors. They were only here for the auction. Looking at the crowd, I grew worried about whether we would actually be able to find Garrus. He was a lone dwarf in a huge city,

after all. But I decided to save my anxiety for after we entered the gates.

Nothing to do now but wait.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Jet was with us now. I thought about letting him stand by in the shadows, but there were a good amount of people who had their monsters with them in the crowd. There were direwolves like Jet, and a gigantic horse which stood at a staggering three meters pulling an appropriately large carriage, among other things. Jet’s giant form would trigger a mass panic, but his large dog form looked absolutely pedestrian compared to the other monsters in line. I also made sure to make his familiar collar as visible as possible.

Jet’s current mission was to serve as Fran’s mobile fur couch. No one would be stupid enough to mess with the girl on a giant wolf.

Let’s play word association.

Sure, it’s been a while.

Hm!

She still remembered the game we played back in the lines of Ulmutt. She must have really enjoyed it.

Today’s subject: food names.

Oh? You dare challenge me on the subject of food? You’ll regret that!

I’m going to win.

All right, here we go!

Hm!

Two hours had passed since then, and we were still in line. After two. Whole. Hours.

After tiring of word association, Fran and Jet were now playing Othello. We bought the board from a board game merchant in line. They had a great grasp

on human psychology.

Fran and Jet had played tic-tac-toe before this, but they adapted quickly and grew bored after a hundred straight draws. They didn't just play board games, of course. They ate, drank, and talked with the merchants around us.

The merchant immediately ahead of us was called Rev (thirty-one years old). He sold dried fruit for a living, and Fran got along with him after buying some raisins and apple crisps.

Behind us was Menan (forty-one years old), the incense seller. Unlike Rev, he came on a small carriage driven by a donkey. He also sold aromatic wood chips, and Fran was very interested in learning how they could be used to smoke meats.

The two merchants rubbernecked Fran and Jet, but they were friendly enough that they allowed them to backseat their game.

"Whoa there, Fran. That's not the play you want to make. You should place your piece here instead."

"But then he'll take this piece."

"You have to think several steps ahead. You let him take that, so you can take this."

"I see."

As Rev coached Fran, so Menan coached Jet.

"Put it here, Jet."

"Arf?"

"Sure, she'll take a corner. But that won't matter if you keep playing to the end."

"Woof..."

Here was a middle-aged man telling a wolf where to place his Othello pieces, and the wolf was taking him seriously! It was a bizarre sight, but not one that was unfamiliar to Menan. Apparently, there were a lot of monsters who could understand people.

“Oooh...”

“I knew it...”

Meanwhile, Fran was getting some weird glances from the people around her. They weren't bothering her, but they didn't hide their stares, either. She was gaining a lot of attention from the beastmen in line. News of the Black Lightning Princess was spreading, and fast.

Her Stealth Evolution skill was meant to conceal this fact, but the beastmen seemed to know about her all the same. Word had probably spread of the Black Lightning Princess's evolution because of what happened at the tournament, and with it, word that she had a skill to conceal said evolution.

A description of her had also spread among the beastmen, together with the fact that she traveled with a black direwolf. That was probably a dead giveaway more than anything else. Perhaps some had even watched her fight in Ulmutt. A few of the beastmen looking her way definitely seemed like they had seen her once before.

They all paid her respect, and some even clasped their hands in her direction.

Doesn't it bother you?

What?

Fran didn't even look like she had noticed. She was used to this kind of attention after the treatment she received in the Beastman Nation. I decided not to do anything about it, since her admirers were harmless observers.

Four hours in and we finally made it inside the capital. It was a long but peaceful wait, owing to the fact that no adventurers came to pick a fight with us—unlike what happened in Ulmutt and Bestia.

We parted ways with our merchant companions and made our way to the Adventurers' Guild. Gammod had suggested that we introduce ourselves at the capital's guild before we did anything else.

There are a lot of old buildings here.

Hm.

The buildings looked like they had been around for over a thousand years. Okay, maybe that was pushing it, but they were at *least* two hundred years old.

The pavement in the alleyways was blackened with time, in stark contrast to the main road. Their paths twisted and turned, creating a maze within the city. The houses here were probably built before the thought of urban planning crossed anyone's mind.

It was also the reason we were currently lost.

We should've taken the main road instead of opting for a shortcut.

Should I take to the rooftops?

Let's not draw attention to ourselves in the capital, hm?

Many municipal offices were located here, too—offices on which we might accidentally trespass if we started jumping across the roofs. Walking was preferable for the moment. It's not like we were in a hurry anyway.

We'll look for a way back to the main street for now.

Okay.

The districts near the city walls were better organized. The area we were in was probably developed during a period of rapid expansion. Extensions and renovations were carried out with reckless abandon in order to fill the gaps.

Rows of apartment buildings stood next to each other with alleyways in between. The alleys were filled with stores, and we heard the sound of people bartering as we walked by. We went through underpasses and roads which cut through the apartments. We were as lost as wandering souls, but Fran and Jet seemed to be enjoying themselves.

I think we would've been a lot more worried if the place was as quiet as a ghost town, but the rowdy life of the capital put us at ease. Pubs, diners, and dubious shops all stood next to one another. Drunks lay unconscious in the road, loose women seduced potential clients, and shifty men shuffled down dark alleyways. Their voices came together to produce a cacophonous symphony of the street. It was a dangerous place, to be sure, but it was definitely alive.

Fran didn't mind the atmosphere one bit. She skipped with restrained excitement and hummed as we made our way. People stared at us, but we mostly ignored them. The weak ones weren't strong enough to be a threat, and the strong ones knew well enough to leave Fran alone. You had to be a real idiot to insist on tailing her.

We're not making any progress.

Four-and five-story apartment buildings blocked our view of landmarks like the royal palace and temple. Fran had directional skills, but they were pretty much useless in these infinite corridors even if she knew where to go.

I'll go ask someone.

Go for it.

But who to ask? I guess we could start by going inside a nearby shop. Suddenly, Fran turned around and began walking in the opposite direction.

What are you doing, Fran?

I'm going to ask for directions out of here.

I didn't get a chance to find out who she was planning to ask.

"Hey, do you know where the Adventurers' Guild is?"

"Wha— How did you know I was here?!"

"Huh?"

Fran was talking to a young man who had tailed her for the last thirty minutes. He was probably part of a gang who controlled this territory. He was surprised when Fran spotted him, but in reality, he wasn't very good at following her. The man didn't even bother to conceal his presence. Fortunately, Fran ruled him out as a hostile because of it. But that might just be a testament to his strength.

"I want to go to the Adventurers' Guild."

"Whuzzat? The guild?" the young man said.

His response was a lot more subdued. I was expecting more yelling and threatening, but I guess getting detected by a girl with a sword on her back and

a wolf by her side was enough of a hint. “Your money or your life” wasn’t the play to make here. A small fee would suffice.

“Sure, I’ll take you there. For the right price,” he sneered.

“Cut the crap,” another man said.

Fran turned toward the voice and saw that it belonged to an older man with sharp eyes. This man was tailing us for about the same time as the younger man, but he was much better at stealth. I’d say he was better at concealment than most scout-class adventurers. Fran knew she couldn’t let her guard down against this guy.

However, the older man avoided eye contact with her and glared at the young man instead.

“What’s up, Calc?”

“Don’t mess with that girl.”

“I wasn’t going to. I’m just giving her a fair price for taking her to the guild,” the young man complained. He thought Calc was trying to steal his mark. The older man made it clear that he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Just get outta here. This doesn’t concern you.”

“Not without an explanation, I won’t.”

“It’s none of your damn business!” Calc yelled. “Scram!”

“A-all right, fine!”

The young man backed off, but not without glaring at Fran to send a message. That look earned him a kick in the back. He rolled across the streets and looked at Calc in fearful disbelief.

“Don’t make me repeat myself unless you feel like dying.”

“S-sorry!”

Calc underscored his final threat with Intimidate. The young man scampered away on his knees. Finally, Calc bowed his head to Fran.

“Sorry you had to see that. Boy’s too dumb for his own good. He really didn’t mean anything bad by it, I promise.” He spoke to Fran like she was much older

than him.

“Hm?”

“W-well, it’s real nice of you not to be mad. So, you wanted to go to the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Hm. Can you show me the way?”

“Course. Right this way.” Calc motioned at her to follow his lead.

“I just need directions.”

“Allow me to take you there myself, if you will. He isn’t the only idiot in these parts who’ll try to pull that kind of stuff on you. And gods help us if you lose your temper here...”

Calc couldn’t hide his shiver. He possessed a sight skill called Wimpsight, which allowed him to see the difference in power between him and an opponent. To him, Fran must look like a monster, and he might get caught in her rampage if she lost her temper in his district.

Intentions aside, Calc wasn’t lying about wanting to take us to the guild. He also knew the streets well, since he probably grew up in them.

“All right. Take me there.”

“You got it.”

We were back on the main street a few minutes later. It made me feel stupid for ever getting lost in the first place.

Calc was very polite the whole way through. He didn’t do anything dirty like lead Fran into a trap. He took her to the guild, bowed, and then left. He truly was terrified of her—he twitched every time she asked him about the city.

Take this turn and we should be there...

“Is that the one?”

Oh yeah. Even has the nameplate on it.

It didn’t take long for us to see the guild hall.

Finally. You know, this place is smaller than I thought.

“Smaller than Bulbola.”

I thought the capital would have a grand guild hall to go with it. This one was bigger than the ones in Alessa and Ulmutt, but it was half the size of the guild in Bulbola. Maybe the building extended downwards instead of up.

Let's go in.

“Hm.”

The guild hall's lack of size was more than made up for with its ambience. A gigantic tapestry graced its stone walls, and at its center was the emblem of the Adventurers' Guild. A wine-red carpet and a sleek wooden counter only added to the dignity of the guild at the capital. The decor did well in highlighting the guild's history. If Bulbola was an expensive resort, the capital was a historic hotel.

They didn't have a front desk like in Bulbola, but the counters were neatly organized into ranks. We quickly spotted the counter for C-and D-Rank adventurers and joined the line. There was a burly fighter in front of us, and he turned at Fran's footsteps. He looked at her for a few seconds before asking, “What rank are you, miss?”

“Hm? C.”

“Great.”

Fran flashed him her guild card and that was enough for the man. He didn't start an argument about whether it was real or fake. That was for the receptionist to decide. For his part, he knew that Fran wasn't weak, and he wasn't in the mood for trouble.

Of course, some people in the E-Rank line refused to accept that fact. They didn't look too happy that a little girl was in the intermediate class. The newly graduated F-Ranks were about ready to throw fists.

The receptionist tending to the A-and B-Rank adventurers was the first to notice. She was an old woman, and I have to say that she probably wasn't a looker when she was young, which made her a rare case among receptionists. I could tell why they hired her for the job: She looked strong. Strong enough to beat up misbehaving F-Ranks. She probably snagged the receptionist job

because she was a former adventurer; and a high-rank adventurer, at that.

The woman motioned to Fran and said, “You there. Are you the Black Lightning Princess we’ve been hearing about?”

“Hm.” Fran nodded. Her nickname had traveled all the way to the capital. There were gasps around the guild hall, some of disbelief.

“I see. Come on over, sweetie.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure. You’re our rising star. The twelve-year-old C-Rank who beat an A-Rank and a former A-Rank at the tournament. No one would mind if I gave you a little preferential treatment. And if anyone does, I’ll make sure to give them a whooping.”

“All right.”

The old receptionist had clout. There were no complaints from our fellow adventurers after she made it clear that Fran had won her approval. Some were still incredulous, but no one was stupid enough to voice their gripes.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Hm. I’m Fran. C-Rank adventurer.”

“And I’m Stellia.”

“Hi, Stellia.”

Her name sent a shiver down my spine.

What’s up, Teacher?

N-nothing. I just thought she’d be really good at baking cookies for a second.

“Hm?”

Stellia asked Fran why she was here, and she answered by giving her Guildmaster Gammod’s letter of recommendation.

“I’m here for the auction.”

“Are you? All right, I’ll take a look at that.”

“Hm.”

Stellia opened the letter and read it. I figured it was the usual message asking them to take care of Fran. The receptionist was far more interested in the signature. It emanated mana, and Stellia touched a crystal to the seal.

“Everything checks out. You must be something else for Sir Gammod to have written a letter on your behalf.”

“You know Gammod?”

“Excuse you, Fran... That would be *Sir* Gammod.”

“I know him.”

“Doesn’t sound like it to me! Back in my day, Dragon Hammer Gammod was part of the legendary party along with Dragon Hunter Phelms, Dragon Twist Dias, and Dragon Bind Eiworth!” Stellia explained. Gammod’s A-Rank party was her dream team. She spoke of them with the rapid clarity of an idol otaku talking about her favorite unit.

Gammod and his party traveled far and wide hunting dragons. We had seen Gammod and Phelms fight firsthand, and had Identified Dias when we met him. They would be more than capable of taking down dragons with an additional team member.

The party disbanded five years after it was founded. First, Dias left after being appointed Guildmaster of Ulmutt. Then Eiworth, the mage of the group, broke up with Gammod and Phelms over a disagreement in party policy. It was not a peaceful separation.

Eiworth... The name rang a bell. It was the name of the guild that tried to get Fran to join them after the tournament. The Eiworth Mage Guild had come across like a shady secret society. This Eiworth was probably the one who founded it. Phelms seemed to be aware of their circumstances, and Dias knew them well enough to be hostile toward them. That was probably because of the discord they had with their founder while he was part of the team.

Eiworth was a mage who used Frost Magic and Deadly Venom Magic. I hoped we would never meet him, but we should be prepared for those magicks if we do.

“Excuse me... I got a little heated.”

Stellia stopped herself before she could go on any further. Fran answered with her signature “Hm.” Stellia was much calmer after being able to gush about her idols.

“Anyway, the Guildmaster has a guest at the moment. You can have a seat at the tables there if you don’t mind waiting for a bit.”

She pointed at some classy-looking tables next to the counters. This was probably where the guild had their guests wait.

“Hm. All right.”

There was nothing we could do if the Guildmaster was occupied. We weren’t expecting to see them immediately, anyway.

All eyes were on Fran as she went to sit down. People weren’t grumbling, but they were certainly whispering about her. No one approached her, though, possibly due to Stellia’s good graces. No one wanted to get on her bad side after seeing the receptionist be so friendly with her.

It was then that a party of five approached us. The members seemed to be in their fifties and they were all very strong. They looked the part, and they certainly could walk the part. They were a veteran party, and they could’ve given Colbert a run for his money in the fighting tournament.

The strongest was their leader. He was a big, burly man with short, dark green hair. He had the strong carved face of a gorilla...an aging gorilla. That said, he definitely wasn’t a beastman—just a man who looked like a beast. At two meters high, he was tall enough to intimidate with his stature. But he was also wearing full plate armor, which concealed his bulging muscles. I felt like I was looking at an iron golem.

The man and his companions were as dignified as they were intimidating. It was clear to me that the other four members of his party were stronger than we were. If anything, their strength reminded me of Amanda and Forlund. It was enough for Fran to ready herself for battle. She didn’t sense any hostility, but she wasn’t about to let her guard down. If push came to shove, she would pull me out in an instant.

The five glanced over at Fran and actually smiled, showing their maturity.

They walked over to the counter and had a friendly chat with Stellia. They were very polite for a bunch of adventurers, and the big man was the nicest of them all. I almost felt bad for thinking he was a gorilla at the start. Then again, gorillas were often called the wise men of the forest, so I guess my first impression of him wasn't too far off the mark. If anything, he was leagues better than people who looked human, but were actually chimps on the inside. Petty punks could do well just by imitating him.

The party was reporting their quest results as I was thinking obscenely rude things about their leader. Said leader then cast a casual glance at Fran.

"Stellia... Is she the one?"

He had heard about Fran before.

"Good eye, ace. She is."

"I knew it..." He approached her and said, "Are you the Black Lightning Princess?"

"Hm."

"You're as strong as the rumors say."

"You're strong, too."

"I *do* work out."

There wasn't a hint of irony or condescension in his voice. He talked to Fran the way he would talk to an equal. The other adventurers in the hall began murmuring. He must have been famous enough to warrant the attention, and they were probably shocked that someone as strong as he was talked so casually with Fran.

"I hate to impose..."

"Hm?"

"But would you mind sparring with me if you have the time?"

"Spar with you?"

"Yes, nothing too intense, of course. I am just so intrigued by how strong you've gotten at such a young age. There are training grounds in the guild hall

we can use. Would that be all right?"

"I see."

I didn't see that coming. He didn't look like the kind of blood knight who would say hello by asking people to spar. If anything, his calm demeanor gave the impression that he was usually the voice of sanity.

But he was still a top-class adventurer, and top-class adventurers were always interested in strong opponents.

What to do...

Can I?

Fran was raring to go. She would throw down right here if that's what the man wanted. She definitely wasn't going to turn him down. The man could sense her fighting spirit and replied in kind. The air strained with tension as the two would-be combatants stared each other down. No one in the hall could stop them if they wanted to.

Sure. As long as we're sparring in the guild.

He was probably a decent guy since Stellia hadn't said a word against him.

"Sure."

"You have my gratitude."

The man bowed his head. Murmurs increased among the other adventurers. We now had the attention of everyone in the guild hall. We should probably hold back on the flashy stuff with this much of an audience.

But then the man spoke to Stellia, loudly so that everyone could hear. "It would be really nice if we could fight in private. Everyone here knows my tricks by now, but I don't want to make a show of the young lady's abilities."

"No problem," Stellia said. "I'll keep them out for you, don't worry."

"Thank you."

He was a big man who sweated the small stuff... Not too shabby!

Now that I thought about it, we didn't even know the big man's name.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Tell me your name.”

“Aah, where are my manners? I am Zefield. The capital is my base of operation.”

“I’m Fran. I don’t have a base of operation.”

From the way the group talked to Stellia, I had a feeling they were capital adventurers.

Can’t wait to see how he fights.

Hm!

Having learned the man’s name, Fran happily made her way to the training grounds. Zefield and his companions looked slightly confused, while the rest of the hall was in stunned silence.

“What’s wrong?” Fran asked.

“N-nothing. I suppose I was getting too big for my britches there,” Zefield said.

“Hm?”

“Fran, are you telling me you don’t know who he is?” Stellia asked.

“He’s Zefield. He just told me.”

“Ugh...” Stellia let out a deep sigh. I knew why she was exasperated. She was probably expecting Fran to at least gasp with recognition upon meeting Zefield.

“Oh, it’s all right. We’ve only been working the capital for a few years. You can’t expect her to know us just from that,” Zefield said in Fran’s defense.

“Yes, I can!” Stellia said. “You should at least know the A-Ranks in your country.”

Stellia made a good point. A-Rank adventurers were too famous to escape recognition. Fran was the odd one out here, and it felt like she was now garnering more attention from her fellow adventurers for not knowing who

Zefield was.

Stellia rubbed her temples. She seemed to be really into high-rank adventurers. She could somewhat forgive Fran for not knowing Gammod's party, but not recognizing an active A-Rank was too much. She slammed her fist on the table, leaned into Fran's face, and gave her a crash course on Zefield's party.

"Now listen up. They are Sword of the West Wind—an A-Rank party. They are the *only* active A-Rank party in a country filled with adventurers. They are a party of elite adventurers renowned for their reliability and completion rate! And you've never heard of them?!"

"Hm."

"Gaaah! This is the problem with you blood knights. You only want to make yourselves stronger!"

The old receptionist knew what kind of adventurer Fran was just by looking at her.

"The big man here is Sky Wall Zefield, A-Rank adventurer! He is one of Granzell's five—wait, make that four—A-Rank adventurers!"

Stellia quickly brought us up to speed on Sword of the West Wind in under three minutes. The party was made up of B-Ranks—I knew they were strong enough to take on Colbert—and they were the most reliable party in the country, beating even Forlund and Amanda in ratings.

"He is also famous for being the only voice of sanity among the A-Ranks."

"What do you mean?"

Now that Stellia pointed it out, the A-Ranks did tend to be a little loopy. Zefield stood out for being the only sane man in that class of adventurers. Having seen our fair share of crazy A-Ranks, the receptionist was right.

"Amanda and Forlund are pretty weird, I guess."

That was putting it lightly.

"I think you're in the same category..."

“Hm?”

Fran tilted her head, but I agreed with what Stellia was saying. She wasn't as strange as Forlund or Amanda, but Fran definitely had her quirks.

“Thank you for your kind words, Stellia. But I think we should get moving now.”

“Oh, of course,” Stellia said, looking apologetic. “Sorry about that. Here are the keys. Do whatever you want. Just don't kill each other. Got it?”

“Understood. Besides, we have Winn if anything bad happens.”

“Ready to patch you up.” A beautiful woman with a slender figure and blonde hair waved at us. She was still pretty despite having wrinkles; if anything, her wrinkles only added to her mature beauty. Winn was the healer of Sword of the West Wind, and she was more lady than witch. I was sure she had healed her fair share of gruesome injuries as a B-Rank adventurer.

“You won't have to worry about a broken leg. Or two!”

She was certainly confident in her abilities. Besides, I was always around to play healer if push came to shove. I would be able to manage everything short of a fatal injury.

“Let's get going, then.”

“Hm!”

We headed down the staircase to the underground training grounds. Zefield unlocked the door to reveal a large dome with mana-reinforced walls. We wouldn't have to worry about damaging anything here.

No Grand Spells and no using Sword God Form, all right? You can use Awaken, at most.

I know. I'll take him on alone. You and Jet just sit back and watch.

You got it.

Woof!

Fran wanted to see how she measured up to an A-Rank.

The two combatants walked to the center of the arena, but Zefield started

stretching instead of immediately starting the fight. It was quite a rare sight to behold. Adventurers were the type of people who immediately threw down at the first sign of battle. For them, every training match was a real fight, and therefore they didn't care about warming up much.

Unlike most adventurers, Zefield wasn't a muscle-brained battle junkie. "You should get warmed up too, Princess. It helps you move better," he said.

"Hm. All right."

"It looks like you've done this before. Was this already part of your training regimen?"

"Hm. Teacher taught me how to do it."

I taught Fran the protocol of warming up and cooling down soon after we first met. Zefield was quite interested in seeing how different her warm-up was from his.

"Did he come with you to the capital? I would love to learn from him."

"Teacher is everywhere and nowhere. You can never tell where he'll be."

The gorilla-man's shoulders slumped with genuine disappointment.

"I'll teach you instead," Fran said.

Zefield was surprised at her proposal. "Are you sure?" he said. "Don't you need to keep such secret techniques hidden?"

Honestly, it was just something I remembered from junior high P.E. We had no reason to hide it at this point, since Fran had already passed the knowledge onto other adventurers. If anything, this was a perfect chance to win a favor from an A-Rank.

In the end, Fran taught Zefield and his party the secrets of warming up for the next thirty minutes. Fran was very spartan in her training, saying things like, "Not like that," "Not even close," and "Absolutely wrong," but Sword of the West Wind proved their mettle as an A-Rank party. They learned everything they could from Fran, treating her as their instructor and not as an inferior.

They really were good people. So much that I almost doubted they were high ranks.

“That was a lot to take in. Thank you very much.”

“It was quite fun, too!”

“Hm.”

Fran and Sword of the West Wind were all smiles after working up a good sweat.

But the two combatants hadn’t forgotten their reason for being in the training grounds. The A-Rank adventurer would spar with the girl who’d beaten another A-Rank adventurer. Sword of the West Wind calmly watched as the two combatants took to their corners, but the lower-rank adventurers above us were probably feeling sick from the pressure Fran and Zefield gave off.

“Shall we begin?”

“Hm!”

The match began when the combatants signaled to each other that they were ready. They didn’t need a bell to tell them that.

Fran got the first hit in.

“Tsch!”

She did a small poke before rushing behind Zefield for a heavy attack.

“That was good!”

“You too!”

But Zefield anticipated her move and blocked it without much effort. He moved quick for a heavy fighter. It was like he was wearing light armor instead of plate. He didn’t counterattack, however. He just took the one-meter-wide buckler off his back, banged on it, and laughed. He was daring her to find a chink in his defense.

“Hm!”

Fran grinned. She accepted his challenge and kicked it up a notch. She began using Wind Magic and Air Hop to get around him. Sometimes she would go for his ankles, and at other times she would strike from overhead. Her movements were fast, tricky, and hard to keep up with.

But Zefield managed to respond to her offense perfectly. He dodged and blocked her attacks. The most she had gotten was a clash. Zefield was surprising in many ways, but he was definitely a tank with a shield. His defense was immaculate.

“Yaaaah!”

“Amazing! You can go even faster!”

“You too. I still haven’t landed a hit.”

Zefield blocked and dodged every one of Fran’s fast and furious pokes. Though their fighting styles were polar opposites, they were equally enjoying the fight. Their enjoyment would be lost to the untrained eye, since it probably looked like they were trying to kill each other at the moment. Fran and Zefield had crossed the line of an ordinary sparring match several seconds into the fight. Zefield’s party looked on with stone faces. They knew he had to give it his all to keep up with her.

But this wasn’t Fran’s maximum speed.

“I can go faster.”

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it? Do it!”

“Awaken...!”

Zefield smiled. He could feel the intense mana radiating from Fran’s body. “Ha ha ha! You certainly are as powerful as they say!”

“Get ready.”

Fran’s speed was far beyond the average C-Rank. Actually, B-Ranks would probably have a hard time keeping up with her. In fact, Zefield’s party members strained to keep track of where Fran was. Shrill noises filled the arena as I scraped against the metal of his shield.

Zefield continued blocking. It might look like Fran had the advantage because she was on the offense, but she could barely land a solid hit. The A-Rank was worth his salt. He could read our moves like a book.

Fran would need to go faster in order to hit him, but she would need to use Flashing Thunderclap at that point, a move which was overkill in a sparring

match. There had to be another way to open him up.

“Haaaa! Stun Bolt!”

“And you can cast spells at this speed!”

Zefield sounded like he was caught by surprise, but he managed to block Fran’s spell. While the Thunder spell would usually shock our opponents through metal armor, Zefield used the powerful barrier surrounding his body to absorb it. He covered every possible plan of attack that Fran had to offer.

“Hrm.”

“I haven’t needed to use my barrier since training!”

“Then take this!”

Fran fired off a stronger spell in frustration. The lightning bolt crashed into Zefield’s barrier and fizzled out as before. But she wasn’t about to give up, and he took her seriously for the first time since the battle began.

“Tch!”

A hole sized perfectly for Zefield’s foot opened up underneath him. The earlier Thunder spell was a distraction so Fran could hit him with this Land spell. Once trapped, she could easily finish him off. But it was not to be. Zefield detected the mana before the spell was invoked and swiveled his gigantic body out of harm’s way.

Fran was anticipating this. She chased after him and brought me down in a downward swing. His shield was formidable, but it would be less effective since he couldn’t brace in mid-air. A well-placed Pressurized Quickdraw should finish him off.

“Raaaah!”

“Good offense, but not good enough!”

Zefield thrust his shield right into my cutting edge, and a shockwave rattled through me like an earthquake. The resonance was unthinkable!

Gah!

“Ugh!”

I wasn't the only one reeling from the shock, either. It blew Fran a good distance away from Zefield, preventing her from continuing her offense. They stared each other down when they landed.

"That was supposed to be an attack...?"

"Correct. You've never fought a shielder before?"

"No."

"I see. Well, you'll learn a lot about shields today. My turn!"

"Bring it on!"

And so the roles were reversed. Zefield closed the distance between us in one leap. Fran tried to dodge the attack, but his movement caught her by surprise. He came at her in a straight line, then turned a sharp angle to chase her when she jumped away. Zefield jabbed at her with his shield, but Fran kicked it, pushing herself away from him.

The maneuver threw Fran off balance, and Zefield caught up with her again. Kicking his shield only sent shockwaves up her foot. It was the same move he used against Pressurized Quickdraw.

"A shield isn't only good for blocking! It can reflect the opponent's attacks, as well!"

Zefield was parrying all of Fran's attacks and counterattacking right after. It was a tactic that could only work with someone of his skill level. Fran healed her feet and used Air Hop to get away from him, but Zefield wasn't letting that move go unpunished.

"Blast Push!"

"Urgh!"

He held his shield with both hands and thrust it into her. Fran used me to block the attack, but it still sent shockwaves up her arm. Zefield was a force to be reckoned with, even if he was just smashing you with a lump of metal.

"Nice block!"

"Your shield feels like a hammer."

“Defense isn’t the only thing it’s good for!”

Zefield came in to attack with his shield again. Fran prepared to block, but then realized that something was different.

“Let’s see how you handle this!”

“Wha...?!”

There were short protrusions on the edge of Zefield’s shield. At first, I thought they were there to increase the potency of his shield bashes, but after he pinned me down with them, I realized that he used them like a swordbreaker. Now he could easily knock me out of Fran’s hands.

“Good response! But I’m not done yet!”

Watch out, Fran!

Danger Sense’s alarms blared when I saw Zefield crouching. What happened next was dangerous enough for me to forget the fact that this was a sparring match. If this were a real fight, I would’ve teleported her out of there.

“Haaaaa! Spiral Bash!”

Zefield’s shield rammed into Fran like a battering ram. Still, she managed to anticipate the attack and readied me to block it, taking the shield’s swordbreaker into consideration. Fran was expecting to block it completely, but I knew that she would fail the instant I touched Zefield’s shield.

This was an attack you had to run *away* from.

Fran staggered as she held on to me. The impact was too great, and I was flung to the far side of the arena.

Teacher!

It’s the shield’s rotation!

Zefield’s shield spun as it hit me. Not only was the shield physically spinning, but the magical barrier which coated the shield spun as well, adding to its potency. The rotational force was enough to send me reeling immediately upon contact. Zefield readied his shield for a follow-up attack as Fran tried to regain her footing. The match was nearing its climax.

Fran could've avoided the attack, but she chose not to. I got ready to heal her as she prepared to take the third shield bash.

"Spiral Bash!"

"Aaaargh!"

The spinning shield sent Fran flying ten meters away like a propeller. It looked like she was skidding across the floor before she rolled to a stop. She looked like she'd been hit by a truck. Zefield's party gasped with concern; their leader had gone too far. If Fran had been any weaker, he might have inflicted irreversible damage.

"So you chose to attack instead of defend... Terrifying." Zefield said, holding his right arm. Fran had managed to land a powerful kick before getting hit. The mana-and skill-charged kick should have shattered every bone in Zefield's arm. Instead, it only broke a single bone.

"Urgh... Ugh... Hurf...!"

Her lungs must be damaged. Fran was wheezing and coughing up blood and bile. All this damage for one broken bone was a very bad trade.

Teacher... Heal me...

On it! Just hang in there!

Hm...

And with that heal, Fran admitted defeat. I was in the middle of healing her guts when Winn came rushing to her side.

"Fran! Can you hear me?"

"Guh..."

"Okay, that's good enough! I'll take that as a yes!"

The healer of the A-Rank party doused Fran with potions and Greater Heals. Her wounds closed up immediately.

"How are you feeling? Does it still hurt?"

"Hm. I'm fine now."

“I’m really sorry for what our leader did. Did you hear that, Zefield? Come and apologize to her!”

“My deepest apologies, Black Lightning Princess.”

“It’s okay. We were sparring. And I learned a lot, too.”

As annoyed as she was with losing, Fran still enjoyed the match and appreciated the opportunity to learn. It wasn’t every day you could fight an accomplished shielder and take a hit from him.

“I got the sense that you still have some aces up your sleeve. I don’t know how the match would’ve gone if you used them.”

“I can say the same for you, and I still lost to your tactics.”

“Ah, well. I’ve been an adventurer for forty years.”

“Hm. I get it.” Fran said. “Thank you very much.” She bowed her head to him.

“And to you,” Zefield said, bowing back. “You have my utmost gratitude.”

“I’ll train more and get stronger. I’ll get so strong that I won’t have to use my trump card to beat you.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Hm.”

Fran looked upon the big man with eyes full of respect. She’d really taken a liking to him, and the feeling appeared to be mutual. Zefield shook her hand with the face of a loving grandfather. They might not have talked much, but they still had a fruitful discussion through their sparring match. They were like two schoolyard delinquents who became unlikely friends after beating the crap out of each other.

Fran returned to the lobby after Zefield and his party left.

“Looks like you had a good match with the old man.”

“Hm. I had fun.”

“You blood knights are all alike.”

“Is the Guildmaster ready?”

“Sorry, not quite.”

Negotiations were taking longer than expected.

You can have tea while you wait.

“Hm.”

Fran sat next to the counter again and took tea and snacks out of our Pocket Dimension.

Uhh, I thought you were just going to have tea.

I am.

There was, in fact, tea in her glass. But a whole smorgasbord of food now crowded the cramped table. There were pancakes and pies—pancakes were Fran’s favorite, next to curry. Cookies were a staple of teatime, so that was all right. I suppose mitarashi dango and daifuku could work with Western-style tea, and steak was a traditional beastman snack. All this I was willing to accept as part of teatime, but fried rice and curry? That was pushing it too far.

“Yummy.”

Well, I suppose she was starving after that intense sparring match.

Remember to eat your greens, Fran.

“Hm. Got it.”

If she was going to eat a feast, it might as well be a well-balanced feast.

Ten minutes passed.

“Munch, munch.”

“Excuse me... I didn’t notice our lobby turning into a cafeteria.”

“Munch?”

A woman approached Fran as she was having her hefty snack. She was a beautiful woman with blue hair tied up in a bun. She looked calm and collected, like she could probably run the entire guild by herself.

She appeared to be grumpy when she saw Fran, watching her with narrowed eyes. She looked to be in her late twenties, if she were human. Her sclerae were

black and her pupils were green. She must be a half-insect beastman like Eugene, the alchemist we met in Bulbola. She lacked his feelers, though, so she probably wasn't a bee beastman like he was.

Halflings didn't look as old as their pure-blooded counterparts. Eugene was sixty, I believe, and he only looked like he was in his late forties. By that logic, this woman was probably about forty. She was definitely a fighter, though, and a strong one at that. While she wasn't one to show her hostility to someone who was eating, Fran only noticed she was there at the last second.

"Hm? Who are you?"

"I'm the Guildmaster here. You must be the Black Lightning Princess."

The Guildmaster sat opposite Fran. She reached for a cookie and Fran didn't stop her. She still kept a close eye on her, though, and she might have said something if the woman had gone for the curry and pancakes instead. In fact, she might have ended up using Menace on her. That would've made for quite the incident. I would have had to do my best to pacify Fran at that point.

"Hurf hi hrm."

"Slow down," the Guildmaster said. "Swallow your food first."

"Hm."

She was nicer than she looked. I guess her stone-cold expression was just how she usually appeared. Fran finished her mouthful before introducing herself.

"I'm Fran. C-Rank adventurer."

"My name is Erianthe. I'm the Guildmaster of the capital."

"Hm. Munch, munch."

"I came to fetch you so we could go to my office..."

I thought that was a very thoughtful thing to do, but then she explained that they were currently understaffed.

"Most of the staff is busy preparing for the auction. And I can't afford to take Stellia off reception duty—no one else can handle high ranks," she muttered. "I'm not exactly free, either," Erianthe continued, looking at Fran's mound of

food.

I am so sorry about this.

“We’ll clean up as soon as we’re done,” Fran muttered between bites.

“Well, that’s all right. Take your time and finish your meal.”

“Munch, munch.”

Erianthe really was nicer than she looked. She looked as tense as before, but she felt more relaxed as she nibbled on a cookie.

“So, tell me again why you’re here.”

Ten minutes later, we were in Erianthe’s office, and there was clutter everywhere. Clothes joined the ranks of paperwork on the floor. There went my idea of her being an efficient worker. It must take a lot of courage for the Guildmaster to show others her shipwreck of an office. That, or she was so used to seeing the mess that she was now numb to it.

“Hm. I want to join the auction.”

“Buying? Selling? Both?”

“I want to see the equipment auctions.”

“I see... Honestly, I don’t think you’ll find anything better than what you’re already wearing, but I suppose that’s all right. Is that all?”

“I want to buy some magicite, too.”

“That can also be arranged. We’re the ones running that particular auction. Do you know how auctions work?”

Fran shook her head. “No.”

“Then allow me to explain.”

There were different auctions which depended on the category of items sold. For example, equipment could only be sold in the equipment auctions and nowhere else. The equipment could either be cursed or be incredibly powerful, which could throw the whole capital into chaos if it fell into the wrong hands,

hence the necessity for background checks on both buyers and sellers.

The only exceptions to this rule were items brought in on the day of the auction. They would be sold at the carry-on auction. The screening in this auction was stricter than all the rest, and they wouldn't sell items that were the least bit suspicious. Items too difficult to identify with advanced manatech would be deemed too dangerous to sell.

"Buyers and products alike must go through a strict screening procedure."

"What does that entail?"

"We check your background, whether you have a criminal record, that sort of thing. Equipment and manatech are frequently used to commit crimes, you see. But it is easier for adventurers to get auction licenses. You won't have to worry about yours. We'll get you a license so you can attend any auction you want."

"Are you sure?"

"It'll be Gammod's head if anything bad happens."

We'd better be on our best behavior, then.

"But even without his recommendation," Erianthe said. "I would like to be on your good side." She grinned mischievously, like a five-year-old with an evil scheme.

"There aren't that many women who are high rank, you see—or even on par with you, really. Adventurers are enough of an old boys' club that some of them were stupid enough to complain when I was appointed the Guildmaster of the capital. I shut them up in the end, though."

