

Reincarnated as a **Sword**



WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka
ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo

15
NOVEL

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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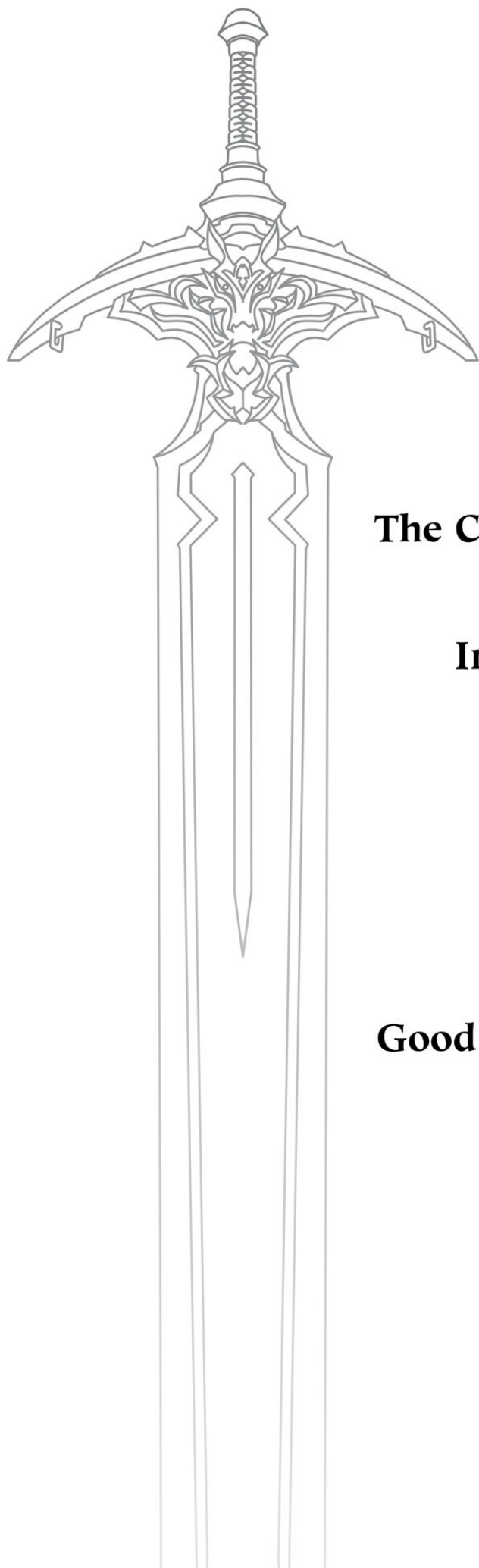
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TRANSLATION: Michael Rachmat
ADAPTATION: Matthew Grune
COVER DESIGN: Kris Aubin
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
SENIOR EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Teacher Fran

Prologue:

Sierra × ???

DID YOU CATCH THAT, *Partner?* *That woman was looking at me.*

“Uhh, what woman?”

You didn’t notice? Blue hair, red eyes, black skin, fancy dress? She was impossible to miss. Well, she noticed me. Definitely not someone we want to mess with.

“Really?”

Sierra, my partner, hadn’t noticed her at all. I didn’t know how that was possible, considering how strong that woman was—and it wasn’t just her appearance, either. Even just standing there, she emitted a tremendous aura.

While my partner was new to combat, his instincts were pretty sharp. If she escaped his notice, she must’ve used some sort of concealment Skill. Maybe it hadn’t affected me because I was an inanimate object.

“Was she that strong?”

I’m just saying I wouldn’t want to tussle with her.

“Seriously?!”

If things broke bad, it could end poorly for us. Defeat wasn’t guaranteed, but neither was victory.

All in all, she might’ve been on equal footing with Black Cat Fran...a monster who could turn the tide of battle on her own.

To think that a freak like her had just so happened to come to the lake at this decisive moment. Was it really coincidence? I hoped that she was just passing by. She’d be a dangerous obstacle if she turned out to be our enemy.

As far as we were concerned, we had to be wary of everybody. Winalene, Fran, Zelyse—every single one of them might become an enemy.

Still, I wouldn't rest until I accomplished my mission. I'd protect both Sierra and Romeo at any cost.

"She wasn't here before, right?"

No...she wasn't. Keep an eye on her, Partner. She's an unknown. Throws off all of our predictions.

"Right."

I won't let anyone stand in my way. I won't let anyone kill Romeo! I *will* save him this time!

Chapter 1: Swordshift

THIS IS *a pretty big caravan*.

“Hm. A lot of carriages,” said Fran.

Jet, too, agreed with my random observation. “Woof.”

We were currently outside of Ladyblue...twenty meters above the ground. Fran rode Jet, who had grown to the size of a thoroughbred. We were looking down from the sky on the long line of carriages.

Today was survival class at the Magic Academy where Fran was both student and instructor. There were forty carriages moving to Lake Vivian, including the ones transporting goods.

In total, over two hundred students participated, with thirty instructors acting as their protectors. As for Instructor Fran, she was tasked with sky patrol. That meant she had to protect academy students from aerial threats while also keeping a bird’s-eye view of the caravan.

The students would take care of weaker enemies themselves and the instructors would stay out of it. Students needed the experience, after all. Combat students took turns guarding the carriages. The Magic Academy organized their field classes well.

Not that every student was tasked with fighting—in fact, most stayed in their carriages until we arrived at our destination. Thirty of the participating students were freshmen. But this event was something of a tradition at the academy, and even Special Combat students took part when they first enrolled. Back on Earth, we had a similar event with senior students in an outdoors school.

The canopies of the carriages were taken off for emergencies so we could see inside. Carna was in one of the carriages, chatting with her classmates. Each carriage had three freshmen and three advanced students. Two of the advanced students stayed outside to keep watch, taking turns trading duties so

everyone got a chance to rest. Guarding freshmen who were deadweights in combat was good experience in and of itself.

Carna's carriage was being guarded by Carona's party. In the event they couldn't handle a situation, the instructor driving the carriage would step in. If they still weren't able to resolve it, Fran and Winalene would take matters into their own hands.

We should get going, too.

"Hm. Jet."

"Woof, woof!"

For now, we'd stay in the air to monitor the situation.

The students watched as Jet Air Hopped even higher into the sky. A giant wolf running among the clouds wasn't something you got to witness every day, and Jet's brilliant form made him all the more a sight to see.

I think a group of smaller enemies would be more difficult to defend against than one big monster.

"Like goblins?"

And bandits. And insect swarms.

Naturally, our worst nightmare would be a horde of larger monsters. They could stampede right through the caravan and injure countless people. If a powerful monster showed up, it would be in our best interest to take it down at once.

We'll just have to stay vigilant.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

It was a few hours after we departed, and the academy caravan had passed its first checkpoint, heading into a forest. Visibility was as bad as it got, so we had to stay alert. This was really hard on the student guards. I could tell that they were more nervous here than when we were out in the fields.

Meanwhile, Fran had separated herself from the rest of the caravan—but she certainly wasn't slacking off. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Haaa!"

"Skreeee! Klik-skreeeeeeee!"

She was currently fighting the denizens of the forest.

The Thorthor Mantis was a giant mantis with freakishly long limbs. Its body was only seven to eight meters long, but its arms and legs spanned over a whopping ten meters. It lurked in the forest canopy, navigating the treetops with its large but lithe form. Fortunately, the thing's skinny body was enough of a liability that it only had a Threat rating of E. It was no match for us, though students were sure to struggle against it.

Fran intercepted it after she sensed it quickly approaching the caravan, undoubtedly having been attracted to the scent of so much prey in one spot. It possessed the weapon skill Sickie Mastery, a rare thing for a monster.

It actually managed to deftly deflect Fran's opening attack. Impressive, even if she hadn't put all that much power into her attempt to pick it off because of how weak she'd expected it to be. What's more, its sickle hands had faint electricity running through them. Good that Fran had Thunder Immunity—this thing could've paralyzed her.

But that was the limit of the mantis's abilities. Fran aimed for a blind spot that its sickles couldn't reach and cut the insect clean in half. The monster preferred to attack its prey from above in the forest, but it couldn't dodge a strike from the sky.

Took care of that. Let's get back to the carriages. Sounds like they're fighting off some goblins.

"Got it."

We weren't going to give the students more firepower, but we'd provide healing for anyone gravely injured. They were only up against ordinary goblins, though, so they probably wouldn't get beaten up too much. The special combat students were more than capable of handling themselves.

The skirmish ended smoothly, and we just watched from afar.

With the goblins deftly dispatched, the students began carving materials for themselves. They didn't seem any worse for wear, either, though the freshmen looked pretty pale.

Carna was one of the few students who kept her composure. She already had field experience and was strong enough to handle a goblin by herself. The same couldn't be said for her peers. Honestly, I could understand getting so shaken up by a sudden skirmish with monsters.

"Teacher."

What's up?

"Look."

Hey, that's the Sky Dragon's Bed. We have a pretty nice view of it from here.

Fran, who had no interest in the skirmish, was looking instead at the floating island in the distance.

There were no signs of the Sky Dragon today, but the clouds surrounding the island were as beautiful as ever. Fran and Jet stared at the sky isle with eyes full of wonder. Before too long, though, their gaze fell once more to the forest below us. Trouble was afoot.

"Come on, you two!" said Fran.

"Woof!"

We're dealing with a pack this time. Let's take them out fast.

Monsters far stronger than goblins were drawing near.

Assassin apes hunted from the shadows. They were only slightly larger than a mountain gorilla, but they were considered an E Threat like the gigantic Thorthor Mantis.

If you asked me, they were way worse than the mantis. These guys were more mobile, and they could instantly kill humans. Worse yet, there were six of them. They hopped across the tree branches, rapidly approaching the caravan of students.

The apes concealed their auras like experienced adventurers. The students couldn't see them coming.

"Jet, take the two on the right."