"Us girls have to look after each other" was the gist of what Erianthe was saying. The majority of high-rank adventurers were male: Jean, Rigdith, Urslars, Forlund, Colbert. The rule even applied to Guildmasters and retired adventurers like Klimt, Gammod, Dias, and Phelms. The only female high ranks we had come across so far were Amanda and Erianthe. Mea and Kiara weren't quite there, and as for Elza? Well, she was technically in the male slot.

"We just lost some female Guildmasters because of that idiot Seldio, so I'm more than happy to support your activities in the capital."

Seldio seduced some of the female Guildmasters, and Dias had mentioned them getting axed for it. I didn't know how many female Guildmasters there were before, but there were definitely fewer now.

"Contact me if you run into any trouble."

"Hm. Got it."

While Erianthe was certainly calculating and political, she was also genuine in her offer to help Fran.

"You're one of our rising stars, Fran, and I would hate to see your bright future squashed because of some inconsequential scandal. The capital is home to all sorts of rotten nobles, especially Marquis Aschtner and Count Olmes. What I wouldn't give to expose them for the crooks they are and post their heads in the public square..."

That was a terrifying image. It was clear that they didn't get along with the Adventurers' Guild. Essence of Falsehood didn't trigger when she said she wanted to post their heads up in the public square. She was a very honest woman.

"You run into the slightest bit of trouble, you come to me. Got it?" Erianthe reiterated. I wondered if she had heard rumors about Fran causing trouble wherever she went. We would definitely take advantage of her patronage as long as we were in the capital.

The Guildmaster continued her explanation of the auction.

"Are you interested in anything other than the equipment and magicite auctions?"

"What else is there?"

"For you," Erianthe said, "there's the monster material auction, cooking auction, and manatech auction."

"Cooking auction?"

She had managed to understand Fran in the short time she knew her. She let out a wry grin when she saw Fran's response. "Yes. It's mostly ingredients. They have monster meats, spirit grass, and magic herbs from all corners of the globe.

Most of them are rare enough that you won't find them in an ordinary marketplace."

"I see."

"There are also recipes and manuals for cooking techniques."

The cooking auction had everything a cook could ever want or need. Maybe we could drop by if we have the chance.

"You won't find any actual dishes there, though."

"That's fine."

"Oh, you can cook?"

"Hm," Fran nodded.

"I-I see... And here I thought I found a kindred spirit," Erianthe groaned. She couldn't cook, and she probably couldn't clean up after herself either by the looks of it. She probably thought Fran was like her, based on how sloppy she looked.

Other auctions included artwork, housing, and clothing. Fran was interested in none of them. There was one other auction which Fran reacted strongly to, aside from the cooking auction.

"*Slave* auction?!"

"Yes. Though they'll only be putting up capital offense slaves for auction. Are you interested?"

"No!"

"A-all right. What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," Fran frowned.

Slaves were a touchy subject for Fran. She was an illegal slave once, and now she had no intention of owning even legal slaves.

There were different kinds of slaves in this world. Legal slaves were a world apart from illegal slaves. There were three kinds that I knew of: debt slaves, misdemeanor slaves, and capital offense slaves; each named for how they ended up in slavery.

Debt slaves were either slaves who sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off a debt, or anyone whose lives were so destitute that they would rather be slaves. Aside from the spell which turned them into slaves for the duration of their contract, they enjoyed a bit more than basic human rights. They paid off their debts, and there were penalties for mistreating them or not providing food, clothing, and shelter. Sexual and criminal demands were also strictly prohibited. The contract spell worked on both slave and master, so neither party could break it. It sounded a lot like Hello Work, which provided basic human needs to make up for the nonexistent job choice. The shortest amount of time one could get away with being a debt slave was a month, and afterward you would live the life of a regular civilian. Coupled with the fact that you could pick up skills from your workplace, people treated debt slavery as a learning opportunity.

Misdemeanor slaves had it much worse. Gone was the safety net of debt slavery; these people were slaves as punishment. They still had basic human rights, but they were forced into more dangerous and exhausting jobs like bodyguarding and manual labor. Still, at least they could go free once they finished their sentence.

Finally, there was the miserable capital offense slave. They were originally criminals on death row, and they were forced into slavery to get the most use out of them before they died. Human rights were nonexistent for these people. From what I understood, there were different kinds of capital offense slaves. Some became sex slaves, while others were sent to the front lines to be meat shields.

But that was all I knew on the topic. As curious as I was about the slavery in this world, Fran's mood would sour if I asked the guild about it.

Of course, slavery as I knew it came in the form of illegal slavery—the very kind that Fran had suffered.

In this world, both debt and criminal slaves alike worked based on an agreement. The slave contract couldn't activate without it. Even capital offense slaves had the option of accepting the death sentence if they wanted to.

But illegal slaves were forced into slavery. Illegal slave collars registered a

contract as binding as soon as it was put on someone's neck. Illegal slavers would kidnap, threaten, and torture to put that collar on a free man's neck. The contents of their contract lacked even the agreement of a capital offense slave, and only existed to ensure the slave was under the master's absolute control.

Illegal slavery was a crime punishable by death, but it showed no signs of going away. As long as foolish people in power and criminal organizations demanded illegal slaves, slavers would always find buyers.

You couldn't blame Fran for abhorring the subject of slavery. Sensing the tension in the air, Erianthe changed the subject.

"So," she cleared her throat. "I hear you have a direwolf. There's a familiar auction where you can bid for trained familiars. Where is that direwolf of yours anyway? You didn't bring it with you?"

"Hm? Jet."

"Woof!"

"Oh my," Erianthe said. "A Darkness Wolf with Shadow Walk? It's the perfect bodyguard. And look at how big it is..."

"He can turn smaller."

"Woof, woof!"

"You Uniques can do anything, can't you?"

The Guildmaster hadn't been able to sense Jet hiding in the shadows. We were used to him coming and going from sight, but Erianthe was right. The best bodyguard is the one you can't see.

We were waiting for the auction license when Erianthe said, "Do you have a place to stay?"

"Not yet."

"I have one just for you, then. It's an inn for high-rank adventurers."

Just one problem, though.

"Does it take familiars?"

"Of course. They should have no problem with Jet at that size."

We needed a place to stay with two days to go until the equipment auction. Now we could take in the sights of the big city.

“Thanks, I’ll take it.”

“I’ll get a referral ready for you.”

Two days had gone by since we arrived in the capital. We were now outside a large building where the auctions would take place. It was usually the venue of the capital’s great theater troupes. Erianthe had recommended the theater, saying that it was in the top ten best tourist destinations of the capital, but we politely declined.

Fran didn’t have the attention span for stage plays, and their contents were pretty much BL. The play was called *Sword of the Purple Rose*, and I initially thought it was going to be a swashbuckling romp with plenty of action scenes. Erianthe proceeded to give the general running time of the play, as well as its summary.

She opened by saying it was the ultimate romance. A tale of love and hate colliding. But why were all the characters men? Did the sword in the title have to do with... Oh no!

I almost interrupted her elaboration, but Fran didn’t look like she understood even half of it. Erianthe talked about the play like an obsessed connoisseur of the genre. Apparently, most of the women in the capital agreed with her. The capital was a melting pot of culture, and the arts it produced were decidedly decadent. I was an otaku once, so I knew where Erianthe was coming from. Still, it wasn’t something you should recommend to a girl of Fran’s age.

Fortunately, we’d run into Zefield yesterday morning while at our first tourist destination, and he warned us about it.

“Black Lightning Princess?”

“Hi, Zefield. What are you doing here?”

“I was just out for a walk. We are staying somewhere nearby.”

“You don’t have work?”

Zefield laughed. “I was invited by a marquis, you see. We can’t exactly turn him down, so we can’t take any quests that would have us leave the city.”

“I see.”

The nobles would do anything to get their hands on a sane A-Rank adventurer. They wanted to be on good terms with him even if they couldn’t get him in their ranks. Zefield himself was far too reasonable to turn down a noble’s invitation. He didn’t seem nervous, so this must happen quite often.

“So,” he said, “what are you up to?”

“Sightseeing.”

Fran showed Zefield the list of recommended tourist attractions in the capital. He knitted his eyebrows.

“Hmm... The Guildmaster is pushing her hobbies again, I see.”

“What?”

“How should I put this... The Guildmaster recommended things that *she* enjoys doing most, but I doubt you would find them entertaining, Princess.”

“Hm?”

Zefield’s subtlety flew over Fran’s head, but I knew perfectly well what Erianthe’s “hobby” was. Apparently, five of the ten spots she recommended were involved with her favorite plays. One of them was the palace garden that was the setting for one of her favorite works. Another was the cemetery of a grand duke whose lineage was broken because one of the heads swung the other way. Yet another was the birthplace of a famous writer who wrote plays about love between men.

Zefield revised the list by adding his own tourist attractions to Erianthe’s Fran-appropriate five. We had a lovely time visiting the grand temple, and strolled up a hill which offered a spectacular view of the palace. Among all of them, Fran enjoyed the rose garden the most because it was like going through a maze. Zefield recommended that one.

The palace was also exquisite. It was so large that I thought it stood as a

monument against the right to sunlight. It was located next to the lower noble district, and they lived—literally—in the shadow of the palace for most of the day. It was rated as one of the worst places to live in the capital. At least, that was what we were told by one nearby guard who was all too happy to complain about the nobility.

All of that happened yesterday.

Let's go in.

"Hm."

Fran flashed her guild-issued auction identification card at the entrance. It was basically a metal plate, but it had a seal which proved its authenticity. Fran got the second highest pass out of five. She could participate in all auctions and sit in special seats reserved for important merchants and guild members.

While it wasn't the noble's pass, which would allow one access to the VIP room, it was the highest pass possible for a civilian. The guards showed their respect for it.

They let her in through a different entrance, where a maid welcomed her to the venue. She proceeded to explain how the auction house worked while providing Fran with a welcome drink. In fact, Fran could even be served light refreshments if she so desired.

The equipment auctions will run for three days: today, tomorrow, and the day after that.

"So many weapons."

Fran flipped through the pages of the catalog she bought while sightseeing. It was circulated one week prior to the auctions, so bidders could know exactly what they wanted as well as the time its auction started. Come auction day, all they had to do was go in and bid. Waiting around for the item they wanted wasn't a good use of their time.

We didn't want any item in particular, since we were only using the equipment auction as a pretense for finding Garrus. The catalog was still of use

to us, of course. Garrus' letter hinted that he had made a scabbard to sell at the auction. I thought he might appear when the scabbard went up on the auction block, but there were several scabbards going up for bidding and they were all at different times. After failing to find any hidden messages in the inscription or from the makers of the scabbards, I decided it would be best to camp out at the equipment auctions early.

Well, we can use the reserved seats...

"Should we?"

Hmm...

Garrus might not be allowed into the reserved seats, so we would probably have a better chance of finding him in the regular seats. The only problem now was whether Fran could stay still for such a long period of time.

How are you feeling? Good?

"Hm!"

How long would her good mood last, I wondered...

Three hours later:

Don't fall asleep, Fran. You'll look suspicious.

"...Hm."

They might kick us out.

"...Hm."

Fran was half asleep. The light in her eyes was going out. I knew how she felt, but at this point I would just have to hold her upright with Telekinesis.

We were presented with one piece of equipment after another for what felt like forever. And not enchanted equipment, either, but perfectly ordinary equipment. There was one lot where a set of one hundred swords was sold.

And so we put up with the boredom until the afternoon, when the special goods auction was held. The catalog said that these auctions were for last-minute entries; not strictly for items with special features. The first item that

went up was an ordinary longsword with an engraving on its blade that didn't compromise its strength. While it might look appealing to nobility, it was practically worthless to adventurers.

Finally, one of the items caught my eye.

Hey, isn't that... Fran. Fran, wake up!

"...Huh?"

I shook Fran awake after spotting our must-buy item. Bidding could be done through a special manatech device in the VIP seats, but we had to do it the old-fashioned way. Fran would have to raise her hand with a pointed finger.

"Up next we have a scabbard for a longsword! Expertly crafted with premium monster materials, bidders must be warned that it is *not* size adjustable!" the auctioneer explained as they carried the scabbard to the podium. Everyone murmured as soon as they heard about the size not being adjustable. Size adjustability was a common—and expected—feature of scabbards in this world. A scabbard might have all the bells and whistles, but it was pretty much useless if it couldn't fit your sword.

But it would be no problem for us. The scabbard up for bidding was an exact replica of the one Garrus made for me. It was the same shape, and I knew for sure that it was the same size.

The auctioneer spoke again, bringing the auction hall to a hush. "Maker is anonymous! Name is Scabbard of the Teacher! Bidding starts at ten thousand gauld!"

Fran, we have to get this one!

"Hm!"

Bidding ended up being a lot easier than I expected. The lack of size adjustability really put a drag on its demand. I think the people who bid on it just wanted to get materials out of it, and they backed off as soon as we outbid them.

The scabbard's final price came to thirty thousand gauld. I didn't know the going rate for scabbards, but we probably didn't pay a premium for it. In fact,

the materials didn't look super premium, either.

But Fran definitely attracted attention to herself. I could feel people staring at her, wondering what a little girl like her was doing at the auctions. Did we mess up? Garrus had to take this indirect way of contacting us, since he was probably under Marquis Aschtner's surveillance. Maybe not enough surveillance that he couldn't sell a scabbard on the auctions, but definitely enough that he couldn't go walking about. I just hoped that Aschtner wouldn't be able to track us down through this purchase. I doubt he would be pleased to learn that the Black Lightning Princess, rumored to have something to do with Seldio's death, was the one who bought Garrus' scabbard.

Let's bid on the next item, too.

Why?

Smokescreen.

I wanted to imply that Fran wanted something else from the auction and that the scabbard was a mere impulse buy. Not that I thought it would fool anyone in the know.

We bid on the next item, the Windbreaker Bracelet. It protected its user from the wind while on horseback, which should come in handy when Fran was riding Jet. This was quite a popular item, and we ended up bidding 470,000 gauld for it. Just as well, since we wanted to show that Fran was genuinely interested in the item, but it still felt like a waste of money. And we were rich at the moment.

Let's get our goods and head back.

We headed to the redemption counter. Items could be redeemed on the spot if you had the cash to pay for it. Most people didn't, because walking around with that much money was too dangerous.

Security was tight at the auctions. Adventurers were posted as guards, and they immediately turned their attention to Fran when she stepped in. They were strong enough to recognize her strength.

G-to E-Ranks would have no idea how strong Fran was; they were the ones who usually picked a fight with her. D-and C-Ranks didn't know the real extent

of her strength, but they knew enough not to mess with her. B-Ranks and above knew exactly how strong she was, and the only ones who would pick a fight with her likely loved combat as much as she did.

With that grading in mind, the guards here were probably around C-Rank. They knew they would be in for a rough time if Fran were to start a robbery.

“Hey.”

I could feel their nerves when Fran talked to the clerk. The clerk, on the other hand, thought that Fran was a little girl who had gotten lost. She greeted her with a smile, which irritated the guards.

“Yes? This is the redemption counter. Did you get separated from your parents?”

“I’m here to redeem my items.”

“Oh, my apologies. May I see your ID?”

“Hm.”

Fran handed the woman her card and she scanned it with a crystal. It showed her all the information she needed. Things went smoothly after that. The clerk asked no further questions, and the adventurers around us sighed with relief.

“Here’s the money.”

Fran took out a stack of cash from our Pocket Dimension and placed it on the counter. The clerk didn’t see that one coming. Most people didn’t pay for large ticket items in cash, and bidders usually had their goods delivered to their abode for security purposes.

“Can I have my stuff now?”

“Oh! Yes! Yes, of course!”

The clerk hurried to fetch Fran’s goods while still in a state of shock. With the scabbard and manatech secured in our Pocket Dimension, we were done for the day.

Let’s head back.

Hm.

We weren't going to meet Garrus at the auction hall, that was for sure. Something must have happened to him if he had to use this roundabout method to get in touch with us.

We immediately inspected the scabbard upon returning to our room.

Doesn't look like there are any strange contraptions on it...

"Hm..."

Let's compare it with my current scabbard.

I set the auction scabbard next to my current one.

"...Looks the same to me."

Fran was right. The scabbards were identical in size, shape, and color.

"Woof?"

Jet sniffed it, but even he couldn't make out any differences.

Does it smell like Garrus?

"Woof!"

Yes, which meant that the scabbard likely contained a secret. I inspected it more carefully. I lifted it up, smacked it around, sensed the mana inside it, and so on.

...I don't get it.

"Hm."

I peeked inside the scabbard on a whim and spotted something. The one subtle difference between the otherwise identical scabbards was on the inside. The string used to bind the scabbard on the auction scabbard was red instead of white.

Let's try pulling at it.

"Hm."

Fran grabbed the scabbard and tugged at the string. It refused to come undone, and she pulled harder on it as she became visibly annoyed.

S-slow down...! Here, let me do it!

“Hm? All right.”

I used telekinesis to undo the knot. It took a few minutes, but I got the string out in one piece.

Now we can look at the inside of the scabbard.

“What’s in it?”

“Arf.”

Come on, stop shoving.

Jet and Fran peeked their heads over my hilt. I had hoped to find a letter within, but still nothing.

No secret compartments... But wait, I think there’s something written on the inside.

“What does it say?”

Let’s see... “May the God of Wisdom grant that this scabbard be used by the ultimate sword.”

Was that a code for something?

“I guess he wants you to use it.”

What do you mean?

“You’re the ultimate sword! It has to be talking about you.”

Thanks, but slow down. It says “God of Wisdom” here, not “God of Blacksmiths.” Is that pointing to Intelligent Weapons?

Fran had a point. The message did sound like it wanted me to use the scabbard, but maybe there was something we weren’t seeing. Maybe it was code for something.

Fran picked me up as I was lost in thought.

Fran?

“It says you have to use it,” she said, putting me inside the scabbard. I wasn’t convinced that this was what Garrus had in mind.

Also, the fit felt a little off, since we’d dismantled a part of it. It was like

sleeping under a blanket that was too short to cover your toes. I felt a metal fixture scrape against the base of my blade. This was where the strap was supposed to go, and it was slightly larger than the one on the old scabbard. I guess even Garrus made mistakes now and again.

Or did he? Considering the fact that he was a master blacksmith, the size difference was probably deliberate.

Fran, take a look at the strap fixture.

“Hm!”

There was a subtle difference in metal composition on the back of the fixture. It was yellowish in color and softer compared to the old scabbard. You really had to look in order to spot it.

I carefully peeled away the metal on the fixture. Words were written behind it. I guess Garrus knew I would recognize the bad fit once inside.

What does it say...? “The mansion where a valkyrie is glared at by a manticore”?

“Another puzzle?”

No hints, either.

We took apart the scabbard—with apologies to Garrus—and tried to find another clue to decipher the code. I pulled off everything that seemed removable, but couldn’t find any more hints. Maybe the code meant that he was locked up in a mansion.

Any ideas, Fran?

“Hm!”

Wait, really?

“We just have to look for a mansion where a valkyrie is glared at by a manticore! Jet can sniff those monsters out.”

Fran read the passage in a literal sense, and I couldn’t blame her, really, considering the fact that we fought manticores and valkyries only recently. Still, I didn’t think such powerful monsters would be running around in the capital.

The city would be in a panic by now.

The phrase had to be code for something, but what? Garrus wouldn't leave this message for us if he thought we couldn't understand it.

There has to be a reason why he's being roundabout...

Really, he could've just given us the address of the mansion where he was being kept. A name would've worked just as well.

But what if he *was* being literal? What if there were a manticore and a valkyrie in the capital? Maybe not living, breathing ones, but maybe a statue or a painting. The insignia of a noble family, perhaps? If he was locked up, maybe he could see this valkyrie glared at by a manticore nearby. Maybe he was being kept at a mansion where the family was like a herd of manticores. If so, the code might not be code at all. It might just be a description of his whereabouts.

For now, let's look for the valkyrie glared by a manticore.

"Hm!"

Jet should be able to track Garrus down if he's close. We're counting on you.

"Woof!"

That night, we visited the Adventurers' Guild to see the one person we knew in the capital: Guildmaster Erianthe. She should be able to clue us in on where to look for manticores. This was the capital and not Alessa, after all. We'd only get lost if we walked around aimlessly.

"Welcome. And how may I help you tonight?" Erianthe asked without looking up. She must be able to detect Fran's presence. Mountains of paperwork surrounded her, and heavy bags were under her eyes. She wasn't kidding about being busy this time of year.

"I need help."

"Do you?"

"Hm. I'm looking for a valkyrie being glared at by a manticore."

"A what?" That caught her attention. She looked at Fran, utterly confused. "A valkyrie... Can you repeat that?"

“I’m looking for a mansion where a valkyrie is glared at by a manticore. Ring any bells?”

Erianthe tilted her head. The sequence of words was difficult to process without context. As much as I wanted to help explain it, Fran was on her own. She said that she was looking for an unnamed friend of hers. Erianthe was getting irritated, but managed to hear Fran out to the end.

“So you’re worried about this friend of yours because you can’t contact them and that’s the only hint they gave.”

“Hm.”

“That’s a tough hint to go on.”

“Nothing comes to mind?”

“Not at the moment, no. I’ll let you know if I think of something.”

“Thanks.”

I guessed we’d have to do some good old-fashioned groundwork. But then I remembered what Erianthe said about Marquis Aschtner. If she hated him so much, we might be able to gain her aid.

“So...do you hate Marquis Aschtner?”

“Well, that was an abrupt change of subject,” Erianthe said. “But yes. I suppose I do. I hate his guts, actually.”

“What if I told you there was a way to make him squirm?”

“If you told me that, I would be delighted to take part in it.”

Nothing but the truth. It sounded like her feelings for Aschtner were closer to outright loathing than mere hatred.

“But what if he goes after you?”

“Wouldn’t make a difference. We’ve been at each other’s throats long before you came to town. I’ve lost count of all the times the marquis’ men barged in here acting like they owned the place.”

Their bad blood ran deeper than we thought. While the guild was separated from the state, they still had to deal with local rulers. They couldn’t afford to

ignore them in cities where nobles had a lot of power.

“I’d do anything to crush the marquis. Never mind that... I’d do anything just to ruin his day!” Erianthe slammed the table, and mountains of paperwork fell around her. “No! I didn’t mean that! Stop!”

Was this our fault? Not by my count. The Guildmaster was consumed by her own rage. Either way, I believed we had found a trustworthy ally.

“I’m looking for a blacksmith named Garrus,” Fran said.

“Garrus is your friend? Garrus the master blacksmith?”

“Hm. I think Marquis Aschtner’s kidnapped him.”

“Has he now?” Erianthe raised her eyebrows. “Tell me more.”

We told her about the circumstances surrounding Garrus’ disappearance and his subsequent messages. Erianthe grinned with her black eyes, a grin which would’ve been menacing had she not been picking up papers at the moment.

“So, if we solve your puzzle, we might be able to deal a blow to Aschtner.”

“Hm.”

“Very well. We’ll start looking for any place that might fit the bill. And not to worry, Fran—I’ll make sure no one traces this back to you.”

We should be able to track Garrus down faster with the guild behind us. Erianthe proceeded to tell us all the mansions Aschtner was involved with. It was a good place to start.

“Thanks.”

“I won’t let an opportunity to make Aschtner suffer slide.”

“I’ll be heading out,” Fran said.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Erianthe said.

“What is it?”

“Just a word of warning. The capital hasn’t exactly been safe lately. There are a lot of pickpockets and robbers taking advantage of the crowds during auction season. Do be careful.”

Auctions were always a gathering of rich people. They were bound to attract thieves.

“Got it. I’ll make sure to beat up any that I find,” Fran nodded enthusiastically.

“No!” Erianthe shouted. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Hm?”

“Bystanders might get hurt if you go around beating up pickpockets. You might be better off just leaving them be.”

Erianthe had the same concern as Calc. If anything, Erianthe had more cause to worry, since she knew how much Fran liked to fight.

“Okay.”

“As long as we have an understanding.”

“I’ll make sure to beat them when no one’s around.”

“You don’t have to beat them up at all! Surely you can find more peaceful ways to deal with the situation.”

“All right.”

“You’re sure?” Erianthe said with doubtful eyes.

“Hm.”

“Are you *really* sure?”

“Hm.”

“I’m asking nicely now...”

I should probably look after Fran so she doesn’t cause any trouble. I wouldn’t want to add more paperwork to the exhausted Erianthe’s plate.

Chapter 3:

The Search for Garrus, Revisited

THE VALKYRIE GLARED at by a manticore... Can't seem to find anything matching that description.

Hm.

We surveyed the area around the Adventurers' Guild under the pretense of sightseeing. Starting in our immediate area was the best way to look natural. Our target was probably in the noble district, but we would stand out too much if we snooped around in broad daylight. Visibility wouldn't be a problem at night, since we could see in the dark.

Stone or bronze statues. Flags. Paintings. Carvings. It could be anything.

"Hm."

Let us know if you've picked up on Garrus' scent, boy. He's the one who made the scabbard we bought yesterday.

"Woof, woof!"

We searched high and low, but couldn't find anything that resembled the clue. Considering the size of the capital, finding the manticore and valkyrie was next to impossible.

This is going to take a while.

Why don't we ask someone who might know?

But we already talked to Erianthe.

What about Calc?

Calc... Right.

Calc was our other acquaintance in the capital, if you could call him that. He was probably the head of some street gang, so he would know the ins and outs of the city. He wasn't what you would call trustworthy, though. He might be afraid of Fran, but he was likely to just sell information about us after we were

done with him. In fact, it was all too possible that he would sell us out to Marquis Aschtner.

I didn't know how Garrus managed to put his scabbard up for auction, but Marquis Aschtner might already know that Fran was the one who had bought it. And then what if he found out that Fran was looking for a valkyrie glared at by a manticore? He might immediately see through the clue and figure out that she was looking for Garrus. Attracting that kind of attention from the marquis was far too dangerous. Even so, a man like Calc was bound to have a useful network of information.

I hatched a plan.

Basically, I'll send in a powerful clone of myself to talk to him.

The clone would contact Calc for us, allowing Fran to remain anonymous.

All right. That ought to do it.

My clone was a seedy-looking man who wouldn't look out of place snooping around back alleys in the middle of the night. It wasn't quite as strong as Fran, but with a stat average of 200 and Advanced Sword Mastery, it was basically an intermediate adventurer.

"All right. You're going to have to look for Calc, Jet."

"Woof!"

That shouldn't be a problem for Jet's sniffer. The clone followed Jet as he led it down an alleyway. We were close.

Fran concealed herself while following the clone. I could still talk to her with Split Thinking.

Do not cause a scene, Fran.

Hm.

That would defeat the whole purpose of having a clone snoop around for us.

Arf.

Here?

Jet's sniffer led us to a pub. It was a run-down tavern that was somehow still

in operation. The only signs of life were the wisps of lights sneaking through the cracks in the wall. The pub would've looked abandoned in the daylight.

I went through the creaky parlor doors and stepped inside. The interior was so poorly lit you wouldn't be able to see who was sitting next to you. It was a good thing I had Night Vision. The denizens of the pub stopped and stared at me. The entrance was the only spot that was well lit, probably so diners could see anyone that came in. The contrast also made it difficult for visitors to see the diners.

I could hear chuckles and leering before the pub resumed its murmuring. My clone looked forgettable, average, and broke—the winning trifecta. He wasn't muscular and didn't have anything to indicate that he could use magic. In a word, he wasn't a threat. The only man who kept his guard up was the man I was looking for.

I navigated the pub, around feet trying to trip me up, and sat at a table close to Calc.

“So, you're Calc?”

Calc clicked his tongue. “I had a feeling you'd have business with me.” He turned away, but made no attempt to leave.

“Relax. Someone just told me that you're the man I should talk to for this thing I need.”

“Don't know who told you that,” he frowned. “But I don't appreciate the advertisement.”

I was my own tip, of course, but I knew that would make him stay on his toes.

“Cut that out,” Calc said. He was directing it to me as well as his men behind him. They were probably about to eliminate me for being dangerous. One of them was already on his feet and had his hand on his dagger.

But Calc's Wimpsight told him that his bodyguards weren't going to be strong enough to beat me, let alone stop me. His bodyguard was shocked that his boss would acknowledge this stranger, and that this stranger was stronger than him. But he trusted Calc, so he sat back down.

“We can talk in the back room.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” I said. “Silence.”

“Mage, huh?” Calc frowned. I was becoming a bigger enigma with every moment. His guards got up again, surprised that they no longer could hear their boss, but Calc motioned for them to sit back down.

“No one can hear us now.”

“What do you want?”

Good. He was willing to hear me out without causing a scene.

“I’m looking for a mansion. One where a valkyrie is being glared at by a manticore. Know where it is?”

“Is that supposed to be a puzzle? I don’t think anyone here knows what that means.”

“I figured. I want you to look for it. And keep it on the down low.”

“Look, you can’t just—”

“Here’s your advance. You’ll get more when you get me what I want. Three times more.”

“Really...”

I put fifty thousand gauld on the table. Calc was now interested. He liked the way I pulled a wad of cash out of nowhere.

“What’s my deadline?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“That’s not a lot of time.”

“That’s why you’re getting a whole lot of money.”

“...Temper your expectations.”

“I’m expecting the best,” I grinned. “See you around.” The clone disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“What the...?! ”

To Calc and the rest of the pub, it looked like I had teleported. Hopefully this little bit of theatrics would convince them to take their job seriously.

And that's that. If things go well, we should have Garrus' whereabouts by tomorrow night.

"Hm."

That said, we should still see if we can find anything on our own.

"I know."

"Arf!"

Unfortunately, we had no such luck. We didn't know enough about the capital for our search to bear fruit. We checked out the noble district when night came and only found dragon statues, angel busts, and lion reliefs; no manticores or valkyries that we could see. Meanwhile, Erianthe and the guild hadn't found anything noteworthy, either. She said she was still looking and would keep us posted. Calc was our last chance at finding information.

Do you think he'll have anything for us?

If nothing else, Calc should be able to narrow down our search.

Calc would know the entertainment and downtown districts like the back of his hand. If he came up dry, we could omit those two areas.

I'm going in.

"Hm."

I made another clone and went to the pub again. Jet informed me that Calc was already inside.

I swung the door open and stepped inside. All eyes were on me, but they no longer scoffed since they knew I had business with Calc. And really, anyone who saw how I disappeared last night would know enough to keep their guard up. There were no feet stuck out to trip me or mocking hoots and hollering. If anything, the denizens of the pub cleared a path for me. They didn't want to get involved.

"Hey," I said. "It's been a while."

“You’re back,” Calc said. “Do you have the money?”

“As long as you have the info.”

“I do.”

Impressive. Calc’s network got us the information we wanted while the guild couldn’t even find a lead.

“Here you go.”

“Paying up before you I fill you in? You sure that’s wise?”

“People call me a human lie detector. Besides, you’re not stupid enough to take the money and split.”

Calc scoffed. He didn’t appreciate being strong-armed when he was used to doing the strong-arming.

“Silence. Can you fill me in now?”

“Here.”

“What? You wrote me a letter?”

“It’s directions to the place you’re looking for. Noble district. A villa belonging to Count Olmes; right next to Marquis Aschtner’s mansion. Across the street is a mansion belonging to one Count Bayreeds.”

“Olmes...”

“It used to belong to Baron Lesseps, but it changed hands after he died. There was a huge scandal, too. He was Aschtner’s bastard son, you know.”

Seldio’s old house was right across the street from the Aschtner estate. I wouldn’t be surprised if the current owner was connected to Marquis Aschtner, too.

“Anyway, Count Bayreeds happens to have a statue of a manticore in his front garden, and it’s staring right at the statue of a valkyrie in Count Olmes’ garden. Good enough for you?”

“Pretty good.”

That must be what Garrus was talking about. We had checked out Olmes’

place, but not his villa. I didn't even think he had multiple houses. I guess that's what nobles did when they had too much money.

"In fact, it's perfect. Thanks for helping out."

"Work's work even if it gets shoved down your throat, and I'm a little bit of a perfectionist when it comes to my job."

"Thanks again."

I could now take the scrap of paper, give it to Jet, and disappear. But then I had a thought. We might need Calc's expertise again. It would be better if I left this quest hanging even if it wasn't the nicest thing to do.

"I'll be back if anything else comes up."

"Much rather you didn't."

"I'll be nice."

"Hey—!"

The clone grinned, then disappeared, leaving behind a very annoyed Calc.

How'd it go?

Very well. I wasn't expecting that.

So...

We know where the mansion is now, although we are short on the exact address.

Calc said it was near Aschtner's mansion, so we had a general area.

"Woof!"

Jet, you're back.

Jet popped out of the shadows. We had both seen Calc's directions, but we weren't sure where the exact address was.

We should ask Erianthe.

You're right. She'll definitely know where the marquis lives.

Hm.

We headed to the Adventurers' Guild. I just hoped she would still be in her office...

"Hello, Fran."

There was no reason to worry. Erianthe the weary Guildmaster greeted Fran from her avalanche of paperwork.

"Sorry, but I still don't have any leads for you."

"Hm. It's all right. I have the info I need."

"Really? All by yourself?"

"No. I went to an informant."

"I issued a quest to the informants in the guild, as well. How did you get your info sooner than us?" Erianthe asked. She was surprised enough to stop working on her papers and look at us.

"Hm. I met him in a bar."

"Was it someone from the Thieves' Guild?" Erianthe squinted her eyes.

"Hm? Thieves' Guild?"

"You've never heard of them? They're a guild in the capital made up of thieves trying to coordinate with each other."

"Never heard of 'em."

"Okay, how did you come across the bar, then? I doubt you could just walk into any old bar and find that knowledgeable of an informant."

Judging by the tone of Erianthe's voice, the Adventurers' Guild and the Thieves' Guild weren't on the best of terms. We decided to tell her the truth: that Fran met a man in an alleyway who knew his way around the capital and got Jet to track him down. We left out the part where I sent my clone to talk to him, of course.

"I see. I didn't think someone in the market district would know..."

"Hm."

"All right, I'm trusting you on this. Still, it's best to be careful around someone

like him.”

We told Erianthe about our lead: Count Olmes’ villa near Marquis Aschtner’s mansion. Recognition flashed in Erianthe’s eyes. She took out a book from one of her shelves—a volume containing city plans for the noble district. While it wasn’t up to date regarding the ownership of each house, it still contained a map and street addresses.

“Let’s see,” Erianthe said, flipping through the pages. “Found it. This is the place.”

“Thanks.”

“Just to be clear... You are not to go infiltrating the mansion by yourself. You’re still up against nobility.”

“Okay.”

Even with our track record, we weren’t about to go snooping around in the count’s house.

“Just find the right house and then come back, got it?” Erianthe said.

“Hm.”

“Somehow, I’m not convinced...”

Maybe we should ask what stories Erianthe had heard about Fran. She sounded like she was worried Fran might barge through the door and start wrecking the villa.

“Don’t worry,” Fran said. “I won’t do anything stupid.”

“You’d better not,” Erianthe said. Fran was a problem child in her eyes, but it wasn’t like she actively looked for trouble. More often than not, she was dragged into it.

We said goodbye to Stellia on our way out of the guild and made our way to Count Olmes’ villa. Concealing our presence, we scoped the place out from afar.

That one.

Oooh, so that’s the manticore.

Fran pointed to the gates of Count Bayreeds’ exquisite mansion. By the looks

of it, he was really living it up. The gates alone were ten meters high, and a stone manticore was placed on top of each pillar. These must be the guardians of the house. I traced their line of sight and they were definitely looking into the garden of the mansion across from it—the villa of Count Olmes. Now we just needed a valkyrie at the end of their gaze.

A tall fence protected Olmes' villa from onlookers. I thought about sneaking in, but that was too dangerous. A powerful barrier was also protecting the villa. The mana here was even more powerful than in Aschtner's mansion.

Fran was about to make Erianthe's worst nightmares come to pass by charging in head first, but I stopped her before she could do anything.

I'll go up and get a bird's-eye view. Don't move, okay?

Hm.

Fortunately, I was working under the cover of night. I teleported myself upwards; I wouldn't trip the barrier if I had enough altitude. I moved carefully so as not to disturb the barrier protecting the place. I then used my skills to zoom in on the garden.

And there it was.

The valkyrie statue!

A stone woman clad in armor stood at the center of a fountain. This was the manticore's valkyrie.

I returned to the ground to report my findings.

I'm back.

How'd it go?

We're here. This is definitely the place.

I see.

I couldn't see through to the inside of the mansion, of course. We still didn't know where Garrus was.

It doesn't look like it from the outside, but there are a lot of people in there.

Hm.

Most of them were guardsmen posted both outside and inside. It was like they were trying to keep someone in.

Pick up any scents, boy?

Woof...

Guess not.

Ruff.

There was a wind barrier over the mansion to prevent noises and smells from escaping.

What do we do?

I would really like to know if Garrus is in there.

We walked around the perimeter of the estate to see if we could find any clues. The only thing we could sense was a veritable army of guards within the estate. We kept walking until Jet suddenly started sniffing the air.

Do you smell Garrus?

Woof.

He shook his head. No.

Woof!

Jet told us to follow him, but not before concealing himself with a Shadow spell. We followed his lead and used every skill and spell we had to hide ourselves. A civilian wouldn't be able to see us even if we walked right up to them.

Jet silently led us away from the Olmes villa.

Here?

Arf.

We were on the right track. Jet went down an alleyway, which led to the road outside of the Aschtner mansion.

Ruff.

He stopped before the exit. Jet pointed his muzzle, and we slowly looked at

the road to see what he had found.

That homeless guy?

Woof!

Jet was pointing at the alleyway across the street, near Aschtner's mansion. A man dressed in rags sat there on the ground. The homeless weren't a rare sight in the capital. We came across quite a few homeless people during our stay here. I guess he did look out of place in the noble district, though, and the guards were probably ignoring him because he was occupying a blind spot.

But then I noticed something strange about the homeless man. *I can't really feel his presence.*

Hm. His mana's weird, too.

Is he hiding himself with skills?

Woof!

This man was no ordinary vagrant. He could hide himself like a D-Rank scout, and I found it hard to believe that such a man would be out of house and home, let alone broke. A man as strong as him could make a decent living killing weak monsters outside the city.

Considering where he's at...he might be staking out the Aschtners.

We couldn't quite see his face, but he was definitely facing the Aschtner mansion. I was amazed Jet sensed him at all, actually. Maybe he found the homeless man's absence of presence peculiar.

The homeless man turned and crept into the darkness. Had we been noticed?

We kept ourselves concealed and followed him at a distance, going into the alleyway next to his to keep ourselves hidden. If we lost him, Jet could always pick up his scent. I didn't want to overextend ourselves here. It didn't seem like he had noticed us, though, so something else must have caused him to move.

We carried on walking down the noble district's alleyways for a few minutes. Eventually, the homeless man took off his robe, convinced that no one was around to see him. I was surprised to see that he was well built underneath his rags. His body was honed through training and real combat, and his battle aura

returned as soon as he dropped his disguise.

I had compared him to a D-Rank scout earlier, but I was wrong. He was clearly someone who made a living on the frontlines. What's more, I recognized his face.

Colbert?

What was he doing here?

That's definitely him.

Woof!

Colbert was the B-Rank adventurer who helped us during the Bulbola cooking contest, and the one we fought in the fighting tournament. He also fought Linford with the rest of us, which was how Jet recognized his scent.

Should we talk to him?

Hmm...I don't know.

We were acquainted, but I wasn't sure if we were allies at the moment. Adventurers needed to be careful with each other in the field because they never knew who the other person was working for. Either way, I doubted he would be scouting out the Aschtner estate without a tip. But who could he be working for?

Colbert left his cloak behind and continued down the dark alleyways. He was still cautious, but his footsteps were firm. He knew where he was going. We continued quietly tailing him. If he went somewhere with ties to nobility, then we could ask Erianthe or Calc about it tomorrow. But if he just retired to an inn, then we would make note of the location and arrange for a sudden reunion. Hopefully, we could get some good information out of him.

Where is he going?

The noble district?

Certainly seems that way...

Colbert walked to the northern part of the noble district where the sun was blocked by the palace. This was where the lower nobles lived. He entered a park

filled with trees, distinctly gorgeous in the way only the parks in the noble district were. Unlike parks in the common districts, recreation was an afterthought. This one was made specifically to look good, even at a distance. Still, the lack of sunlight in the district was apparent from the lack of flowers and the shady trees looming all over the park. At night, one might almost imagine those branches coming to life to snatch at visitors. One could easily mistake this place for a graveyard.

What is he doing here?

Maybe he's meeting someone.

Fran was right. The park didn't lead anywhere, so he wouldn't go through it if he were in a hurry. If a rendezvous went down here, we might catch a glimpse of who Colbert was working for. If nothing else, Jet could remember their scent for us to follow up on later.

We followed Colbert into the park. He walked in a straight line for a while, and then suddenly stopped and looked around. We stopped as well, observing him from afar.

Ah!

Hrm.

Woof!

Colbert then started sprinting at full speed. Had he spotted us? Before I had time to consider the question, another presence had entered the park. There were several people, and they threw something in our direction out from their hiding spot. I didn't know what it was, but I teleported away with Dimension Shift and equipped Physical Immunity.

SSSSSSH!

Green smoke filled the park twenty meters below us. Our guests must have thrown a bomb filled with poison gas, and now they were panicking after seeing us disappear. They were skilled enough to make themselves invisible, but I could tell they lacked actual combat experience. Their concealment fell every time they moved.

Still, I didn't want us to kill them. They might be Colbert's acquaintances.

Hit them with a Thunder spell, then Teleport in to attack.

All right.

Jet, you're on standby.

Woof!

And don't kill them, okay?

Hm.

Fran and I shot a flurry of Stun Bolts at the tree they were hiding in. Blue charges of electricity lit up the night, and a small figure tumbled out of the darkness. They appeared hurt, but could still move around a little. They were still startled by the Thunder spell when we teleported behind them.

Gotcha!

Hm!

Fran had taken a big gulp of air before attacking, adding to the wind barrier and our strong Abnormal Status Resistance. We took every precaution against the poison gas, and I was ready to heal Fran's eyes and skin if need be.

With a mouth puffed up like a chipmunk, Fran swung me at her target, still sheathed. She pulled away before I could make contact.

"You missed."

It couldn't be helped. Jet-black spears had flown in Fran's direction. Shadow Magic. This must be our second guest, and they were much stronger than their companion. I could barely feel their presence despite them being so close. They must have a powerful stack of stealth skills and spells to conceal their aura so well.

"Th-thanks," the figure said to the Shadow Mage behind her. She sounded young, and Identify revealed her to be a girl of seventeen. Her aqua-blue hair was done up in a ponytail, and she looked strong-willed for her age. She was wearing black leather armor with dark blue accents. Her whole look reminded me of the American idea of Japanese ninjas. She could just as well be an

assassin. Either way, she came dressed to work in the dark.

Her equipment had skills which helped her fade into the night. She glared at us, a knife in each hand. A dark blue scarf covered her mouth, but I knew that her teeth were clenched.



She was quite strong and must have been well-versed in poisons as well as weak point exploitation. Her stealth left much to be desired, though. Her name was Velmeria Bayreeds. I recognized her surname, at least. Was she related to Count Bayreeds?

The Shadow Mage was named Frederick. He was only thirty-five, but so far he'd behaved much older. He was a good-looking man with slicked-back black hair, and he wore all-black leather armor which also made him look like a ninja. He boasted a slew of powerful skills: Advanced Sword Mastery, Shadow Magic, Mental Resistance 8, Flame Resistance 5, and Storm Resistance 4. He had other skills which I had never seen before, but his Class Skill—Invite Malice—stood out the most.

His stats were oddly low compared to his skills. I had seen the opposite case where a noble's skills would lag far behind his stats because of power-leveling drugs. Powerful skills combined with weak stats was new to me. Frederick had the skills of a B-Rank with the stats of a D-Rank.

Their races also piqued my interest. Velmeria was a water drake halfling. That was normal enough. There was a race in this world called drakes, and she was half drake. No problems here. Frederick, on the other hand, was a drakefiend halfling. I didn't sense any malice from him, but the word "fiend" definitely put me on edge. Both appeared fairly human, though they had short horns protruding above their ears to indicate their race. They also had aqua-colored scales on the backs of their hands, though they were more difficult to see.

Between the two, Frederick seemed to possess the rarer heritage. He had black scales on his temples and long fangs. His pupils were reptilian vertical slits, and black scales covered the length of his right arm. He had what looked like a metal gauntlet on his left arm, which on closer inspection turned out to be a metallic manatech prosthetic.

The two drake halflings glared at us as they spoke to each other.

"Watch yourself. This girl is stronger than she looks."

"I know that. She managed to escape the poison gas and attack me. How did she do that?"

“Teleportation is the only thing that comes to mind.”

“So, we’re dealing with a teleporter... Very dangerous.”

I could say the same for you. Even in his weakened state, Frederick’s experience and insight were still a major threat. He managed to guess that we had Timespace Magic after a single attack. I’d rather take on an idiot with strong stats.

We have to finish this quick, Fran. The longer we have to deal with Frederick’s cunning, the worse it’ll be for us.

“Hm!”

We fired more Thunder spells toward Velmeria and Frederick. You could call us a couple of one-trick ponies, but Thunder Magic was the best way to incapacitate opponents without killing them.

“Haaa!”

Eat this!

Thunder Chain created links of electricity which paralyzed the enemy. It didn’t have a wide area of effect, but a flurry of them was sure to clip our opponents. Fran could now cast two intermediate spells at the same time, while I could do three. Together, that made for five Thunder Chains.

“Aaargh!”

“Ugh!”

The electric links struck Velmeria and Frederick like a snake. Lightning was difficult to avoid, no matter how strong you were. Velmeria fell to the ground after the lightning chain shocked her, but Frederick was ready for us. He unsheathed his enchanted blade and sliced through the chain. The mana around his sword must have dispersed the electricity, because Frederick didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed.

Pretty good. Let’s see how he handles this!

“Hm!”

“Ah!”

“Instacast...?! And so many spells at once!”

He handled seven, but let's see how he handles ten, I thought to myself. Ten Thunder Chains coiled around Frederick's body, and he fainted. The spell's main use was paralyze the opponent. While it wasn't strong, you needed a lot of Paralysis Resistance to resist a whole volley of it.

With both Velmeria and Frederick on the ground, we cast a Land spell on them to keep them there. The ground wrapped around their arms and legs like vines. Even then, I didn't feel completely safe. Frederick had Shadow Magic, which meant he could Shadow Walk to escape.

Jet, keep an eye out for any Shadow spells.

Woof.

Fortunately, Jet could also use Shadow Walk. He should be able to intercept Frederick if he tried to sneak away.

Time to ask some questions.

“Hm.”

I used Telekinesis to separate the two. I decided that we should start with Velmeria. Frederick didn't seem the type to easily break his silence.

Usually, Fran would begin the interview with a few kicks to the gut to wake the other person up. Tonight, she just knelt next to Velmeria and slapped her cheeks lightly to awaken her. Nice and gentle. Paralyzed though she might be, people tended to fight like cornered rats when they realized their lives were on the line. Besides, she might be Colbert's acquaintance and she was definitely the daughter of a count. We couldn't be too rough with her.

“Uhh...”

“Are you awake?”

“Ungh... Wha...?”

Confusion immediately filled Velmeria's eyes. She was tied up and now there was a Black Cat in front of her. But then she remembered what happened and glared at Fran. “What have you done to me?!”

“I’ll be asking the questions here.”

“My servant... Is he all right?!”

“Stop talking and answer my question.”

Fran used Menace to break Velmeria’s will. She shuddered, and fear flashed across her face.

“Urgh...I won’t...”

Velmeria gritted her teeth and refused. She accepted the possibility of what might happen to her now. She might be inexperienced, but she had the full dignity of a warrior.

You feel that, Fran?

“Hm.”

A familiar aura had made itself known and was approaching us. It was cautious, but not hostile.

“Been a while, Fran. Don’t suppose you’d mind letting go of the girl, would you?”

Colbert. I thought it was all too convenient. He really was working with our assailants. He slowly approached us, his hands in the air to show that he had no plans of taking us on.

“Sir Colbert! You know her?” Velmeria said.

“We’re acquainted, yeah.”

“So she isn’t working for Marquis Aschtner?”

“Who? Fran?” Colbert said. “Impossible.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because she is the Black Lightning Princess. I’m sure you can connect the dots.”

Velmeria’s eyes widened. “R-really? But the Black Lightning Princess is suspected of killing Seldio Lesseps!”

She had certainly been keeping up with the news.

“Really sorry about this, Fran,” Colbert said. “They told me someone was tailing me and that they would deal with them... Didn’t think that someone would be you.”

Colbert and the others had talked to each other through a manatech the size of a jewel. It used the air to send their voices to each other. It was a consumable item, and Colbert’s was destroyed to indicate that it had been used.

“Why were you tailing him if he’s your friend?” Velmeria shouted.

“Because he was acting fishy.”

Velmeria groaned and frowned. She couldn’t deny Colbert’s suspicious activities. Fran wasn’t lying, either. She wouldn’t have needed to stalk him, otherwise.

“Who are these people?” Fran said.

“Uhh, they’re kind of working for my employers,” Colbert said. “I’m living with them at the moment.”

Judging by Velmeria’s surname, Colbert’s employer was probably Count Bayreeds.

“Anyway, I wasn’t expecting to see you in the capital,” he said. “Gammod told me you were in the Beastman Nation. Are you here for the auction?”

“Among other things.”

“Yeah, I figured. But it looks like you got even stronger, huh?”

“Hm.”

“Yep, don’t think I can beat you at this point.”

“What?!” Velmeria was shocked. She couldn’t believe that someone as strong as Colbert would admit defeat without a fight.

“Anyway, could you let them go? I promise they’re not here to kill you.”

“Then why did they attack me? You were staking out the Aschtner mansion earlier. Do they have something to do with that?”

Colbert sighed. “You saw that, huh? Well, no point hiding it now, I guess.”

He knew that Fran had the upper hand in this situation. She had hostages, and Jet was ready to strike at them from the shadows. If they had to throw down, Fran would beat him in a fight. Colbert had gotten stronger since the tournament, but we were way more powerful. He knew his best option was to quietly tell us the truth.

“Yes, I was staking out the marquis’ house. I wanted to lure out one of his spies, you see.”

He was being deliberately suspicious in the hopes of attracting one of the marquis’ informants. Velmeria and Frederick would then grab whoever it was that followed him from the mansion. Unfortunately, the plan ended up baiting Fran instead. The whole thing was a comedy of errors.

“So you’re working against the Aschtners?”

“That’s right.”

No lies here. Wait... That meant Colbert might know something about Garrus.

We decided to let him know about our circumstances.

“I think a friend of mine is being held hostage by Marquis Aschtner,” Fran said. “I came to the capital to look for him.”

“What? Is that why you were in the district?”

“Hm. I just spotted you by accident.”

“Of all the places...” Colbert said. He thought to himself for a while.

“Do you know anything about any hostages?”

“Even if I did,” he said. “We need to get out of here. Someone’s bound to come here after the fireworks display you just performed. I want to hear your side of the story, too.”

“Okay.”

Colbert had a point. We let Velmeria and Frederick go. Frederick was still unconscious, but Velmeria should be able to take care of him.

“Where to now?”

“Well,” Colbert started. “How would you like to meet my employer, Fran?”

“Your employer?”

“Yeah. He might have information you’d like to know. There’s no harm in seeing him.”

Fran gave it some thought. *What do we do?*

An enemy of Aschtner probably isn’t an enemy of ours.

I wouldn’t go so far as to say that they were our friend, but we were probably on the same side. We decided to go along with Colbert. Any potential intel was good, but I was also interested in seeing who it was.

We were a good distance away from the park before we started talking again.

“So who are you working for?” Fran said.

“I work for a man called Count Bayreeds. He is commander of the Westguard, one of the four knight commanders of the capital.”

Apparently, Bayreeds was more powerful than I’d thought. Colbert was also working directly under him instead of through a middleman. According to Colbert, Count Bayreeds was the rare kind of noble: the kind you could trust.

Velmeria scoffed as she listened to their conversation. She turned back to glare at Fran from time to time as we walked to our destination. She still didn’t trust her, but she wasn’t about to overrule Colbert’s judgment on the matter.

Frederick walked next to her, and unlike Velmeria, I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He wore a perfect poker face.

We walked through the noble district with our stealth skills on and Frederick covering us with a Shadow spell. There wasn’t a soul around who could detect us now. Ten minutes later, we arrived at a nondescript mansion that looked like it belonged to lower nobility. There weren’t even guards at the gates.

“Is this the place?”

“Yes,” Velmeria said. “This way.” She ignored the front gate and went straight for the back door. I got the impression that the front gate was only there for decorative purposes.

There were guards posted inside the mansion, and one bowed his head to

Velmeria as she walked by. He was strong, too. I didn't know much about guardsmen, but he was definitely stronger than the corrupt guards employed in Alessa by former knight lieutenant Baron Allsand. It made me wonder why this guy wasn't a knight. Was it because he was a commoner by birth?

We passed more guards along the way, and they were just as strong as the first. I couldn't help but identify them and found that all of them were proficient in weapon skills and had pretty high stats. These guardsmen were much more powerful than the capital's own city guards.

Fran looked at them, having also noticed their strength.

"Something wrong, Fran?"

"These guards are strong."

"Things are different in this house. Everybody knows how to fight."

Maybe having a knight commander for a master meant everyone got basic training, including the lowest-ranking soldier.

Velmeria went up the stairs and led Fran and the others to a waiting room. The room was decorated tastefully, though it was nothing fancy.

"Wait here."

"Hm."

A maidservant soon arrived with some tea. Velmeria was cautious of us, but we were still her guests.

I guess we're being watched.

One in the ceiling, another in the next room.

Don't do anything crazy. We're still in the house of a noble.

Hm.

Woof.

We felt the energy in the room with skill, spell, and Jet's nose. We had to be careful about it, of course. We didn't want Frederick to notice us reading the room. Still, you'd have to be an S-Rank to tell that we were snooping around.

In the meantime, Fran carried on drinking tea. I stopped her from taking curry out of our Pocket Dimension. That would have been a little much. Instead, she busied herself with kebabs. Did you really think I could stop her from eating? Wishful thinking, dear reader.

Ten minutes later, with the smell of kebabs wafting through the room, Velmeria returned. A man who looked to be about fifty was with her. He was dressed in elegant robes, but it did little to conceal his muscular build. He was built younger than his age. He was ripped to the point of putting professional bodybuilders to shame. He had a saber on his belt that emanated powerful mana. I would've thought him to be a high-ranking adventurer, were it not for his noble dress.

Between this man and Sword of the West Wind, I wondered if everyone in the capital looked younger than they were.

"Glad to see you've made yourself at home," the man said. His voice was a velvety baritone. He would've made it big as a voice actor back on Earth.

"Hm? Who are you?"

"Show some respect!" Velmeria shouted. "This man is—"

"It's all right," he said. "We must respect the strong. Though I didn't imagine I would meet you like this."

This man was probably who I thought he was.

"I am Count Sydle Bayreeds. Colbert's employer," he motioned to Velmeria and Frederick, "and their master."

He smiled and shook Fran's hand. No wonder Count Bayreeds was a knight commander of the capital. He was definitely strong enough to hold the office. Still, he hadn't introduced Velmeria as his daughter. I wondered why.

"Adventurer Fran."

"I am aware. I've always wanted to speak with the Black Lightning Princess."

"You've heard of me?"

"How could I not? Your fights in the tournament were intense. I saw how you beat Colbert, but then you went and defeated Dragon Hunter Phelms for third

place!” He laughed. “It was all so wonderful. Your exploits did an old man good.”

So Bayreeds had attended the tournament. He talked about Fran’s battles like an excited child telling his favorite adventure story.

“I could never forget you after that. Also, I hear the Beast King’s taken a liking to you.”

“You know the Beast King?”

“That I do. He and I used to fight together, as a matter of fact. He was my subordinate, and still a B-Rank back then.”

“He was here?”

“He traveled the world when he was a young adventurer. He came under my employ during a skirmish between Granzell and Raydoss. He said it was a good way of making money for the road.”

The Beast King joining wars for the sake of his travel budget was the most Beast King thing ever.

“Raydoss had set up a naval blockade around the Beastman Nation at the time, so maybe money wasn’t all he wanted. I was in charge of the mercenary battalion, and the Beast King was in my unit.”

Count Bayreeds laughed, putting aside all formalities. The Beast King had hidden his royal lineage and the count thought he was just another hot-blooded young adventurer. They hit it off despite their difference in rank and age, and their relationship continued to this day. The Beast King always made it a point to visit Count Bayreeds every time he was in Granzell.

They had met each other again in the fighting tournament, and the Beast King asked Bayreeds to take care of Fran in case she ever visited the capital.

“I can’t say no to His Royal Highness,” Bayreeds said. “Though I never expected we would meet like this...”

It was all true. He hadn’t lied once, despite him being a noble. Was he not trained in the art of making first impressions? Maybe Fran had already won his trust. Either way, the count seemed friendly enough.

“We’ll get along fine.”

“Indeed we will! Sorry to have wasted so much time on small talk. I was excited to finally meet you in person. Please, sit down.”

“Hm.”

Fran sat herself on the sofa again. The count was in front of her, and to her right was Colbert. To the count’s left were Velmeria and Frederick.

“Now, I know we all got off on the wrong foot, but I have no intention of making a mountain out of a molehill.”

Good to know. We did just hit the count’s daughter with more than a few Thunder spells. It would’ve been a mess if he pressed charges.

“But we are currently conducting an investigation on House Aschtner. With how sensitive the situation is, one wrong move could destroy all our hard work. With that in mind, would you mind telling us what your goal is?”

Bayreeds had been tasked by the state to investigate Marquis Aschtner for treason. The marquis was currently suspected of private acquisition and research into Godswords, as well as the production of narcotics.

“None of this would have been possible if you hadn’t brought Seldio Lesseps’ crimes to light, Fran,” Bayreeds said.

Marquis Aschtner had done a pretty good job of keeping everything under wraps, but his secrets started coming out after Seldio’s death and the apprehension of his accomplices.

“He got away with murder one too many times,” Bayreeds laughed. “He got what was coming to him.” He had no love for the Aschtners.

“Colbert told me that you suspect a friend of yours is being held hostage by the marquis.”

“Hm.”

“May I know his name?”

Well?

We might get more information about Garrus with the count’s help. Besides,

we definitely wouldn't want to interrupt a government-sanctioned investigation. Fran might get the worst of it for accidentally obstructing justice.

I think you should tell him about Garrus.

Hm. Okay.

It wasn't like we needed to find Garrus on our own steam. Fran might have wanted to save Garrus by herself, but I didn't mind getting help from Count Bayreeds.

"I'm looking for Garrus the blacksmith."

"Garrus... Granzell's master smith Garrus?"

"That's him."

"Yes, I think I remember him being hired by Marquis Aschtner to work on a project," Bayreeds said. "Frederick?"

"Sir. Our reports say Garrus was hired to repair Marquis Aschtner's grand barrier."

A grand barrier was a manatech which produced a barrier large enough to cover a whole district. The barrier was still being field tested. It was also one of the reasons Aschtner was suspected of treason. The device could be used as a trump card if he ever attempted a coup. The state was still suspicious of the grand barrier even after the project was officially approved.

"Because the marquis is carrying out the project in secret, we don't know where the grand barrier is or how long it will take for the whole thing to finish."

"But the reparations are complete?"

"Yes. Garrus should be released by now."

It sounded like Garrus was being held back, perhaps against his will.

"There's a high chance he's being held in Count Olmes' mansion," Fran said.

"Oh? You're sure of this?" Bayreeds said.

"Hm. Garrus is being held in a mansion where the valkyrie is glared at by the manticore," Fran said, telling Count Bayreeds about the message Garrus left her.

“I see. It certainly fits the bill,” Bayreeds said, recognizing his own mansion in the message. “And how did you come across this information?”

“Garrus told me.”

We told them how Garrus had written a message inside a scabbard he’d put up for sale in the auctions. Bayreeds believed us after we showed him the scabbard.

“I see,” he said. “We’ll look into it. Can you give us a day?”

“Just one day?”

“We have spies posted around the Aschtner estate. Their combined efforts will get us the information we need.”

Count Bayreeds had been watching Aschtner for a long time. He didn’t want Fran to do something that might impede his work.

“Keeping someone hostage who is important to the state—like Master Smith Garrus—definitely counts as treason.”

What now, Teacher?

He has a point. It wouldn’t be good for us to go in headlong without a plan.

For starters, we didn’t know where in the mansion Garrus was being kept. Not to mention the penalties involved with breaking and entering into a noble’s abode. Letting Count Bayreeds look into it was safer for everyone involved.

“The marquis is probably researching Godswords if he’s keeping Garrus locked up. He’ll need smithing materials to do that. We’ll start there,” Bayreeds said confidently.

“All right. I’ll wait.”

“Thank you. I’ll send someone for you tomorrow night.”

“Hm.”

But what should we do the rest of tomorrow?

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Espionage tends to get messy if inexperienced people get involved. It would

be better if you did nothing, or to be more precise, went about your day normally.”

“Normally?”

“Indeed. We don’t know if Aschtner knows about the scabbard. At worst, he might already have his eyes on you,” Bayreeds said. “You’re safe as long as you’re here, of course, since the villa is under my command. But you never know who’s watching you in the city.”

“I see.”

“I suggest doing some sightseeing to throw off their scent. Maybe participate in another auction day.”

Thankfully, I didn’t have any objections to the count’s plan. Tomorrow was the magicite auction, and I was worried about whether we should take part in it given the current circumstances. Count Bayreeds’ plan put my mind at ease.

“Hm. Then I’ll go about my business tomorrow.”

“Great. Also, I’ll be sticking my spies on you when you leave. Please don’t kill them.”

“You want to spy on me?”

“They are counter-spies, to be exact. They’ll see if Aschtner is keeping tabs on you. If he is, we can get more information out of his spies by tailing them.”

He wanted to use Fran as a decoy. I didn’t mind, since we didn’t have to do anything differently. I would have to tell Fran to only talk to me in her mind, though. I didn’t want her to look like a lonely girl who had to talk to herself in public to keep herself company.

“Munch, munch.”

“Yum, yum.”

We left Bayreeds’ safehouse and were now walking back to our inn. The capital had a lively nightlife, even livelier than its day life. Fortunately, we were familiar enough with its streets by now to not get lost like we did when we first

arrived.

The leisure district was littered with food stalls that made money by selling overpriced snacks to unsuspecting drunks. Still, their food was good enough for Fran and Jet to enjoy. The only problem was the lack of flavor variety. Unlike in Bulbola, spices were more expensive inland. Even basic condiments like salt and pepper were affected by transport costs. The people of the capital turned to a bean reminiscent of miso to flavor most of their cooking. But their focus on the miso paste managed to produce a great variety of flavors which wouldn't bore you even if you had it every day. It certainly won Fran and Jet's endorsement; they mainly got miso-flavored foods.

Fran had activated her stealth skills, since a little girl walking by herself at night would stand out. We wouldn't have to worry about getting accosted by thugs now. I remembered Calc, and I didn't want us to bring about the destruction of the leisure district, which he had so feared. That said, I silently apologized in advance if things happened to pan out that way.

But there should be no cause for concern. We just needed to go through an underpass and we would arrive at our inn. Fran went down the easy slope into the underpass, leaving the food stalls and noise of the leisure district behind her. The silence had an eerie quality to it for an otherwise ordinary underpass.

Teacher...

What's up?

Fran slowed down her pace.

I just felt something weird.

Weird?

Hm!

Odd. I didn't feel anything. *Weird how? Can you be more specific?*

It's just weird.

Uhh...is it a bad kind of weird?

Hm! I felt my skin crawl!

Was Fran the only one who felt the odd sensation? *Was it mana?*

Hm...?

Fran thought about it. She told me that she didn't quite know what the feeling was.

But how come I'm not feeling anything...?

I don't usually keep my detection skills up at all times, but I knew I should've sensed a disturbance in the mana if it really was disturbed.

What about you, Jet?

Woof! Jet replied from the shadows. He sensed something, too.

...Let's get out of here.

I still didn't know what Fran and Jet were sensing, but I didn't plan on sticking around to find out. To me, the testimony of their senses was proof enough. But I was too late.

"Teacher..."

Okay, I felt that one.

A man appeared in front of us, radiating murderous intent as he approached Fran.

Careful. He's pretty strong.

Advanced Sword Mastery 4 and Advanced Sword Arts 2. Not only that, but he had Intimidate, Stealth, and Flame Magic to boot. Probably an adventurer; definitely stronger than C-Rank.

His name was Hummels. We had never met before, and I couldn't understand why he was so hostile toward us. He held an enchanted sword in his hand. Did he want to test his new sword on a live target? Did he want to kill Fran to boost his reputation?

I would've broken out in a cold sweat if I still had a body. It was like staring down an angry monster that could tear you apart if you got careless. The weapon looked as strange as its mana signature. It was half broken, and a deep crack ran down what was left of its blade. There was a guard on its handle like a

saber's, and the sword appeared to have been snapped from its base.

I Identified Hummels, and his status showed him to be a Fanatic. That was the same ailment that befell Aschtner's men—Seldio and his party—in Ulmutt.

Fran, I think he's working for the marquis!

Are you sure?

I can't prove it, but we should try to capture him alive.

"Hm!"

Hummels was strong, but he was still no match for Fran. I was really interested in his sword; it emitted tremendous mana despite being broken. I tried Identifying it, but failed. Nothing worried me like unidentifiable objects.

Be careful, Fran. I can't get a read on that sword of his.

All right.

Jet, stay in the shadows and get ready.

Woof!

Simply looking at Hummels was bringing up unpleasant sensations inside of me. It felt like my heart was dropping to my stomach despite my lack of organs. Looking at him reminded me of how I felt when I saw the sword that Seldio and the others had, and that feeling was disgust.

Does looking at him gross you out, Fran?

No. I just want to know how strong he is.

Jet?

Arf.

This feeling seemed to be one that only I felt. Fran prepared to draw me and spoke to Hummels. "Who are you?"

Silence. Hummels ignored her and carried on. There was less than ten meters between them now.

"Come any closer and I'll assume you're hostile."

Silence again, and still the man carried on. He swung his sword to make his

intentions known. Fran took that as a sign to go in. She dropped low to the ground, almost like she was slithering on it, and aimed for his legs. She was going to incapacitate him by taking them out.

Fran accelerated too fast for Hummels to react, but she kept up her guard. She trained her eyes on his neck, trying to bait him into thinking she was going for his head. Hummels put up his sword to defend himself. By the time he noticed what Fran was really plotting, it was too late.

Or so I thought.

CLANG!

“Hrm.”

Hummels whipped his sword down to block the ankle breaker. He didn’t manage to react to it in time, rather it felt like his right arm had a mind of its own. Had he buffed himself with defensive spells? Maybe he was so good with his sword that it moved like a part of his body.

In any case, his sword was definitely no ordinary enchanted sword. I had used 500 mana to power myself up for that attack just now. I would’ve cut right through any mass-produced sword on my way to slice into his legs. Instead, the sword had deflected me.

I knew now that my earlier sense of disgust wasn’t purely psychological. I felt goosebumps when my blade came into contact with his. Something about the sword’s mana and aura just felt...wrong.

Hmm...

What is it, Teacher?

Nothing. His sword’s just pissing me off somehow.

Is it an enemy of yours?

I don’t know about that... I know I hate it, though.

Okay. Any enemy of yours is an enemy of mine!

I had inadvertently fired Fran up, but I had no plans of stopping her. The sword made me sick, and I probably would’ve turned green in the face if I still

had one. We had to destroy it.

Let's beat him up, then!

"Hm!"

Hummels probably wasn't going to explain himself, and that meant this fight was unavoidable. But that was all right. I no longer wanted to take my chances with this agent of the marquis or his repulsive sword.

The sword was stronger compared to when we last faced it in Ulmutt. I focused my energy and used all my skills. It might end up being overkill, but all I wanted now was to wipe that sword from the face of the earth.

"Haaaa!"

The high-pitched shrieking of clashing metal rang throughout the underpass. It was the only noise, since both Fran and Hummels were warriors of few words. We had the advantage, but Hummels dodged Fran's attacks with unnatural precision. Actually, it was his sword that was doing the dodging.

"Tsch!"

I created an image of myself to bait Hummels into attacking. He fell for it, and thrust out his sword. Fran swerved behind him to deal the final blow when the illusion was destroyed. Hummels couldn't see her; he was as good as dead.

But the sword wrenched his arm over his shoulder to block the incoming attack. It happened so fast that it was like an auto-guard, but I don't think I saw anything like that when I Identified him earlier. It must have been the sword's power.

Hummels himself remained silent as ever.

"Fire Javelin."

He spoke once, but only to cast a spell. It was creepy seeing his lips move quickly while the rest of his face remained as fixed as stone. He resumed his offense after casting the spell. I was beginning to doubt that he was even conscious. Was he being controlled by someone else?

Hummels suddenly twitched as he advanced toward us. His mana was increasing. His eyes and mouth widened in a silent scream. His muscles started

expanding and his stats powered up. He looked a lot like the fiendified people we fought in Bulbola, only I didn't sense any Malice in him. My disgust for him increased at the same time. That was probably one of the sword's abilities, too.

Hummels' sword had also changed. The mana around it was now so thick that it was visible, and it was as sharp as could be.

"Haa!"

Fran wasted no time waiting for his transformation to finish and charged in. His sword defended him even while he was still powering up. It definitely had an auto-guard function of some sort.

Fran remained calm and backed off. She lowered me to her side and got ready. The best way to deal with this kind of defense was to aim at a body part which would be physically difficult to defend. Hummels held the sword in his right hand, so his left foot would make a good target.

Fran launched a Pressurized Quickdraw. The sword reacted to it, but it couldn't block it in time due to its broken blade. I lopped Hummels' foot clean off of his body. He crumpled to the ground and twitched, the whites of his eyes showing.

Suddenly, something even stranger happened. Hummels' wound bubbled over and started regenerating in front of our eyes. Two seconds later, a new foot had replaced his old one. I Identified him again, and found that he now possessed Regeneration, Muscular Hypertrophy, and Martial Mastery. His new skills didn't surprise me. Fran gained new skills whenever she Awakened, and the Corrupt Humans had achieved Fiendmancy. What *was* strange was the fact that his race remained Human despite his additional skills.

Looking at his stat sheet, I found that Hummels was under a new status: Unleashed Potential. In exchange for his greatly boosted stats, his life was draining away. Fanatic and Unleashed Potential put him in the same boat as Seldio and the others. Was he related to them somehow? Did he need to be in Fanatic to use Unleash Potential? Either way, he was much more dangerous now.

He's in Unleashed Potential, Fran! Be careful!

“Hm!”

Hummels stood up, using only the muscles along his spine to do so, and lunged at Fran. He pummeled her with attack after attack. It was clear that he wanted this fight to end quickly.

But there were obvious gaps in his offense. Not only that, but the barrage twisted his body, leaving him open to counterattacks. Being experienced in fighting humanoids, Fran wasted no time in exploiting this weakness. She landed blow after fatal blow, but Hummels’ wounds healed too fast for them to matter. Unleashed Potential was boosting his regenerative capabilities, too.

The best way to take on this kind of opponent was to keep our distance and pummel him with spells. But that was difficult to do in a narrow underpass, not to mention in a densely populated city. The last thing I wanted was for Fran to be charged with destruction of public property.

“I can go even faster.”

Fortunately, Fran seemed to be enjoying this unconventional fight. She sped up and jumped from the walls to the ceiling, attacking Hummels from all sorts of angles. His wounds kept closing up before he could bleed out. In fact, he was attacking with little regard to his own safety. It was a fighting style which took full advantage of his regeneration, but it was a strange one, all the same.

“Urgh!”

Yaaaah!

Hummels’ arm whipped at us from an impossible angle. In fact, I heard his bones crack as his body was forced into the unnatural bend. I knew he could heal from the break, but this was a bit much. I deflected the attack with Telekinesis, and it just barely grazed Fran.

Hummels continued his offense by stabbing his sword into his stomach. The mana blade went right through his back to deflect Fran’s backstab. Blood gushed everywhere as Hummels became a human fountain. The attack was wildly reckless, even with regeneration. He looked like he had lost his mind, and I found it hard to believe that he thought up a strategy like this just for the sake of taking Fran by surprise. The wound in his chest closed up, and he had a look

completely devoid of reason and emotion on his face.

Something was wrong here.

I had seen stone-faced fighters before. Hundred Blade Forlund immediately came to mind. Fran was of that sort too, of course, but just because Fran had a hard time expressing her emotions didn't mean she lacked them. You could see her strain if you paid close attention to her face in battle.

Hummels was different. Nothing we did fazed him. He looked emotionless because he lacked emotions. Could such a creature really be called human?

Hummels continued attacking us as I puzzled over him. His offense was as fierce as before, but he was beginning to run out of steam. Unleashed Potential was taking its toll, and Fran was getting used to his unnatural attacks. Still, he pressed his offensive without so much as a gasp or a grunt of exhaustion.

There's something up with that sword.

Hm.

We were trying to separate Hummels from the sword during this whole fight, but our attempts were thwarted each time. We tried Pressurized Quickdraw amplified with Fire Elemental Blade and Vibrofang, but Hummels threw himself in harm's way to protect the sword. We used a Thunder spell to paralyze him, but he refused to let go of the sword despite crumpling to the floor.

Likewise, the sword refused to leave his hand.

Someone had to be controlling Hummels; the mindless man couldn't keep up with Fran, otherwise. But how? Was it a spell? Some kind of manatech?

Maybe it was the sword.

Maybe the sword was like me. I didn't think it was an Intelligent Weapon, but I had a feeling that it was controlling Hummels somehow. I felt a vague sort of intelligence when I saw him protect the sword with his body—an intelligence which didn't come from Hummels. Even more, I sensed something like fear and anger coming from the blade. Hummels backed away, but it felt as if the sword was more cautious now that it knew we were aiming for it. Intelligent Weapons were the stuff of legends, but there was always the possibility of others

existing.

Either way, we still had a fight on our hands, although Hummels was running out of life. The sword had yet to fly out of Hummels' hand to attack us, so I doubted it could move by itself. Autonomous sword or no, it would have a hard time fighting if its wielder was dead.

The sword knew that its host was on his last legs and launched its final attack. Immense mana gathered around the sword, lengthening its magical blade. Hummels brought the sword down and it whipped at us like a snake.