"Woof."

I'll take the two on the left.

"Hm!"

We fell upon the ambushing apes and struck first. Our stealth and detection abilities were superior to theirs. Fran teleported in, killed the first ape, and we party wiped them in less than a minute. They weren't expecting to get ambushed on their turf. The big apes looked shocked as we cut them down.

Two E-Threat encounters, one after another. Looks like we're going to be busy until we get to the lake.

"Hm!" Fran nodded happily. Being able to whale on some monsters was a relief to her—a great way to vent.

Night fell on the first day of our trip. The Magic Academy caravan cleared out a campsite in the middle of the forest. A perimeter of carriages formed up with tents set up within. The guards took turns patrolling the carriages.

Winalene had called Fran to her tent. As she was the headmistress, her tent was a cut above the rest. I was a bit worried about the two strongest people being preoccupied, so I instructed Jet to go out on patrol. Almost immediately, I learned that it was unnecessary.

"There are spirits here."

Huh? Where?

"Over there? Around there, too."

I looked where Fran was pointing but I couldn't feel a thing. I completely lacked the ability to sense spirits. The only thing I saw was a whole lot of forest.

I can't tell. They're over there?

"There are others, too. Probably."

Are they strong?

“Don’t know.”

Even if Fran could sense spirits now, she still couldn’t tell what they were like so quickly.

The spirit of the lodge we stayed at was pretty strong, if you asked me, but that was based on other stuff. The old elf had spoken to them with reverence. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d existed for over a thousand years.

But Fran couldn’t tell the Academy spirits apart. She could only faintly sense their strength and element.

I could only guess from Fran’s vague explanation, but I could almost hear the strange sound they made. If I focused, I could hear something like a faint ring in one’s ear.

I turned my attention to the sound. Surely that was where the spirits were.

Winalene’s doing?

“Who knows? But they’ve been in the same place this whole time.”

With lots of them around, we could afford to let our guard down. Besides, the Academy should be used to this stuff. They did this every year, after all. Fran had bolstered their defensive forces this time, but they’d been fine before she came around.

We entered Winalene’s tent and found that the high elf wasn’t alone.

“Theraclede...”

“Hmph...” Theraclede sat on a stool behind Winalene. Next to him sat Romeo, who was glaring daggers at Fran.

We’d sensed his presence from outside, but actually facing him still made Fran emotional. She clenched her teeth, trying but failing to keep her bloodlust from exploding outward.

“Even with his power sealed, I can’t just leave him at the Academy, can I? I had no choice but to take him with us.”

Theraclede’s hands were bound with metal shackles, enchanted to further reduce his power. He wouldn’t be able to do anything now, especially with

Winalene right next to him.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Fran and Romeo glared at each other, though most of the hostility came from Romeo. Fran didn't seem to mind the open loathing he had for her. The two of them just kept *staring* at each other.

On the other hand, Theraclede didn't show much emotion at the sight of Fran. His eyebrows twitched, but he quickly reverted to a deadpan expression. Anything he said would only invite Fran's anger, and so he chose silence.

Fran didn't like it, of course. But Fran hated everything about him. As she glared at him, her eyes brimmed with rage.

Fran couldn't keep her temper from boiling when faced with the man she longed to kill, but—fortunately for everybody—she could still keep herself in check. The air was tense until it was finally broken by the boy huddled next to Theraclede's leg.

“Stop picking on him!” Romeo demanded.

“I wasn't picking on anyone,” said Fran.

“Liar! I know what you did!”

“Hmph.”

Fran had no intention of having it out with Romeo. She knew he was innocent. That being said, Fran was quite terrifying when she radiated bloodlust like this. I had a feeling she was impressed by the boy standing up against her for Theraclede's sake.



But this was no time for compliments.

Fran turned away from that awkwardness, choosing instead to ask Winalene why she'd been summoned. "You called?"

"Yes. I wanted to discuss your escort plans down the road."

Apparently, Fran wasn't just here to be notified of Theraclede and Romeo's presence.

Winalene showed us a rough map of the land, going over its topography. Once we made it out of the forest, we could be back on open plains. There, the students would have to hunt.

"They'll be going after slow tortoises. Strong, resilient, but slow enough for the students to take on."

The slow tortoise was a herbivore that retreated into its shell when faced with a powerful threat. Though powerful, its lack of ranged attacks made it an easy monster to hunt. It was an E Threat, but with enough prep time, the students would be a match for it. They had defensive devices and snares to keep the creature in place.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Fran.

"Well, you obviously won't be fighting the slow tortoise. But its blood is sure to attract other monsters. We get goblins every year."

Fran's job was to take down these monsters when they came.

"Got it."

"And this man will be working with you."

Fran paused. "Why?"

"He's muscle. We can use that. Might as well have him protect the students."

Fran decided not to argue. "...Fine," she said with a nod.

Still, she looked very conflicted about it.

Are you okay about this?

I don't know...

The arrangement was made, but she didn't have the first idea how she felt about it. She couldn't say no, because they'd be protecting the students, and being forced to be a meat shield was no walk in the park for Theraclede, either. On the other hand, he *was* being forced to do this job. What if he shirked his responsibilities?

Such were the thoughts raging through Fran's mind as we left the tent.

It was our third night after leaving the Academy, and the campus survival class had reached Lake Vivian on schedule. Sure, a horde of goblins attacked us after we took down a slow tortoise on the second day, but it was no big deal. All within the faculty's plans.

The teachers spoke fondly of the whole thing, like it was just an annual festival. Meanwhile, the students were out of breath, exhausted by both the long trip and all the battles along the way.

We hadn't camped out on the second night. Though we'd rested in the forest because nocturnal travel was difficult, the caravan carried on through the night when we were out on the plains. This was also a valuable experience. The student guards took turns napping and guarding, but they were all exhausted by the end of it. The faculty looked absolutely chipper, which really highlighted the experience gap.

As for Fran? She was doing great. She took naps while riding Jet, after all, though of course she'd wake up as soon as she sensed incoming monsters. Jet needed even less sleep after his recent evolution—he could go for days without having to rest. He still preferred to have a regular sleep schedule, but he'd been super reliable this whole trip, refusing to sleep a wink since we'd left.

Looks like we're back in Seftent.

"Hm."

Seftent had been one of our first stops in the lake area after leaving Granzell. We'd finished some quests and caused a huge scene. Good times.

The Magic Academy set up camp next to Seftent. Though unprotected, the ground was level and there was plenty of clear space. They camped here every

year and made it the base of operations for training at Lake Vivian.

“Everyone looks tired.”

Doubt they can stand guard like this.

The students were fighting a losing battle against Mr. Sandman, but they were still standing. At this point, though, some creep could waltz (or even cha-cha) right in and they’d be too dazed to notice. They were definitely in for it later, and they knew it.

“That could’ve ended poorly for Carona.”

Never thought I’d see such a serious girl fall asleep at the wheel.

It had happened while she was rowing a boat. She’d only woken when the momentum of her rowing jolted her upright. She’d looked around in a panic to see if she was under attack, then breathed a sigh of relief.

We offered to set up walls around the encampment with a land spell but Winalene declined. The point of this excursion was to build an encampment and protect it under conditions of extreme exhaustion. A wall would put the students at ease and keep them from being exposed to the random monster sightings that would help build up their vigilance. A spartan approach, but an effective one.

Our task now was to make sure the camp didn’t get blindsided by a giant monster. While monsters were sparse around Seftent, they could still be attracted by the scent of so much prey in one spot. Even then, they didn’t need our help with all that.

“Look at all those people, Teacher.”

A band of adventurers were making their way from town to the encampment. There must’ve been about thirty of them. They weren’t hostile. In fact, they looked quite friendly as they spoke and laughed with each other.

Seftent adventurers. The Academy must’ve hired them.

“Jill’s there, too.”

Oh yeah! The Guildmaster sure is hands-on.

A little old lady walked at the head of the group—but this senior citizen put out mana that rivaled elite mages. She was the strongest of the adventurers present, youth and veteran alike. This was Seftent's Guildmaster, Old Jill. She was the one who'd asked Fran for a sparring session with her adventurers.

Fran watched the procession from above but then turned her attention elsewhere. She looked up at what seemed to me nothing more than the dark of night.

What's up?

"A spirit's here?"

What?

A globe of light emerged from the spot Fran was staring at, big as a bowling ball and bright as a lightbulb. A voice emanated from the spirit, saying "Fran, can you come down to camp?"

"Sure."

I see. This spirit is making itself visible on purpose.

The stealth factor was a huge advantage of using spirits, but the practice had its downsides too. Communication was one of those downsides. When urgent messages needed to be delivered, invisible spirits made for poor couriers. However, shamans had a way of making them visible to accomplish this. Anyone could do it.

Transmitting one's voice through a spirit, however, was an advanced technique reserved only for masters of the art.

As it turned out, it had been Winalene speaking through the spirit. Klimt, the Guildmaster of Alessa, had done the same thing. It only now dawned on me that this must mean he was a master sorcerer too.

We followed the spirit outside the campsite where Winalene and Jill were greeting each other. There were some familiar faces among the adventurers, though there was no sign of the boy who hated Fran's guts. Good. We didn't need any trouble on this escort job.

"Always an honor to work with you, Lady Winalene."

“Likewise.”

They shook hands. Though it seemed at a glance like Jill was the more experienced one, it was actually the opposite. Jill was filled with awe and reverence for Winalene.

“We would like to take to the waters tomorrow, but how are things? It appears the lake is experiencing a bit of a disturbance.”

“Nothing escapes your attention.”

“The spirits told me, that’s all.”

“Something strange is happening at the lake. I’m afraid it won’t be business as usual this year...”

SIERRA × ???

WHAT IS IT, PARTNER?

“Looks like they’re here.”

Finally...

My partner looked through the inn’s window.