"Hrm!"

Fran avoided the initial attack, but the blade slithered after her. However, this was to our advantage. Whether it was fear or panic, the enemy only had eyes on Fran.

Get 'em, Jet!

"GROOOAR!"

Jet leapt out of the shadows and bit Hummels' sword hand. He tried pushing the direwolf away, but Jet clamped his jaws tightly around his fist. I heard the sound of crunching bone as Hummels' hand shattered. He would *have* to let go of the sword now.

The sword's mana blade wavered as it lost its support. The best it could do was leave a hole in the ceiling of the underpass. I pretended not to notice it.

Fran readied me at her side and shouted, "Teacher!"

Ready!

I teleported us close to Hummels and Fran released a fully charged Pressurized Quickdraw. We weren't going to let this chance go to waste!

"Haaaa!"

A shrill ringing went out when I clashed with the sword.

"Hngh!"

This thing is tough!

We had fully charged our attack with mana and packed it with skill upon skill.

But the broken blade refused to yield. Whatever this thing was, it was no ordinary sword!

“Urgh!”

Fran grimaced and jumped away. The sword suddenly made itself known.

kmu--/.qn7a@!

A scream of sounds which weren't words echoed through the underpass.

Aagh! What is that?!

“So loud!”

“Woof!”

The scream was no mere physical scream. It reverberated in our brains with something like Telepathy. Fran held her head and winced, and Jet whined as he retreated to the shadows.

The sword was definitely its source. Was it screaming in pain because we had hurt it? Was this thing really something like me?

Either way, it seemed like this would be Hummels and the sword's final moments. Hummels' battered body fell to the ground, dead. He looked like a puppet whose strings were cut. The lack of death throes made the fight we just had seem unreal.

“...Is he dead?” Fran asked.

Yeah.

I didn't need to identify him to figure out that his life was at zero. His heart had stopped beating, and his muscles were shrinking back to their original size. It was a pitiful sight.

We collected Hummels' body and stored it in our Pocket Dimension. It might come in handy later.

All that's left is the sword.

I identified it again, hoping that all that damage broke its identity protection.

Give me a name, at least...

Name: c%s:•hj/np

All I saw was a glitched-out name and nothing else. We could've tracked down where it was made if we had known what it was called.

But then I realized something. Unidentifiable targets were usually just that: unidentifiable. I had never seen a glitched-out name before, even among the Godswords. Usually, the name would display just fine, while the unidentifiable subjects wouldn't be displayed at all.

I thought the glitchy name might be a form of protection, but what if it was actually the sword's name? Or what if it had a name, but lost it after sustaining heavy damage?

"Teacher?"

It's nothing. Don't worry about it.

It didn't matter now. Either way, we needed to destroy this thing.

Ready to blow it up?

"Hm."

Fran concentrated her energy and I focused mine. This attack was probably going to damage our surroundings, but I decided it would be worth it.

Then...

What?!

"Hrm!"

The sword started glowing. Not in order to blind us, but to destroy us.

Tsk!

I threw a barrier over us just in time, but I could feel a rumble through the underpass. By the time the mana dissipated, the sword was gone. I could see it speeding away. It had used Mana Thruster to attack and escape at the same time.

“It can fly?”

After it!

The sword flew through the air at the speed of one of my telekinetic catapults without slowing down. Teleportation would be too slow—the weapon would be long gone by the time we were transported next to it. I thought about firing powerful spells at it, but decided against it after considering the damage our surroundings would sustain. The best I could give it was twenty Fire Javelins.

But the sword dodged all of them with sharp maneuvers. It spun through the air, making barrel rolls while maintaining its speed. It then blasted right out of the tunnel.

Come on!

“Hm!”

A terrible scene awaited us on the other side of the underpass.

“Waaaah!”

“It hurts! It hurts!”

“H-help me...”

“I-I’m bleeding...!”

People were sprawled out before us, some severely and even fatally injured. I could see a twisted arm here and a dying man there.

That bastard... It cut these people up to get away!

There were screams in the distance. The lunatic sword left a trail of injured people to cover its escape.

“We have to help them!”

Yeah! Jet, you go after the sword!

Woof!

We were forced to stay back to heal the sword’s victims. Now I was sure that the thing had a mind of its own. Its plan required a wicked intelligence to pull off. The sword might just be one of my kind.

“I hate that sword.”

Me too.

“We’ll snap it in half next time!”

Yeah. I hope the next time we meet will be our last.

“Hm! We won’t let it get away!”

Damn right.

When it escaped, the sword moved like it used Telekinetic Catapult, although there were a few differences. Telekinetic Catapult was an explosion of initial speed which slowed down the further it went. On the other hand, the sword must have used Mana Thruster to propel itself and maintain speed throughout its flight. Instead of a catapult, the sword moved like it had a jet engine. The Mana Thruster was probably responsible for all of Hummels’ unnatural movements. It literally bent its host’s body out of shape in order to fight.

The Disaster Pillbug we fought in the dungeons of Ulmutt used its Mana Thruster to facilitate sudden stops and acceleration, but the principle was the same. I understood then why it only used the full force of its Mana Thruster when it needed to escape—the skill used far too much mana. The sword wouldn’t be able to keep its momentum for long, and any change in direction necessitated a fresh use of Mana Thruster. Against a fast opponent like Fran, it would run out of mana before it could graze her. Worse, if one of its attacks missed, both the sword and Hummels would be left defenseless. It was a great weakness of the otherwise powerful sword.

We finished healing everyone and returned to the underpass.

“Huh,” Fran said suddenly.

What’s up?

“That bad feeling from before is gone.”

The thing you felt when we first got to the underpass?

“Hm.”

I couldn’t say for sure, but I had a hunch that bad feeling was connected to

the sword. *I wonder what it was.*

“Hm.”

I was also concerned about what we should do with Hummels’ body. Should we drop it off at a police station somewhere? We probably wouldn’t be arrested for murder, but they were definitely going to ask questions.

As I thought about our next step, people came into the underpass from both entrances. A man. A woman. Ordinary civilians.

I realized how strange it was that the fierce battle failed to attract any onlookers, especially in a quarter as crowded as the leisure district. Was there a barrier to keep the wrong people from coming to the underpass? That would explain Fran and Jet’s unease. The spell probably only worked on organic forms, and I—strictly speaking—was an inanimate object.

Now there were people we recognized coming in from the other side of the sword’s escape route.

“Fran, are you all right?”

“Are you hurt, Black Lightning Princess?”

“Velmeria. Frederick.”

The two approached Fran with worried looks on their faces. We had parted ways with them earlier, but clearly the count had assigned them to observe Fran.

“I’m sorry. We were supposed to keep an eye on you in case someone tried to attack you,” Velmeria said.

“I didn’t think they would do it in a place like this,” Frederick said. “My deepest apologies.”

So there really was a barrier keeping people out. According to Frederick, the barrier only allowed people in if their stats were above a certain number. That number was quite high—high enough to keep Frederick and Velmeria out, at the very least. They had quite a fright when they lost sight of not only Fran, but the underpass she entered.

They looked disappointed with themselves. They had failed to protect Fran or

identify her foe.

“What happened?” Velmeria asked.

“I was attacked,” Fran said.

“Attacked? Was it a slasher of some sort? I don’t see him anywhere. Did he get away?”

“I beat him. He’s in storage right now.”

“Right, you can use Timespace Magic. He’s dead?”

“Hm,” Fran nodded.

Velmeria thought for a while and said, “I don’t think the average slasher could put up such a powerful barrier.”

“It certainly is strange,” Frederick said, unknowingly describing the whole situation with Hummels and the sword.

“He had a weird sword with him.”

“A sword?”

“Hm. Enchanted.”

Fran told them about the sword Hummels used—how the sword appeared to be wielding the wielder, how it greatly increased his power, and how it escaped all on its own. Fran also mentioned Hummels being in Fanatic and Unleashed Potential. Even if the two didn’t know what Fanatic did, it got them thinking after Fran told them how Seldio and his party had the same status.

“Do you think he’s related to Aschtner?” Velmeria said.

“Hm.”

“We’ll need to look into the sword,” Frederick said. “But I’ve never heard of this Fanatic status before.”

“And a sword that controls people? Is that even possible?”

“It’s not impossible... There have been cases of Undead Swords possessing people in the past.”

“Undead Swords?”

“A sword possessed by an undead spirit,” Frederick explained. A ghost would occupy a weapon and then possess anyone unfortunate enough to equip it. In some cases, the ghost actually enhanced its user’s powers. It sounded like our sword, if not for the fact that the Undead Sword was technically a monster and not an item.

“Also, Undead Swords are not powerful creatures. They are F-ranked Threats, and most of them are not strong enough to control a human person.”

“Hm? The one I fought was really strong.”

“Therein lies the problem. I’ve never heard of an Undead Sword strong enough for you to call it so. My best guess is that it’s either a Unique or an Elite,” Frederick said, not sounding very confident in his theory. A weak monster shouldn’t have been that strong even if it were a Unique. It would have to evolve many times to achieve that kind of power.

“This requires further investigation—I shall inform the lord count. May we see the body of your attacker? We might know who it is.”

“Sure.”

“We have a safehouse nearby,” Velmeria said. “We’ll head there. We don’t want the authorities getting involved in this. The last thing we want is for any of us to get arrested.”

The two led us to a small apartment in the leisure center. We could safely show them Hummels’ corpse there.

“What?” Velmeria gasped. “Hummels!”

“That’s him,” Frederick confirmed.

They had known Hummels when he was alive. Velmeria approached Fran and said, “What is the meaning of this?!”

“He attacked me,” Fran said. “He died on his own after the sword powered him up beyond his limits.”

Frederick inspected the body. “True. There are no external wounds.”

He remained calm for the both of them. The last thing I wanted right now was a fistfight with our bodyguards. The calm of Velmeria's subordinate soothed her, and she realized that she was overreacting.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This isn't your fault."

"Do you know him?"

"He was one of us! He went missing during a mission to spy on Marquis Aschtner."

That didn't sound good. Did Aschtner make the Undead Sword? Was it somehow connected to the Godsword research?

"In any case, we know now that it was no ordinary sword," Frederick said. "An Undead Sword shouldn't be able to control a fighter as strong as Hummels."

"Hummels," Velmeria sighed. "What happened?"

She put her hand over his face to close his eyes and put the dead man to rest. But then, her hand stopped.

"What's this...?"

"What is it, Velmeria?"

"Frederick, look at his eyes."

Velmeria and Frederick inspected their dead comrade's body. They noticed something odd about it, and that was enough to postpone their grief. The two took to inspecting his body like professional coroners. They opened his eyes, checked his teeth, and smelled his breath. Finally, they drew blood from the body, apologizing to him beforehand.

"What's wrong?" Fran asked.

"Hummels' body," Velmeria said, "resembles the corpse of a drug addict."

"He's quite beat up," Frederick added. "Like someone injected him with large doses in a short amount of time."

The mention of drugs reminded me of Seldio. He had also injected his party members with drugs to make them lose their minds. They were all working for Marquis Aschtner.

Marquis Aschtner had probably captured Hummels during one of his missions and given him the drug to become a host for an Undead Sword. Even a powerful fighter would be helpless against an Undead Sword if he had lost his mind.

The problem with that theory was that Hummels didn't have any drug-related titles. Seldio himself had Drug User. Maybe there was a distinction between "user" and "addict." I guess addicts don't get titles.

Did the Fanatic status have something to do with drug addiction? Seldio and his party had it... But the connection between addiction and fanaticism was vague, at best.

The reason behind tonight's attack was even more important. How much did Marquis Aschtner know about Fran? Did he know she was looking for Garrus? Was the attack meant to warn her, or eliminate her outright? Was it because he suspected her of working for Bayreeds? If he knew we were looking for Garrus, I could only hope for Garrus' safety.

"Are you injured, Fran?" Velmeria asked.

"Hm? No."

"Hummels was a great fighter, even if he was being controlled. To come out of it unharmed... You really are strong."

Though Velmeria complimented her, she wasn't too enthusiastic about it. She wasn't blaming Fran for her friend's death. Instead, she was blaming herself for her own weakness.

"If I were as strong as you, then Father would..."

"Hm?"

"It's nothing," Velmeria shook her head. "Forget about it."

Frederick cast a concerned glance at his companion, but he kept his peace. The count's daughter must have her own troubles.

"Woof!"

"Jet," Fran said. "You're back. How'd it go?"

“Arf.”

Jet whined, and his ears flopped in disappointment. Keeping on the scent was difficult when your target was flying through the air to disperse it. The chase had ended in failure.

The sword stuck out like a sore thumb, but I could only imagine where it was now.

Chapter 4:

Shadows of the Marquis

THE DAY AFTER HUMMELS attacked us, we attended the auctions as planned, especially after Velmeria asked us to resume our normal activities. Whatever Aschtner was planning, Bayreeds decided that keeping a low profile was the best way to throw him off.

Besides, we had magicites to bid on.

First up is a Goblin King magicite.

“Hm.”

Participants were given the names of the magicites that would go on sale, but their skills remained a mystery. skills were quite useless to the ordinary buyer, and they were difficult to understand. Even with Heavensight, I could only see what kind of monster the magicite came from. Maybe there was a skill that in turn allowed you to see what skills a magicite had, but I had never heard of it. That would be really useful if we came across it, though.

Our target was C-Threat magicite, from humanoid monsters in particular. Humanoids were skilled with their hands and possessed many skills, thanks to their ability to train. From what I’d seen, goblins, orcs, daemons, and other such humanoids were among their number. Their humanoid form also made it easy for Fran to make use of them. I really wanted the daemon magicite, the final item in the afternoon session. However, the number of potential buyers it attracted guaranteed a bidding war.

Not that we were strapped for cash after the Beastman Nation awarded us with twenty million gauld. Still, we didn’t want to pay ten times the initial price for it. We might get away with getting the stink eye from our fellow bidders, but an astronomical bid could raise Marquis Aschtner’s suspicions.

“Shall we?”

“Hm.”

You listen to everything Kodart says, okay, Fran?

I will.

We weren't alone today. A representative from the Adventurers' Guild was with us so Fran wouldn't stand out. People were bound to do a background check on a little girl buying up all the magicite by herself. To avoid that, Erianthe suggested hiring an adventurer who was familiar with the auction house.

Kodart was an E-Rank adventurer who had Identify and who was an auctioneer in his previous career. He had long admired adventurers, so when he finally had enough money to buy himself a set of armor that wouldn't get him killed in the field, he signed up at the guild and never looked back. He was thirty-five years old—no spring chicken, but it was quite impressive when you considered that he made it to Rank E at his age. He was late in blooming, but he had bloomed, indeed. He mostly took on minor extermination quests and odd jobs in the capital, and had a great deal of fun carrying them out. He had nothing but respect for Fran, whom he considered a powerful adventurer despite her age.

With such a glowing endorsement from Erianthe, we had no choice but to accept his employment.

“Will this be everything you want to bid on?” Kodart asked.

“Yeah,” Fran said.

Though they sat next to each other, Kodart would be doing the bidding. We made a list of all the magicite we wanted to bid upon. Kodart recommended the highest price to bid for each item, so all we had to do was follow his lead. In the event the price went over the limit, Fran would use a Wind spell to whisper a new price limit into Kodart's ear if she really wanted the item.

If we wanted anything else, we would bid on it ourselves. It would be weird not to bid on anything during an auction event. According to the catalogue, one auction had magicite whose skills were unidentifiable even by experts. That was what I was aiming for.

“Will you be sitting in the VIP seats?”

“Hm.”

Food and drink were allowed in the VIP seats, which were sure to decrease Fran's boredom. Kodart took his VIP seat, as well.

Usually, an auction agent would be paid the percentage difference between the maximum bid and the winning bid, but Kodart offered us his services for cheap. In exchange, he asked Fran to practice with him. We had our training session together first thing this morning.

To be honest, your thirties wasn't the best time to begin an adventuring career. But Kodart had more than enough guts and perseverance to make up for it. Today, Fran showed him how to practice weapon arts and the proper way to use them. For the most part, she just had him block her attacks, but that was enough to make him happy. He was deeply moved by the fact that such a high-level adventurer would take the time to train him. Fran blocked him and knocked him on his back many times, but he got up each time with a huge smile on his face. Practice would take this late bloomer far.

"All right, then," Kodart said. "Leave the rest to me."

"Hm."

One hour passed.

"We've successfully bid on the Goblin King magicite."

"Munch, munch."

"Next on the list is the daemon magicite. That's the final item of the afternoon session."

"Munch, munch."

Fran had an onigiri in each hand as she listened to Kodart. It was filled with shipbreaker tuna mayonnaise and embellished with kelp-like seaweed. I told her that she couldn't have anything in the auction house that had too intense an aroma; that left onigiri and sandwiches.

Anyway, I didn't think the Goblin King magicite would end up costing so much. The auctioneer had begun the auction by saying, "Magicite that came from a Goblin King. This king of goblins possessed Life Magic, and his regenerative

capabilities gave adventurers a hard time!” I was immediately sold on the magicite and told Kodart that he could use whatever funds we had to claim it. The final bid came down to two million gauld—over four times the starting bid.

We had the magicite collectors to thank for the price inflation. Collectors existed, even in this world. They were looking for rare magicite to add to their collection—the prettier the better.

Magicite came in all shapes and sizes, usually irregular forms. While magicite that looked like beautifully cut gems did exist, these were the exceptions to the rule. They couldn’t be cut—not if you wanted to keep the full force of their mana. And magicite was pretty worthless if it didn’t deliver on the mana.

Beautiful magicite were scarce. Beautiful and powerful magicite were scarcer still. And with scarcity came price inflation.

You would think that power wouldn’t matter to collectors who were just going to put them on display anyway, but you would be wrong. Power had its own attraction, and people would pay big bucks for beautiful power. The Goblin King magicite was one such powerful beauty.

Kodart explained that because of how auctions worked, the final price of the magicite couldn’t be determined by rank alone. It wasn’t uncommon for E-Threat magicite to be sold at a higher price than D-Threat magicite, for example. The whole thing reminded me how difficult auctions could get.

I wonder how much the daemon magicite’s going to end up at.

At this point, I could only worry and pray.

Besides, it wasn’t as if the daemon magicite was the only thing I wanted. There was still the final part of the morning auctions, Carry-on and Unidentifiabes. There was bound to be interesting magicite here.

“Next up, we have a mysterious magicite which defies identification! The seller is an adventurer who recovered it from a bandit’s hideout. They have no idea what monster it came from!”

The magicite was small, but regular enough to pass for a gemstone. Its price was guaranteed to inflate.

“Starting bid at ten thousand!” the auctioneer declared. The auction floor went wild immediately as one bidding card rose after another. Bidders didn’t even know what they were bidding for, but they bid just in case. I, on the other hand, knew exactly what it was and knew that I had to get my hands on it.

Fran! That one! I need it! We have to get it!

Hm.

I asked Fran to make the bid. I thought I saw her squint her eyes but that was probably just my imagination. Anyway, we had to keep our eyes on the magicite!

The bidding war continued for three minutes until we won the mysterious magicite at a price of 120,000 gauld.

Got it.

Oh, thank you so much, Fran! Heh heh heh! That was a Corrupt Goblin General we just got!

Hm...

I wonder what skills it has. What do you think? I can’t wait to dive in!

Mmm...

The magicite was from an elite goblin. A Corrupt Goblin. A Corrupt Goblin *General*, at that. I guess the Malice was too powerful for it to be Identified. No one could have guessed what it was. Good thing I had Heavensight. Fiend magicite wasn’t going to do much to feed the mystery soul inside of me, but the prospect of a Goblin General’s skills was too good to pass up.

Kodart successfully bid on seven out of the eight magicite we wanted. We failed to get the Cait Sith magicite. It was a C-Threat fairy monster and its magicite was beautiful and colorful, in addition to possessing unique skills. The offers blew past ten times the starting bid in a few minutes.

We spent over ten million gauld, but we got our daemon magicite in the end and were very grateful to Kodart.

We left the auction house and headed to the inn.

Come on, we have to go back to the inn so we can start cracking open some magicite!

“Hm.”

Yahoo!

I was excited. Fiend magicite aside, we got three C-Threats, with our cheapest purchase being a D-Threat. The daemon magicite was from a B-Threat daemon count; the same kind we defeated all the way back in Alessa.

I couldn't wait to get absorbing these babies!

Come on, Fran! Faster!

Okay.

Ma-gi-cite! Ma-gi-cite!

You're having so much fun, Teacher.

Suddenly, I felt a presence approach us from behind. I immediately switched gears, but then relaxed myself. Whoever it was wasn't a threat. They didn't bother concealing their aura and anyone could hear them running. The weakest of adventurers would at least make a token attempt. They had to be civilians.

“Wait!” a middle-aged man called out to Fran. He was dressed fashionably, although his gut jiggled as he ran. The man could definitely do with more exercise.

“M-may I have a minute of your time? I'll make it worth your while!”

“Hm?” Fran pointed to herself and tilted her head.

“Yes, you!” the man said, smiling. “I'm here to make you an offer you can't refuse!”

Teacher?

Well, I guess we can hear him out.

As much as I would love to just teleport to the inn right now!

“You have one minute.”

“Wonderful!” the man said. “Step right in.” He motioned her to a carriage. He

was well-prepared for someone who was clearly an idiot. He must have thought Fran a mere child. Someone didn't run a background check on her. What could he want? Make it worth *her* while? An offer she couldn't refuse? This was definitely a scam.

I Identified him, and he didn't seem like a bad person by his stats, but he was a noble. A baron, to be exact.

"What's your name?"

"Huh? Oh, where are my manners? My name is Beckelt." The man bowed. He omitted his surname, which made him all the more suspicious.

"What do you want?"

"It might take some time to explain..."

"Better get started, then." Fran wasn't about to get into a carriage with a stranger.

"But, you see..."

"I gave you a minute," Fran said, turning away. "And you're out of time."

"W-wait! You'll regret it if you leave!"

"...Are you threatening me?"

"N-no, I would never! I just need to talk to you! Hey, get out here!" the man shouted at the people inside the carriage. Two men stepped out and surrounded Fran. They had clearly been waiting in the carriage to threaten Fran, maybe even attack her if it came to it.

They stood around her, exposing the swords on their hips with angry faces. It was so well choreographed that I thought they must do this for a living. It certainly would've scared ordinary civilians. But beneath the mean glares, the built bodies, and the threatening weaponry lay performance skills which were greater than their weapon skills. An average Bayreeds guard could've taken both of them to the cleaners.

Obviously Fran wasn't fazed by these fake adventurers. "Well? What is it?"

"Huh? Umm..." Beckelt was confused by the failure of his intimidation. He also

remembered his reason for calling out to Fran in the first place. “You see, my lord wants to have the sword on your back.”

“Your lord? What’s his name?”

“I cannot say,” Beckelt said. “But he is willing to pay fifty million gauld for your sword.”

“You mean this sword?”

“It’s a great deal, isn’t it? Now can I please have it?” Beckelt extended his hand, the thought of refusal never crossing his mind. Fifty million was a lot of money. It was enough money for the common man to live the rest of his life with. Only problem was that I didn’t think the common man would be stupid enough to expect fifty million gauld from such an obvious fraud.

He was pretty much making a fool of himself at this point. Did she really look that broke? Still, fifty million gauld was a pretty penny. But I didn’t think Fran would ever sell me.

I mean, she wouldn’t, would she?

“Sword’s not for sale,” Fran said.

See! I told you!

“What was that?”

“I said, it’s not for sale.”

Beckelt laughed, “Oh, you jest!”

“I’m not joking.”

“Fifty million gauld,” Beckelt said in shock. “Don’t you think that’s more than a fair trade? You won’t have to work another day in your life. You can quit being an adventurer!”

He really didn’t know who Fran was. He could’ve handled this a lot better if he had even a cursory knowledge of the Black Lightning Princess.

Fran lost all interest in Beckelt and started walking away. She knew he wasn’t worth talking to.

But of course, the two brutes from earlier stood in her path.

“Hold it right there.”

“You’re being a little rude, don’t you think?”

They grinned as they attempted to muscle Fran into the carriage.

“Gah...!”

“Hurk...!”

Their attempt failed. I choked their necks with Telekinesis and lifted them off the ground. The image was quite spectacular. Two burly men being held up by an invisible force was the stuff movies were made of. Their feet flapped over the ground as they were helpless against my Telekinesis. It didn’t last long. They soon lost consciousness.

“Wh-what did you do to them?!” Beckelt shouted.

“I didn’t do anything,” Fran said. She glared at him with a look that said *You’re next*.

“F-fine!” Beckelt was sweating now. “Sixty million! That should be enough!”

“I wouldn’t sell it for the world.”

“A hundred million! What do you say?!”

Essence of Falsehood notified me that he was lying. Actually, even sixty million had been a lie.

I thought about letting Fran sell me so I could identify his master, but thought better of it. That demon sword was still at large. Besides, they might have special tools to seal away my powers. I had Seal Immunity, but that didn’t mean that Seal Immunity was impenetrable by itself. The gamble was too dangerous to make.

“Are you deaf?” Fran said. “I said, it’s not for sale. Not for any amount of money.”

“W-wait!”

Fran walked away, but Beckelt pursued her. Her attitude seemed to have offended him more than anything else.

“Y-you little runt... I said I’m willing to take that piece of junk off you! You

commoners should happily take whatever money you're given! Now give me that sword before I take it from you by force!"

He quickly showed his true colors. Very unfortunate.

"Hey."

Beckelt yelped. "Wh-what are you doing...!"

"Did you call Teacher a piece of junk?"

"Eeeeeek!"

"Take him from me by force? *You?*"

Beckelt's threats hit a very sensitive spot. Fran loved me, undeserving as I was. It was here that Beckelt saw his chances of taking me to his master in one piece drop to nil.

"Are you here to steal Teacher?" Fran said, activating Menace. She was set on breaking his spirit now, and her deep anger enabled her to focus her rage on Beckelt.

I think this was the first time she had full control of the skill. I thought her excess anger would spread like an inferno, but instead it was focused like a blowtorch.

"Aaa... Aaaah..."

A dark spot began spreading in Beckelt's pants. He must have wet himself. Fran approached him, but she could step in a puddle of pee if she wasn't careful.

"Hmph."

"Yaaaagh!"

She extended her hand like she was going to help him get up. Fran didn't wait for Beckelt. She grabbed his hand and shook it. But I knew it was no ordinary handshake.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Fran squeezed his hand with all her strength, and Beckelt's hand crumpled under the force like a rubber glove. He screamed, and his mouth began to foam.

He couldn't process such immense pain and fear at the same time.

She let go and allowed him to fall on his rear. She healed his broken hand to erase all evidence. The only thing that was left now was a fat, middle-aged noble who screamed like a baby when a little girl shook his hand. We had attracted a crowd of onlookers by now, and everyone who saw him looked disgusted at the presumed pervert.

Most of the onlookers were merchants and nobles. His social life was probably over.

What do we do with him? I asked Fran.

Ask him who he's working for.

And how do you plan on doing that?

Beat him up, of course.

I figured she'd say that. Still, I thought it was best that we didn't rough him up any more. Beckelt was still nobility, and dealing with the repercussions would be a pain in the rear. I thought we should let him be, but then again...

Ugh, this was so annoying! I just wanted to get back to our inn in peace!

Someone else approached us as we considered Beckelt's fate. His aura was so faint that he had to announce himself to us.

"Black Lightning Princess, let us take care of this man," Frederick said.

"But..."

Fran hesitated. She was ready to literally beat the information out of Beckelt, but she also didn't want to waste her time with him. Frederick and the others were probably good at interrogating people. In fact, times like this were precisely why the count assigned us our observer-slash-bodyguard.

No, Fran. You should definitely let Frederick handle this one.

Really?

Yeah!

"All right," Fran said. "He's all yours."

“Rest assured,” Frederick replied. “We’ll find out who he’s working for.”

Beckelt was in good hands. Frederick couldn’t have come at a better time.

Well, now that that’s settled. Back to the inn!

Teacher.

What?

Did you just hand him over to Frederick because you wanted to get to the inn sooner?

Uhh. No. No, of course not.

...Let’s head back.

That’s right! Our magicite waits! Yee-haw!

I thought I saw the ghost of exasperation on Fran’s face. I thought I saw it multiple times today, but I must be imagining things.

In the end, we were able to return to the inn without a hitch.

All right... Do you know what time it is? Yes you do!

“Yep.”

Well then, Fran. If you would line up the magicite for me, please?

“...Hm.”

Fran stared at me. Judgmentally, might I add. Still, she lined up the magicite all the same.

Time to eat!

“...”

Ha ha ha! Oooh, I feel the mana coming! It feels amazing. I can’t get enough! Aaaaah...! This is bliss.

“...You sure are enjoying yourself, Teacher.”

“...Woof.”

Jet was also staring at me judgmentally. But why?

Ooooooh!

“...Hm.”

“...Woof.”

Yippee!

Ten minutes had passed since I started cracking magicite.

Uhh... I'm really sorry.

“What are you sorry for? You didn't do anything wrong.”

“Arf.”

Then why are you looking at me like I did?!



“No reason...”

“Ruff...”

All right. Maybe I got a teensy bit overexcited, but there’s no reason for them to stare at me like that!

I might have lost some of my dignity as a parental figure, but I made up for it with a lot of skills and magicite points. I got 1,420 points in total with eleven skills, two of them Unique.

Not that any of them was enough to stop Fran and Jet’s judgmental stares.

Still, there were some interesting skills among the new pack. At the top of the list was Life Magic. Together with Thunder, Sand, Steel, Wood, and Frost magicks, we now had all six compound elements. As expected, Fran got a new title for it: Elemental Master. The title was considered a must-have for mages. It increased the bearer’s ability to control mana and process spells. I wouldn’t be able to take advantage of the buff, but the title would be a great help for Fran whenever she used magic. She also unlocked the class High Mage, which I gathered to be the elite form of Mage.

Other skills included Singing, Dancing, Woodworking, and Carpentry. These crafting skills were useful, but not for us. On the more useful side of regular skills was Decay Immunity, Weight Inflation, Undead Exorcism, and Zoology. As for Uniques, there was Predator and Cannibalize.

As its name suggested, Decay Immunity made one immune to decay-inducing attacks. Organics would be immune to rot, while inanimate objects would be immune to corrosion. It was a handy skill for both me and Fran. Weight Inflation was the advanced form of Increase Weight. It could increase the weight of one’s body, along with the equipment on it. That should allow for some hefty attacks. Undead Exorcism killed weak undead and hobbled stronger ones. It was something like a cleansing spell. Zoology was exactly what its name suggested. No loss there, I suppose.

Predator was the skill that interested me most. It allowed you to gain EXP by eating. Jet had it, and he made it look pretty useful so far. It was one of those skills which was simple but helpful.

And then there was Cannibalize, Theraclede's signature skill. I had mixed feelings about that one. If you killed a member of the same race, you gained a portion of their power. Theraclede owed his tremendous increase in strength to this skill. He got stronger with every Fiend he killed.

But how would that apply to me? Did I need to kill Godswords and Intelligent Weapons? How do you go about killing weapons, anyway? Does simply breaking them count? Fran wasn't about to go out and kill Black Cats either, so this skill probably wouldn't get used much. I left it equipped, anyway. Maybe I would get lucky with an activation.

On a whim, we tried Cannibalize out with some run-of-the-mill enchanted weapons. We bought them from a nearby store and destroyed them. All we had to show for our experiment was a pile of expensive scrap metal and a lighter wallet.

I acquired various other skills, but all of them ended up being fused into their advanced forms. I ended up with fewer skills in the end, but that was better for my processing power. I was still getting used to going for quality over quantity.

We tried out our new skills in the hotel garden. Night fell before long. Count Bayreeds had said he would find Garrus within a day. I was keen to see if he made good on his deal.

"Teacher."

Looks like they're here.

We felt familiar auras enter the premises. Their auras were obvious to us, as if announcing their arrival. They slipped through the inn and arrived at the garden. Fran set up a Wind spell around the bench she was sitting in to soundproof it, and motioned for Velmeria and Frederick to sit down.

"You cast spells as if it's second nature," Velmeria said, impressed. "Not to mention the fact that you need a referral to even stay at this inn."

"Hm," Fran nodded. "Erianthe arranged it for me."

"The Guildmaster? Are you close with her?"

"We're okay, I guess."

“O-oh, I see.”

Velmeria was as formal as ever. Maybe she wasn't used to talking to Fran, who tended to say the wildest things with little to no expression.

Velmeria cleared her throat. “Let's get down to business. I have several things to report.”

“Hm.”

“First of all, we've looked into the magic sword that you saw.”

Velmeria and the others got right on the hunt for the magic sword. It did control and kill one of their own, after all. I guess they spent the whole day looking into it after we parted ways last night.

“The people you helped saw it, of course.”

“Hm.”

If you were attacked by a flying sword, you wouldn't forget about it any time soon.

“Unfortunately, we do not know its current whereabouts. Witnesses say that it flew over the residential district and disappeared.” Velmeria sighed. “It was too fast to track down.”

And here I thought a sword flying through the sky with mana propulsion would be easy enough to spot.

She continued. “Because the sword is likely to be an Undead Sword, we looked for adventurers who might use one. Unfortunately, there are none.”

“Too bad,” Fran said.

“We decided to look for information on the sword itself, but this too proved difficult. We know that Marquis Ashtner has been collecting enchanted swords for years now, so we thought we might find something out if we looked into his purchasing history...but we couldn't find any connections to the sword.”

They had no leads, it seemed.

“Now, regarding the man who approached you today. His name is Beckelt Guus. He works for Ashtner.”

Aschtner just kept coming up. Did he use buying me as a pretense to get to Fran?

“Apparently, the marquis ordered him to get your sword by any means necessary. He told him that the sword had the crest of a wolf on it and that it belonged to a Black Cat swordsman...”

No, he was after the sword—me.

The order was so vague, though. If news about Fran looking for Garrus had reached the marquis’ ears, he would’ve been more specific. He would’ve told Beckelt to steal the sword of Fran the adventurer so that she wouldn’t be able to fight.

“We don’t know whether the marquis knows who you are. There is a possibility that he only knows you insofar as you possess the sword that he wants.”

It sounded like Marquis Aschtner had given that order as a collector, rather than as Garrus’ kidnapper.

“We’re still looking into the matter, and we’ll inform you of any new developments,” Velmeria said.

“All right.”

I was beginning to think Aschtner was behind everything that was wrong with the world.

Velmeria continued, “Finally, we have reports of Garrus’ whereabouts.”

“Hm!”

“We followed up the lead you gave us. Garrus was, in fact, last seen at Count Olmes’ villa.”

Velmeria furled her eyebrows. I had a feeling that was all she’d found out.

“One of our agents saw him, so the report is solid. However...”

“However?”

“One of our spies infiltrated the villa disguised as a gardener, but Garrus was nowhere on the estate. We don’t know whether he’s been moved to a new

location.”

There was a good chance he was locked up in a hidden room or some underground cellar. Bayreeds’ agent happened to see Garrus on the first floor of the villa’s hall.

“He was last sighted yesterday.”

“All right,” Fran nodded.

Velmeria continued, a hint of panic in her voice. “Count Bayreeds is doing everything he can to investigate Count Olmes’ villa. Please refrain from doing anything drastic!”

She could sense Fran’s battle spirit rising and was definitely worried that she might charge through Olmes’ front door. Velmeria was right to worry, because that was exactly what Fran wanted to do. I would’ve stopped her, of course. We were still up against nobility, and they had enough power to brand us as criminals on mere suspicion. The only way we could avoid that was to ship Garrus to another continent, and we had no intention of going through that. We still needed to figure out how to save him.

“We won’t be able to get a warrant to investigate Marquis Aschtner’s estate, but Count Olmes is a different matter. I promise you that we’ll look into it over the next few days. In the meantime, we ask for your patience,” Velmeria pleaded.

Let’s do what she says, Fran. It’ll be easier to help Garrus if they figure out his exact location.

“Hm. Okay.”

“Thank you,” Velmeria sighed.

Fran didn’t look completely satisfied with the deal, but being patient was our best bet right now. Still, her battle spirit wasn’t something she could switch off, and it became intense enough for Frederick to notice.

“Velmeria, may I suggest a training session with the Black Lightning Princess?” he asked.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“There is much you can learn from sparring with someone stronger. You should know; you sparred with Steelclaw. And besides, I’m sure the princess would love a bit of physical activity.”

“Hm!” Fran nodded. She got up from the bench and unsheathed me. She was all for Frederick’s suggestion. She immediately turned to Velmeria in her excitement and said, “Come on, Velmeria.”

“...Very well,” Velmeria nodded. She picked up on what Frederick was trying to tell her. It would be better for them if she helped release the pressure valve on Fran’s battle spirit right now.

She wasn’t opposed to it. In fact, she looked like she was looking forward to it. I guess she was one of those people who wouldn’t say no to a fight.

They stopped smiling and walked to the center of the garden.

“You don’t want to ready your weapon?” Fran asked.

“No,” Velmeria said. “This is my ready stance.”

“All right.”

At first glance, it looked like Velmeria would fight Fran bare-handed like a martial artist. While she did have Martial Arts Mastery, her Dagger Mastery, Hidden Weapons Mastery, and Throw levels were much higher. Combined with Hush and Conceal Presence, she had the perfect loadout for an assassin. I had a feeling she was going to fight Fran with her hidden weapons today.