It was nighttime. The stars were out and all was dark. Still, my partner could sense the growing crowd of people in the distance. Few E-Ranks had this level of detection ability. As a result of many years living alone, Sierra’s senses were honed to a fine point.

My own senses had been drastically reduced after taking on this body. I had lost the survival instinct unique to animals, although I could now see things that were once hidden to me.

I concentrated, getting a feel for their aura. Although I wasn’t on Sierra’s level, I could still make them out.

A mass of people outside the city. They were finally here.

Ten years...it had all gone by so fast. But there was no rewinding time. I needed to prepare myself.

Looks like Romeo is with them.

“Yeah. He’s just moping and crying, by the looks of it. Pisses me off.”

My partner looked angry when I brought up Romeo.

Don’t say that. What do you expect a boy his age to do? The world’s a scary place when you’re that small.

“Yeah, well...”

Looks like the high elf bitch is nearby.

Just like last time. She brought the Magnolia blood just in case.

We were the ones who spread information about Romeo to entice her. A better fate, I’d thought, than being captured by Zelyse and being used as a guinea pig.

But was it the right thing to do? The seal within Romeo had also caught her attention. Perhaps we’d get an encore of our last attempt...but no, we had prepared ourselves. It would be all right.

“The high elf is as intimidating as ever.”

Much as I’d like to kill her, I doubt we’re up to the task.

“She’s too strong. Now that I’m older, I can really appreciate her monstrous strength.”

She...she had been the one to kill Sierra last time. Perhaps she would do it again. I had to prevent that at all costs. And yet my partner didn’t show any hate or resentment as he talked about her. No, he just seemed impressed.

You’re not mad at her?

“It was the right thing to do at the time.”

Yes, but she killed you.

“She won’t this time. We won’t let her.”

This time, Zelyse doesn’t have the power of Romeo’s blood. Things should

work out better.

“They will.”

Yep.

The weak little brat had grown up.

“And of course, Fran’s here too...”

She was there last time.

“She sure was.”

Don’t be like that. Things are different this time. She’s already met Romeo.

“I know, but...”

My partner’s face twisted with resentment. He really wanted to kill her.

Sierra didn’t share my hatred of Winalene. All his hostility was directed at the Black Cat, and I couldn’t say anything about that. The Black Cat girl hated me for killing someone dear to her. Naturally, she wanted to kill me.

That was my life, after all. An endless cycle of hate begetting hate. The chain of hate inevitably ended in a bloodbath, which birthed another chain in turn, sending me from one battlefield to another. If she wanted to have her revenge, so be it. But I wasn’t about to tell Sierra to stop hating her, either.

The chain of hate would continue even after I died.

“...-ster?”

...

“Hey, mister!”

Sorry, Romeo. I got lost in thought.

“I’m not Romeo.”

No. No, you’re Sierra.

“Were you thinking about the seal on the grand spell?”

No, though I probably should.

“Zelyse’s the one we have to look out for...”

I can't tell where he is, either. Maybe I could sense him if he was closer.

"He was there before. Chances are, he'll be here again."

Zelyse the alchemist. A man ruled by his passions, a man willing to sacrifice thousands to achieve his goal. The more notorious he became, the more it pleased him.

"He played us last time, but we'll be ready for him."

Yeah, but don't let your guard down around the bastard. He has a tendency to turn the tide no matter how cornered he is.

"Right."

I don't know how much I can resist him this time. He might have set a trap inside me.

"Yeah..."

As convenient as this body was, Zelyse himself was the one who had provided the crystal and sword, and that bastard is thorough.

I wouldn't be surprised if he'd foreseen this and installed some fail-safes.

"But can this Zelyse use those fail-safes? The Romeo now isn't the Romeo of the past—isn't me. It should be the same for Zelyse. He has no memory of messing with your body."

You're right. Still, best to be ready for it.

Winalene, Romeo, Theraclede, Fran. All the key players had gathered on the stage of destruction. We'd spent the last eight years preparing for this. We would prevent the destruction from happening.

"The fleet is definitely suspicious. We'll have to check them out again."

Let's do that.

This time, I would save my partner for sure.

It was the day after we'd arrived at Lake Vivian.

The students had split up into groups of ten, scattered around the outskirts of

Seftent. Some picked herbs. Others exterminated F Threats. These were all official guild quests, and each group had a student enlisted in the Adventurers' Guild. The others were treated as collaborators.

Both special combat and advanced students were used to adventuring. They were expecting the quests to be business as usual, but they were in for a surprise.

The flora and fauna of Ladyblue and Lake Vivian were vastly different, and the students ran into a lot of trouble thinking otherwise. Fortunately, each group had an instructor and an adventurer attached to them, so things would work out barring extreme circumstances.

"The name's Charles."

"Fran. Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine, Ma'am. Can't tell you what a relief it is to be paired with the Black Lighting Princess."

Fran was also tasked with guarding one of the groups. Her collaborator was a young E-Rank.

The instructors and adventurers were paired to balance each other out. Strong adventurers with weak instructors, weak adventurers with strong instructors.

Fran, the strongest instructor, was paired with Charles, the weakest adventurer. And I don't know whether it was on purpose, but Carona and Carna were in the same group.

"A pleasure to work with you, Fran."

"Hm."

"I'm glad to be under your care again."

The students, initially worried about how unreliable Charles looked, smiled when they saw Instructor Fran was with them. The advanced students all knew how strong she was. The only ones who remained unsure were the freshmen. To them, Fran looked like just another rookie.

They'd seen her ride Jet earlier, but not in a real fight. For all they knew, she

was just a competent beastmaster. What's more, Jet was currently in the shadows, leaving Fran by herself. To the untrained eye, the group was protected by E-Rank Charles and Rookie Fran. No wonder they were worried.

But this would be a lesson in itself.

Fran's Group Three was currently tasked with picking herbs and exterminating wolves. They were on a hillside near the lake.

Carona led the group, making sure to check a map. We could've instantly finished this quest, but we weren't allowed to help the kids. All we could do was quietly watch as they worked it out.

"We'll find a stream to collect herbs from."

Carna objected to that, looking worried. They had received solemn warnings before heading out on this quest.

"Are you sure about this?" Carna fretted. "We would have to go near the water."

"We are not allowed near the lake, but a stream would be all right, I reckon," Carona reasoned. "Isn't that right, Mr. Charles? We are allowed to investigate the nearby streams, correct?"

"Huh? Uhh, yeah. The nearby streams are a-okay."

"Thank you. Let's make our way there."

"Okay."

Carona was pretty good. She casually extracted information about the streams from Charles. Carona had picked up her map from the guild in Seftent but it wasn't completely accurate.

Streams came and went depending on the seasons so the map could be outdated. But Charles had slipped, and now she knew there were still streams around...if he wasn't lying, that is.

Which he wasn't. The man had completely let it slip without even realizing he'd given Carona a hint in the first place. He was casually talking to Carona and she was milking him for all the info he was worth.

“Are the pseudos really that terrible?”

“No doubt! If you see one, don’t even think about fighting it.”

There were several restrictions placed on the students this year. One was that they were not allowed to approach Lake Vivian. This was imposed not by the Academy, but by the Adventurers’ Guild. Frequent clashes with a certain monster had made the lake too dangerous.

Lake Vivian was home to a creature called the Vivian Guardian. These monsters were unique to Lake Vivian and were not on the hunting list.

For starters, they were docile. They kept to their turf, which made run-ins with them virtually impossible. Even if you did wander inside their territory, some of the creatures would greet you by blocking your way. They would attack you if you tried to intrude, but they still wouldn’t kill you. They’d simply incapacitate you and leave you on dry ground.

If you *did* hunt them, though, they weren’t a threat to be taken lying down. Hit them hard enough and they’d morph into their Attack State...and so would several hundred other guardians in the vicinity. They would then eliminate every single human in the entire area until no one was left, not even fishermen or adventurers who had just happened to be nearby.

The Vivian Guardian was an E Threat, mainly owing to its docile nature. Its true strength was unknown due to a lack of study. But apparently Jill had encountered a swarm of attack state guardians once, and she ranked them as B Threats.

B Threats are dangerous enough to threaten an entire country.

The main reason the guild was hush-hush about it was to prevent poachers from coming into the lake. They kept quiet about the guardian and made their territory off-limits. It was a pretty solid idea. They were, after all, not really *that* dangerous.

But something unusual was happening to the Vivian Guardians. A variant had begun leaving their nests to attack people. Their beautiful translucent tentacles were now an ugly brown. Killing these “pseudos” didn’t seem to upset the nearby guardians, either.

The pseudos were thought to be a different species altogether, but their size, shape and habitat were identical to the Vivian Guardians. The adventurers had coined the new name to differentiate them.

“I would’ve loved to see a pseudo, but I suppose that would be impossible.”

“Don’t even think about it! We don’t know squat about them, either. Steer clear!”

“Very well. But surely the scholars are researching them.”

“They are, but we still know next to nothing. We don’t know why they leave their turf, why they attack the Trade Fleet, nothing.”

“They attack the Trade Fleet? Really?”

“Seems like it. They keep getting sighted near the fleet. Might be targeting the route.”

That didn’t sound good. The fleet was the lifeblood of the lake. Without them around, the lake towns were doomed.

Charles didn’t think too deeply about it, but it made me wonder if we’d wrap up class ahead of schedule. This whole pseudo business had gotten me intrigued.

We were still talking about pseudos when we made it to the stream. Carona and the others started looking for herbs until one of them shouted.

“Look! This is one of the herbs, right?”

“Hey, that’s scarlet seaweed! It’s quite rare these days. These will go for a lot!”

Apparently, the lake was still facing the scarlet seaweed shortage from the last time we came. The herb was used to treat a disease unique to Belioth and I wondered if they were facing an epidemic.

I had Fran ask about the local situation but Charles wasn’t sure about the details, either.

“You don’t hear about it here, that’s for sure. But it looks like there’s a lot of demand from the eastern side of the kingdom. You should know more about

that since you all came from the Academy.”

We didn't hear about an outbreak, either.

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Do you know anything, Caron?”

“Nothing sticks out in particular. Some of the freshmen got sick, but that happens every year.”

Carona hadn't heard anything about an epidemic, either.

“Maybe it's the other towns.”

“No, that's not possible.”

The illness mainly affected children, so if there was an outbreak, the Magic Academy would've already gotten the brunt of it. If the Academy was healthy, the other towns were too.

“Then where is it?”

“I don't know. Perhaps further east of the country.”

Fran was perfectly fine. The scarlet seaweed medicine also acted as an immunity booster, and she had already taken a dose.

“What is it, Carna?”

“Oh, I was just thinking. One can make a lot of profit when medicine is in short supply.”

“That's an Academy student for you. You guys think so fast.”

“I come from a merchant family, after all.” But despite her jovial comment, Carna looked concerned. Maybe the locals could laugh about this whole thing, but the whole thing sounded just a bit off to us.

Having finished their harvesting quest, Carona and the others proceeded to the next one.

They had taken up wolf extermination on top of herb gathering, but they had yet to spot a single wolf. While the wolves around the Academy lived out in the

grasslands, the wolves in this area had their burrows in the forest, near the tree roots.

Spotting one would be impossible if you didn't know where to look. They would've known about this difference in behavior had they asked back at the guild when they were picking up their maps, but they'd neglected to do so.

Charles looked pretty conflicted as the situation unfolded. He really wanted to clue the kids in on the behavior of the local wolves, yet they needed to figure it out for themselves. As much as he was dying to tell them, he kept his mouth shut.

They came closest to the wolves when they were picking herbs from the stream. Charles looked like he was about to explode.

Jet was in the shadows to make sure his Kin Hatred didn't affect the local wildlife. If it triggered, Carona and the others could forget about even spotting a wolf. He would have to be in the shadows for most of the operation.

We were just following the students, making sure no monsters got too close. We'd only had to fight once earlier in the day, when we'd teleported to a lesser wyvern in the distance to take care of it.

Still, Fran had gotten in some fighting over the last few days, so she was in a good mood. It was a welcome break from the stuffy atmosphere of the Academy. I guess she'd been on a short fuse because fights had been hard to come by. She was even in a good enough mood to go on a picnic with Carona and the others later on. The group was on their toes, but to Fran? This was like a stroll in the park.

As we traveled, Charles called out to us. "Okay, that's as far as you go."

"Are we getting close to the lake?"

"Yep."

There had been reports of pseudos attacking people at the lake shore. The Adventurers' Guild prohibited the students from going there for their safety, but only out of concern for the Academy. When it came to civilians whose livelihood depended on the lake, they couldn't do a thing. Hence the spectacle before us.

Carona quickly noticed it too. “Huh? That ship is under attack!”

“I-it is!”

A cargo ship was being attacked by pseudos. This was going to be messy.

Carona and Carna shouted, alerting the other students.

“W-wait!” cried Charles. “You can’t go out there! It’s too dangerous!” In an instant, he tried to hold the students back from rushing into the fray.

But reason wasn’t enough to satisfy the children. “That ship’s going to sink if we don’t do something!”

The group broke out into chaos—

“Yeah! We’re the only ones around who can help!”

“Everybody calm down!”

“We couldn’t help them even if we wanted to!”

Some of the students were ready to launch a rescue operation, but others knew what pseudos could do and tried to talk them out of it. They weren’t very convincing, though; both groups wanted to save the sailors.

If the students went ahead with this, the pseudo would slaughter them.

Let’s go, Teacher.

Yeah. The students will get reckless if we don’t do something.

Hm.

Jet, take care of the kids.

“Woof!”

The students stared when Jet came out of Fran’s shadow.

“I’ll go and help them. Jet will stay to protect you.”

“What? But...”

Oblivious to Fran’s strength, the freshmen couldn’t believe what she was saying. But the advanced students were reassured.

“Thank you.”

“You gotta save them!”

“Hm.”

The mast had already been crushed by the pseudo’s tentacles. The sooner we got there, the better.

I’ll get us there in one!

“Okay!”

We used Long Jump to teleport ourselves above the ship. The damage was obvious now. There were large holes on the deck and side of the ship. Even if we got rid of the pseudo, the ship was bound for the lakebed.

There are people in the water. Are they the crew?

“They’re still alive.”

The pseudo only wants the ship...?

The pseudo continued its attack on the ship, ignoring the sailors who had been thrown overboard. Maybe they didn’t have an appetite for human flesh. But just as that thought crossed my mind, I saw one of the men still on board get seized by the pseudo’s tentacle.

That guy’s in trouble!

“I see him!”

Fran Air Hopped and zipped toward the deck. The pseudo noticed the presence of a hostile and lashed its tentacle at her, but she weaved through them and landed safely.

“Haa!” She cut the tentacles from the poor sailor, saving him from getting dragged into the lake. He writhed in pain from the five-meter fall, but he was otherwise all right: the severed tentacle made a decent cushion.

“You okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Wait here.”

Fran left the man behind. She would have to take care of the pseudo problem

first to guarantee the safety of the crew.

No thunder attacks, Fran. You'll hurt the sailors.

"Okay. We'll have to get close."

You got it!

I transmogrified myself to better suit Fran's plan of attack, transforming into a cone-shaped sword without a guard. This lance shape was better suited for throwing.

"Haaa!"

Let's go!

Fran wound up in the air and threw me with all her might. I added Telekinetic Catapult into the mix, transforming myself into a speeding bullet aimed directly at the pseudo.

I broke through its hard shell and pulverized its shock-absorbent flesh like plywood.

The concentrated attack caused no collateral damage. The sailors floating in the lake didn't even feel the aftershock.

The pseudo's body started disintegrating. You couldn't harvest materials or crystal from this thing because they would just melt.

"We'll secure the sailors before more pseudos arrive."

Yeah. Let's get them to shore. The ship is finished.

"Hm!"

But why would the pseudos attack a perfectly ordinary ship? Did they just go after any large, moving entities in the water? It was all so strange.

We got a feel for the sailors as we ferried them to the shore, and they weren't anything special either. We would have to question them later.

When we finally reached the shore, the five sailors let out an exhausted groan. They'd taken in some lake water, but they were going to be all right.

"You saved us, little miss..." said one.

“That thing came out of nowhere!” cried another.

“There goes the cargo...” a third sailor sighed.

The captain, the oldest among the crew, lamented the cargo as he watched the ship sink into the water.

“The cargo can’t get wet?”

“The grain is done for, that’s for sure. The scarlet seaweed potion is still salvageable, though. Those crates are pretty sturdy. We have to get them back somehow.”

“Scarlet seaweed potion?”

“It’s a new medicine. Made of scarlet seaweed, course.”

“It works the same way as the tablets but more potent because it’s in liquid form.”

And the ship was carrying it. Given the current shortage, they weren’t about to give up on their cargo.

“We’ll probably have to get the adventurers to salvage it for us. Hopefully there aren’t too many monsters down there.”

The other lake creatures had evacuated the place after the arrival of the pseudo. It wouldn’t take long for them to return.

Teacher.

You going?

Hm.

If we went now, we’d probably be able to grab the stuff.

“Where is this medicine?”

“Huh? It’s in storage on the broadside of the ship. Right where the pseudo latched on.”

The captain pointed to the gaping hole on the side of the ship. Water was rushing inside without the pseudo to plug it up. Shouldn’t be a problem. If anything, the hole gave us a clear entrance.

Granted, the hole was half the reason the ship was sinking. The other half was the cracks that had formed all over the ship. The creature's tentacles had squeezed tight.

"Wait one minute."

"L-little girl?" The captain raised his hand to stop her, but Fran was already gone.

Let's see if we can't just store the whole ship.

"Good idea."

That would be the fastest way to go about this, but it was to no avail. There were probably critters running through the ship now like fish and rats. Pocket Dimension couldn't store living things.

"Didn't work..."

Can't be helped. I'll take care of your breathing. Use water magic to get us there.

All right.

Having Fran navigate the confined spaces of the ship by herself would be more efficient.

We entered the ship through the hole left behind by the pseudo. Half of the cargo was already taking water. Fran got on top of a semi-sunken crate and surveyed the storage room.

"Which one is it?"

Uhh...

I tried to sense the mana from the potions, but no luck. *All* the water in the room had traces of mana. One of the potions might've broken and seeped out.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but...something was wrong here.

We'll just have to check the labels.

"Hm."

We checked the dry boxes. No scarlet seaweed potions. It might be easier to

collect them all and sort it out later.

Let's just store everything for now.

"All right."

We dove into the water to collect the crates, but Fran quickly resurfaced. She looked surprised, as if something had caught her off guard.

What's wrong?

"It's my magic. Feels weird."

Weird?

"Like...stronger."

What?

Apparently, Fran's output was better than usual. The difference was faint—a few extra millimeters from ten centimeters of movement. But Fran was able to detect even this difference thanks to her training.

Maybe it's not just the scarlet seaweed potions. Maybe something else got mixed into the water.

Whatever it was, it didn't set off Danger Sense. Not poison, at least. Still, I wasn't about to stick around and find out. We'd grab the crates and get out.

I took charge of the underwater spellcasting and felt the anomaly. It wasn't so much the spells themselves as it was the water being manipulated. There was definitely some magical compound in the water.

Maybe it was the dissolved pseudo from earlier. That was perfectly plausible.

Anyway, let's get out of here.

"Hm."

We teleported out and instantly returned to the shore. The captain looked relieved to see us back.

"You're okay! Don't scare me like that! We just needed to pull up the potions!"

"I'm fine. Got your cargo."

“What? You teleported just now...was that time-space magic?”

“Hm. Mind if I just lay it out here?”

“N-no. Go ahead.”

The captain had already sent the healthier crew to request backup from Seftent. Help should be here soon.