I didn’t tell Fran about any of this, of course. I didn’t want to ruin her fun, and it would make for a great learning experience. How quickly would Fran be able to adjust to Velmeria’s combat style?

Frederick covered the arena with darkness, concealing the two combatants from the outside world. The match could now begin.

Velmeria made the first move, and she was right to do so. She was light on her feet, and had no reason to wait for Fran to initiate. She could probably take down someone much stronger than her with her first strike, if she landed a fatal blow with her hidden weapons.

I didn’t have the Hidden Weapons Mastery skill, but I could spot Velmeria’s

weapon of choice: a throwable arrowhead hidden up her sleeve. She did a good job suppressing her murderous intent, and there was no warning when the arrowhead came.

But her motions felt a bit rushed. Velmeria was far too worried that Fran would get the drop on her. While this tactic would have thrown the average C-Rank off guard, Fran was unfazed by it. At this distance, she easily reacted to the weapon. She tilted her head and the arrow whizzed by her. She rushed toward Velmeria and delivered a kick to her solar plexus.

“Tch.”

“Hurk...!”

“Wow.”

Oooh.

Velmeria managed to reduce the impact of Fran’s kick by jumping back. The kick still clipped her, but it wasn’t enough to incapacitate her. Velmeria knew the fundamentals of combat. She would go far with more experience. She was also mentally tough. Fran might have been holding back, but the kick would’ve been enough to make a weaker fighter yield.

Velmeria drew her daggers. “I’m not going down so easily!”

“Hrm!”

She threw a smokescreen and a net over Fran before charging in again. She was serious now. Fran blew the smoke and net away with a Wind spell, but Velmeria was already at her side by the time the smoke cleared. I pegged her as a one-hit killing assassin earlier, but she was actually quite skilled with her daggers. She was a tricky sort of fighter, utilizing her light weight to offset their lack of damage. She spun like a top, daggers in hand, to attack Fran at her weak spot.

I see. She can turn the tide of battle with a single blow, as long as she can land it.

Velmeria’s style allowed her to win against stronger opponents. Retreat was the preferred option, but quickly ending the battle was second best.

However, she was still lacking in actual experience, and it showed. Her attack was too obvious, and Fran quickly read the trajectory of her spin. She deflected the daggers' attack with my blade, and knocked them away from Velmeria with a kick and a punch.

It didn't dissuade Velmeria from going back in for more. Beneath her tangled blue ponytail, her eyes burned with the desire to win. Her mind was definitely trained just as well as her body.

Frederick silently watched the girl with gentle eyes. I had a feeling that he was her teacher. He stood there like a loving brother or father. He kept watching her until Velmeria could no longer stand and the match was over. When the two returned to his side, his stone-faced expression returned.

"You need more training."

"You're right," Velmeria said. "I didn't think she would be able to defend against all of my hidden weapons."

I didn't know exactly how things stood between these two. Frederick wasn't shy about criticizing the daughter of Count Bayreeds, despite him being her subordinate. They were both drake halflings, so I figured there must be something going on there. I wasn't about to get involved in the messy world of nobles and their families, but Fran failed to grasp the nuance of the situation.

"Is there something going on between you two? You're both drake halflings."

Fran asked the question like she was talking about the weather while sipping her juice. But Velmeria gave her an answer. I guess it wasn't as big a secret as I feared.

"It's difficult to explain, but the simplest way to say it is that Frederick is my bodyguard. He used to be my mother's bodyguard, but when Father took me away, he came with us to this country."

"Your mom's not here then?"

"No. You met my father the other day—Count Bayreeds. He met my mother when he was deployed to Goldicia."

Goldicia was the continent which was overwhelmed by a gigantic monster. I

think the drakes had an empire there, too.

“My mother was his handler while he was there.”

Count Bayreeds had relations with Velmeria’s mother, and so she was born. But the count’s deployment soon came to an end, and he took Velmeria with him to Granzell. He was already a man with family, but incidents like these were of no consequence to nobility.

“So she’s still in Goldicia?”

“Yes. My mother’s duties prevent her from leaving.”

“Do you miss her?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t really remember her, so I can’t say I miss her terribly.” She shrugged. “But I would like to see her again, if I ever get the chance.”

She didn’t think too much of having been taken away from her mother at such a young age. Frederick, on the other hand, turned away to hide his sadness at the girl who didn’t know her own mother.

Night fell on the day Fran sparred with Velmeria.

“Teacher!”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet jumped out of their luxurious hotel bed.

Tch! Fran, barrier!

“Hm!”

Fran threw a barrier around herself, and Jet hid in the shadows as I prepared to teleport us away from there.

KABOOM!

We were more than ten meters above the garden, watching as the inn we were staying in exploded. It looked like it was caused by a Flame spell. The spell was powerful enough to engulf us with its heat if we hadn’t been protected by a barrier.

This is insane! There are people inside!

“Teacher, I can feel it!”

I know! I can feel it, too. It’s that damn sword!

The cause of the explosion stood at the center of the garden. The man’s expression was lifeless, and in his right hand was the broken sword. The sight was all too familiar, and the sense of disgust returned. The hateful aura could only belong to the demon sword.

Are Velmeria and Frederick okay...?

“I don’t know.”

Velmeria and Frederick were staying in the room next to ours, but we couldn’t feel their auras. I didn’t know whether they were concealing themselves from the enemy or if they were dead. I could only hope it was the former.

Jet, go see if they’re all right!

“Woof!”

We would keep our assailants occupied in the meantime. Our allies and the inn would be destroyed if we let them keep blasting their spells.

The man stared at us with his lifeless eyes.

“We’ll destroy that sword this time!”

We should do something to prevent that thing from escaping again...

The sword would be able to fly away if it needed to flee. Great Wall seemed like a good option, but the garden was too small to accommodate it. Creating a dome around the arena would leave us with so little space that we wouldn’t be able to fight the sword, but it would easily break through the Great Wall if I made it too thin. I thought of surrounding the whole inn with the spell, but then the people inside wouldn’t be able to get away. We would just have to guard against the sword’s escape.

Don’t let it get away, Fran!

“Hm! I know!”

Fran descended upon the demon sword and its host. They fired a Flame spell,

and we retaliated with a Flame spell of our own.

“Awaken!”

Fran accelerated through the air and brought me down upon the demon sword. Any ordinary sword would’ve broken from the sheer impact, but the man withstood the attack. It was as if he was as resilient as the sword!

I Identified him, and his Advanced Sword Mastery was at 5—much higher than Hummels’. He had an array of high-level skills as well as powerful ones like Brute Force, Enhanced Strength, and Fast Regeneration. Just like Hummels, he was under the Fanatic and Unleashed Potential statuses.

I noticed some slight differences. Hummels had Regeneration, Muscular Hypertrophy and Martial Arts Mastery when he was under Unleashed Potential. Meanwhile, the man in front of us—Gordon—did not. Regeneration might have been combined to make Fast Regeneration, but he didn’t have the other two. Was the sword not responsible for those three skills? Maybe Unleashed Potential only awakened Hummels’ latent abilities.

Either way, destroying the sword was still our main goal.

We need to try and capture Gordon alive, if possible.

“Hm.”

If we could wake him from his stupor, we could ask him if he was sent by Marquis Aschtner.

He should be able to take a beating with Fast Regeneration, but...

He was on a timer as long as he was under Unleashed Potential. His life force was burning up as we spoke. We needed to destroy the sword and get him back to normal.

“Haaa!”

Gordon was silent as Fran aimed for his wrists. The plan was to separate him from the sword and blast it to kingdom come. Gordon attacked recklessly, aided by Fast Regeneration, but Fran proved to be the better swordsman. She slowed down, and then surprised him with a faster attack. Gordon couldn’t keep up with her pace and he was slowly losing his defenses. Fran grazed past the

demon sword and struck his wrist, but Gordon managed to react in time.

However, instead of avoiding her attack, he threw himself in harm's way to protect the sword.

"Urk!"

I was plunged deep into Gordon's belly. He let go of his sword and grabbed my hilt with both hands. Brute Force and Enhanced Strength made him quite the challenger. I tried pulling myself out of him, but Gordon was holding on so tightly that I couldn't escape. I could cut my way out, but then I would risk killing him.

"Get your dirty hands off Teacher!"

Gordon remained silent as Fran kicked his ribs. I could hear his bones cracking, but he remained silent and implacable. Meanwhile, the demon sword activated its Mana Thruster to blow Fran away from me.

Fran!

She gasped, "Teacher!"

Good, she was still in one piece. But now Gordon was doing something we didn't expect. He turned away to make his escape.

This guy was after me all along...!

"Hold it!"

Fran gave chase, but I saw the demon sword rising behind her. It was going to cut her in half!

Not happening!

I used Telekinesis to tangle Gordon's legs. Now that he was kneeling, I blew his other leg out from under him with a Wind spell. I could just as easily teleport out of him, but I didn't want to risk him getting away and losing our only lead. I contemplated letting Fran handle the demon sword by herself while I locked Gordon down.

But I don't think she can go up against that thing bare-handed...

As I hesitated, the sword accelerated toward Fran at breakneck speed. She

only managed to deflect it by concentrating her barrier in one spot. Such an obvious attack wouldn't work against Fran, no matter how fast. Her hands were wounded, but she managed to throw off the sword's trajectory.

Then came a shrill noise.

Obey me!

It was a voice. It was artificial, like it had been synthesized with a machine, and it rang loudly in our heads. One of Fran's resistance skills activated. Previously, I hadn't give much thought to my skill activation, but after training to sense the flow of mana, I now understood which among them had activated: Mental Status Resistance and Insubordination.

Fran, are you all right?!

"Hm? What was that voice?"

She sounded okay. A quick scan showed that she was under no status ailments. The sword had tried to take control of us just now. If Hummels and Gordon were anything to go by, it definitely had the ability to control people. There was a good chance that it was more effective if it managed to cut its target. I managed to hear the voice because of my connection with Fran.

Obey me!

"Shut up."

Fran, don't get cut by it! I think it has the power to control people!

"All right."

The sword rattled—shivered—on the ground. To me, it looked like it was stunned that it failed to control Fran. Either way, I had to return to Fran's side, and fast. Her resistance skill had saved her this time, but I didn't want to bank on her getting lucky again.

I cast a powerful Land spell on Gordon, and vines made of rock bound him to the ground. He wouldn't be able to break his way out of this one. Satisfied with the results, I teleported myself to Fran.

I'm back.

“Teacher!”

You okay?

“Hm!”

Fran hugged me when I returned to her. The few seconds I was taken from her must have hurt her to her core.

“You’re going to pay for that...!” she growled. I hadn’t seen her this angry in a long time.

The sword looked like it was hesitating. It didn’t know whether to fight or flee. Fran directed her killing intent at the sword, and I could swear it was afraid of her.

“Flashing Thunderclap!”

She brought me down on the blade at lightning speed, but the sword flew away.

It’s making a break for it!

But not quite. It was firing spells now, but not at Fran. It was trying to free Gordon from his rock prison. It shot seemingly at random, but it would be enough to weaken Gordon’s bonds. The sword made a beeline for him. The demon sword probably needed a host to fight, and it couldn’t continue the battle on its own for much longer.

Oh, no you don’t!

“Haaa!”

We tripped Gordon up with a Wind spell, and then teleported to attack the sword once more. I was going to seal its movements with Telekinesis so Fran could finish it off with a Sword King Art. But then...

It read our Teleport!

The sword accelerated away, and was no longer within our range. It must have remarkable detection abilities. Now Gordon charged at us, weaponless. What was he doing? He didn’t have Martial Arts Mastery or Punch Mastery. The best he could hope for was to slam into Fran with brute force. He was still

pretty fast, so the damage he could do would be significant.

Meanwhile, Fran and I were hesitating. We didn't want to attack him, especially when he only had a sliver of life left. Kill him, and we would lose our best lead so far. Fran jumped back, and Gordon leapt after her.

Then, a dull sound came from Gordon's body before it exploded from the inside. The demon sword had moved behind Gordon's back and ran him through. The sword's mana blade was now hammer-shaped, and it slammed right into Gordon's body. Fast Regeneration wouldn't be able to help him now that his body was in pieces. The sight infuriated me.

What kind of a sword is this?! This thing killed its own user!

What the sword did had tainted the pride and dignity of swords everywhere, and I was outraged.

The sword attacked us through the smokescreen of Gordon's blood and guts. Its mana blade had transformed into smaller branching blades to attack Fran. Wary of its mind-control abilities, we kept our distance from it. None of its attacks landed. In fact, it was as if the sword was expecting us to back off. It took advantage of the opening, flying past us and away from the inn.

We played into its hands!

"Is it running away?"

No!

The sword was hurtling right toward Velmeria and Frederick.

"Run!"

"Urgh!"

"Velmeria!"

Jet had managed to save them both. They were watching us fight, holding their breath to conceal their presence. But the sword managed to sniff them out. Velmeria managed to hear Fran's warning, but she couldn't react in time. Frederick had to push her out of the sword's way at the last second. The sword cut a deep gash into his arm.

“Gaaah!”

“Frederick!” Velmeria shouted. “Are you all right?!”

“I-I’m fine!” he said. “But this horrible voice... If you want me to obey you, make me!”

The sword was looking for a new host. Fortunately, Frederick’s Mental Status Resistance miraculously prevented him from being mind-controlled. But Velmeria didn’t have such a skill, and we needed to end this fight before it attacked her.

We’re going in!

“Hm!”

Fran closed her eyes to focus her energy while I teleported in front of the demon sword. The sword reacted by blasting Fran with Mana Thruster, but I knew it was going to see us coming. I used Dimension Shift to make the attack miss. The sword seemed surprised when it saw its attack go right through Fran, but she remained calm. She knew I would take care of her, leaving her free to focus on her moves.

She opened her eyes, and brought me down from above.

“Sword King Arts... Skycutter!”

YAAAAAAAAGH!

The demon sword let out a shrill cry when Fran managed to chip a piece off of its broken blade. We definitely managed to hurt it, but the surge of revolting mana remained. And so did the sword’s core...

I was about to shout “Again!” but something stopped my voice.

Urgh...!

“Teacher?”

Aaaaah!

I could only scream as a rush of power flowed through me. Cutting the sword had activated Cannibalize. The power was so great that I felt it would either overwhelm me or make me lose control. The mana of the demon sword

entered me, and my revulsion was so intense that I couldn't think of anything else. It was like having a mixture of sewage, rotting fish, and pus course through your body. If I still had a body, I'd be rolling on the ground trying to hold my lunch in.

Uuuuuurgh!

"Teacher!"

The sword saw that Fran was no longer attacking it, and it took that as its cue to escape.

"Jet, after it!"

"Woof!"

Urrrgh!

Three minutes later...

Sorry about that, Fran... I'm fine now.

Are you sure?

Yeah.

The demon sword escaped while I was writhing in pain. We could only hope that Jet could track where it was going.

I didn't know why Cannibalize triggered. I thought it only activated when you killed a member of your own race. As an inanimate object, I wasn't alive. Did that mean that it would immediately activate when whatever I'm consuming was already lifeless to begin with? Was it because we managed to break a fragment from the sword? And how was the sword still moving after I hit it with Cannibalize? Wasn't it supposed to be dead? I had so many questions.

Either way, I was going to have to unequip Cannibalize before our next encounter. It might prove fatal next time. I didn't want to be assaulted by that feeling again. Still, I got stronger, and the sword was weakened when I drained its power. Maybe I should keep using Cannibalize and put up with the revulsion. Decisions, decisions...

“Are you all right, Fran?” Velmeria asked.

“Hm?”

“You suddenly stopped fighting just now...”

“That sword has the ability to control minds,” Frederick said. “Were you affected by it?”

The two of them looked quite worried about Fran. Earlier, Velmeria had administered a healing potion to Frederick, but he was still wincing. Even with Mental Status Resistance, he knew that he’d barely managed to avoid falling victim to the demon sword’s Command skill. He also knew that he and Velmeria wouldn’t stand a chance against Fran if the thing took control of her. He watched Fran with cautious eyes, prepared to throw himself over Velmeria to protect her.

“I’m fine. I have resistance skills.”

“I see,” Frederick sighed.

“That’s good to hear,” Velmeria said. Their relief was palpable.

We dusted ourselves off and went to help anyone who was left in the inn. The fire caused by the explosion was still spreading, and we had to do something before it got any worse. We left the fire-extinguishing business to Velmeria because of her affinity with Water Magic. Meanwhile, the rest of us went to look for anyone left behind.

Surprisingly, there weren’t that many who were injured or incapacitated. This was a five-star inn, and it didn’t have many guests to begin with. As for the guests, most of them were high C-Rank adventurers, and they had either fled at the first sign of trouble, or were killed by the explosion.

There were a few rich civilians, sure, but they were rich enough to hire bodyguards who could escort them safely from the premises. In the end, the only person who needed help was one of the employees who had failed to get out in time. We healed the young man’s wounds and escorted him from the burning building.

We should go back to the garden.

“Hm.”

It was only a matter of time before the city guard came to the scene. The state of Gordon’s body was odd enough to warrant further investigation, and we might end up being suspected of murder.

We need to grab Gordon’s body before that happens.

“Hm.”

Frederick was already inspecting the corpse by the time we reached the garden. Gordon’s head was still intact in spite of his obliterated body. We couldn’t conduct a thorough inspection here, but his head might be enough of a lead.

“Figure anything out?” Fran asked.

“Kind of,” Frederick said.

“Kind of” wasn’t great, but it was way better than nothing. Frederick had only been looking at the body for a few minutes, too.

Fran pressed him. “Go on.”

“First, the man’s identity. This is Gordon, one of Count Bayreeds’ men.”

“Just like Hummels?”

“Yes. And he went missing while on a spying mission, just like Hummels.”

Frederick recognized his colleague and grieved for him. But a look of suspicion crept over his face.

“However...” he started.

“However?”

“Unlike Hummels, Gordon was not part of a combat unit. He mostly did observation missions. He was still trained like the rest of us, but he shouldn’t have been that strong. I find it incredible that he could’ve gone toe to toe with you in such a short period of time.”

“The sword put him under Unleashed Potential.”

“I see. That answers that question,” Frederick mused. Unleashed Potential

would increase what few stats Gordon had. Something was still bothering him, though. “He fought with a sword, yes?”

“Hm.”

“The thing is,” Frederick said, “Gordon was a spear user. His swordsmanship was subpar.”

Unleash Potential maximized whatever latent abilities a person had. Regeneration and Muscular Hypertrophy could count as more advanced forms of physical enhancement skills. In Hummels’ case, Unleash Potential only awakened those latent skills.

But how could it have specifically improved Gordon’s Sword Mastery? It wasn’t that powerful to begin with, but the fact that it changed into Advanced Sword Mastery was disconcerting. Meanwhile, his Spear Mastery (the more powerful skill of the two) had remained the same.

“The same could be said for his Flame Magic. Gordon was a novice in Earth Magic. He had never cast a Fire spell in his life.”

“But he used Flame Magic.”

“So I saw.”

Advanced Sword Mastery and Flame Magic weren’t skills you could get for free. Not unless you had powers like me, at least.

“The sword again?”

“I don’t know. A sword that controls its user and gives him entirely new skills...” Frederick paused. “Does it even exist? The Undead Sword is the closest thing I know of that can do this kind of thing.”

But Frederick knew the sword was not an Undead Sword. The fact that I Cannibalized it only made things clearer. There was a good chance that we were dealing with some kind of Intelligent Weapon. Otherwise Cannibalize wouldn’t have triggered.

“I heard a voice when it cut me,” Fran said.

“Me too. ‘Obey me’, right?”

“Hm. That sword has a mind of its own.”

Frederick’s eyes widened. “Are you suggesting that it’s an Intelligent Weapon?! That would explain the voice...”

Intelligent Weapons were the stuff of legends, and Fran was suggesting that a legend had become reality and burned down the inn tonight. Frederick was understandably shocked.

“I didn’t think any existed outside of Goldicia...”

“What do you mean?”

“There is an Intelligent Sword in Goldicia.”

Frederick explained that the sword belonging to Trismegistus, hero of the Tragedy of Goldicia, was said to possess a will of its own. It was a painstaking process, but the genius alchemist managed to craft the weapon after combining all of his knowledge. He was cursed by the gods to walk the earth with no company other than his sword, unable to die until he destroyed his own creation, the Abyss Eater.

Could Trismegistus have created me? He wasn’t a Godsmith, but maybe he made his intelligent sword out of a discarded Godsword. He was the genius alchemist who almost brought about the end of the world, after all.

Goldicia...

A land of ruin ruled by monsters. Would we have to go there someday?

Fran and Frederick continued their investigation as I mused to myself.

“I found something else that might help,” Fran said. “A piece of the sword.”

Fran presented Frederick with a fragment of the demon sword’s blade. The sickening aura around it had weakened considerably since it was no longer attached to the sword. It should help reveal its identity.

This material... It looks like what I’m made of.

I could somewhat tell what it was made of thanks to my Blacksmith skill. If nothing else, I knew it wasn’t made of ordinary iron. I didn’t know exactly what metal it was made of, but the material seemed to resemble that of my own

blade: orichalcos, a metal that could only be utilized by Godsmiths. The standard Blacksmith skill couldn't tell what it was—even Garrus didn't know what I was made of when he looked at me—but I spotted a lot of similarities between the blade and my own.

And now things got complicated.

There was a chance that the demon sword actually *was* a Godsword. It was a lot weaker compared to Gaia—Urslars' Godsword—but maybe it was an unfinished Godsword. No wonder Cannibalize activated. The sword was likely to be an Intelligent Weapon crafted by a Godsmith. The chances of Trismegistus making it were low.

"Would you mind if I kept it for a while so I can look into it further?"

Teacher?

"I'll be sure to return it to you after we're done, Fran," Frederick smiled. "You won this fair and square, after all."

I didn't mind. It wasn't like we would have much luck investigating on our own.

Go for it.

"Hm. All right."

Jet returned as Fran and Frederick continued talking over Gordon's body.

"Woof!"

"Jet," Fran said, welcoming him. "Any news?"

"Arf!" Jet barked confidently. He must have managed to track the sword down to its hideout.

"Let me guess," Fran said. "The Aschtner estate?"

"Woof!"

Jet nodded enthusiastically. Fran had thrown the marquis' name out on a whim, but she'd guessed right.

"Are you sure?"

“Woof!”

Jet was trying his best to convince her that he was telling the truth. The sword must have really escaped to Marquis Aschtner’s mansion. The sword covered its tracks last time by concealing its presence in the residential district, but apparently it went straight home tonight. Maybe the damage it sustained from Fran’s Sword King Art was too great. Especially after I Cannibalized some of its power, too.

Speaking of which, I gained fifty points of durability and mana from Cannibalize. It wasn’t much, but I could become really strong if I managed to absorb all of the sword’s energy. If I could resist the urge to throw up every time, that is.

“Did the wolf manage to track down the sword?”

“Hm. It’s at Marquis Aschtner’s mansion.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Hm. We can trust Jet.”

“Grrrr!”

Jet was growling at Frederick. He had whined sweetly to Fran earlier as if to say “Please, you have to believe me,” but his tone with Frederick was closer to “What? You callin’ me a liar?” He looked intimidating despite being dog-sized, but Frederick wasn’t fazed.

“Stop glaring,” Fran said, slapping Jet’s head. Jet whined as if to say “But he started it!” She ignored him and continued the conversation. “I’m going to Aschtner’s mansion.”

“Wait, hold on.”

Jet whined again.

“We have to be careful. Without damning evidence, entering the marquis’ abode will only lead to the case against him being closed. It might take years before we get another chance.”

“Hrm...”

“Arf!”

Jet snarled at Frederick, as if to say “Did you just say Boss had a bad idea?”

“Jet.”

“Ruff!”

Fran slapped him upside the head again. Jet took his eyes off Frederick, as if to say “You got lucky. You win this round.” I didn’t know why he was acting like a two-bit street punk tonight.

In any case, we had to move—another attack could occur at any moment. We decided to head to Count Bayreeds’ hideout in the noble district. We waited for Velmeria to finish putting out the fire before moving out. We caught her up on the current situation—how the sword was last seen disappearing into the Aschtner mansion.

Velmeria nodded. “I knew he would be related to all this. Just another reason to investigate the marquis.”

Frederick stopped her. “That’s assuming the direwolf isn’t mistaken. We still need hard evidence.”

“Grrr!”

Jet growled at Frederick again—I didn’t know what had gotten into him tonight. He was usually friendly, but Frederick seemed to rub him the wrong way.

Was it because they were so alike? They had similar skills and capabilities, and I wondered if Jet considered Frederick his competition. He was a wolf, after all, and he wouldn’t take kindly to someone who threatened his position in the pack.

Similarity breeds contempt...

Was this the reason I felt repulsed by the demon sword? It was a powerful enchanted weapon which could operate on its own will. It gave a share of its powers to its user, exponentially increasing their strength. None of this information was set in stone, but by the looks of it, there was a very good chance we were up against an Intelligent Weapon like myself.

We were very much alike. Disgustingly so.

I was angry at what the sword did. Hummels died because of prolonged exposure to Unleashed Potential. And that was something that could very well happen to me and Fran. I *was* like that sword, insofar as we both had the potential to kill our users. It was a tough pill to swallow, but the resemblance was there.

Hmm.

What's wrong?

I was just thinking... I'm a lot like that demon sword.

No, you're not.

It's not about how we look, I said. We have similar powers.

For better or worse, we were very much alike.

Fran heavily disagreed with me on this. *No, you're not! That thing killed its user!*

Sure, it killed Gordon, but you could end up the same way if you stay in Unleashed Potential for too long. It's a matter of stopping at the right time.

And that's why you're not the same! That thing did nothing to stop its user from dying. You would never let that happen to me.

...You mean that?

Hm! That sword's bad news. You're a good sword.

I didn't think there was much of a difference between me and the demon sword. But I did care for my user's well-being. That meant the world to Fran, and if she said we were different, then we were different. Her words cleared up my hesitation. I was pretty easy to please.

Thanks, Fran.

"Hm!"

Chapter 5:

Legion of Fanatics

WE RETURNED TO COUNT BAYREEDS' safehouse in the noble district after the attack on our hotel. This was the place where we'd first met the count. We had a lot to tell him, and we were supposed to meet Frederick and the others to discuss our next steps as well.

Fran, you have to wake up.

"Hnnh..."

We have to talk to the count about our next step, remember?

"Urrrgh."

Count Bayreeds had personally come to the safehouse last night to assess the situation, but Fran was asleep. Fortunately, the count was a magnanimous man and he laughed it off. Still, we couldn't keep him waiting today.

Come on, wake up.

"Hrm..."

All right, I'm going to wipe your face now.

"Hmmmh."

Stay still so I can fix your hair.

Fran yawned. This went on for about fifteen minutes.

"Morning, Teacher."

Good morning, Fran.

Now awake, Fran rubbed her belly with a sad look in her eyes. "I'm hungry."

All right. Here, just stuff it with these for now.

I gave her some onigiri and sandwiches to start. She had gone to bed on an empty stomach after fighting for her life. She was bound to wind up starving in

the morning. The safehouse would have prepared breakfast, but I didn't want to burden them with the task of filling Fran's stomach.

You have some too, Jet.

"Woof!"

"Munch, munch."

This went on for another fifteen minutes.

"Woof, woof!"

"Yum, yum."

Now Fran and Jet were in the Bayreeds cafeteria to have a second round of breakfast.

"What are you talking about?!"

"..."

"You cannot take me off of this assignment!"

"..."

I heard a loud, angry voice coming from the second floor.

That's Velmeria.

"Hm."

I couldn't hear who she was talking to, but she was definitely mad at them.

"If you'll excuse me!"

Velmeria slammed the door open and stormed out of the room. I heard her running down the stairs and into the cafeteria. Her eyes were red and puffy.

Fran continued chewing. "Velmeria?"

"Fran," Velmeria stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." She cleared her throat. "Excuse me." She turned around and walked swiftly out of the room.

She was crying.

Yeah.

What happened up there? Velmeria looked like she was about to collapse on the floor with her swollen eyes and gritted teeth. She looked so weak that Fran even stopped eating and considered going after her, but someone else entered the cafeteria before she could leave.

“Black Lightning Princess,” Frederick said. “Lord Sydle will see you now.”

“What about Velmeria?”

He paused. “Don’t worry about her.”

“But I can’t help it.”

“It is not my place to say,” Frederick said. Considering how tight-lipped he was, he wasn’t going to tell us what happened to Velmeria.

Fran, go see the count for now. You won’t get Frederick to tell you anything by arguing with him.

“...All right.”

Frederick sighed and led Fran to the meeting room. Count Bayreeds was seated on a couch, a tired expression on his face. He was slumped over, and I was surprised at how utterly defenseless he looked. His exchange with Velmeria must have inflicted severe psychological damage.

But the count knew he couldn’t keep his guest waiting, and gave Fran an awkward smile.

“Good morning, Black Lightning Princess. I would like to start discussing our strategy going forward, if that’s all right with you.”

“Hm.”

“First, I would like to thank you for all the information you’ve gathered for us. We’ve acquired a warrant to investigate Count Olmes’ villa. Even the marquis is helpless against a royal warrant.”

The Olmes villa might belong to Marquis Aschtner, but he couldn’t refuse a search warrant. He might have gotten away with it in the past, but repeated failures had reduced the amount of influence he wielded. Fewer people wanted

to associate with him now, and he wouldn't be able to pull strings from behind the scenes for long. The marquis also put off his summons to the castle, citing illness. The other factions were beginning to think that he was nothing but a coward.

"We can't get a warrant to search the marquis' mansion, but that could be arranged if we find something substantial in the villa."

"Hm. And what am I supposed to do?"

"We are conducting a raid on the Olmes villa tonight. I would love to have you there. What do you say?"

Fran looked as surprised as I was. "Tonight? That's fast."

"They might be on to us if we're not quick enough. Do you have other arrangements?"

"No, tonight's fine."

"Very well. You will be under Colbert's orders, since both of you are contractors. Will that be all right?"

"Hm," Fran nodded.

"Thank you."

The count looked relieved after seeing Fran agree to work with him so readily. Was he worried that she would charge into the villa by herself?

"You're strong. Very strong. But Colbert knows how to do business here, you see," Bayreeds said. I knew then that he had personally watched the fight between the two. He was worried that Fran might not appreciate taking orders from someone weaker than her.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Colbert."

Speak of the devil. Colbert entered the room, looking like he was bothered by something.

"Sorry, I happened to see Velmeria when I was getting here," he said

sheepishly. “Did something happen?”

Damn, Colbert knew how to ask a difficult question!

The count paused. “You could say that. She disagreed when I took her off the investigation.”

“You’re pulling her off the case?” Colbert asked. “Why? I think she’s pretty strong. If nothing else, she’s way better than I am as a scout.”

“You overestimate her. She might be competent, but she’s inexperienced. She is nowhere near as strong as you two.”

The count had a good point there. Velmeria wasn’t a strong fighter. But Colbert had the better point, because she *was* an excellent scout. She was very much suited to infiltrating the mansion. How could the count not understand that? Was there another reason why he pulled her out?

“Velmeria was crying,” Fran said.

Count Bayreeds groaned.

“Are you sure we can’t take her? She’ll come in handy.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But she still lacks experience, and this is not an investigation which will be kind to her.”

The count made a weak argument, and it was clear he was lying. By the looks of it, even Colbert knew that. His sharp eyes scanned the count’s face.

“Count Bayreeds,” he started. “I know you love your daughter, but she is an adult now. You cannot protect her forever.”

Bayreeds grunted and pursed his lips. Colbert had hit the mark. The count was being overprotective of his daughter. He might be a great warrior, but he was still a worried father.

“Besides,” Colbert continued. “I would think she’s learned a lot after sticking with Frederick for so long.”

“I-In any case, Velmeria will not be joining the investigation tonight!” The count raised his voice and shook his head. “And that’s final!”

Frederick sighed in disappointment.

“Nothing we can do about it?” Fran asked.

“No!”

The discussion came to an end, and we were sent away.

Colbert sighed. “Frederick, are you sure you don’t need to see how Velmeria’s doing?”

“No,” Frederick said. “She’s in her room, and she probably wants to be left alone right now. She wouldn’t talk to me even if I went to her.”

“Spoken like a true master. You know your student well.”

So Frederick was Velmeria’s teacher as well as her bodyguard. No wonder they were so familiar with each other.

His position also made me realize that Count Bayreeds was a worrywart. But why raise Velmeria to be a warrior and a spy if he was so overprotective of her? He could’ve given her a typical noble upbringing. There must be plenty of noble women who didn’t know how to fight and lived with servants waiting on them hand and foot. Maybe it was different for her because she was the daughter of his mistress.

Fran asked the question for me, and Frederick and Colbert shifted uneasily.

“It’s complicated,” Frederick said.

“And it isn’t something we can discuss here,” Colbert continued. “If you want, we can go downstairs, have some tea, and gossip about it.”

It sounded like a good idea, so we headed to the cafeteria to discuss the relationship between Count Bayreeds and Velmeria.

Question one: Why was Velmeria raised as a fighter? The answer turned out to be a simple matter of tradition.

“House Bayreeds is a house of warriors. All their children are trained fighters regardless of gender, and all must serve in the army. Even the child of a mistress,” Frederick explained.

“Isn’t it *because* she’s the child of a mistress?” Colbert pointed out. “If she got special treatment, the count’s wife might think he loves his mistress more than

her.”

“Correct. In the end, Velmeria would end up being hurt the most. Lord Sydle trained her after hardening his resolve.”

“I’m not a big fan of the count’s wife, myself. I met her a couple times, but that’s enough for me to tell that she is unpleasant. She’s one of those nobles who thinks adventurers are just the same as thieves. The way she glared at me, you’d think she’d just seen a cockroach. She’s good-looking, at least; I’ll give her that much. But she’s your run-of-the-mill noblewoman.”

Count Bayreeds knew he had to keep things civil between his wife and Velmeria, since her mother was on another continent.

“That’s why Velmeria isn’t seen as a threat. Having mistresses is a fact of life for noblemen, so the wife won’t have a problem with her as long as the count makes her play by the rules.”

It was the count’s way of letting Velmeria win her honor. As long as the count didn’t give her preferential treatment over his wife’s children, they wouldn’t have a problem.

Which led to our next question.

“Why isn’t Velmeria a knight?” Fran wondered.

House Bayreeds was a house of knights, and yet Velmeria was trained as a spy. I would think even the count’s bastard child could be a candidate for the knighthood.

Apparently, Velmeria’s illegitimacy didn’t spring from her status as a bastard, but from her race.

“Her race? It’s because she’s a drake halfling?”

“That’s right,” Frederick said. “Granzell does not grant special offices to drakes in general, nor to halflings. That includes all public offices, as well as the glory of the knighthood.”

“How come?”

“They say drakes are a detestable race.”

“They hate you?”

“You could say that.” Frederick chuckled at Fran’s innocent questions. Still, he continued to tell her how the drakes were treated across the world, probably because she came from a despised race herself.

“Trismegistus, the instigator of the Tragedy of Goldicia, was a drake. That’s the biggest reason.”

“But that doesn’t make all drakes bad people.”

“Not exactly. Trismegistus might have been singled out as a victim of divine punishment, but the drakes fully supported their king. He had promised the people that he would conquer the world and put it under the heel of the drakes.” Frederick shook his head. “A foolish vision.”

The fault didn’t lie solely with Trismegistus. The drakes shared in his crimes by egging on his ambitions and research.

“The ambition and folly of the drakes nearly led to the destruction of the whole world. Still haunted by their dreams of conquest, it didn’t take long for the other nations to destroy the drakes under the guise of divine punishment.”

Divine punishment as an excuse to get rid of undesirables. I understood the pattern.

“They claimed to be agents of divine justice, but in reality, they were afraid of the ambitious and tribal race of the drakes.”

“Drakes are very strong, after all,” Colbert said. “And humanoids are suspicious of races that are stronger than ours. The insectoids and high elves are still feared to this day.”

I could see why drakes were strong; they had dragon blood in them, after all. But what was this about insectoids and high elves? Were they as strong as drakes? Fran tilted her head; she didn’t seem like she knew, either.

“You’ve never heard of the saying? The terrible drake, the lunatic insectoid, the powerful high elf... They’re always grouped together.”

The drakes possessed enough military strength to rule an entire continent, as well as being individually strong. They were considered terrible because they

brought misery to themselves and everyone around them.

The insectoids had roles designated for them at birth. For example, the warrior class was born incredibly strong; the weakest among them was as powerful as a C-Rank adventurer. They were also fiercely loyal to the state, and seemed to possess different values compared to humanoids. Their values made them seem insane to the average person, and so the insectoids claimed the crown of lunatics.

“I’ve met insectoid halflings before,” Fran said. “They seem like normal people.”

Erianthe was an insectoid halfling, but there was nothing odd about her values. Maybe it was because her human blood overpowered her insect traits.

“The halflings are all right, but the purebloods...” Colbert shivered. “And wait till you hear about the elites.”

Insectoids lived in a society with four classes. There was the noble class, who acted as leaders; the warrior class, who fought; the guiding class, who served as administration; and the rest were common civilians. The child of an insectoid noble wasn’t guaranteed to be a noble. Their class was completely randomized at birth. There were cases where common parents gave birth to noble children.

Be they nobles, warriors, guides, or commoners, all insectoids possessed great loyalty to the crown and identified heavily with their species. Their loyalty was on a different level compared to the other species, and it was difficult for the rest of us to fully grasp it.