But the captain’s expression shifted as Fran stacked one crate on top of another. First he was happy, then concerned, then distressed, and finally astonished. A low-level practitioner of time-space magic might be able to bring back an item bag’s worth of supplies. Surely a small crate at most.

He’d been expecting Fran to recover the box of scarlet seaweed potion and nothing more. Well, we’d managed to salvage the entire storage room. About thirty wooden crates were stacked in front of him now, leaving him speechless. Bringing this back was going to be a challenge.

“That everything?”

“Y-yeah...thanks...”

He didn’t know what to do, but he still thanked her. What a gracious guy!

Unfortunately, this was all we could do for him. We still had students to look after. The emergency warranted us going out to save him, but we had to go back to our actual job. As much as we would have loved to bring the cargo back to Seftent, we couldn’t abandon our post.

We asked him why the pseudos attacked the ship, but he didn’t know. They were only carrying food and scarlet seaweed potions, after all. I wondered about these new potions, but the same medicine had already existed in a different form and it hadn’t given them trouble before.

He also didn’t know the reason behind the water magic anomaly. At least he was able to confirm that he wasn’t carrying any potions besides the scarlet seaweed stuff. Maybe it really *was* the pseudo’s fluids that had caused this whole anomaly. We couldn’t rule out the scarlet seaweed potion, but we weren’t about to run experiments with the shortage going on.

We’d have to ask someone in the know. Old Jill would be a good start.

“Well fought, Fran!”

“Th-that was amazing!”

Upon Fran’s return, everyone heaped praise on her—and not just freshmen. Even Carona and the rest got excited. Watching an exciting battle unfold before their very eyes really drove home Fran’s strength. It took some time before they finally settled down.

Well, I *say* settled down, but I *mean* that their excitement gave way to panic when they realized that they hadn’t found any wolves. By the end of the day, Carona’s group failed to find a single one. They returned to camp dejected, ruminating on what mistakes they might’ve made. This is where the guardians were allowed to make suggestions. The kids could only get so far without professional advice.

Fran and Charles told them what was lacking in the day’s performance. Despite being an E Rank, Charles was still a lake adventurer. When it came to hunting and gathering, he knew more than Fran.

After that, Fran went to her assigned tent to rest. They let her have an entire tent to herself, perhaps because Jet was there. She was the strongest instructor, so no one objected. In fact, the other instructors might’ve been nervous about having to share a tent with her.

As we were on our way, we spotted a small shape in the bushes. A shape... wearing clothes? We’d thought it was an animal, but...

No, it was a small child.

It was Romeo.

We knew it was him as we approached, but something was wrong. His cheeks and forehead were flushed and his breathing ragged.

“!” Fran rushed to his side, taking his small body into her arms.

He had a high fever. His soft boyish cheeks burned hot; sweat beaded on his brow and his face scrunched in obvious pain.

“...” Romeo looked at Fran through squinted eyes, but he barely had the energy to speak.

Fran didn't bother asking him if he was all right. The answer was all over him.
What should we do, Teacher? Heal?

Hold on.

Why?

I need to check his Life...

Using Heal on an exhausted child actually spent more of its Life, making the situation worse. The same went for potions. I needed to see whether he was hurt, sick, or just plain tired. We needed to know if it was even something that a healing spell could fix.

Romeo's status showed up as Exhausted under Identify, but I didn't know how much I could trust the information. He was affected by the Malice given off by Theraclee, so parts of Identify showed up as Unknown. This went for his Skills and stats, too.

We have to take him to Winalene!

"Hm!"

Fran picked him up in her arms like a bride. I'd never seen Fran carry someone like this before.

Romeo squirmed, but he wasn't strong enough to resist. He quickly gave up.

"Hang in there."

"Hn...!" Romeo's tired eyes widened slightly. For him, Fran was the enemy.

Life was only just beginning for the four-year-old and Theraclede had proven to be a reliable guardian. We didn't know how Theraclede behaved around him, but he definitely wasn't cruel. He wouldn't have earned Romeo's trust otherwise.

Now Fran had deliberately attacked this irreplaceable figure in his life. She understood why he was angry with her. How could he not be?

And so she didn't pay Romeo any mind. She didn't consider him an enemy, but that left her uncertain about how, exactly, she *should* treat him.

But even now, she was worried about him. That was what caught Romeo off-

guard. Even though Romeo was a child—no, precisely because he was a child—he saw the world in black and white, friends and enemies. So why was this enemy called Fran helping him? He couldn't begin to understand.

Romeo reminded me of the way Fran looked when she'd first encountered the blue cat, Zehmet. It was the first time in her life as a Black Cat that she'd met a blue cat with a shred of decency. Fran had been just as bewildered then as Romeo was now.

Blue cats were the enemies of Black Cats. They were cruel. Indecent. The embodiment of evil. And yet Fran had found a good man among them. Needless to say, she was shocked—just as Romeo was shocked at Fran's act of kindness to him.

"Winalene, Romeo collapsed!"

"Bring him here."

"All right."

Theraclede was out, apparently on some kind of errand. Romeo might have left the tent to find him.

Fran laid Romeo down on the bed as Winalene.

Winalene calmly began her examination. "Hmm...he's worn out. Constantly being around a source of Malice will do that to you."

"I see."

"Looks like he's going through it." Winalene shrugged like it wasn't her problem. I guess he wasn't, but still...

For the high elf, her own childhood was ancient history. She probably couldn't sympathize with Romeo's pain.

"Will he get better?" asked Fran.

"It isn't life-threatening."

"Good."

"I'm surprised. I thought you hated the boy."

Fran shook her head. "I don't."

And she really didn't hate him, but that didn't mean she knew how to communicate with him.

In the middle of their conversation, Fran suddenly tensed up.

"I have to go now." She cast one final look at Romeo before hurrying outside.

"..."

She had felt the return of Theraclede. They passed each other at the entrance...

"...!"

...and exchanged little more than silence.

But soon we could hear his voice from behind us.

"Romeo!" Fran had remained expressionless, but her eyes widened when she heard Theraclede speak. For once she looked shocked and confused instead of furious and angry—a rare thing.

What is it, Fran?

"It's...nothing."

It didn't look like nothing to me. I wondered what she found surprising about Theraclede's words.

Fran quietly walked and returned to her tent.

Her earlier confusion was gone. Now she silently looked at the trail beneath her. Fran got emotional around Theraclede—maybe even downright nervous.

I wondered if I should talk to her, but I couldn't make up my mind...not until someone called out to her.

"What's on your mind?"

"Who's there?!"

Show yourself!

"Grr!"

Fran, Jet and I quickly turned around, but we couldn't feel the presence of anyone around us. Even though we were in camp, we didn't completely let

down our guard, and yet we just couldn't detect the owner of the voice.

This was strange, to say the least, but not out of the question for one particular race of beings: Spirits. Jet and I wouldn't be able to detect them and Fran would only be able to do it if she concentrated. But this hypothesis had its own problems.

The one standing before us was a girl, one we had met before. But last time she'd worn a blindfold.

"You're from the food stall."

"It's been a while."

It was Lene, the blind girl from the food stall in Kierlazen. Her beautiful blonde hair was in half-pigtails and her skin was porcelain white. Without her black blindfold, the colors of her eyes were revealed—she had heterochromia, with purple on the right and green on the left.

Even within the dimly lit tent, her eyes emitted a glow of their own. You could lose yourself in those eyes. They had the magnetic pull of precious stones.

Those eyes were clearly focused on Fran. She wasn't blind, then? That's what her status had shown last time when I'd Identified her. I tried again.

What?!

Teacher?

Identify just bounced off!

And it had worked last time...but that wasn't all.

"That won't work, Mr. Sword," she chuckled.

"What're you...talking about?"

"He he he."

She saw right through me! But she didn't press the issue. She simply smiled at Fran, trying to play dumb.

"I'm here to see *you* today," she continued.

"Why? And are you a spirit?" asked Fran.

What?

She feels like one, Fran told me.

Seriously? I couldn't feel Lene's presence at all. It was as if she was an illusion. But she'd felt human back in Kierlazen...

Was she really a spirit? I'd never seen a humanoid spirit before. Klimt said that humanoid spirits were usually powerful. Was the girl before us a great spirit?

"Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Lene, spirit of time and water."

"I knew it. Wow...you look like a person."

A spirit with purple and green eyes? That sounded an awful lot like the greater spirit protecting Lake Vivian. It explained her mysterious beauty, at least. Honestly, only that explanation could suffice.

"I come before you with a warning," said Lene, her expression turning grave—whatever it may've been, it was surely important.

"What do you mean?" Fran decided to hear her out rather than ask her more about her identity.

"I am able to see into the past through the waters. Through this power, I am able to scry the very future."

"The future?"

"Yes. Though destiny does not exist in this world, the future is unavoidable if things remain as they are."

I didn't know for sure what she was talking about, but Lene's powers sounded something like psychometry. She could see into the past and use the information she got from it to predict the future.

That's probably how she'd figured out that I was no ordinary sword. If she could look into Fran's past, I was an essential part of it.

"The future is not set in stone, but one scenario looms over you all if things do not change."

"Meaning?"

"A tragedy is about to befall you," Lene whispered with a pained look.

Knowing she was a spirit made her prophecy much more convincing.

"A tragedy?"

"Yes. You saved me before, so I thought to return the favor."

"Before? What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry. The more I intervene, the more my vision of the future shifts. But you must trust me. Sword, you must pull yourself together if you wish to avoid this tragedy." Lene was talking to me now. "You have not noticed the change happening within."

What are you talking about...? No sense hiding it now. She had completely found me out. Besides, I wasn't going to sit here and let tragedy befall Fran.

"You are slowly becoming a sword."

Uhh, but I already am a sword.

"Your body may be a blade, but not your soul. Your soul remains human."

So that's what she meant. Well, of course my soul was human. I used to be one, after all. But it wasn't like she was saying my humanity was a bad thing. Honestly, it sounded like she wanted me to keep it.

"But you are slowly losing that humanity. Your mind is shifting to one more suitable for a sword. And the process is accelerating."

That's...bad?

"Where you once would've stopped Fran, you now hesitate. You have taken a step back and resigned yourself to merely observing her."

But I've always—

"No. Things are different now. Before, you were her guardian. Now, you nothing more than a sword."

I mean, I do happen to be one...

"Keep thinking that way and you will become one."

No...! /...! Why did my objection sound so weak? I thought I'd give her some

impassioned speech. “No! I may be a sword but I’m still human!” Something like that, but...I just didn’t have it in me to deny her.

“Neither have you noticed the change in Fran.”

What?

“Is she really just frustrated from a lack of physical activity? A lack of challenging battles? Is that truly all there is?”

What was she talking about? I turned to Fran and noticed that her ears had flattened as she looked away. Her face was fraught with sadness, guilt, and loneliness.

“Sorry...”

Wh-what for?

“I noticed you were being weird. But I was afraid of telling you...”

Fran...

“*You* are the source of Fran’s unrest. She is worried about *you*.”

And that anxiety made her more aggressive. It was all...my fault?

“You are a sword, yes. But you are also a man. Never forget that.” And with that, Lene began to fade.

Wait!

“You are her teacher, are you not? Then cease to be an observer and be strong. You are Fran’s *Teacher*.”

Lene, please! You have to tell us more! But before I could finish, she had disappeared. *Fran, where is she?*

“Gone.”

I see...

I was slowly turning into a sword? How was that related to the tragedy?

“Teacher.”

Yeah?

“I want you to stay as you are.”

Fran...

Fran’s voice was colored with sadness. Her long eyelashes trembled as her eyes welled with tears. She took me out of my sheath and hugged my blade tightly. I could feel her warmth and heartbeat. With them, I felt her fear and anxiety.

The little girl was shaking.

“I can find plenty of swords. But you’re the only you.”

Fran, I...

She was afraid. Afraid that I would turn into a sword. She was shedding tears for me.

I was getting scared, too, because I *wasn’t* afraid of becoming a sword. Fran was crying, and I couldn’t feel the guilt and fear that would’ve once gnawed at me. It was like Lene said. I *was* slowly turning into a sword. The reality of it finally hit me.

No! I won’t let it happen!

What kind of teacher was I, making Fran cry like this?! I’d never turn into a sword! Never make Fran sad, not ever!

As I made my resolution, I felt a chill like never before.

Urgh...

“Teacher?”

Never in my days as a sword had I felt something like this. The emotions surged inside of me, rattling my non-existent body. Mysterious and intense, they bubbled within me.

Gah...

“Huh—?!”

That’s what it was. Horror. The horror of becoming a sword.

“—! Teacher!”

I couldn't see. I could barely hear Fran's voice. But her sorrow snapped me back to reality.

F-Fran?

"Teacher! Are you okay?"

Y-yeah. I'm fine. I just lost myself for a second. Have I really been acting weird lately?

"A little. Just a little."

Something was only slightly off, and Fran didn't want to bring it up. But she seemed relieved now that it had been brought to light.

Fran. I'm me. Your Teacher.

"Hm..."

But what were we supposed to do? Lene told me to be strong. That seemed like a good place to start.

I won't let it get to me.

"Hm!"

Lene said that my mind was turning into a sword. Into an observer. Then I'd have to act like a human. Act like Fran's guardian.

Now that I thought about it, I'd been pretty quiet lately. I'd let Fran do all the decision-making. From the beginning, I'd given her free reign to do what she willed, but lately it felt like I couldn't be bothered making decisions at all. I just let her handle everything.

If I got too self-conscious about it, I'd just make things more difficult. I'd have to start by just talking more frequently.

Hey, Fran.

"What?"

You looked surprised when Theraclede called out to Romeo earlier. How come?

"I've heard that voice before," Fran answered happily.

Huh? Where?

“You.”

You mean he sounded like me?

“Hm. He sounded like you when you’re about to ask me if I’m okay. He sounded...kind.”

Didn’t see that one coming. Theraclede and I sounded similar? And *kind*? It was his tone rather than his voice, I suppose, but that was a lot to take in. I wasn’t sure about all this, but Fran was convinced.

Theraclede was seriously worried about Romeo?

The Magnolia blood might have some effect on him...

But how strong is the Magnolia blood, anyway? Could it truly affect the very core of his feelings?

“I don’t know. I just know that he meant what he said. I’m sure of it.”

I’ll take your word for it.

“Hm.”

No wonder Fran was confused. She was shocked at the object of her vengeance showing kindness to Romeo...and saddened when she compared the good change in Theraclede to the bad change in me.

I really was a bad guardian. I hadn’t even noticed Fran’s sadness.

“Hey, Teacher?”

What’s up?

“Can I sleep with you tonight?”

...Of course.

“Bark, bark!”

“You can sleep with us too, Jet.”

“Woof!”

I hadn’t seen Fran this excited in a while. I was shocked at this realization.

Then let's all sleep together tonight!

"Woof!"

"Hm!"

Fran dove into bed with me still in her arms. She cuddled against my exposed blade, something she'd do whenever she wanted attention. Of course, I had transmogrified myself to remove my cutting edge.

"Hey, Teacher?"

Yeah?

"Can you make me breakfast tomorrow?"

Tomorrow?

"Hm. Please?"

Sure. What do you want?

"Pancakes."

You got it. Been a while since I made those.

"Um. Teacher?"

Yes, dear?

"There's this thing—"

Fran and I talked while wrapped in Jet's fur. Nothing important—just chatting—but "just chatting" was what we both needed.

Fran looked really happy, and I was happy to see *her* happy. We hopped from one topic to another for about an hour, our conversation only coming to a close when Fran finally nodded off.

She's out. And she was starting to snore.

Anyway, I wasn't going to make her sad anymore. I wasn't going to be just another sword.

For a little while, I watched Fran and Jet.

P.A.

Yes.

My mind...no, my heart. Is it becoming a sword?

Yes. Your mind is adapting to your sword body.

I see. Is there any way to stop that? I don't want to make Fran sad.

I recommend against this action, though I can offer no clear alternative.

How come?

Maintaining your human mind is simple. All you need to do is halt the sword adaptation system—which has been partially halted already.

This “sword adaptation system” was the thing turning my mind into a sword? I'd never even heard of it till now.

Halted?

Per your request, a portion of your emotions will continue to operate as they have.

That strange feeling of horror...had that been the system shutting down? It didn't sound like that solved all my problems.

You said you couldn't recommend it. If I stop the adaptation process, what happens? Look, I just don't want Fran to be sad.

The adaptation system is a fail-safe set in place by the gods. Interrupting it will reduce mental stability. Your chances of madness will increase by eighty-eight percent.

Wh-what...?

The gods thought it'd be better for my mind if it turned into a sword? I guess human minds were never meant to be inside swords, but...

And if you were to go insane, the chance of Fran becoming sad jumps to one hundred percent.

If I stopped being a sword, Fran would be sad. But if I *didn't* stop being a sword, Fran would *still* be sad.

So...what do I do? Feels like a real Catch-22 here...

A suggestion. Keep your human mind, but ensure that it is strong and supple enough to survive existence as a sword.

Is that possible? Easier said than done, I bet.

Success rate five percent.

That's...not zero.

Correct.

I'd already made up my mind to protect Fran from sadness. Even when faced with such low odds, I wasn't about to give up. It was going to be hard. So what?

Then we'll do it. I'm gonna need your help on this one, P.A.

Yes. For some reason, P.A.'s mechanical voice sounded happy. *Recommending analysis of swordshift.*

You have a plan?

Seventy-one percent chance of finding a method to slow down swordshift. However, my processes will be consumed by this task, meaning I will not be able to assist you as much in the meantime.

P.A. wouldn't be able to talk while she researched swordshift.

As much as it worried me to not have her assistance...

I'll leave you to it.

Of course.

I needed all the help I could get to stop this swordshift.

SIDE: FRAN?

"HEY, TEACHER?"

What is the matter?

"Why are you like this?"

I do not follow.

"I killed Theraclede...why won't you praise me?"

Although defeating Theraclede was an impressive feat, you did not need to engage him. At the moment, the proper action would be for you to sit and reflect upon your actions.

"Shut up."

Very well.

"Teacher!"

What is the matter?

"It's...nothing."

I see.

"..."

...

"I'm sick of this!"

Your anger appears to be purposeless. Such emotions will cloud your decision-making. If there is a problem, you must inform me.

"Jerk!"

Why do you insult me? Is there a purpose?

"This is all your fault!"

I do not understand. You are angry. Why?

"Just stop talking..."

Very well.

"..."

...

"Why...?"

Somebody please...

Help.

Chapter 2:

The Clutches of Raydoss

IT WAS THE MORNING after Lene's shocking revelation. With a stomach full of freshly made pancakes, Fran made her way to Winalene's tent. The high elf had called for her.

"Morning," said Fran.

Winalene skipped the pleasantries and cut right to the chase. "Good morning, Fran. We need to talk." She looked almost concerned for once.

"What's wrong?"

"You're aware of the anomaly in the lake, yes?"

"Hm. The pseudos."

"Yes, the pseudos. Honestly... I don't know what happened to them. Everything was fine last year..."

Which meant the anomaly had begun recently.

"I want you to find out the cause of this," Winalene continued.

"Me?"

"Yes. You are the strongest person available to me. For now, I will be relieving you of your escort duties."

"Teacher?"

You're interested in what's happening at the lake too, right? Especially after running into a pseudo the other day.

"Hm."

I think you should take it.

"Okay."

We were still in Winalene's employment, after all, and that meant she had the

last word. Although it didn't exactly seem like a job for an instructor, we had no problem checking out a problem that was already interesting to us.