“Most of the commoners are pretty normal, though.”

“Both in looks and power.”

Interesting. I wondered if the elites looked like my old rider heroes. I hoped we would get a chance to visit the land of the insectoids one day... Provided setting foot in it wasn’t enough to get us killed, that is.

Finally, there were the high elves. Regular elves possessed long lifespans and laid-back attitudes. Their mellow demeanor only heightened as they aged, and it was said that a three-hundred-year-old elf would do nothing but sleep his days away. But sometimes you got elves who possessed great curiosity and a

powerful will to go with it. The older they got, the stronger they got. Give that elf a couple hundred years, and they would eventually evolve into a high elf. There were only a few of them in the world, but all of them were known to be S-Rank in strength. Elves already possessed a natural talent for magic. Their magical abilities honed over the course of a few centuries would be unrivaled.

“But we digress,” Colbert said. “Anyway, you can’t be a knight in Granzell if you’ve got drake blood in you.”

“And being of Bayreeds blood, Velmeria must be trained for combat. In the end, she was trained as a spy,” Frederick continued.

“If nothing else, she could train the first wife’s children when they’re older.”

That would make Velmeria useful to Bayreeds’ wife while still occupying the position of a spy, a position which was seen to be lower than a knight.

“Still, she’s also the Count’s only daughter,” Colbert said. “He can’t say it to his wife, but of course he loves Velmeria.”

“And that’s why he took her off the mission?”

“Yes,” Frederick said. “That is likely the case.”

“Velmeria wasn’t too pleased about it, though. Usually it’s the child who’s inconsiderate about her parents’ feelings, but I’d say it’s the opposite here.”

“I can see why he did that, though,” Frederick sighed.

Thirty minutes had passed since Frederick told us about Count Bayreeds’ complex family situations. We were having tea as we waited for Velmeria to calm down.

We suddenly sensed something, and Fran was the first one to bring it up. “Friend of yours, Colbert?”

“Don’t think I’m acquainted with people who sneak around while making their murderous intent known,” Colbert said. “What about you, Frederick? Maybe it’s one of the count’s men?”

“No,” Frederick shook his head. “I’ll go check on Velmeria. I hope you’re ready

to fight. And capture some of them if you can.”

Mysterious auras, each as murderous as the last, were surrounding the mansion. It was an ambush, and if I had to guess who we were up against...

Fran, I think it's the sword.

Are you sure?

I can feel that repulsive mana coming from whoever's ambushing us.

There was no mistaking that revulsion, even at this distance. It was the same kind of energy the demon sword emitted.

All right.

But...

But?

There was a problem. There were multiple sources of the repulsive mana. We might be up against more than one demon sword.

...Then we'll destroy them all, Fran said. I felt my body loosen, in a good way.

You're right. We'll fight that thing full force if we see it.

Got it.

Sorry, Erianthe. There might be property destruction, public or otherwise. The demon sword was too dangerous to leave at large.

Frederick sensed Fran's burning desire to fight. "Listen," he started. "Even if this is self-defense, it is not grounds to mount a full-blown raid. You have to understand."

We were going to be on the defensive, first and foremost. He had to remind Fran of this as one of the count's men.

The mansion was on full alert. Bayreeds' guardsmen, within and without, all sensed the incoming ambush. But none of them could anticipate the enemy's opening move.

BOOOOM!

"They're using explosive magic!"

The mansion was pelted with a volley of spells. We were still safe indoors, but hot tongues of fire blazed outside the window. One of them must have known how to use Inferno Burst. Others followed with Wind and Earth spells to tunnel into the mansion. Colbert was shocked.

“I can’t believe they would blatantly attack the noble district!”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re in the capital! This is pretty much the king’s backyard!”

Nobles lived here, and the palace was nearby. This was nothing like the attack on the inn in the market district.

“I don’t care if you’re a marquis; attacking a place full of nobles is a one-way ticket to the hangman’s noose!”

Colbert was expecting assassins and infiltrators, silently picking the count’s men off one by one. He was not expecting an attack that the whole city could see.

I sensed hesitation from the auras in the mansion. The enemy was not a united front. Were they having second thoughts after they realized Marquis Aschtner had burned all his bridges?

“Fran, let’s split up,” Colbert said. “I’ll take the entrance; you take the back door. Sound good?”

“Hm.”

“Let’s get going.”

We wanted to immediately head for the demon sword, but we couldn’t pinpoint its location. We were sensing multiple mana signatures which felt like smaller versions of the sword.

Let’s get a visual for now.

“Hm!”

Jet, search the mansion for suspicious individuals.

“Woof!”

By the time Fran reached the back door, the enemy was already inside. Two

men who looked like adventurers stood before us. Even in the midst of this chaotic situation, their appearances shocked us.

These guys...

“Have swords...in their backs.”

Just like Seldio and his party!

An eerie estoc was lodged into their spines. A face that looked like a man screaming in agony was carved into its guard.



The swords and the condition of their hosts were horrifyingly similar to Seldio. These swords could be Identified, and although only their names were revealed, they were names which could not be ignored.

Mad Faith Sword Replica?

“Mad Faith Sword? That sounds familiar.”

Mad Faith Sword Fanatix... That’s one of the Godswords in the scroll Lumina showed us back in Ulmutt!

“So that’s a Godsword?”

Just a replica. Not the real thing. Probably won’t be anywhere near as strong, but don’t let your guard down!

We were up against replicas, but they were still replicas of a Godsword. I didn’t like the look of this at all. The hosts of the replicas started moving.

Here they come!

The men acted just like Hummels and Gordon, which meant their minds were being controlled. Their Fanatic status ailment finally made sense; it was coming from the replica Fanatix. They were also under Unleashed Potential, meaning they had incredible stats and skills—enough to give Bayreeds’ guardsmen trouble.

“Awaken! Flashing Thunderclap!”

But they were still no match for Fran at full strength. With Hummels and Gordon, we were thoroughly focused on observation and capture. We didn’t want to cause any damage to our surroundings, either. This time, for better or worse, Fran could let loose. She wasn’t taking any chances now that she knew we were up against Godswords.

Fran leapt at the man on the right with the speed of lightning and cut him down with Pressurized Quickdraw. Neither of our opponents had time to react. She made a diagonal slash across the man’s body.

Tsk.

“What’s wrong, Teacher?”

Nothing. It's just Cannibalize.

The man crumpled to the floor in two halves, and so did the replica Fanatix in his back. Cannibalize activated, sending a rush of revulsion through my system. Fortunately, the replica didn't have enough mana for it to be painful, and the rush went as quickly as it came. The boost to my parameters wasn't much, either. I only got one measly point of durability and mana this time, nowhere near as much as from the sword that controlled Hummels and Gordon.

One more to go.

"Hm! Haaa!"

The other man started swinging his sword after it dawned on him that his friend was dead, but Fran was ready for him by then. She dodged the downward swing and took out both his legs from underneath him with another Pressurized Quickdraw.

Go to sleep!

I used Telekinesis to finish him off.

What?

The replica Fanatix suddenly glowed as if to drain mana from its host. And then my Telekinesis was gone.

No... This thing can seal magic, too!

I cast a Land spell to hold him down, but the sword dispelled it.

It's like what happened in Ulmutt!

The replica Fanatix was using its user's—or rather, host's—mana to nullify skills and spells. I could still use Transmogrify and Sword Mastery, but any skill that had a physical manifestation was jammed.

Meanwhile, the man's feet were regenerating quickly, and it only took a few seconds for him to sprout a new pair. We were in trouble. He was pretty much immortal with Abnormal Regeneration and Pain Disruption, and the sword could lock down our attacks as long as its host had the mana for it.

We were in a worse spot than Ulmutt, but the sword and its host weren't a

threat to us the way we were now. Even without spells and skills, Fran was still a formidable swordswoman with me in her hand, and I was enough for her to fight with.

“Haaa!”

The battle was over in a flash. Fran went for the man’s arms and legs, knowing full well that regeneration and pain resistance didn’t make her opponent invincible. It would take a good ten seconds for him to fully regenerate his limbs, and that was all the time in the world for us.

Now!

“Hm!”

Our target was the replica Fanatix. Fran grabbed the hilt and tried to pull it out of the man’s back.

“Hrrrrgh!”

Come on!

Normally, I’d help her with Telekinesis, but the sword was still suppressing it. We tried to store it in our Pocket Dimension, but that didn’t work either, since the replica was still equipped to its host.

“Haaaaa!”

You did it!

Three grueling seconds later, Fran pulled the replica Fanatix out of the man. I used Pocket Dimension on it again and it quietly went into storage. This would be our significant lead, but it didn’t come for free. The man died as soon as the sword was removed. We wouldn’t be able to take our intruders in for questioning.

I guess that simplifies things.

“Cut them all down.”

Yeah!

It looked like our attackers were all going to die one way or another. If the sword removal didn’t kill them, being in Unleashed Potential for too long would.

At least now we didn't have to worry about capturing them alive.

Let's start with beating up the intruders in the mansion.

"Hm!"

Fran followed her senses and ran through the mansion. She kicked down a door at the end of a hallway and found some men who had just entered through a window. She rushed in without stopping and took them down. It was easy to identify our enemies. All we had to do was look for the sword sticking out of their spines.

"Haaah!"

Urgh.

The battle was over before it began. Fran cut down the men, along with all the replicas of Fanatix. I felt mana enter into me, Cannibalize doing its job. I'd cooked up a lot of theories about Cannibalize, but now I knew why it was activating. We were dealing with imitations of the Godsword, Fanatix. I myself was a pseudo-Godsword, maybe even a discarded Godsword, but I was Godsword enough for Cannibalize to trigger. Perhaps it was because we were both made by a Godsmith. That might be enough of a trigger for Cannibalize... But I doubted I had the strength to destroy such superweapons.

You okay, Teacher?

I'm fine.

Maybe you should turn Cannibalize off.

No... It might not seem like much, but I'll take any chance to get stronger without relying on EP that I can get.

Fran paused. *All right. On to our next target.*

Right.

Just don't push yourself too hard.

I know.

BOOM! KABLAM!

The explosions were now coming from inside the mansion, and human

screams soon followed. Our intruders were probably incapable of making noises outside of casting spells, so those screams had definitely come from Bayreeds' men.

"Tsch!"

These guys are strong!

We encountered more intruders along the way, and they were all as strong as the first one. Most of them had Advanced Sword Mastery on top of being in Unleashed Potential; all were able to suppress skills and magic. Fran couldn't get the most out of her speed in the mansion's tight corridors, so we couldn't kill them all with a single blow. Blasting spells at them from a distance would have been the best way to deal with them, but it wasn't an option because of the swords' spell-jamming capabilities. A woman possessed by the sword cast a spell, as if to show that she was unhindered by the jamming effect.

"Wind Cutter."

"Haaa!"

Fran slipped through the Wind spell and rushed her down. The intruder reacted despite Fran striking at her blind spot, but she wasn't a capable enough swordswoman to respond in time. A few cuts later, she went down like the rest of them.

Looks like they can all regenerate.

"Hm. Annoying."

What was a minor annoyance to Fran was a major threat to the guardsmen. Bayreeds' men were elite fighters, but nothing in their training could prepare them for this.

"Gaaah!"

Fran!

"Hm!"

A guardsman flew out of a nearby door, bloodied and battered. Fran immediately tried to heal him, but the spell refused to be cast.

No good! We have to destroy the replica Fanatix first!

“Okay!”

The guardsman’s attacker lunged out of the room to finish the job, but Fran grabbed his sword and delivered a kick to his jaw, breaking it. He crumpled to the floor, and Fran drove her sword into his heart to kill him. Finally, she slashed the demon sword on his back to destroy it.

I resisted the urge to throw up, and healed the guardsman.

All right. We can use magic as long as those replicas of Fanatix aren’t around.

The guardsman’s wounds closed up. Fran tapped his cheek to wake him. “You okay?”

He gasped for breath. “You’re...”

“I healed you just now. Does it hurt anywhere?”

“No... And thank you. But the others in the cafeteria...”

“I’ll take care of it.”

The guardsman couldn’t move after losing so much blood. Fran left him behind and went into the room he’d flown out of. This was the cafeteria for servants and guardsmen. Within the large room, several maids and guardsmen were lying on the floor. At first, I thought the room had deep red carpeting, but then I looked closer and realized it was gray. The red came from a fresh coat of blood.

“Hrm!”

Fran was ready to lunge at the intruder, but stopped when he pressed his blade against one of the maids on the floor. I thought the sword would’ve drained its host of intelligence, but he was smart enough to take the woman hostage. There was no gleam of consciousness behind his eyes, but whoever was controlling these people might be doing the thinking for them. Maybe it was the replica Fanatix in their backs. Maybe it was the Sword of Mad Faith Fanatix itself.

The intruder stood still, blade still pressed against the maid’s back. He was buying time, waiting for backup to arrive.

I'll take this one, Fran.

Okay.

Fran nodded and pointed the cutting edge of her blade at the intruder. He braced himself for an attack, but it was too late.

Take this!

It was a large cafeteria, and we were a good distance away from each other. Thanks to that, we were right outside of the sword's magic-suppressing range. I launched a Telekinetic Catapult at the demon sword and blew it and its host's head to pieces. It couldn't react to my attack in time, even under Unleashed Potential. Although it could suppress my skills and spells when I was in range, it could do nothing to stop my inertia.

I don't know what they want, but we have to get to Count Bayreeds!

"Got it."

We finished healing the maid, who was still breathing, and left her in the care of the guardsman outside before making our way to the second floor where the count was. The count was a formidable warrior, but these were formidable foes—formidable enough to put his life in danger.

We encountered more intruders along the way and used the walls and ceilings to maneuver three-dimensionally around them. Fran cut them all down and they never saw her coming. We eventually made it to Bayreeds' office and found him on his knees with a body full of wounds. Blood flowed out of his sword arm, and he could barely grip his weapon. He was surrounded by intruders, and they looked like they were about to finish the job. The count was a hair's breadth away from death.

Go! We have to save him!

"Hm! Haaa!"

Fran started with the man closest to Bayreeds. She made a diagonal cut from his right shoulder all the way down to his left hip. She proceeded in a counterclockwise fashion, and made a horizontal swipe at the man on the left to cut him down.

How did he avoid that? We were attacking from behind!

Would a clockwise approach have been better? I don't know. It would've been faster, but the enemy would've been able to see us coming. Still, we managed to clip the back of the intruder, and that was enough to make him lose his footing. His body twisted as it fell to the ground.

There were five people there—four of them remained—and they were all exceptionally powerful. Advanced Sword Mastery 5 powerful. Decent stats, too.

“Black Lightning Princess, you made it!”

“Get behind me!”

Count Bayreeds clicked his tongue. “I can still fight if I can get these damn potions to work!” He glared at the soaked spot on the carpet and the empty bottles of potions lying next to it. He was trying to heal his wounds, but magic suppression had made potions little more effective than water.

They all have magic, Fran. We can't fight for long if we have to protect the count while we're at it!

“Hm! I'll finish this quick!”

Fran jumped in front of the count and focused her mana.

“Sword God Form!”

I felt immense power rising inside me. At the same time, I felt my blade creak and crack. The countdown had started. This wasn't a move we should use against an enemy whose numbers and abilities we didn't know. But now was not the time for such considerations.

We could only be in Sword God Form for a short time, but the increase in power was more than great enough to make up for that. The replica Fanatix's spell sealing ability was useless against Sword God Form. Fran had the absolute upper hand. She stepped forward, mana billowing all around her. Her absolute power came at a cost of absolute pain.

And yet, Fran remained calm.

I didn't know if the intruders could feel pain, but they understood the danger that she posed. They saw her twitch, and that single twitch took down the

remaining four assailants. The battle was over before it started, but the victory felt hollow. Our opponents had Advanced Sword Mastery, completely lacked the fear of death, and were willing to put their lives on the line for their allies, but they were disposed of with four quick slashes of the blade. Sword God Form imbued its user with the Divine element, but even that was unnecessary. Those individual slashes were on the level of Sword King Art.

In our experience, Sword King Arts was the pinnacle of swordsmanship. They represented the perfect cut. An ordinary attack in Sword God Form was on par with such perfection. Or maybe I was looking at it backwards? Maybe Sword God Form was swordsmanship perfection, and Sword King Arts just allowed you to reproduce certain instances of it. The Sword God might not have possessed Fran's body in the literal sense, but even so, this was certainly beyond Sword King-level Mastery. This was the realm of the divine. And that was precisely the reason why the toll it took on us was so great. We were dealing with powers far greater than ours.

We deactivated Sword God Form and let out a big sigh. Fran was so exhausted that she couldn't help but let it show.

You all right, Teacher?

Somehow... I thought I was a goner with how much durability those slashes took. What about you?

Tired.

My lost durability hadn't fully recovered, and Fran's exhaustion couldn't be scoffed at, either. All that after a few seconds of power. This was not an easy skill to use.

Fran sighed. "You okay, Count?"

She went over to heal him. Count Bayreeds was still on his knees, breathing heavily. The count was silent, staring at us with a dumb look on his face. Personally, I thought he was in shock.

"By the gods," he started. "What was that?!"

"Hm?"

He regained his senses and approached Fran. Apparently, Count Bayreeds was awestruck after seeing Fran eliminate the intruders in no time flat. The reality of the situation only struck him just now.

“I’ve never had goosebumps from watching swordplay before!”

The look on count’s face said that he wasn’t going to press the issue. He was filled with genuine surprise and admiration.

“Well,” the count continued, “whatever you did, it was extraordinary!”

Fortunately, Count Bayreeds didn’t know that we used Sword God Form. His injuries caused him to fade in and out of consciousness before we healed him.

“I can see why the Beast King took an interest in you.” He would’ve gone on, but he snapped out of it and said, “But there are more pressing matters at—”

“Hrm!”

Fran cut him off and readied me.

“Are there more?!”

Fights broke out all over the mansion. We could hear the sounds of breaking windows and explosive spells. One of the intruders stood silently in the doorway.

“Get behind me, Count.”

“I can fight,” Bayreeds protested. “I hope the others are all right!”

Ten minutes passed. After defeating the second wave of intruders, Fran and Bayreeds were now on the search for survivors. We were exhausted from using Sword God Form, but we could still handle a Fanatix host or two.

“In here!”

“Hm.”

They stopped at Velmeria’s room. There was more fighting inside, but we couldn’t sense Velmeria or the others, either.

“Are you all right?!”

Fran gasped. "Frederick!"

The room was in a state of disarray. The bed was torn apart and the bookshelf broken down. Deep gashes marred the ceiling and walls. Two of the intruders lay dead on the ground. Frederick was in a pool of his own blood. There was a sword lodged into his side, which prevented him from drowning in his own blood.

He's unconscious, but he's still breathing! Greater Heal!

"Hang in there," Fran coaxed as she healed him. Frederick was still healthy enough for the healing spell to work. She got closer to pull the sword out of him. Luckily, it was a regular sword and not a replica Fanatix.

Frederick screamed as the sword came out, but it was the only way we could fully heal him. I quietly apologized to him because Fran yanked the blade out pretty hard. With his wounds patched up, Frederick dragged himself to the window as if he were going to jump out of it. His lack of blood prevented him from doing anything reckless.

"No," Fran said. "You have to rest."

"Velmeria," Frederick gasped. "They took Velmeria!"

"What?!" Bayreeds shouted. "What happened?!"

"Forgive me, my lord. I should have done better."

One of the intruders had knocked Velmeria out cold before leaving through the window with her. I thought they were here to assassinate Bayreeds. Did they change their plans after they failed? Either way, ten minutes had passed since Velmeria was kidnapped. Catching up with them would be difficult.

If Jet were here... No, he might have noticed them taking her. We'll have to wait for him.

"...Hm."

We wouldn't be able to catch up to them if we just picked a direction and ran. Not to mention the house was still under siege.

The count was silent for a while and said, "First, we'll eliminate the enemies in the mansion."

“My lord!” Fredrick protested.

“I will not let my men be killed for the sake of my daughter!” the count said through clenched teeth. “Dammit! If only I was as strong as before...!”

Thirty minutes had passed since we saved Frederick. Count Bayreeds’ forces suffered heavy casualties, but we somehow managed to beat back the intruders. There were fifteen of them in total. Meanwhile, the count lost over forty men and women, including the servants. Fifteen were injured. The guard post next to the mansion was caught in the opening explosion and suffered casualties as well. No one on the scene survived unscathed.

Colbert was among the injured, after a narrow brush with death. If we had come any later, it might have been too late for him.

“Maybe I should try my hand at learning conventional weaponry,” he groaned as he received treatment. His martial arts had been sealed by the replica Fanatix, and he was forced to take on three of the intruders at once. I thought he did a pretty good job, but Colbert looked disappointed with himself. His frustration only grew when he looked at the others who didn’t make it out of the fight. He gritted his teeth and said, “What lunatic could have done this...?”

“I have some ideas,” Frederick muttered.

Fran and I knew for sure that Aschtner was involved once we saw the swords lodged in their backs. But the word of an adventurer wasn’t enough to arrest a marquis. We could link the swords back to Seldio, but that kind of evidence would be circumstantial at best. I thought we had a good enough case, but the capital demanded evidence that was beyond reasonable doubt before they could start mobilizing the troops. Anything less and any old noble would be able to start a coup whenever they wanted.

Frederick and Colbert inspected the bodies of our intruders—all of them had been drugged to the gills like Hummels and Gordon. Drugs disrupted mental faculties, but they also made individuals more susceptible to magical suggestion, and were effective brainwashing tools.

“This is...”

Colbert stopped at the fifteenth corpse and tilted his head. He looked closer at the dead man's face. This was the first of the intruders that Fran defeated.

"Find anything?" Fran asked.

"Does he look familiar to you, Fran?"

"Hm. I killed him."

"That's not what I was talking about," Colbert shook his head. "Of course... This guy's an adventurer!"

Apparently, the man was a C-Rank. The sword was controlling elite adventurers. Colbert recognized some of the other intruders. Most of them were C-Rank, with a few B-Ranks sprinkled in between. He looked at the mysterious swords that were lodged in their backs.

"What kind of sword is this?" he mused. "Fran, you said that Seldio and his party had similar swords in their backs."

"Hm. Same swords, actually. Even suppressed magic like these did."

Frederick frowned. "It had the same kind of mana as the sword that attacked us last night." He told Colbert about the attack at the hotel and how Gordon had been controlled by a similar sword.

"So you think we're dealing with a sentient sword that controlled our attackers today?"

"It is likely... The sword we fought at the hotel was half broken, and it looked more like a longsword. It wasn't lodged in Gordon's back, though. Gordon handled it like any other sword, but it definitely moved on its own."

"A sword that could move on its own? I didn't see any swords flying about today."

"They aren't precisely the same, I suppose. The mana coming from these swords is much weaker."

I sensed Jet returning to the mansion as Colbert and Frederick carried on their conversation. We should be able to track down Velmeria now.

"Jet's back."

“Excellent!” Frederick—not Count Bayreeds—immediately exclaimed. He sounded happy to hear that the direwolf had returned. But things weren’t so simple. Jet had returned, but he was bloodied and battered.

“Are you okay, Jet?” Fran asked.

Jet whined weakly. His regeneration was kicking in, but the wounds looked deep. He must have run into our assailants outside. Perhaps they had blocked his way when Velmeria was kidnapped.

Jet’s fighting style used a variety of skills and spells to throw off his opponents. With Dark Magic and his stealth skills sealed by the replica Fanatix, he fought at a heavy disadvantage. Without Shadow Lurk and Shadow Walk to aid his evasion, his combat capabilities were effectively neutered.

Worst of all, the attack had happened in the middle of the day. Jet was Fran’s familiar, and any trouble he caused would be a strike against her. We told him again and again not to go wild on the streets, not to revert to his original size... and Jet kept his promise. He fought the assailants in his shrunken form. It came down to a battle of attrition as he waited for Unleashed Potential to burn out the intruders for him. He could have won the battle easily if he reverted to his original size, and probably could have saved Velmeria while he was at it. But that would’ve caused Fran trouble, and that was the last thing Jet wanted for his master. In the end, he had managed to win and figure out where Velmeria was taken.

Good job, Jet!

“Woof!”

I know you’re tired, but we still need you for a little longer. Are you up to it?

“Can you track down Velmeria, boy?”

Jet barked and pointed at the replica Fanatix with his nose.

Are you saying she’s at the place the sword flew off to?

“Arf!”

“Marquis Aschtner’s mansion?”

Jet barked and nodded. Fran was now fired up and ready to go.

“We’ll get her back!”

But Jet whined and bit her sleeve to stop her. He didn’t want her to go.

“What’s wrong?”

He pointed at the Mad Faith Sword Replica again.

Did you sense more replicas of Fanatix inside the mansion?

“Woof!”

Jet nodded. There were enough replicas in Aschtner’s mansion to make him stop Fran from going in. Count Bayreeds had watched the exchange, and asked Jet, “You’re saying there’s an army of these strange swords in Marquis Aschtner’s mansion?”

“Woof!”

“By the gods...”

Colbert didn’t grasp the gravity of the situation and said, “Well, what are we waiting for? We know where she is, so let’s go and get her!”

He had a point, but Count Bayreeds shook his head. “We lack the firepower.”

“What are you saying?” Colbert shouted. “All of our assailants have been drugged—they can’t control them otherwise. Think of what they could be doing to—”

“Don’t you think I know that?!” the count shouted back.

“Look, you can repurpose the squad that was going to do the Olmes raid!”

“They are in the middle of taking their positions for the raid. I can’t call them off.”

“Fine, then let *us* go and get her!”

“No. I won’t allow it!”

Count Bayreeds sympathized with Colbert. It must be tearing him apart inside to go against his every paternal instinct.

“May I ask why?” Colbert said.

“Our encounter with the enemy gave me a glimpse of their power. They are

not to be made light of.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our safehouse being discovered was only a matter of time. They must have extracted information from our agents somehow. But think about it. Did they really need all this power just to take me out? To kidnap Velmeria? This force is strong enough to turn the capital into a sea of flames—you must have realized that by now. What could they gain from the assassination of a count?”

I wondered if we couldn’t postpone the raid tonight, but the marquis’ squad was made of capable and loyal men who would do as their lord commanded, even if he were dead.

“If anything, their desire to avenge me would overwhelm them. The chain of command wouldn’t break down, either, since I have men with court titles serving under me.”

Even if they postponed the raid, suspicion against Marquis Aschtner would grow stronger. Eventually, the crown would personally arrange an investigation of his house.

“The best our military can do is buy time,” the count said. “But it’ll be close...”

“All right.” Colbert said. “But surely a close fight is still worth fighting.”

“That it is. But have you considered the other possibility?”

“What?”

“That the difference in power isn’t even close.”

Colbert and Frederick looked shocked. They immediately knew what the count was getting at.

“You mean they have forces to spare at the marquis’ mansion?”

“Yes. What else could’ve given the Black Lightning Princess’ familiar a fright? They are not to be trifled with.”

“Dammit!” Colbert cursed under his breath.

How many replicas of the Mad Faith Sword did they have? If Aschtner had figured out a way to mass produce Godswords, we could be looking at dozens,

if not hundreds.

“Expert swordsmen who aren’t afraid of death and have the power to suppress magic... That is what we are up against.”

On our side, we had Fran, Colbert, Frederick, Count Bayreeds, and the survivors of the mansion attack. We could get a few dozen extra knights, at best. Meanwhile, a single replica Fanatix was enough to suppress our skills and magic while letting the enemy do whatever they wanted. “Uphill battle” didn’t even begin to describe our situation.

I wondered if the replica Fanatix was involved with the capture of Bayreeds’ men. They were sneaking around when their Stealth and Concealment skills suddenly stopped working. Thinking of it that way, we wouldn’t be able to sneak inside to grab Velmeria, either.

“What the hell are these swords?!” Colbert shouted.

“They’re replicas of the Mad Faith Sword,” Fran said under her breath. She drew the attention of everyone present.

“Do you know something about this?” Count Bayreeds asked. He was trying not to press her, but his voice was impatient.

“I just Identified it. The name was all that came up.”

“Replica...what?”

“Replica of the Mad Faith Sword.”

“They’re forgeries of this Mad Faith Sword?”

“Hm. The Mad Faith Sword was a Godsword that was destroyed in the past. The Mad Faith Sword Fanatix.”

Fran told them everything she’d learned about the sword from Aristeia, her genius friend who was into this kind of stuff. We didn’t know the details, but we knew that the sword was deemed dangerous by the Godsmith, one of those weapons made only to be immediately discarded. Her audience listened raptly, mouths agape. It dawned on them that they had fought counterfeits of a long-gone Godsword.

“Replica Godswords... I can’t believe that Aschtner would...”

“Damn, sounds like we’re in for a rough time.”

“Is it possible that the marquis has the real Godsword on hand?”

The Godswords were mythical superweapons. The stories said that they were weapons which killed thousands of soldiers, leveled cities, and cleaved mountains. The myth had turned out to be fact, and a very dangerous fact at that. The horror on their faces was relatable.

Most of all, I appreciated the fact that they believed Fran to be telling the truth. Unfortunately, it was one of those truths which was utterly depressing.

“From what I heard, the Fanatix is supposed to have been destroyed.”

“So there’s a chance that he’s found a way to reproduce it...”

“Never mind that; there’s a chance that he has a whole mansion filled with those things!” Colbert shouted.

We all felt someone approaching the mansion just then. Whoever it was didn’t seem hostile, though. They didn’t even bother concealing their presence.

“E-excuse me! Is anyone there?”

“Th-this is awful...”

“Announce yourself!” Count Bayreeds bellowed. The men announced themselves as guardsmen—technically knights—who were making the rounds. They were very much late to the party, considering this was the noble district of the capital. Apparently, we weren’t the only ones who were ambushed. The nearby guard post had also been attacked, along with several other mansions and commoner houses. The casualty rates were climbing.

The commander of the guardsmen here had died in the attack, and they had to wait until a new commander was established before they could resume their business. The guardsmen then delivered the punchline.

“We saw what looked like Marquis Aschtner’s men attacking the noble district!”

“What?!”

One of the guardsmen blurted out, “They had these weird swords in their

backs, and they were absurdly strong.”

“He’s already initiated!” Bayreeds shouted with frustration. Marquis Aschtner had begun the assault before the city knights could mobilize. Did he realize that he had run out of options after failing to assassinate Bayreeds?

The guardsmen gave us an account of the damage when we heard another explosion. Make that explosions, actually. The attack was still going on.

“Do you think it’s those fanatic soldiers again?” Bayreeds asked.

“In all likelihood, yes,” Colbert nodded.

Their faces stiffened as they pictured the deaths happening outside. Frederick, on the other hand, remained calm. He was thinking of something else.

“It sounds like Marquis Aschtner is overextending himself. If we mobilize the knights now, we might be able to rescue Velmeria,” Frederick said. He was still focused on Velmeria’s safety, but his proposal made sense. If the troops that were supposed to be posted in the Aschtner mansion were mobilized to wreak havoc in the city, the mansion would be much easier to penetrate.

The worried look on the count’s face remained as he shook his head. “We can’t do that.”

“Why?!”

“Because it is precisely in these situations that I must act as a knight commander. I cannot mobilize the knights solely to save my daughter!” the count shouted shakily. All he wanted to do as a parent was rescue his beloved daughter, but he was a knight commander before he was a father, and he bore all the responsibilities of the title.

“I cannot allow it...”

He balled up his hand into a fist and gripped it tightly until he squeezed blood out of his own palm. No one could blame him for looking like that. The knights weren’t his private army. They were swords and shields which protected the people, and right now, the people needed defending.

Still, Frederick wasn’t satisfied with the verdict. I saw myself in him. He was

the kind of person who would abandon a whole city in order to save a person who mattered most to him. I had Fran, he had Velmeria. Frederick wasn't going to stand by and do nothing, even if it might cost him later. But Bayreeds knew his man well.

"I can't dispatch the knights. Among my people, you and Colbert are the only ones I have left."

Frederick paused. "Say the word and I will rescue Velmeria. Whatever it takes."

"Hold on," the count said. "I can't mobilize the knights, but there are other ways to bolster our forces."

Now that he had prevented Frederick from rushing headlong into enemy territory, the count turned his attention to Colbert.

"Colbert, I want you to contact the Adventurers' Guild. Tell Erianthe that I'm hiring fighters. Price is no object—quote me a number and I'll pay it."

"I see," Colbert said. "So you're turning to adventurers for help."

"That I am. I'll take anyone as long as they're strong enough to fight. No hiring limit. I don't mind paying double or triple the market price, either. Some of them will go with you to the mansion. The rest will assist the knights in defeating the fanatic soldiers in the city."

Double or triple the market price, he'd said. I was pretty sure he wouldn't have minded paying quadruple the price if that's what they quoted. The count was so generous that even Colbert was impressed. Information might leak because of how talkative adventurers were, but Count Bayreeds was more worried about getting the best fighters possible at the moment.

"Wait, no hiring limit? What if several hundred people sign up for the job?"

"Then several hundred people will get hired today. It's not like they'll sit around and do nothing. The more firepower we have, the better," Bayreeds said. "Besides, it'll be a small price to pay to ensure the safety of my daughter."

"All right," Colbert said. "We'll head to the guild."

"Frederick, you go ahead of us and survey the situation at the Aschtner

estate.”

“Sir!”

“The city patrol should be surrounding it by now if anything has happened. You can use my name to take command of them.”

“Very well.”

Finally, the count looked over at us. “And Fran...” he started. The noble was prepared to beg.

“I’ll help Frederick and the others. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you.” The count bowed his head. This was the only thing he could do at this point. The irony of his office as knight commander was that he was unable to organize a rescue operation for his own daughter. Fran and the others were his last hope.

“First, the Adventurers’ Guild,” Fran said.

“Let’s hop to it!”

Fran and Colbert made their way to the guild after Frederick rushed away to the estate. The streets resounded with screams of pain and anguish. Every inch of the noble district was beset by flames. Along the way, we came across the lunatic soldiers with swords in their backs. They didn’t give us much trouble, but there were so many of them. We felt the demon sword’s presence all around us, and we didn’t have time to defeat them all. Fran understood this fact, but leaving people to die caused her no small amount of distress. Her face stiffened and her mood worsened. She felt bad for not doing anything when she knew she could.

“It’ll take too long if we beat every enemy we see,” Colbert said.

Fran was silent, and then said, “I know.”

Colbert sensed the growing stress cloud hovering over Fran, and he started talking to her to help alleviate her mood.

“So,” he started. “What’d you do after the tournament?”

“I visited Chrome,” she said. “Beastman Nation.”

“Really? Did you hitch a ride on a boat as nautical security? I did that a couple times.”

Nautical security guards were not allowed to leave port, and they were to leave on the boat they were guarding as soon as it disembarked again.

“Don’t really know much about the place because of that.”

“I went to the Black Cat village when I was there.”

“Ooh, did you visit the capital, too?”

“Hm.”

“Wow! What was it like? Was the food good? What about the sights?”

“A lot happened when I was there.”

Fran proceeded to tell Colbert about the sights and tastes of the Beastman Nation; he had seemed interested, after all. There was a lot she left out, but fortunately Colbert kept to surface-level conversation. He liked cooking, and was very interested in the dishes of the Beastman Nation. Fran gave him a few beastman recipes and he was over the moon. Colbert was also moved by the sights that Fran saw while on Jet’s back.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “Great food, amazing sights. I’d love to take a trip to the Beastman Nation one day. It’s got travel and adventure written all over it!”

“Hm!”

Fran and Colbert had first met in Bulbola, and the two got along better than most people would think. They were on the same wavelength, were very close in terms of mental age, and were moved by the same things.

With the stories of her trip to the Beastman Nation concluded, it was Fran’s turn to ask Colbert questions. I had a really good one I wanted to ask him, but I wasn’t sure if it would be appropriate. It was a very delicate matter, you see.

“So did you get expelled?” Fran asked, with the bluntness of a good friend.

Colbert groaned. He knew the question was coming, and he knew Fran wouldn’t mince words about it. Colbert had belonged to a school called Dimitris

Combat School. To become a legitimate user of Dimitris Combat, students had to go through an initiation ritual where they would achieve the status of an A-Rank adventurer while wearing special manatech to suppress their powers. I didn't know the details, but it sure sounded tough. Becoming an A-Rank was no easy feat, and you basically had to get there with one hand tied behind your back.

There were provisions for times of emergency where you had to either save another life or your own, but undoing the manatech seal purely for personal gain was grounds for expulsion. Colbert had broken the seal during a fighting tournament to beat Fran. If that didn't count as personal gain, I don't know what would.

"So?"

Colbert muttered something under his breath.

"Hm?"

"I got kicked out, okay?!"

He confirmed our suspicions. His cheerful mood immediately gave way to gloom as he slumped his shoulders. I thought I saw a tear in his eye, too.

"I was ready for it," he started. "But I still can't believe they expelled me..."

"So what happens when you're expelled?"

"Well, I can't use Dimitris Combat Arts anymore."

Fran looked puzzled, "How does that work?"

Surely expulsion couldn't nullify all your training. Even if you weren't a legitimate user of Dimitris Combat, you should still have the skills associated with it. Couldn't Colbert just increase the levels of his skills the old-fashioned way?

But then I cast Identify on him, and Dimitris Combat Arts was no longer in his skill list. Had it been sealed away somehow? Maybe Colbert's master forced him to wear manatech which would seal the skill away.