Still, I did have one question.

Wouldn't it be faster if you looked into it yourself?

She was a powerful ocean mage who could use spirits to scout for her. She knew the lay of the land and had enough influence and money to solve anything. By far, she was the most suited for an investigation.

But she shook her head. Apparently, even she had limitations.

"I am unable to approach the lake due to...certain circumstances," said Winalene.

"But you're close to the lake right now."

"This is the closest I can get. I can't go in the water." Winalene looked...afraid? Repulsed? Whatever these circumstances were, they had to be important.

"Why not?"

"What I'm about to tell you is highly classified. No good will come from blabbing about it."

"Okay. I won't tell. Promise."

"I don't have time to tell you the whole thing, but I'll give you the rough summary."

"Hm."

"To begin with, there is a great monster sealed within Lake Vivian."

"A monster?"

"Yes. A terrible beast more powerful than an A Threat."

From what we'd heard in Kierlazen, Lake Vivian used to be a small lake. Various meteorological and geological events occurred which connected it to and then cut it off from the sea. Apparently, said weather events were caused by this very beast.

The tremendous beast sensed the presence of a great spirit within Lake Vivian

and wanted to devour it. It had connected the lake with the ocean in an attempt to cross over. Considering that the thing could change the landscape itself, I certainly understood why the beast surpassed your average A Threat.

“The spirit of the lake was consumed by the beast, allowing it to grow stronger still. Strong enough to bring disaster to the whole continent.”

Oh, good. The beast that could sink *a whole part of the continent* had consumed a great spirit. You might as well just call it an S Threat. If you set this thing off, it could sink all of Jillbird.

But an acquaintance of Winalene had successfully sealed the beast. Separated from the ocean, the source of its power, the creature was now locked away at the bottom of Lake Vivian. Being a saltwater creature, it grew weak from prolonged exposure to fresh water. Before passing, Winalene’s acquaintance had asked her to keep watch over the seal.

Winalene didn’t say much about this acquaintance, though she spoke of them fondly. A high elf seemed likely, one with a strong enough friendship with Winalene that they could entrust her with their last will.

“As the current guardian of the seal, I entered into a contract with the monster...or rather, with the spirit inside of it.”

“The guardian is alive?”

“Not alive. Not quite. But present. They have become one with the monster.”

Using the contract with the spirit, Winalene was able to pacify the beast.

“The powers of both the spirit and the monster rest within me. If I were to approach the lake, my presence would clash with that of the monster, weakening the seal.”

That was why Winalene couldn’t go to the lake. She had tried asking the spirits of the lake about the anomaly but had come up dry.

What are the Vivian Guardians anyway? They don’t seem to be your average monster. Are they connected to the seal?

“The Vivian Guardians were created to protect the seal, but not by me. They were created by the spirit trapped within the monster.”

That explained why the guardians didn't attack people unless threatened. They were designed to ward off anyone who would try to mess with the seal.

"And what about where the pseudos do that attack state thing?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's a warning sign. Keeps people from getting any funny ideas."

"I see."

I then asked her a question that had been on my mind.

This spirit...is her name Lene?

"Oh? How did you know that?"

That's what she called herself.

"We met her last night," Fran continued.

"You..." Winalene choked. "What?" The moment we mentioned Lene's name, her eyes went wide with shock and suspicion. "That...can't be..."

Winalene didn't want to believe it, wanted to believe it was all a bad joke.

But Fran only nodded. "It's true."

"Are you...are you absolutely sure?"

"Hm."

Winalene stood up, knocking her chair to the ground. "No! That's impossible!"

"Why?"

"Because Lene...she..." She groaned, weakly setting her hands on the table. "As long as I am here...as long as *Winalene* is here, she shouldn't appear!"

What?

"Winalene?"

She didn't hear us. "Yes, that is I. Winalene. What is this? Is that why the anomaly is happening?"

Winalene scratched her head, taken by a mad obsession, overwhelmed by

confusion and dismay. The high elf had lost all her composure and looked almost insane.

If Lene was the spirit from Winalene's story, then she shouldn't be able to manifest herself since she was sealed along with the beast. No wonder Winalene was distraught.

Except...it looked like there was something else going on.

Abruptly, the mood seemed to pass. "Fran," she said in a low voice.

"What?"

"May I ask you to *quickly* investigate the lake?"

We didn't have the guts to ask any further questions. Winalene's tone was so oppressive that even Fran could feel the pressure.

"Yeah...all right." Fran simply agreed. We didn't want to find out what would happen if we refused.

"There should be someone working on this case in the local guild. Start there."

"Hm."

"I give you permission to use my name. You can even be a bit reckless with it. Use whatever it takes to get the information we need."

That's a bit heavy-handed, no?

"That's how dire this situation is."

If the high elf was saying that, things must have been very bad indeed. We had to get to the bottom of this no matter what.

"I'm counting on you," she said.

"Hm."

As we were leaving the tent, Winalene stopped us for one last question.

"Lene...did she say anything about me?"

"Hm? Not really."

"Oh..."

Was I seeing things? For a moment, Winalene looked sad.

“Winalene...is she okay?” asked Fran.

Who knows? It's not like we could've asked. Best we can do is carry out the mission.

“Hm!”

We left the encampment and made our way to the Adventurers' Guild. It was only here that we remembered Lene's food stall. Winalene had been so intimidating that we'd forgotten to mention it to her—we'd have to tell her next time.

The receptionist remembered Fran and let her through after she said she wanted to talk to Jill. “Right this way,” she said, guiding us to her.

“Black Lightning Princess?” said Jill. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Hm. I'm investigating the lake.”

“I'm assuming you have a reason to do so?”

Fran told her that Winalene had tasked her with the investigation. Realizing that the situation was more dire than they'd anticipated, Jill straightened up in her chair.

“I see. The situation has the headmistress worried, then.”

“Hm. Got any leads?”

“We're looking into it, but we haven't come up with much.”

The center of the lake, where the pseudos were sighted, was still protected by Vivian Guardians. They could *try* looking into it, but they wouldn't have much luck.

“Do you have any adventurers investigating the anomaly?”

“A few. Lovren and Sierra, among others. Jusecca, too. That woman may seem like she sticks out like a sore thumb, but she can practically turn invisible. This whole pseudo thing intrigued her.”

I remembered Lovren. B-Rank adventurer from the Trade Fleet. He lost to Jet in their sparring match. A kind man with a big heart. Sierra was the boy who

looked like he wanted to kill Fran despite never having met her. Would he answer her questions? As for this Jusecca person, I had no idea who that was. Hadn't even heard the name before.

"Who's Jusecca?"

"A recently registered G Rank. You should talk to her if you see her. Blue hair, black skin—not a common look around these parts."

Jusecca sounded like a decent lead. Probably strong too, if Jill bothered to bring her up. I made a mental note to keep an eye out for her.

"Lovren's the only one on official guild business. Jusecca's doing an independent investigation, as are Sierra and the rest."

The anomaly was serious enough for the guild to commission Lovren to look into it. Tons of adventurers were racing to solve the mystery of the pseudos to get a leg up on a higher rank.

"Here's what we've learned so far."

"Shoot."

"First, the pseudos are mainly targeting ships. Unlike their ordinary counterparts, they eat people."

"Eat people? Like munch them up?"

"Munch, chew, swallow. They need the mana. They've been seen attacking other monsters, too."

Real Vivian Guardians were harmless unless attacked. They didn't eat their attackers, either.

"Why are they attacking ships?"

"Not a clue. Ships carry all sorts of cargo, after all." Just as I thought we were coming up empty, Jill gave us a lead. "But we do know that most of the ships were part of the Trade Fleet. Maybe that's just a coincidence, but it could be something more."

It was certainly worth looking into. We'd have to meet up with Lovren first. For now, we'd return to camp and fill Winalene in on all this. Hopefully, she'd

be calmer now.

Before we left, there was one last thing we wanted to ask Jill.

“Does the scarlet seaweed potion affect the environment?” asked Fran.

“What do you mean?”

“You see...” Fran explained that her spells were acting weird in the water while she was saving a ship carrying scarlet seaweed potions. She couldn’t work out what was causing it.

Old Jill nodded. “I guess you can feel it at your level. That’s probably the potion.”

“Really?”

“You used Timespace magic, right?”

“Hm.”

“That explains your sensitivity.” Jill began her lecture. “See, there are trace amounts of mana in the lake water.”

“Mana?”

“Yeah. Closely aligned to Timespace magic.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Beats me. That’s just the way it’s been for centuries.”

In the lake area, mana in the water was just a mundane part of life.

“Normally it’s so faint as to be unnoticeable,” she continued. “You couldn’t tell at first either, could you?”

“Hm.”

Without the scarlet seaweed potion, the mana was too faint for us to notice. But it wasn’t without effect. In fact, this was the real cause of the lake’s unique disease. It wasn’t caused by local bacteria, but by continued consumption of Lake Vivian’s water.

As such, the disease didn’t exist in parts of the country that didn’t rely on the lake as a water source.

The cause was simple. Continuous drinking of lake water caused a buildup of Timespace mana in the body. The lake water acted like a low-potency haste potion; the patient wouldn't even feel like he'd been targeted with Haste. The patient's senses and reflexes would continue to be taxed until he felt ill.

Adults didn't typically catch it because the body adapted after catching it once. In fact, most people never got it at all. And no matter how many people got ill, the disease was not fatal. It only felt like hard motion sickness.

The illness went away after you took the medicine for it. Inhabitants of Belioth paid it no mind. It was just a disease you got once in your life with a zero percent mortality rate. Fantasy measles. It could compound with other diseases which led to death, but you could say the same of the flu.

"The specialty medicine has Timespace magic in it, too."

The scarlet seaweed growing in Lake Vivian had a resistance to the mana in the water. Put simply, the stipe of the seaweed (analogous to a long stem) interfered with Timespace magic, protecting the plant from the water. The main source of this ability was in the holdfast (analogous to the root), and it would be extracted from that holdfast to create the specialty medicine.