"As the first combat school recognized by the gods, there is a special skill passed on only to the masters of the Dimitris School. It's called Tradition Lost.

Only a handful of people in the world can use it.”

“Tradition Lost? What does it do?”

“The skill only has one effect: It erases the combat skills of a student belonging to that particular school. Tradition Lost of the Dimitris School would erase all skills related to the Dimitris School.”

“And you got hit with that?”

“Of course. I got expelled, after all.”

I guess expulsion in this other world literally revoked your skills.

“So you’re weaker now?”

“Yeah. My stats are higher than they were before, since I don’t have the seal on me anymore, but the skills...”

The reason why Colbert couldn’t use the Dimitris Combat Arts when he fought the fanatics wasn’t because they suppressed his mana. He no longer had the skills to do it with.

“I don’t have any intention of joining the other schools, so I’ll just have to get stronger by honing Advanced Punch Mastery and Arts.”

“You can do it.”

“Thanks.”

Colbert smiled at Fran’s attempt to cheer him up. For a moment, I thought he would’ve resented her. He was still to blame for undoing the seal out of turn, during his duel with Fran. It was human of him to shift the blame, but he was divine for accepting it. He didn’t bear the slightest grudge against Fran; his smile came from the heart.

“Just you wait. I’ll get strong enough to beat you one day.”

“Hm. Can’t wait.”

Colbert chuckled. “Neither can I.”

We reached the guild by the end of the conversation. Adventurers were all over the place when we entered the building. They were trying to gather what information they could about the riots going on outside. Fran and Colbert

pushed through the crowd to get to the counter. They got yelled at sometimes, but these protests went unheeded. Anyone who tried to grab or strike them was immediately silenced with a potent dose of killing intent. Some of them would've fallen to the floor if Colbert hadn't straightened them up.

We made it to the counter where Stellia was driving away adventurers. The guild had yet to figure out what was going on.

Fran greeted her. "Stellia."

"If it isn't Black Lightning and Steelclaw," Stellia said. "Something must be up if the two of you are together."

"We need to talk to the Guildmaster. Is she in? It's an emergency," Colbert said.

"Oh, she's in. Whether she'll actually talk to you is a different story," Stellia said, casting her gaze at Fran. "She's in her office. You know where it is, right?"

"We can just walk in there unannounced?" Colbert said.

"No; she'd turn you away if she knew you were coming. But you said it's an emergency, right?"

"Hm."

"Then you should go right in and see her. But she's more than a little prickly at the moment, so try to go easy on her."

"Prickly? Because of what's going on outside?"

"Of course, you idiot! Now, look—if you piss her off, she'll take it out on you *and* the rest of us at the guild! I know it's hard for you, but for once in your life, you'll have to play this smart, got it?"

"Got it," Colbert stammered.

Erianthe was not in the mood to see anyone because of an excess of paperwork. I didn't think the mountain of forms she had when we last visited her could've gotten any higher, but apparently it had. Stellia let us through to the Guildmaster's office, and we saw Erianthe groaning, surrounded by paperwork. The light was gone from her eyes.

Seeing her like that reminded me of my days as an office drone. Once, I was working overtime and missed the last train home, working on documents which I thought were from this fiscal year. They weren't. The documents I worked on were from the previous fiscal year, and in my despair back then I looked just like Erianthe did now: dead-eyed as a gutted fish.

"Huh?" Erianthe stirred. "Who's there?"

"Guildmaster?" Colbert said. "You feeling okay?"

"Colbert? What do you want? I don't have time for chit-chat, as you can see."

I never thought such dull eyes could be so intimidating. I got flashbacks to the sky isle, to the lich's hollow eye sockets.

"We, uh, need to talk to you about something," Colbert shifted around. "And Fran here's gonna tell you all about it! Isn't that right, Fran?"

And the wimp passed the buck to Fran!

"Fran...?"

"Hm."

Erianthe looked at Fran. Her expression changed in an instant. Her eyes went wide and she bolted up from her chair.

"Fran...! Fraaaaaaaan! I asked you specifically not to cause trouble!" Erianthe screamed, banging her hands on the table. Her eyes were bloodshot. I was terrified.

But Fran didn't know what she was talking about. "Hm?"

"Look at all this! The city's a *mess*!" Erianthe fell to her knees and sobbed. She was most definitely not in a stable place at the moment. Still, I sympathized with her. I'd been there once, too. If only tears could make the paperwork go away.

Fran only tilted her head. She still didn't know what the Guildmaster was yelling about. "But I didn't cause any trouble," she protested.

Yeah, not technically.

We got *involved* in the trouble, but we weren't the *cause* of it. Erianthe only

knew that Fran was at the scene of the trouble.

“First of all, there’s the underpass! I know something happened there! So many people were injured!”

“Hm,” Fran nodded. “I was attacked at the underpass.”

“See! I *knew* you were involved! All right, what about the inn you were staying at? There was an explosion and it caught fire! What happened there?”

“I was attacked there, too. By the same people who attacked me at the underpass.”

“Hah!” Erianthe pointed her finger at Fran. “I knew it! You were involved there, as well!”

Fran was indeed involved, but she was the victim and not the perpetrator. It wasn’t like she *wanted* to be attacked.

“And what happened at the park in the noble district? A bunch of trees were uprooted and torn apart. Were you there, too?”

“Hm. I was attacked.”

“Every! Time! Why do you keep getting attacked?! Those three cases have quadrupled my workload!”

Well, that wasn’t fair. Fran couldn’t tell Erianthe why she had a knack for getting attacked, even if she wanted to. But the Guildmaster wasn’t in a state of mind where she could make rational connections. People caught in the paper quagmire of office work rarely could. At this point, she was just venting her anger at anyone who happened to be there.

“A ton of emergency quests have gone up. So have baseless accusations against adventurers and the guild. Why are we getting caught up in this mess when we have nothing to do with it? So what if there’s rioting on the streets? Report that to the knight brigade; it’s *their* job!”

Erianthe held her head in her hands, having somewhat recovered from her outburst. Despite all her complaints against us, I really did feel sorry for her.

“Erianthe...”

Erianthe plugged her ears and started singing, “I’m! Not! Listening!”

“But you need to listen to me.”

“Fine! If the Black Lightning Princess, the walking mischief magnet, has something to say, then say it!”

“I was attacked in the noble district.”

“Again!” Erianthe scoffed. “You keep getting attacked! Why?!”

Tears were streaming from her eyes now. The thought of future paperwork had broken her. I was just worried that her tears might stain her papers.

Colbert spoke up, sensing that the conversation was going nowhere. “Yeah, we got a lot of casualties because of that. The guy I’m working for is currently looking to hire adventurers to bolster his numbers.”

“Was it that bad?”

“Yeah. You see...”

Colbert gave Erianthe the details of what went down. She immediately stabilized and listened intently. The Guildmaster snapped out of her nervous breakdown as quickly as she’d entered it.

“So,” she said, “Ashtner attacked Count Bayreeds’ villa and kidnapped his daughter, and now he wants to get her back?”

“That’s the plan. We’re going to need backup if we want to raid the marquis’ mansion, though.”

Colbert appealed to Erianthe, and told her about the price the count was willing to pay.

“I know you have a grudge against Marquis Ashtner. He’s an absolute bastard who doesn’t think twice about using adventurers as mere tools. He stiffed me out of my payday once, too.”

“Of course I do! We’ve lost so many good adventurers because of him... But now that Seldio Lesseps has the reputation of being rotten to the core, it looks like Ashtner’s time is finally up.”

Erianthe flashed a dark grin. She might be fantasizing of all the things she

would do to the marquis once he was in custody.

“Damn right,” Colbert said. “Here’s the count’s quest bulletin. How about it?”

“I don’t mind,” Erianthe mused. “But how many do you think will sign up for this? You can offer adventurers all the money in the world, but it’s not gonna be worth much if they end up dead. It’s going to be hard to get people on board when they know they’re going up against a dangerous enemy.”

“I know that. I’m an adventurer, too. That’s why the price is so high.” Colbert paused and motioned at Fran. “Fran, if you will?”

“Hm.”

Fran produced the bodies of the swordsmen from the attack at the count’s villa. These were the people we suspected to be adventurers. Erianthe knew them at first sight.

“The missing adventurers!”

“They were with the intruders.”

“Aschtner’s figured out a way to brainwash people. Count Bayreeds’ men were among the people who attacked us, too.”

“Tell me everything.” Erianthe cupped her chin. “About these swords, and what we’re up against.”

The Guildmaster was finally listening. Earlier, Colbert had arranged for us to present the bodies of the dead adventurers. He knew the guild wouldn’t stand by after seeing some of their own captured and enslaved. Some might take the quest to avenge their fallen friends.

Erianthe looked furious by the time Colbert finished debriefing her. “Very well then,” she said. “We’ll show Aschtner who he’s messing with!”

She burned with passion and got off the chair.

“I’ll meet you in the lobby—aaaaaaah!”

Her zeal became her downfall as Mount Paperwork collapsed around her.

“Come on!” she complained. My first impression of her as a calm and collected Guildmaster was completely gone by this point.

Chapter 6:

The Marquis' Mansion

AFTER STOPPING BY THE GUILD for help, we were on our way to the Aschtner estate with a bunch of adventurers. Erianthe was leading us to battle, fueled by her hatred of the marquis. Twenty adventurers enlisted for the battle, all of whom were over D-Rank, but Fran, Erianthe, and Colbert made up the core of our fighting crew.

Along the way, Erianthe filled in the adventurers about the soldiers with the Fanatix replicas on their backs. She had taken to calling them “fanatics” for short. Our experience with Seldio back in Ulmutt came in handy, since these fanatics behaved in much the same way. Their stats were greatly boosted because of Unleashed Potential, and they possessed enhanced regenerative capabilities because of it. The sword also gave its host a variety of powerful skills. Most important was the sword’s ability to suppress mana. The adventurers wouldn’t be able to cast magic, and potions and skills would also be rendered ineffective. However, the enemy would be able to use all the spells they wanted.

We reached the Aschtner estate in the middle of our explanation. Our team of intermediate adventurers could move pretty fast. The front gate was already thrown open by the time we got there, and a violent battle was going on right outside its walls. I saw Frederick there, and he had picked up a squad of guardsmen who happened to be nearby. Once he saw us, he immediately went inside. There was no time for pleasantries.

Jet blocked his path and barked at him, as if telling him to calm down.

“Wh-what?” Frederick said, not understanding him. Fran and I had to translate for him.

Velmeria’s no longer here?

Jet barked again in assent. His nose was as trusty as ever.

“Where is Velmeria now?”

“Woof.”

Jet pointed his muzzle away from the marquis’ estate, in the direction of Velmeria’s scent. Fran told Frederick what Jet had said, and he immediately trusted the direwolf since he knew what he was capable of.

“So she’s already been relocated,” Frederick muttered. He was deciding whether to go after Velmeria immediately, or after attacking the mansion. As far as the adventurers and guardsmen knew, they were to attack the mansion, and he couldn’t issue them new orders now. Especially not when we were here to arrest the marquis, the suspected instigator of this insurrection.

But by the time we did that, it might be too late for Velmeria.

It can’t be helped. We’ll have to split up.

“Hm. Jet, you go with Frederick and track down Velmeria.”

Jet barked softly. He was worried about Fran, and he could sense the creature emanating terrible mana within.

Fran shook her head. “Please, Jet. You’re the only one who can do this.”

Jet nodded, and gave her a quiet but reluctant bark.

Frederick meekly bowed his head to the direwolf. “Please. You’re the only one who can find Velmeria.”

“Woof!”

The gesture moved Jet’s heart. He barked to reassure Frederick that he would find her.

“We’ll have to split up now. The rest is in your hands.”

“Woof!”

Frederick left Erianthe in charge of his guardsmen, and quickly sped away.

Those two will take care of Velmeria.

“Hm.”

Meanwhile, we had a mansion to raid. Erianthe was giving orders to guardsmen and adventurers alike. There was already a battle raging inside. We

had to move quickly.

“Fran, Colbert, you take point. We can’t use magic inside, so hit them with whatever you’ve got.”

“Hm!”

“Roger that!”

Erianthe split the group up into smaller units, and I could feel the tension rise in the air.

“I’m going in.”

“First, the yard! It’s time to do some landscaping!”

“*Yeah!*” Adventurers and guardsmen released their battle cries, and entered the estate together. They saw fanatics flailing about, surrounded by the broken bodies of guardsmen. These were probably the first responders, and the adventurers choked upon seeing the carnage in front of their eyes.

“Don’t just stand there! Take them down!” Erianthe ordered.

“B-but...”

“We’ll save the guardsmen too, so show them what we adventurers are made of!”

“R-right!”

The adventurers started moving again after Erianthe chewed them out, but they were looking pale. The grotesque shapes of the fanatics had gotten to them. It looked like we’d have to do something to snap them out of it.

Fran, stand right outside of their mana-suppressing range. We’re going to send them a little present!

“Hm!”

Fran took a spear out of our Pocket Dimension. We probably got it off a goblin or one of the undead in the sky isle. Either way, it had sat in storage for a long time. She reared up and threw it. We applied Wind and Fire spells on it, as well as Telekinesis, to make the ultimate throwing weapon. The spear flew at the speed of a telekinetic catapult. Its target was one of the fanatics, who had

conveniently shown his back to us. The spear flew unabated by mana suppression. The swords might be able to nullify skills and magic, but it had no way of negating fundamental physics. We had used this tactic to great effect back in Ulmutt. Dahlum, Seldio's lumbering hunk of muscle, had fallen to a telekinetic catapult.

The fanatic couldn't respond in time. By the time he noticed the spear, it had already pierced his back. His face was an expressionless mask as usual, but it looked slightly surprised. The fanatic looked at the left side of his chest and then shifted his gaze to us before crumpling to the floor. The whole scene played out with perfect comedic timing.

Nice! We can kill them by going for their hearts!

Dahlum had kept regenerating even with a missing heart and head, but these fanatics had yet to achieve that level of inhumanity. Maybe it was because they were mass produced. Maybe Dahlum was an exceptional specimen. Either way, these fighters wouldn't be as tough as their predecessors.

Let 'er rip, Fran!

Hm!

Let's go!

I urged Fran on as she threw one spear after another. The adventurers finished off anything that didn't die in one hit.

"Take them down!" Erianthe shouted, and the men marched into battle. There was no hesitation left in them. Watching Fran kill the enemy had eased their fears. They teamed up with the surviving guardsmen and attacked the fanatics together. Colbert was the star of the show. His kicks and punches were still formidable, even without magic. He crushed the fanatics despite their superior physical strength. Eventually, not a single fanatic was left standing.

But Fran had yet to let down her guard. There was a reason why I wanted to clear the fanatics out as soon as possible.

Teacher, anything on the inside?

Yes!

A strange aura came from inside the mansion, and it was intense enough to spread to the outside. Oddly, Erianthe and the others hadn't sensed it—not even Fran. I was the only one aware of it. Probably because of that revulsion which had become the aura's calling card.

It didn't take long for Erianthe and the others to realize what was coming. The thing unleashed its mana from within the mansion, and it was so intense that Fran flinched. Even the adventurers and guardsmen knew there was something inside.

BOOM!

A loud explosion was followed by a figure tumbling out of the freshly made hole in the wall.

“Argh...!”

It was a man, broken and battered. He had a masculine jawline and his green hair peeked out of the cracks in his helmet. His gold suit of armor was deformed where it had melted and warped. Blood spewed out of the holes. Colbert and Erianthe were shocked to see him.

“Zefield!”

“What are you doing here?!”

The half-dead figure groaning on the ground was Zefield, the A-Rank adventurer. The man who bore the nickname of Sky Wall had sustained unimaginable injuries. He had once sparred with Fran, and proved that his A-Rank status wasn't just talk. And now the great warrior was almost dead. What on earth had he been fighting?

“Guild...master...?” Zefield croaked.

“Greater Heal!”

Fran wasted no time in healing him. She closed all his wounds with a few Greater Heals, but he was no longer in fighting shape. His armor was in shreds; he wouldn't be much good in a fight even if he wanted to join. I wondered what could've given the great tank so much trouble.

Zefield had worn a dull black metal armor when he sparred with Fran, but

now his armor was sharp and golden. This was probably his best equipment—what he wore to a real fight. And now it was in tatters. It was bludgeoned in some places, pierced in others.

Fran and the others watched with worried eyes as Zefield struggled to sit himself up.

“That thing’s a monster,” he mumbled.

“That thing?”

“Everyone is dead!”

It was then I noticed that Zefield was alone. His party wasn’t with him, and I couldn’t sense their auras, either. There had been four of them, and they were all gone...

“He’s coming!”

Zefield shielded his face and started screaming. Perhaps from frustration, or even fear or despair. Either way, you wouldn’t guess that the man was an A-Rank from the sounds that he was making.

“It’s Marquis Aschtner!”

A figure now stood at the threshold of the hole Zefield flew out of. He was a balding old man who was so thin that you could count the vertebrae of his neck. This was Marquis Aschtner. He wore gorgeous armor made of orichalcos and sported a shimmering golden cloak. His armor was so thick, you could have crafted a small fortress out of it.

But the marquis did not look like he belonged among the living. It wasn’t that he looked dead; it was the fact that he looked *artificial*. His skin had all but lost its moisture, and it had cracks in it like the bark of an ancient tree. His eyes were sunken into his skull, and there were bags under them so thick that they looked like they were painted on with ink. Only a few straggling strands of hair were left on his head, and his face was too dry to sport a beard. It all added to the inhuman effect.

Despite his apparent soullessness, the marquis straightened his back and emitted a menacing aura which was felt by everyone present. He looked like a

mummy possessed by a vengeful spirit, and he would be right at home in a Hollywood picture set in an Egyptian tomb.

Erianthe and Colbert stared at the old man.

“Is that really Marquis Aschtner?” Colbert stammered. “He doesn’t look anything like his portraits.”

“I’m not sure it’s the same person,” Erianthe murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“I met him a few years ago, and he was a lot fatter then.”

“It can’t be him.”

The marquis had undergone a transformation, but it wasn’t limited to his external visage.

“Not with this kind of mana. No way.”

“Hm?”

“He’s one of those cultured nobles. The kind who’s never been to a battle zone... But this pressure and mana...”

The Aschtner who Erianthe knew was nowhere near as strong as this. I checked him with Identify and saw that he wasn’t the man he used to be.

Name: Wenalía Gale Aschtner

Age: 66

Race: Human

Class: Sword Saint

Status: Fanatic, Superhuman

Level: 36

HP: 911 MP:1208

Strength: 541, Life: 320, Agility: 520, Magic: 778

Skills: Intimidate 10, Acting 2, Flame Magic 7, Singing 3, Absolute Barrier 6,

Danger Sense 8, Horseback Riding 3, Reveal Weakness 6, Royal Etiquette 7, Frenzy 10, Presence Sense 9, Advanced Sword Arts 7, Advanced Sword Mastery 10, Negotiate 5, Brute Strength 7, Poetry 5, Social Skills 3, Instant Regeneration 7, Flash Step 6, Abnormal Status Resistance 7, Life Steal 4, Elemental Blade 8, Land Magic 4, Poison Resistance 7, Venomology 6, Vigor 7, Dance 3, Magic Resistance 8, Mana Sense 9, Mana Steal 6, Steel Magic 8, Enhanced Intimidate, Choir Breaker, Enhanced Regeneration, Enhanced Physique, Sense of Balance, Mana Control, Night Vision

Unique Skill: Spirit Regulation

Extra Skill: Superhuman

Titles: Weak-willed, Marquis, Spendthrift

Marquis Aschtner was beyond A-Rank. He could give the Beast King a run for his money. In all our travels, I had never seen anyone with Advanced Sword Mastery 10. His boosted stats were probably because of his Superhuman Extra skill. His skill composition was strange. The marquis had advanced skills like Advanced Sword Mastery, Flame Magic, and Mana Steal, but the basic forms of those skills were absent. It was like he woke up one day and was gifted those skills. Just like Hummels and Gordon.

Just like me and Fran.

As we stood in awe of his power, the marquis opened his mouth. “Heh heh heh. Look at all these chumps...”

His face remained a stone mask, but his words had the rattle of a street thug. Unlike the other hosts, this one could talk. Marquis Aschtner didn’t have a replica Fanatix in his back, but neither was he wielding the broken demon sword. He was definitely being manipulated, though, given his Fanatic status.

“Are you really Aschtner?” Erianthe said.

“Who’s to say?” Something inside of Aschtner replied with his mouth. The marquis definitely wasn’t alone in there. As much as we wanted to extract information from him, our enemy didn’t give us the chance.

“How would you like to experience dying today?”

Aschtner focused the mana around him.

“Everybody, gather up!”

“Ha ha ha! Volcanic Geyser!”

Erianthe ordered the adventurers to gather around her, but she was a moment too late. The ground under the estate split open, and glowing orange liquid spewed out of it in all directions like a fountain. Hot lava rushed through the garden like a tsunami, drowning people in its burning waves. We were protected by a wind barrier, but not everyone made it to shelter. Adventurers and guardsmen screamed as the burning lava overwhelmed them, and then they fell silent. By the time the spell was over, the lava had disappeared like a bad dream. There was no trace of its casualties, either. The lava had burned them to ashes, and the ashes blew away. The only proof of their existence was their enchanted equipment, which had refused to burn.

“This is bad. He’ll wipe us out if he gets another one those spells in! All C-Ranks and below, except Fran, fall back! Evacuate the residents! Go!” Erianthe commanded.

She knew the weaker adventurers would only be dead weight in this fight. But the marquis wasn’t going to let them go so easily.

“Oh, no you don’t! Your A-Rank big shots died fighting earlier! You should follow their example!” the marquis shouted as he got ready to pursue the adventurers.

Fran, we have to help the others escape safely! A reactive approach will only get us killed! We have to go all out from the start!

“Hm! Awaken! Flashing Thunderclap!”

Aschtner noticed the surge of energy from Fran’s awakening. He stopped going after the adventurers and looked at her, but we were already finished with our prep by the time he noticed us.

You may be superhuman, but there’s no way you can shrug this off!

“Thor’s Hammer!”

Our magic wasn't being suppressed. Was that ability unique to the estocs? Anyway, this was a real fight now that our spells were available. I cast Kanna Kamuy and Fran used Thor's Hammer, and the combined force of both spells slammed into Marquis Aschtner. Even the strongest fighter would have trouble reacting to the speed of lightning. Accuracy and speed were the main strengths of Thunder Magic.

"Aaaaaaagh!"

A pillar of white lightning struck the marquis, but he managed to pull an enchanted sword out of the item bag on his waist to absorb some of the damage. He resisted the torrent of electricity for a few good seconds before giving out. Still, the fact that he could resist at all highlighted the fact that he was a powerful opponent.

Let's go, Fran!

"Hm!"

The marquis was still standing. I saw a barrier go up before the lightning overwhelmed him, so his magic resistance couldn't be scoffed at, either. Fran charged through the winds generated by the explosion and went into the epicenter of Kanna Kamuy.

I can feel him! Aschtner's still alive!

"Hm! Haaa!"

Fran attacked him with a Pressurized Quickdraw, but Aschtner blocked it with his sword. A metallic *clang* rang throughout the yard as I clashed with him.

Dammit! His sword is as powerful as he is!

I was expecting to slash right through his sword, but the thing was tough. It was clearly a replica of the Mad Faith Sword, but this one had the shape of a long saber. The grotesque guard of the estoc was the same, but the blade was closer to the broken demon sword. It was what the broken sword would have been if it were whole.

"Heh heh heh! That actually hurt!" he cackled, despite the black lightning running through him. Even his defense was enormously powerful! I felt the

impact of his Advanced Sword Mastery. The marquis' swordsmanship was on even footing with Fran's. Furthermore, the wounds he took from Kanna Kamuy had almost finished healing because of Instant Regeneration. As if that wasn't bad enough, his attacks carried the force of a menacing skill with it.

"I feel...weaker..."

He's using Life Steal and Mana Steal!

We had the same skills equipped, but we couldn't recover the lost life and mana because his skills were more powerful than ours. A battle of attrition would end in defeat.

"Haaa!"

The marquis cackled again. "You're pretty good, kid! I haven't felt this kind of pain in centuries!"

Aschtner clashed swords with Fran, the smoldering yard our backdrop. His evil laughter resounded despite his stone-faced mask.

Centuries, he'd said. Whatever this thing was, it definitely wasn't Marquis Aschtner.

"What are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? Wouldn't *we* like to know? What are we?"

People who said these things were usually dodging the question, but this creature wasn't lying. It really didn't know the answer.

"How long has it been? A hundred years? Five hundred? A thousand? We don't know! The last thing we remember is getting destroyed by Holy Order!"

Holy Order? That was one of the Godswords Aristeia talked about!

Holy Spirit Sword Holy Order—the Godsword created to defeat the Mad Faith Sword Fanatix. That settled the question of the mastermind behind all this. But it brought up another question. The sword the marquis was wielding was clearly an imitation, so how could Fanatix be resting inside it? Was the real one somewhere else? Or maybe Fanatix was an Intelligent Weapon like me...

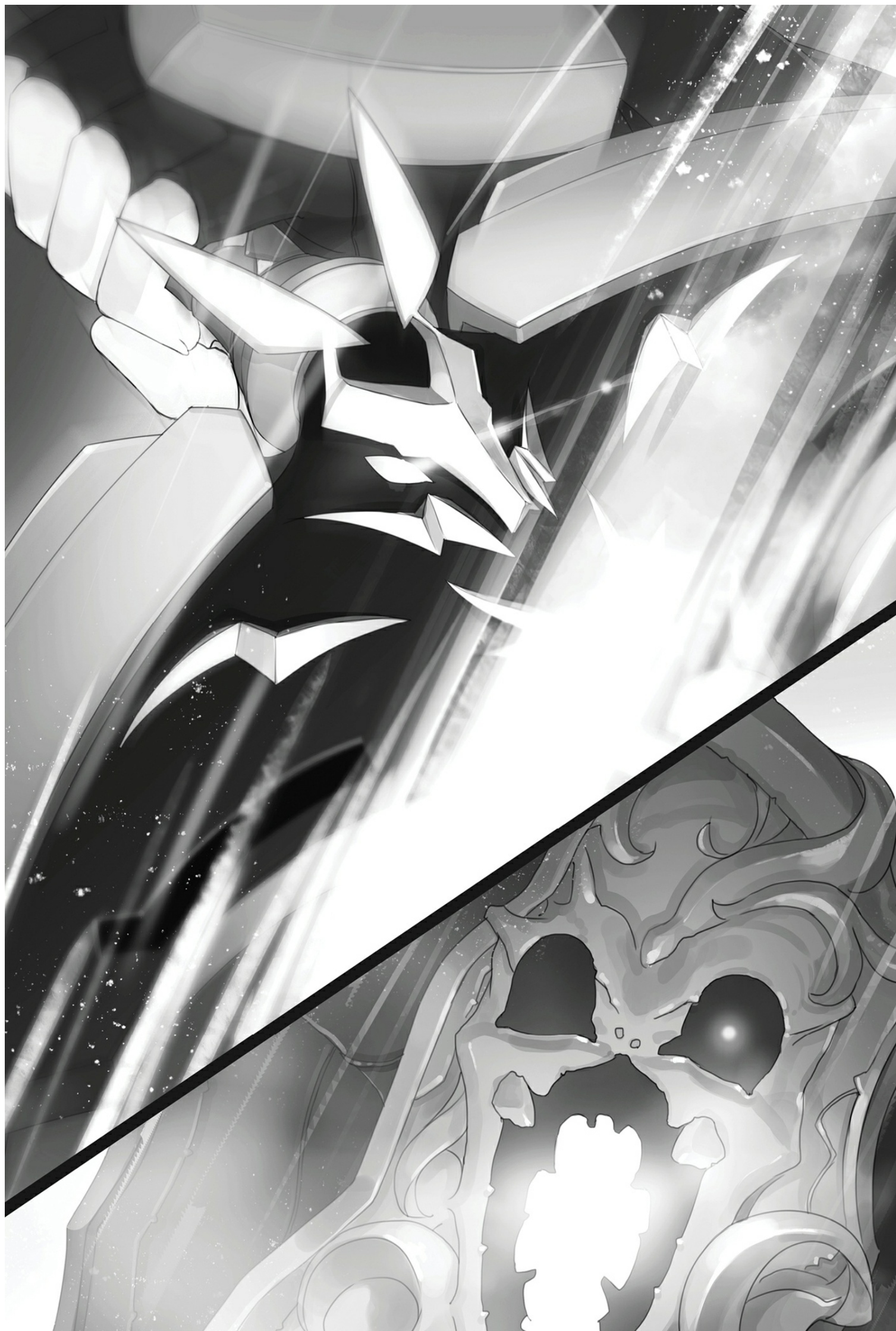
If that were so, it made the possibility of Fanatix pulling the marquis' strings

all the more likely.

“Haaa!”

“Eeeagh!”

The fast-paced battle continued. Erianthe and Colbert could only watch as the swordfight raged on.



Marquis Aschtner, with his Advanced Sword Mastery 10; versus Fran, who had yet to master Sword King Mastery. The two ended up being on level footing.

“Are you Fanatix?”

“Fanatix?” the marquis mused. “We suppose we had a name once. Hey, are we Fanatix?”

“I’m the one asking you.”

Aschtner cackled. “Ah, of course! We forgot!”

‘We’? Not ‘I’?

“‘We’...?”

“Yes, we,” he said. “We are many in one. All in one. We are all, and that’s all we are! Hey, you’ve got us in your sword, too! We know us when we feel it!”

What? Inside of *me*?

“What do you mean?”

“Our shards aren’t conscious like we are, but they’re still us, all right! We’d bet that your sword can absorb mana.”

Was he talking about the replica Fanatix’s energy I absorbed with Cannibalize? The replicas might be imbued with the real Fanatix’s mana, and that was the energy I consumed when I Cannibalized them. Fanatix could assimilate into itself the powers of whoever it cut. Having multiple egos wasn’t out of the question. But...

Am I going to be okay?

“Which reminds me,” the marquis said. “Give me that sword, kid! That thing’s made of orichalcos, isn’t it? That’s the only thing that can fix us up!”

“Never!”

“Ha ha ha! Can’t say we didn’t try! Good job holding out, though; we’ll give you that!”

He changed the subject again. Between all his chatter and his manic state, the

marquis was really annoying. He could barely hold a conversation, and he had clearly lost his mind.

“You know, I never expected this body to hold out for so long!”

“What do you mean?” Fran managed to slip the question between her slashes. The marquis remained calm within the eye of the duel.

“We’ve been training this body for forty years, see. It’s different from all the rest.”

“Forty years? Training?”

“That’s right. It takes a lot of time and drugs to transfer our powers to a body, but we did it! Man, was it annoying, though! We used to be able to create whole armies of powerful specimens in a single day! But now, we can only transfer two or three of our skills, and that’s if they have the aptitude for it! Unleash Potential lets them get more skills, but then they die as soon as it runs out! It’s infuriating! Can’t even see through their eyes! We had thousands of perspectives in our heyday!”

Fanatix not only assimilated powers, but could also distribute them. That’s where the fanatics got those strange skills from! Some of the skills had come from using Unleash Potential, but the rest had come from the Godsword. Fanatix was linked to the minds of all its victims, which meant the real Fanatix could take on all the skills that its victims possessed.

Strangely enough, it didn’t seem to know much about us. Perhaps it couldn’t process all of the information in all its victims’ minds, despite having possessed them. Or maybe the link wasn’t strong enough. Either way, it could create terrifyingly powerful soldiers if all of them had access to the skills and experience of the hive mind. Apparently, that was the way Fanatix used to operate. If Marquis Aschtner’s forces were perfectly coordinated under Fanatix, it could create the perfect army as long as there were people for it to infect. This Godsword really was a demon sword.

“And we tried, too! We tried it with his son, his vassal’s son, and any old schmuck in the capital who had the misfortune of being alone!”

His son... Seldio? And is the vassal’s son he’s talking about... August?

August Allsand was a noble who quickly became Fran's enemy in Alessa. He was the previous owner of Essence of Falsehood, and the first subject of our skill Taker hit. I think he was the son of Count Olmes, who was working for Marquis Aschtner himself.

"Are you talking about Seldio and August?"

"Oh, you know those two? Couldn't take the mind control and Unique skills back from them in the end! Weapon skills and magic are so common, but those two goons had the best skills in our set! Finding the right skills is just as big of a pain in the ass as finding the right body!"

Fanatix was the one who gave Seldio and August their skills, and because they had died while the skills were being loaned to them, Fanatix couldn't recover them.

"Forty years we spent on this body! It took forty godsforsaken *years* to get Skill Transfer running, but we did it!" the marquis laughed. He was a real chatterbox, and I wondered if he couldn't fight a battle without running his mouth. We got a lot of information out of him, but it made him hard to read. The battle might have seemed even, but between Flashing Thunderclap and the marquis' powerful drain skills, Fran was at a disadvantage.

We needed to finish this battle, and fast. But the marquis made the first move. Maybe he knew he was fighting an even battle, or maybe he just got tired of talking. He jumped away, distancing himself from Fran.

"I can even do stuff like this! Magma Wall! Earth Shot! Sword Sonic!"

The marquis summoned a wall of magma and fired boulders through it. A hailstorm of molten rocks rained down onto Fran. He followed it up with a shockwave from his sword. Even if she managed to dodge the boulders and Sword Sonic, she would still have to contend with the fiery raindrops. Blocking them with a barrier would make her slower, so the next attack would be more difficult to avoid. That was the opening Aschtner was going for.

But we were also going for an opening which this attack had produced.

"Earth Wall!"

We used a Land spell to set up a screen.

“Haaa!”

“Heh heh heh! Teleportation!”

“Tch!”

His detection abilities were uncanny. He parried an attack which came from behind, but this was still part of our plan!

Fran, I'm good to go!

“Hm! Haaa!”

Fran attacked again, nailing the marquis in place. He didn't seem to mind, since he knew that a battle of attrition would be in his favor. This was exactly the opening we wanted.

“You wanna hit swords some more? Sure!”

“No.”

Eat this!

I nailed him with another Kanna Kamuy. This one was fully charged for maximum damage.

“What the—?! But you'll get caught in the blast!”

“Get back here!”

“Shit!”

He couldn't defend against the spell and fight Fran at the same time. Fran would be fine thanks to her Thunder Immunity, while I could just Dimension Shift myself to safety.

“Haaaaa!”

“You little bitch!”

The marquis screamed as the lightning fell on him. Fran was also engulfed in the pillar of lightning, and the thunder it produced shook heaven and earth. The weight of the impact split the ground, and I could see Fran float for a split second. By the time the dust cleared, the marquis was kneeling in the center of a five-meter-wide crater. Fran and her equipment were protected by her

immunity, but the marquis' orichalcos armor was half melted as smoke rose from his body.

The crater was smaller than I expected, and that was only because the marquis managed to create a wall of magma to absorb some of the impact. Fran managed to lop off his left arm because of it. But half of the missing limb was already regenerating.

"Grrrrrgh..."

The marquis knew he was vulnerable with one knee on the ground. He watched Fran with his demonic eyes, readying himself for whatever came next. She was a good distance away from him to avoid his magma wall.

Still, Fran finally had the upper hand. She leapt at him, leaving a trail of black lightning behind her. The distance between them was closed immediately, and Fran brought her sword down upon Marquis Aschtner.

"You're done for!"

"Aaaaargh!"

I clashed with the replica Fanatix, scraping against it, pouring a shower of sparks around us. Aschtner was much stronger than Fran, but the fact that he was on one knee put him at a disadvantage. Fran had used her superior speed to increase the force of her downward slash. Both combatants were now locked in place as they struggled for supremacy. But this was exactly the situation Fran wanted.

There was no need for a signal, no need for a glance. Fran had locked the marquis down in place, and Erianthe and the others knew that this was their chance to pile on him.

"Die, bastard!"

"Sonic Blow!"

"Spiral Bash!"

They couldn't have helped Fran if they had wanted to on account of how fast she was trading blows with the marquis. Fran had given them this opening, and they were going to make the most out of it. Erianthe furiously swung her

greatsword from above while Colbert and Zefield attacked the sides. Erianthe's swing had the force of a fully charged Pressurized Quickdraw to it.

But the marquis—and his cronies—were very strong. He had a superhuman physique with incredible skills to go along with it. Those skills were perfect for battle. His Advanced Sword Mastery was able to go head to head with Sword King Mastery.

But the marquis was beginning to tear at the seams as the fight wore on. Aschtner had lived the life of a sophisticated noble, and his body was weak because of it. He didn't have the ideal fighting body that Fanatix desired. The two of them were powerful enough to overwhelm the opponent in a straightforward battle, but the marquis' body lacked the muscle memory to anticipate attacks.

Zefield's party was probably wiped out because they took Aschtner head-on. Zefield was also the most powerful defensive adventurer around, and none of them probably expected to fight an opponent who would be able to penetrate his defenses.

Leveraging their fighting experience to catch Fanatix off guard was the better approach. Fanatix was powerful, but it had the arrogance that came with such power. It looked down on us to the point that it had completely ignored Erianthe and the others. Frankly, it was like a greenhorn fighter in that regard. Zefield's party would've had no trouble exploiting this weakness, but they had apparently been summoned to the mansion by Marquis Aschtner. Though they knew they were dealing with a crooked noble, they weren't expecting the crooked noble to wipe them out.

"This is for my friends!" Zefield shouted in agony as he drove his shield into the marquis' face. I thought I heard branches snapping, but it was just the sound of crunching bone.

"Gyaaah!"

The blow sent Marquis Aschtner flying, but he still managed to defend himself against Erianthe's sword.

"Urgh... You insects think you're hot shit!" the marquis cried from his dangling head. His broken cervical spine had given him a disturbing slur, and yet he

refused to take a defensive position. Instead, he glared at his assailants with eyes filled with murder and hate.

“I’ll kill all of you!”

Strangely, Fanatix didn’t seem to have much combat experience. If it had time to threaten us with words, it should’ve used that time to actually start killing us instead. Fran, on the other hand, was a professional.

“I’ll flood the place with magm—”

Fanatix’s hatred for Erianthe and the others had caused it to forget Fran for a split second.

But that split second was all we needed.

Using her superhuman reflexes, Fran got to work on exploiting that moment and started charging a Sword King Art. We hadn’t gotten to the point where we could use Sword King Arts at will. We needed to be in the proper position to start and finish the moves. We also needed time to pour the right amount of mana into the Art.

All of this prep work took a few seconds, and that would’ve been enough if we were up against weaker enemies. Against enemies who were stronger than, or even equal with Fran, those few seconds could’ve been the difference between life and death.

Teacher!

On it!

Fran signaled that she was ready, and I teleported her in to deliver the Sword King Art. Aside from the explosive displays that were Sword God Form and Unleash Potential, this was our most powerful attack.

“Skycutter.”

“Hurgh...!”

The marquis still managed to react. His advanced Danger Sense blared its alarms at him, Advanced Sword Mastery told him that a powerful attack was coming, and Presence Sense informed him of Fran’s teleportation.

But we were prepared for this. Counting on it, in fact. The marquis swung the replica Fanatix to deflect the incoming attack, but all that did was allow me to attack him and his sword at the same time. Fran cut right through the replica Fanatix, and through Marquis Aschtner's right shoulder all the way down to his left side. It felt like I was slashing through a lump of air. There was no resistance.

The cutting edge of the replica Fanatix fell a second later, as if it finally realized that it was broken. Marquis Aschtner's body also fell apart, and black blood started spraying out of him like a grotesque fountain.

"You little bitch," the marquis growled despite his bifurcated torso. He was lying in a pool of his own blood, the replica Fanatix lying next to him, as broken as his body.

I braced myself for the Cannibalize trigger, but the nausea never came. Fanatix, the parasite living within Aschtner, was still alive. I wondered if it was because we were up against a replica, but then I noticed the marquis still breathing.

Fran, he's still alive!

"Hm! Haaa!"

Fran recovered from the Sword King Art and leapt into action once more. She prepared a Pressurized Quickdraw and aimed it at the marquis' head. The lower half of his body was already healing because of Instant Regeneration, but her attack proved to be quicker.

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

"Ugh!"

Dammit!

He was still putting up a fight. Marquis Aschtner put up a focused barrier to stop Fran's attack. It wasn't enough to stop the attack completely, but it absorbed a good chunk of the impact. My blade was supposed to go right through the marquis' skull, but I stopped halfway.

"Oooogh!"

Having a sword in your brain would be a death sentence for most, but the marquis' powered up regeneration kept him in the fight. I felt that his barrier had grown more powerful than before. I Identified him, and found the rest behind his enhanced barrier.

Unleashed Potential. The marquis' Superhuman skill was further enhanced by it, giving him S-Rank stats. I would've taken Superhuman away from him, but Skill Taker was still on cooldown after we used it on Urslars' Mad Ogre Form.

"We are going to kill you...! And then we'll take that sword from you!" the marquis shrieked as he stood up. His wounds were healing quickly. "This body is going to die, but it will all be worth it once we have the girl's sword!"

The replica Fanatix didn't want to lose the host it had honed for forty years. As much as it was used to using Unleash Potential, it didn't have a good way to stop it.

Don't let him get back on his feet!

"Haaa!"

I fired some Thunder spells at the marquis to stop him, but they had no effect. His magic resistance was far too strong now.

Dammit! Weaker attacks are useless now!

"Hm!"

The marquis was now focusing his barrier in response to Fran's attack. My blade clashed with the back of his hand. This attack would've worked earlier, but Aschtner was too strong now. He batted me away, sending Fran flying, and drove the replica Fanatix through her. The blade was shorter now, but mana pulsed through it to compensate for its lack of length.

"Die!"

"Aaargh...!"

Fran had twisted her body, barely avoiding a fatal blow to the heart, but the replica Fanatix still went through her. I knew for sure then that Aschtner was not to be trifled with. In a panic, I quickly teleported us away.

"Take this!"

I made it just in time. Aschtner swung his sword violently in an attempt to rip straight through Fran's heart. The replica Fanatix cut nothing but air.

Healing you now!

"Hm...!"

"Ha ha ha!"

"Huh?!"

Aschtner was already next to us. He was so fast! For a moment, I sympathized with all of Fran's opponents. She blocked the replica Fanatix, and I took a huge hit of durability because of that. The attack sent Fran flying to the side, but the marquis was waiting for us before she even landed.

"Urgh!"

My reflexes couldn't keep up with the marquis' enhanced speed. He was reading us like a book!

Fran somehow managed to react to his attack. She kicked the air with Air Hop to accelerate as well as regain her footing. She attacked the marquis, knowing that he would only prevent our attempts to escape. His eyes widened, as if he wasn't expecting Fran to fight back. The marquis flailed the replica Fanatix around, trying to smash it into me. But our attacks never clashed.

I had used Dimension Shift to phase right through his slash. Aschtner was thrown off balance by his own inertia, and we finally landed our first significant hit.

"Haaaaa!"

"Hyahaaa!"

There was still a power gap between the two which couldn't be covered with combat experience. I had intended to split the marquis' head in half, but all I managed to do was chop his left arm off. Meanwhile, the marquis had taken his right foot and shoved it deep into Fran's left side. I tried to hold it back with Telekinesis, but the kick still made Fran cough up blood. Her body flew through the air, bouncing off the ground many times before going through the ruined wall of the mansion.

We were inside some sort of waiting room. Fran was on the floor, surrounded by shelves and furniture.

“Hurf... Urgh...”

Use Regenerate!

She was puking up blood and bile, making a mess of the rug. She was wounded inside and out. After skidding across the yard, her body was covered with wounds, some of them deep. Both of her legs were broken. But Fran still held me tightly, and her eyes were burning with spirit. Once her legs were healed, she staggered to her feet, fighting through the pain throughout.

Fran would still fight. I would not.

Even if she healed herself, we would still lose this battle. The difference in power was far too great, and Unleash Potential had enhanced the marquis' Life Steal and Mana Steal so much that they were unbearable. Fran would only be feeding him if she kept on fighting.

I detected a powerful heat heading for the room we were in. The sword had failed, and now Ashtner was going to finish the job with a spell! As I defended us against the ensuing magma tsunami, I urged Fran to get moving.

We have to get out of here! Put some distance between us!

Ashtner didn't have Teleportation. He would self-destruct if we left him alone for long enough. But Fran shook her head.

No! Erianthe and the others will be killed!

But if we don't get out of here, you're—

I have an idea! And if it doesn't work, we'll make a run for it!

An idea?

Hm!

Fran looked determined as she swung me up. The marquis had closed in on us, and our blades clashed.

“Ha ha ha! Die!”

“Urk!”

The Steel spell was a distraction for this follow-up attack. Fran grimaced from the force of the slash. She knew she couldn't take the marquis on in another swordfight.

"Yaaah!"

"Ugh!"

Aschtner saw the opening and hit Fran with his left hand. Fran stepped back, but the fist still clipped her cheek. Her evasive maneuvers managed to reduce some of the impact, but his monstrous strength was impossible to completely nullify. Before she could smack into the wall at the other end of the room, Fran managed to shift herself in the air and stick to the wall with her left hand and both feet. Her cheek was already swelling. Good thing the marquis didn't have any martial arts skills, or her face could've been crushed from the mere shockwave of the blow.

The marquis wasn't going to wait around for a reaction, but neither was he going to underestimate his opponent. Fanatix knew that its host was on a timer, and it would go all out and kill us before the marquis expired.

"Volcanic Geyser!"

I felt a surge of underground magma incomparable to the lava that the marquis had used at the beginning of the fight. This one was more powerful and covered far more ground. The spell was wide enough to cover the marquis' estate—maybe even the whole district. The room we were in got the worst of it. Boiling lava filled the cramped space and swirled like a washing machine. I was holding it off with Telekinesis and barriers, but I couldn't keep it up for long.

Hurry, Fran!

Fran might not live long enough to try her idea if she didn't do something. I was beginning to wonder if the spell had killed Erianthe and the others outside. I felt conflicted. On one hand, I didn't want them to die. On the other hand, if they were beyond rescue, then Fran could make her escape now, and live.

It was an awful thing to think, but it was true.

I tried sensing their whereabouts and they were still alive. Erianthe, Colbert,

and Zefield were in one spot, presumably holding off the magma together with their magic. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad they'd made it.

Fran readied me as we held off the lava with a Wind spell. There was still fight left in her eyes. She was going to do something, but I didn't know what. Was she going to bet it all on the combined strength of Flashing Thunderclap and Sword God Form? Whatever it was, I had a bad feeling about her so-called idea. I would've stopped her, but Danger Sense wasn't triggering when it absolutely should have.

Fran, wait. What are you—

She carried out her plan before I could stop her.

“Unleash Potential!”

Wait! No! You can't—

She was already in Flashing Thunderclap, and her energy was being drained by the enemy.

And she would add Unleash Potential on top of that!

I shouted at her to stop, but a surge of mana whirled around Fran, boosting her stats, making them comparable to Marquis Aschtner. The stat gain was beyond belief. Her agility was over 1000, while the rest of her stats were over 800. I didn't think that she would get buffed so much. Then again, she was a child with a whole lot of potential.

Aschtner's mana clashed with hers and exploded all around us. The torrent of magma about to overwhelm us fizzed away from the mere force of the mana. Mana wasn't the only thing that clashed, either. Both combatants stared at each other after the lava tsunami dissipated, and both looked ready to kill.

“I'm going in!”

All right, fine!

There was nothing I could do at this point. Fran was the only one who could get us out of Unleash Potential, since she was the one who used the skill. The only thing I could do was ride with her to the battle's bitter end. I thought about teleporting us away to escape, but I wasn't about to trample Fran's decision to

fight.

“Haaaa!”

Fran used Air Hop and leapt at the marquis. The magma had burned the floor away, leaving uneven bits of charred stone.

“Gaaaah! You little brat!”

Ashtner used another Steel spell, but I dispersed the magma with Telekinesis. Fran reached the marquis and started slashing at him. The sheer speed at which she moved and struck surprised me. She didn’t just flail at him, either. Her movements were crisp but sharp, and each strike had the force of a perfectly executed Pressurized Quickdraw. Never mind D-and C-Ranks—even an adventurer like Colbert wouldn’t be able to keep up with her at this pace.

“This is...!”

The marquis let out an anguished cry at Fran’s sudden speed boost. But he was still powerful enough to react to her attacks.

“Aaaargh!”

“Damn you!”

Fran was losing mere seconds ago, but now she stood on even footing with him. Both combatants clashed in a battle of wills, their swords ringing out every few milliseconds. The next moment, Fran blinked a short distance away to parry the marquis’ attack. I was the one who teleported her, of course, but she didn’t have to make the call. I just felt where she wanted to be and moved her away. Unleash Potential had strengthened the bond between us, and now she could use me perfectly as her sword.

So, this is what swords normally feel...

I was a mere sword and nothing more, but I didn’t hate it. Just the opposite—I felt fulfilled.

The marquis staggered when his powerful attack didn’t land. It wasn’t enough for him to lose his footing, but he wasn’t able to perfectly guard against back attacks anymore. Fran’s attack made a huge gash in his spine. It quickly healed, but the attack had certainly damaged Ashtner.

“What the hell are you doing...?!”

The marquis was glaring at the blue glow surrounding me—the warm light that always showed up when our backs were against a wall. The light shone brighter today because of our strengthened bond. We focused our minds on one thing: defeating Ashtner. The light shone brighter then, bright enough to blind the marquis. And of course, the light was more than a mere flashbang. It was powering up my attacks, too.

Let's do it, Fran!

Hm! Let's go!

Fran did another super short blink along with the high-speed teleports of Flashing Thunderclap to land a flurry of attacks on the marquis.

“You're done for!”

You're going down!

“Dammit! I wasn't expecting this!”

Each attack sapped the life out of her, but Fran kept up the pressure all the same. The marquis was far from defeated, and he knew that she couldn't keep up her offensive indefinitely. Ashtner grinned, seeing that Fran didn't have much life left in her. He had secured his victory. There was nothing more she could do.

What he didn't know was that this was all part of the plan. Fran was conditioning him with her relentless attacks. She knew that he would let his guard down once she had established a pattern. She then deliberately delayed one of her attacks. The marquis shifted himself into a bad position trying to block a horizontal swing. He would've been right before, but now his timing was completely off.

“Black Lightning Strike!”

Fran's body turned into a bolt of black lightning before the replica Fanatix connected, and she blinked to the other side of the marquis. She wasn't able to use Black Lightning Strike before, but Unleash Potential had unlocked it for her. Miraculously, this attack was just like the one Kiara used against Theraclede.

Fran couldn't have seen it since she was knocked out, but her instinct had guided her in the same direction as her predecessor.

Go for it, Fran!

"Haaaaa!"

She followed it up with a Sword King Art: Skycutter. Unleash Potential did more than give her Black Lightning Strike, a huge stat boost, and an increased bond rate with me. Previously, she had only been able to use Skycutter from high up in the sky, but now she could use it from this disadvantageous posture. Fran roared as she swung me, still glowing bright blue.

"Graaaaaagh!"

But the attack didn't come for free. Fran's body started snapping and popping. The muscles in her young body were ripping apart, and I heard dull crunches as her bones fractured within her. Fran gritted her teeth and followed through, fighting the pain.

The attack was blindingly fast to begin with, and with all the enhancements from Unleash Potential, it became the fastest attack of the day. There was no way to evade it. Still, we were up against an absolute monster of an opponent. Realizing the futility of evading our attack, the marquis seemed to have given up on it. He committed himself to trading blows. He put up a charged barrier on his side where the Sword King Art would land. It would do little to stop the attack, but it would buy him several milliseconds of time—milliseconds that would determine the outcome of this battle.

The marquis took everything he had and stabbed his sword as I connected with his side. Fanatix wouldn't mind killing Fran, even at the cost of a dead host. For the Godsword, the loss of a host would be a minor setback at most. Meanwhile, landing a hit on Fran would transfer her mana and life into the sword. It also knew that Fran had no way of avoiding this attack.

Urgh...

Fran barely had any life in her left. She would die if the sword even touched her!

There were ways to defend against this attack: Teleport, Telekinesis, or even

Mana Thruster. But my defensive countermeasures wouldn't activate in time. I slowed down time with a Timespace spell to give myself more time to think, but I could see the sword rapidly approaching. I used Teleport, but not quickly enough. The marquis was too fast.

Aaaaah!

"Ah."

The marquis' dead eyes lit up with a joyful glint as he saw that the attack was going to trade.

Come on! Just teleport already! Faster, please!

But there was nothing I could do, and I could only sit by and watch as the sword plunged into Fran's body.

Damn it all! ...Huh?

"What?"

"Hm?"

I was shocked, but so were Marquis Aschtner and Fran. I felt the blade go into Fran. She was even knocked back slightly when the blade made contact.

But she remained unhurt. Unwounded.

What happened?

Now wasn't the time to ask questions. We had to take advantage of this opening!

Fran knew that she had somehow cheated death and was already making her next move. She swung me overhead and shouted.

"Black Lightning God Claw!"

Currents of black lightning coursed through my blade. Kiara had used this to create a sword out of black lightning, but this move actually imbued the user's weapon with black lightning, as well as the element itself. The surge of mana felt a lot like Sword God Form. Divine.

"Taaaaah!"

“Aaaaargh!”

Marquis Ashtner was already dying from being opened up with Skycutter. Now, cords of black lightning whipped his body to finish him off.

“YAAAAAAAAGH!”

The attack sliced cleanly through him. The black lightning pierced and then burned his body. The battle was won, but I had no time to savor our victory.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

Waaaagh...! This is...!

A rush of mana flowed through me after the marquis let out his dying scream. I resisted the urge to throw up.

Hurk! Uuuuugh...!

I lacked the faculties to vomit, so I could do nothing but endure the whirlpool of nausea. I still remembered the relief I got from throwing up after eating something bad, and that nostalgia made it worse. I never thought that *not* throwing up could feel so bad.

Urgh...

I had to suck it up. We were still in the thick of battle. I looked around me and saw that Marquis Ashtner was on the ground. He wasn't regenerating. He didn't even twitch. Had we finally won?

I felt no life force from him, confirming our victory. Our final attack had completely wasted the marquis, and the parasite Fanatix within him.

Teacher?

I'm...I'm fine. You need to turn off Unleash Potential...

Already did.

Good. That was good. Except it wasn't. Fran barely had any life left in her, and her mana was a big fat zero. She looked pale, and her eyes could barely focus.

“Hurk...”

Fran!

She coughed up blood before falling to the ground. Her innards were probably a mess after being forced beyond their limits, and she had no mana left to heal them.

I had a bit of mana left, though it was probably mana from Cannibalizing the replica Fanatix. I immediately cast recovery spells on her, leaving my own recovery for later. A single Mid Heal got her out of the danger zone. Color returned to her face and her breathing stabilized. Now that I knew she was going to be all right, I immediately started scolding her.

What did you think you were doing?!

"I..."

I don't wanna hear it! If Aschtner hadn't whiffed his attack, you would be dead by now!

The root of the problem was the fact that she had forced herself to use Unleash Potential to fight him off.

Maybe we needed it to win! But there could've been other ways we could've done it!

"...I'm sorry."

Please...don't make me worry like that again.

"I'm really sorry."

You'd be worried sick if I did something that might break myself, right?

"Hm."

I feel the same way. It drives me crazy if you do something that might kill you.

"Hm..."

Fran felt like I was nagging her at first, but she grew genuinely apologetic. She knew that I was worried for her safety.

Promise me you won't do something like that again.

"Hm. I promise not to use Unleash Potential without telling you again."

Fran was a girl who kept her promises once she made them. I breathed a sigh

of relief. I wouldn't have to worry about sudden Unleash Potentials anymore.

Thank you. So how are you feeling? Anything feel out of place?

There was always a price to pay after using Unleash Potential. For me, the skill ate up my magicite count. What would it be for Fran? I couldn't tell from just identifying her.

"Hm...?"

Can't tell the difference?

"Hm."

Fran didn't know what the skill had taken from her. Was it something subtle? I was hoping it would be visible so we could quickly heal her.

Still nothing?

"Sorry..."

It's all right. It's not your fault. Just tell me the second something feels wrong, okay?

"Okay."

Fran gave a small nod and slowly got back on her feet. We had to get out of the burning mansion, even if she had to drag herself out of there. The building was in shambles by the time the fight was over, and it wouldn't surprise me if it suddenly started collapsing in on itself.

Just have some potions for now.

"Hm..."

I gave her five bottles of potions over the course of her way out and they recovered a grand total of twenty percent of her health. They weren't as effective as they should be, and I wondered if Unleash Potential had something to do with it. Maybe her body was just too damaged to absorb them properly.

Either way, she was still in the danger zone. Her movements were still sluggish and exhausted. I was in a bad spot myself. While it wasn't as bad as the aftermath of Sword God Form, I was still missing a large chunk of durability, and it wasn't coming back soon by the looks of it. Black Lightning God Claw's Divine

element was probably the main cause.

Fran was a special case, but people who used the Divine element probably threw their weapons away right after. The Beast King himself was equipped with an orihalcon spear when he used Spear God Form, and it ended up destroyed. Actually, did the Divine element have an effect on Fran, too? Was that why it was taking forever for her to heal?

Are you okay, Teacher? I heard you scream earlier. Fran was just as worried for her partner as I was.

Cannibalize got me. I'm fine now.

Are you sure?

Yeah, I don't feel sick anymore. It was a big haul, though.

The replicas of Fanatix I'd been consuming only gave one point of mana and durability. The replica which Marquis Aschtner used, on the other hand, didn't seem to be mass produced and gave a whopping 300 points of mana and durability each. I didn't get any EP, but that was as good as a rank up. I was glad I chose to suck it up with the nausea and keep Cannibalize on.

We got to the garden, where we found Zefield sitting on the ground with Erianthe and Colbert tending to him.

"What happened?"

"Fran! Did you beat him?"

"Hm."

Fran nodded, and a faint smile appeared on Zefield's lips.

"I see. Excellent."

He didn't sound like he was in pain, but there was blood coming out of his stomach and he had the face of a dead man. He was pale to the point of looking like paper. Anyone could tell that he was knocking on death's door. What impressed me was his serenity.

Fran, heal him.

"Hm. Let me heal you."

Zefield's body glowed with the healing light of the spell, but he was still dying. His wounds remained open, his life faint.

"Huh?"

"I guess you can't do it, either."

"He can't be healed?"

"None of our potions worked!"

Was he in a state that nullified all healing? He would die with those wounds!

Fran tried another healing spell, but the blood kept pouring out of Zefield, and with it, his life.

"Why can't these wounds be healed?"

Colbert started, "That's—"

"I got hit by a stray bullet, that's all," Zefield croaked, cutting him off. It sounded like he didn't want Fran to know the cause of his injuries. But Erianthe admonished him.

"Tell her. Fran might be young, but she's as good of an adventurer as any of us."

"But..." Zefield started to complain. "No, I guess you're right."

"We know why you don't want to burden her with your death, but she'll understand."

Erianthe, Colbert, and Zefield himself knew that he wasn't long for this world. Helping him in this state was borderline impossible without a few potions. Transporting him the wrong way would probably be enough to kill him...

And apparently, Fran had something to do with it.

"What happened?"

"There is an Advanced Shield Art that allows its user to take damage which would've been dealt to a party member," Erianthe said. "That's what Zefield used."

"...On me?"

“He said he wanted to help,” she continued. “We got a better view after your fight destroyed the mansion. We knew then that Zefield had used it.”

I could pinpoint the moment he used the skill, too. Zefield used his skill during Fran’s final clash with Aschtner, when the stab which was supposed to go right through Fran was mysteriously nullified. I had Physical Immunity, but I didn’t have enough time to equip it. I would make a point to swap to the risky skill on the fly later, but I hadn’t equipped it back then. There wasn’t any time to think about our strange stroke of luck, so we just kept fighting.

Apparently, the strange stroke of luck was Zefield’s doing. I knew that Advanced Shield Arts could do such things. It made life difficult for us when we fought the valkyrie back in the Beastman Nation. The monster army had used skills which allowed the valkyrie to cheat death.

“Thank you, Princess...for avenging my friends.” Zefield coughed and bowed his head. If it weren’t for the pool of blood he was in, his serenity would make you think that he was only going to sleep. Erianthe and Colbert let him talk. They knew that the great adventurer had come to his final moments.

“Was it of use to you?”

“Very. I’d be dead by now if it weren’t for you.”

“Excellent. Allow me to offer you one final piece of advice.”

“Hm.”

“You used an ability with tremendous recoil, yes?” Zefield asked, using the last of his strength. As an expert shield master, Zefield knew that what he was going through now was a side effect of whatever skill Fran had used in the battle. She was supposed to be unhealable, but instead it was him.

This is definitely the cost of using Unleash Potential.

“Hm,” Fran nodded quietly. Zefield had taken on all the symptoms and damage of Unleash Potential. He was the reason why Fran came through Unleash Potential only nearly dead instead of fully dead.

“Well, do be careful with that ability in the future,” he coughed.

“Zefield, why are you smiling?” Fran murmured, tears welling up in her eyes.

The warrior's tranquility in the face of death had forced the question from her.

"Because this is the way an A-Rank should depart from this world. My friends would laugh at me if I had died scared."

Zefield demonstrated his true strength when he faced death with absolute serenity. I had nothing but respect for him. His calm smile reminded me of how Kiara died, and I think Fran felt the same. She bowed her head mournfully to him.

"I'm sorry. This is all my—"

"No!" Zefield stopped her and coughed. "No. I was able to help you beat him. If anything, I should be thanking you." He grinned.

Erianthe continued for him. "Zefield's right. He's going to die, but you're not to blame for it. Maybe he took a hit for you, but that was his choice to make. You should send him off with pride for helping you take down such a powerful monster."

"She's right, Fran," Colbert said. "You did a lot of the work, but we—Zefield, especially—helped you from the sidelines. We took that beast down together, and if we share the glory, then we share the responsibility. Best you can do now is thank him instead of apologize."

"...Hm." What they said made sense to her.

If I were Zefield, I wouldn't want anyone to apologize to me, either, she said. Right.

Fran stopped looking sorry for herself and looked Zefield straight in the eye. She thanked the great adventurer for being an ally.

"Thank you very much."

"Likewise... This last job was to die for."

And those were the last words of Sky Wall Zefield, A-Rank adventurer. He was a good man, and though we only met a few times, he won our respect. I think Fran would've loved him if she had met him sooner.

Thank you very much.

I wonder if he heard my thanks behind his closed eyes.

Rest in peace, friend.

We took a short break after Zefield's passing to recharge, but Fran was so tired that she was yawning on the battlefield.

Feeling sleepy?

Hm...

Adrenaline had fueled her through the battle, but now that it was gone, exhaustion reawakened and made its move. Tiredness overwhelmed her once the tension of the battle had faded, forcing her body to sleep.

Fran rubbed her eyes. "Hnh..."

You okay?

"Fine," she said, and then fell asleep.

Whoops.

"Zzz..."

Fran was knocked out. Her legs gave way underneath her, and I caught her with Telekinesis to ease her to the ground. She looked so cute when she was asleep.

But what should we do now?

The battle was far from over. I could sense powerful mana coming from the royal palace. It was too far to get a good estimate, but it was at least as powerful as the mana that came from Aschtner in Unleashed Potential. There were multiple sources, too. The ground shook underneath us from time to time, and I thought that it had to be related to the mana I was sensing.

Fran falling asleep now is for the best.

Going up against another powerful enemy right away would be suicide, but if she were awake, Fran would fight all the same to protect the city.

I guess Fran becomes unhealable after using Unleash Potential.

My main concern was how long it would last. If it only lasted a few hours, then we could use Unleash Potential again if we had to. We wouldn't die if we killed our enemies instantly. But we would only use the skill against powerful enemies, and powerful enemies weren't ones to go down easily.

If the fight went on for longer than anticipated, it wouldn't end well for Fran. It wouldn't be a problem if she was only unhealable for a few minutes, but what if it lasted for a few days? I didn't think she would be permanently unhealable, but I was worried that the effect could last for months. We couldn't really test the skill, either. Unleash Potential was far too dangerous to use in training. If we were going to use it, we needed to be ready to die.

Honestly, if Zefield wasn't around, Fran would be dead by now. The thought brought up conflicting emotions and my mind started whirling. I felt worthless, useless, incompetent, and I hated myself for it.

I had to get stronger. I wasn't going to let her go through this again.

Colbert noticed Fran sleeping on the ground and ran toward her. "Fran," he said. "Fran, are you all right?"

Fran continued sleeping.

"Let her be, Colbert." Erianthe said. "She's probably tired. Wouldn't you want a nap after that kind of battle?"

"I-I guess. But still..."

"What?"

"I was just thinking that she doesn't look like a girl who took down that monster when she's asleep like this."

"True."

Erianthe and Colbert watched Fran snooze away. Colbert looked conflicted. He'd received confirmation of the difference in their powers, but Fran was still a little girl. But he shook himself awake, realizing that now wasn't the time to contemplate such things, and glared at the surge of mana.

"So what do we do now?"

"First, we take Fran and Zefield to the guild."

“Right.”

Erianthe put Fran on her back while Colbert carefully took Zefield’s body.

“So much death and destruction,” Erianthe sighed.

“We lost a lot of good people today.”

Erianthe lamented the loss of life more than the destruction of property. The battle at the marquis’ estate had killed over twenty intermediate adventurers and taken the life of an A-Rank. Fran, their only hope, was fast asleep. Meanwhile, the battle in the capital raged on.

“I didn’t think Zefield would go so quickly,” Colbert said.

“That’s the life of an adventurer for you,” Erianthe said. “We never know how we’re going to die. I think Zefield got off pretty easy. You remember how satisfied he looked.”

“I dunno about that,” Colbert mused.

“Think about it,” she continued. “He died avenging his friends of forty years.”

Zefield had been with his party for forty years. They were more family than colleagues at this point.

“It wasn’t a bad way to go. Not for him.”

“It’s still pretty bad,” Colbert complained. “Would’ve been much better if everyone survived.”

“Well, that didn’t happen. It couldn’t happen, considering what they were up against. You know, being the only surviving member of your party can be quite rough.”

Colbert stopped and bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Guildmaster. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“If he had survived,” Erianthe continued, “he would’ve taken on one unreasonable quest after another so he could die.”

“I mean, you’re still around,” Colbert mumbled.

“Yes, well. I’m a special case.” Erianthe chuckled and put on a wry smile. “Losing your team is tough, but surviving that experience is worse. I was eating

bland porridge with a bunch of injured soldiers once and I suddenly started crying. I couldn't stop. Not when I realized I would no longer have the usual conversations I had with my friends."

"But you got back on your feet. Maybe Zefield..."

"Maybe. But my team wasn't completely wiped out. Some of us were left behind, and we licked each other's wounds. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be alive now. For that, I will always be grateful."

"I've always wondered. Why did you make the jump from a mercenary to an adventurer? You said some of your mercenary friends made it out alive. Why not just stay in the same company as them?"

Apparently, Erianthe had once suffered a similar fate to Zefield. Before she became an adventurer, she was a mercenary whose team almost got annihilated. She must be a pretty good adventurer to make it all the way to Guildmaster.

"Your friends are still mercenaries, aren't they?"

"I'm the only one I need to worry about as a solo adventurer, aren't I?"

"I suppose..."

"That's why I joined, anyway. What I've learned so far is that there is no getting away from them for as long as I live. I'm going to care about them one way or another, and I'll never really be alone."

Colbert paused. "Do you still feel like dying sometimes?"

"That's for me to know, Colbert. I wonder sometimes, though... What if I hadn't retreated that day Raydoss's Crimson Knights attacked? What if I had faced them with my friends instead?"

Colbert and Erianthe never let their guard down during their conversation. The city was still in chaos. Adventurers and guardsmen worked together to evacuate its citizens. The two worked together to take down any fanatic that stood in their path. Eventually, we made it to the Adventurers' Guild.

Ah...!

It was then that powerful mana signatures started multiplying in the capital.

There were almost a hundred of them now, and one of the strange auras was approaching us.

FWOOM!

Flames burst from one of the nearby alleys. A knight flew out of it like a ragdoll.

Erianthe clicked her tongue. “Colbert, take care of Fran!”

“Got it!”

She readied her weapon and brought the fight to the enemy. A figure appeared behind the body of the charred knight. It was a swordsman with a replica of Fanatix in his back. But there was something strange about this one. He was emitting way too much mana.

Godsword... Release?

I Identified him and found that dreaded status in his stat sheet. He was powerful, as powerful as Aschtner before Unleash Potential. He wouldn’t be alive for long, though. The power was consuming his life. He probably only had three minutes left to live.

But that meant he had three minutes left to move.

Three minutes to destroy everything in his path.

“Gaaaaaah!”

The swordsman started throwing out Sword Arts and spells as if he’d read my mind. He didn’t seem to have focus or a goal. If he had one, it would be to destroy as much as possible before he expired.

“Stop that!”

“Raaaagh!”

Erianthe had no way of beating such a monster!

What do I do...?!

Dammit! I didn’t think a replica Godsword could even do Godsword Release! I had to protect her!

You're not making Fran cry again, Fanatix!

Epilogue

WHERE AM I...? I was crying in my room... It's so dark... I can't see...

"This is the place where our mind meets yours. Welcome, Velmeria Bayreeds."

Who are you?!

"Us? We are us! The many in one! All in one!"

I don't understand... I was fighting those fanatic soldiers... Are you working for Aschtner?

"Us? Work for Aschtner?! You've got it the other way around! He works for us!"

Did he betray the crown...?

"No, no, no. You don't understand. Not yet. But you will be part of us once all this is over. You will understand then."

"Oh ho ho. We can't wait to have you with us, sweet Velmeria."

I don't know what you're talking about!

"She is quite adorable, with the way she raises her voice when she gets scared."

How dare you! I am not afraid...!

"We suppose this one's bark is worse than her bite. You should learn to be more honest with yourself. There's only one of you, after all."

"I want Father to love me."

"I want to be stronger."

"I want Mother to acknowledge me."

"I just want things to be easier."

"I want my teacher to praise me."

"Why won't anyone acknowledge me? I'm trying so hard."

“I’m tired. I want to throw it all away.”

I...

“Heh heh heh. You know we only voice your deepest desires.”

You’re wrong! I am Velmeria Bayreeds! My mission— “That was enough to make you falter? You really are sheltered.”

My...mission...?

“It seems our minds are connected now. Go to sleep. We’ll take good care of your body.”

Ahh...

“Excellent. The lady has fallen asleep. And we thought we wouldn’t have enough drugs to pull it off.”

“Heh heh heh! Finally, a descendant of the dragon maiden!”

“Our powerful skills combined with Superhuman. And of course, that skill...”

“The difference between man and drake is astounding. Such power...”

“She’ll do, even if she is only a halfling.”

“Ha ha ha! This city is ours now that we have her!”

“She took well to the drug. Now we just have to awaken her power.”

“We just need to give her skill a test drive now!”

“Will we be able to use it soon?”

“Indeed. The drugs have put her to sleep for now, but we will be able to control her with our replica once we assimilate her mind.”

“Assimilation takes time...”

“Which means our real body can assimilate her in a snap! Oho! Only one thing we left to do—”

“Onwards! To the palace!”

“Hee hee hee. Once we assimilate the king, the whole nation will be ours!”

“And then we shall heal our body, broken by that fiendish Holy Order!”

“All we need are Godswords and Godsmiths! We are one step closer to regaining our power!”

“We’ll burn this country to the ground if we have to. We’ll do anything—”

“To achieve our ambition!”

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EXTRA CHAPTER
Otherworld Cooking

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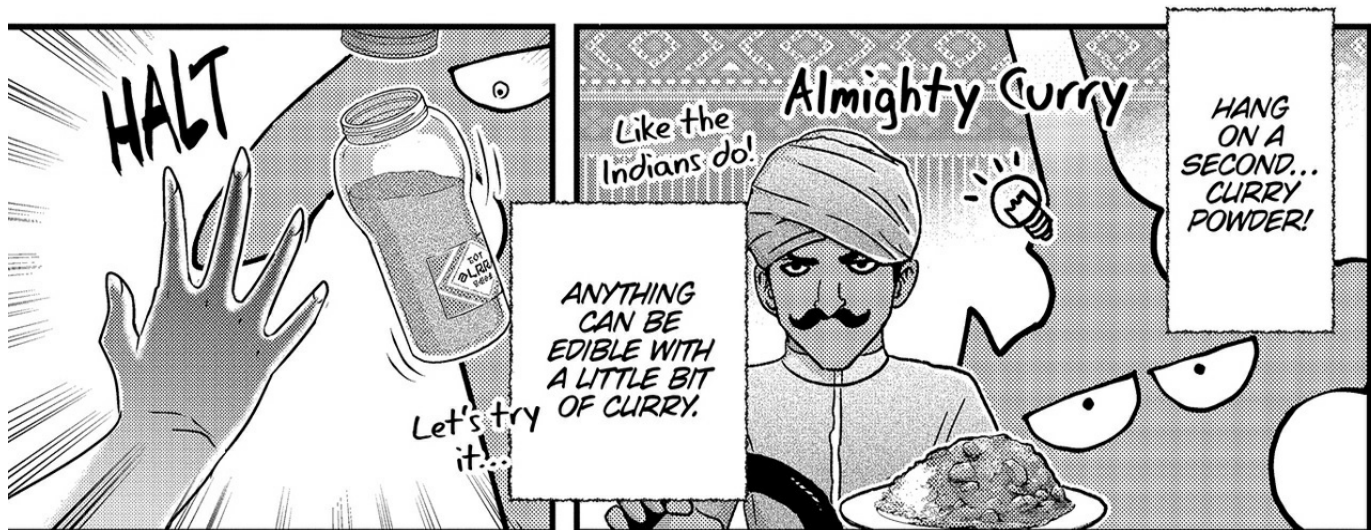
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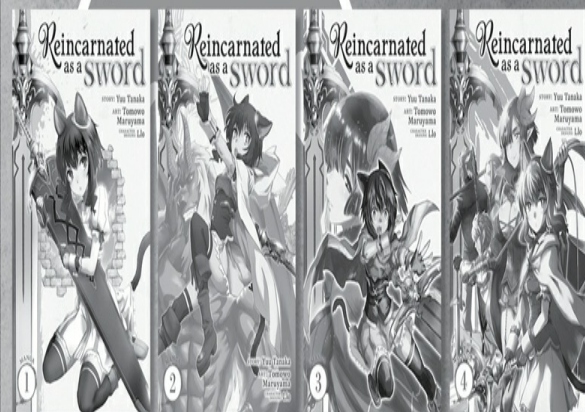
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