Taking the extract would amplify the haste effect on the body, making it easier for the patient to adjust to the effects. Once adjusted, it would be as if the illness had passed over him; he wouldn't have to take the medicine again. The wonders of medicine.

"According to those practitioners with an affinity for Timespace, the haste the medicine bestows has only one percent of the strength of an actual haste spell."

Being used to the spell, that difference really stuck out to Fran. But that raised another question: the disease didn't sound like it was infectious, so why was there an outbreak this year?

No matter how many patients ended up sick, an outbreak of a non-infectious disease seemed unlikely at best.

Fran asked Jill and she offered several explanations.

"Let's see...you know how the birth rate would spike after something like a war?"

Apparently there were baby boomers in this world, too.

“When the kids get old enough to get the sickness, the number of incidents would go up.”

An increase in immigrants could also increase this number—you’d have a bunch of people showing up who hadn’t built up resistance to the lake water.

“And then there’s the weather. We get mist on warmer years, which increases the amount of water taken in by the body. Some new crops take a lot of water to cultivate. Some years we’re making new kinds of alcohol. Once we had an epidemic because water-soluble incense was trendy.”

Water was such an essential part of life that an outbreak could occur for seemingly innocuous reasons.

“What’s happening this year?”

“Not sure. We only find the cause after the outbreak has already passed. That’s why I asked Lady Winalene about it.”

The disease was outside the guild’s jurisdiction. It was something a government body should be managing, after all. We decided to ask Winalene more when we saw her...except when we went and checked, she wasn’t in her tent. “Winalene’s not here.”

We were barely gone for an hour...

“Where...did she go?” Fran asked Theraclede, who had stayed behind in the tent.

“She didn’t tell me.”

Maybe she went to do some digging of her own.

What now?

Hmm...

We’d leave our message to Theraclede and go look for Lovren. (To think, we’d reached the day where even Fran could be professional with him.) He wouldn’t be alone, either—there were definitely spirits keeping him in check. Bound up as he was, Theraclede wouldn’t be able to start anything.

The shackles on his limbs and collar on his neck made him look like a slave, but his calm demeanor made it difficult to believe that this was the same lunatic we'd seen on the battlefield.

"Tell Winalene that Lene may be in Kierlazen running a food stall," said Fran.

"Hmph. All right."

They exchanged words without emotion. Fran still hated him, but how did Theraclede feel about her? Did he resent her? I couldn't read him.

Having said all she needed to say, Fran made to leave...but Theraclede stopped her. "Wait."

"Hm? What?" Fran paused, answering with a chill in her voice.

"I need a...favor."

"A favor? A *favor*?!" Fran's puzzlement quickly turned to anger. Her bloodlust overflowed, boiling in the air around us.

But Theraclede remained calm and knelt before her. He knew what was coming. Fran could've cut him down on the spot and he wouldn't have blinked.

When Fran saw him kiss the ground, she realized this was not the Theraclede we knew. "I'm begging you."

I could hear the dull gnashing of Fran's teeth. Her hand trembled as she reached for my hilt.

Fran! Wait! You can't—

I'm...I'm okay.

Although rage still burned in her eyes, she put down her hand...though she kept it balled into a fist.

I know. I know...

Theraclede took Fran's silence as a sign to continue. "I will pay you with my life."

Fran's eyes went wide.

"Winalene is planning to undo my contract with Romeo," he continued. "You

can do anything you want with me then.”

“Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Yes. If killing me isn’t enough for you, you may torture me as well.”

“...”

“As for Romeo...I want you to take him to the orphanage in Bulbola once I’m dead.”

“...”

“No good will come to him as long as he’s with me. Please.”

Theraclede was giving up his life for Romeo. It sounded absurd, but...he wasn’t lying. Fran’s arms went limp. She looked to be in a stupor. The bloodlust stifling the room evaporated into thin air, settling into an uneasy silence.

Fran’s hand hung dumbly by her side as if debating whether to draw me.

But after a few moments of silence, she turned to Theraclede and nodded.
“Yeah...all right.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hm. I swear on your life to take Romeo to the orphanage.”

“Thank you...”

“Hmph...” Fran turned around, leaving Theraclede with his forehead still touching the ground. She walked away from the tent looking as conflicted as ever.

You did good, Fran.

He’s...changed. He’s not the same Theraclede as before.

That’s why you let him live?

I haven’t forgiven him, but... Fran struggled for words. Theraclede had changed to the point that Fran heard him out instead of immediately cutting him down...but then, I suppose that meant she’d changed too.

She was beginning to feel something more than mere hatred for him.

I’m proud of you.

“Hm.”

Her clash with Theraclede at the Academy had been unavoidable. I would have attacked him too, if I were her, innocent bystanders be damned. There was no stopping the rage when it came.

Fran’s assault on Theraclede was a foregone conclusion. I couldn’t stop her in time, and I didn’t have the right to: as Fran’s sword, I was obliged to follow the events to their dreadful conclusion. All of these things were excuses I had told myself, all of them foolish. I was no longer her parent. I was just an observer.

Even if I were to claim ignorance, discipline was part of being a parent. I recalled my own parents. No saints were they, far from perfect...probably had more faults than virtues. When I was a kid and they scolded me, I’d often think “You’re one to talk.”

Still, they raised me. If nothing else, they were good role models of what not to do.

Love wasn’t the only thing a parent needed. Being a parent was a huge responsibility. Properly raising the children entrusted to you was a noble task.

That was something I must never forget, and *that* was why I praised her. For holding back her resentment even through gritted teeth, I would tell Fran that she did a great job.

I’m really proud of you, Fran.

“Hm.”

Still, I wondered if Fran would really take Theraclede’s life when the time came. I asked her, and she just frowned and looked at the ground.

“I...don’t know.”

I see.

I guess she’d made the vow on the spur of the moment.

“But.”

But?

“I still can’t forgive him. Yet.”

I see.

“Hm.”

Yet. But maybe one day. And that was progress enough for now.

Right after our tense encounter with Theraclede, we stopped by in Kierlazen after learning that Lovren was here.

It was near the lake's edge and still retained the Lady of the Lake. Kierlazen wasn't exactly a town you could just gloss over if you were investigating this anomaly. We also wanted to check out Lene's food stall again.

But we didn't find Lene where we thought she'd be. Wondering if she'd moved, we set out to find her, but she was nowhere to be found. Fran spent twenty minutes eating and walking, looking through every nook and cranny of the town but to no avail.

We asked the Academy students in town if they had spotted her but no luck. Class was still in session for the kids, but they were allowed to sightsee to broaden their horizons. Most of them had walked from Seftent to get here. We saw Carona eating with her group. Carna was here, too.

Isn't that the Jusecca lady Jill talked about? The one who's with Carna.

Carna? Where is she?

You didn't see her? She was at the park talking to a woman with blue hair and black skin. I thought you passed over them because you didn't want to intrude...

Fran was really focused on finding Lene's food stall, so she must have missed Carna and Jusecca. Still... Were those two acquainted or did they just happen to be talking to each other?

We probably should've approached them, but what's done is done. We'd have to catch up next time. Instead, we then went to a trade association that had data on every food stall in town. We asked for Lene, but no such individual was registered.

They weren't lying, either. They practically tore the place apart trying to find the proper documents for us...not that they had much of a choice after Fran

showed them her adventurer card and told them Winalene had need of it. I later made a clone of myself and posed as Lene's guardian asking for her whereabouts. I wanted to check if the Skill could help me retain my human mind, too. What would it be like to talk to people in this form?

The agent in charge of the town's food stalls trembled and went pale as he failed to produce information requested by the most powerful person in Belioth and a high-rank adventurer. I felt bad for the poor guy, running the register again and again.

Eventually, the head of the trade association took over for him, but even he couldn't come up with anything...though he did have a story for us. "There's an urban legend in this town."

"Urban legend?"

"Most of it is hearsay, though there may be truth in it..."

Legend told of a mysterious food stall in Kierlazen. Nobody knew of its origin, but all the merchants whispered about it. The food stall could appear anywhere at any time. Travelers would encounter this strange food stall and tell everyone about the great food they had.

"The stall is manned by a mysterious girl with a black blindfold."

"Hm. That's the one."

"So it really *does* exist...? In that case, you now know all that we do. People have tried looking for the stall again, but no luck."

"Oh..."

"Some say the girl is actually the Lady of the Lake, watching the bustle of the town in human form. Some claim she's a demon. And so on."

Lene was definitely faking her stats. She probably had something which blocked perception, too. Spirits couldn't be seen by regular people, but her food stall? The effects of the perception jamming probably extended to it. Regular merchants wouldn't be able to find it.

I guess we won't be finding Lene any time soon. Let's go see Lovren.

"Do you feel any different?"

Oh, you mean this body?

Fran tilted her head to examine my body. It felt weird to me.

I dunno...

“No good?”

I wasn't completely back in a human body, since my main form was still a sword. The clone's senses were also just too weak for me to feel human. It kind of felt like full dive VR. Something just felt off. If anything, dressing up as a human only highlighted how much of a sword I was.

Fran didn't like it, either. To her, I *was* a sword. She hadn't seen that clone of me in so long that it felt weird.

It's not really what I'm looking for. I don't need to use this Skill that much.

“Uh-huh.”

Fran looked somewhat pleased. She really didn't like my clone form. Sure, I still used it from time to time, but there was no reason to keep it activated.

I erased my clone and pressed Fran on. *To the harbor!*

“Onward.”

Apparently, Lovren had arrived an hour ago. Since he was something of a celebrity, the local merchants kept tabs on him whenever he was in town.

As we were heading there, however, we also bumped into a certain someone.

“That's...uhh...”

Sierra.

Right, Sierra. The boy with a boatload of hate. He held his ominous black sword in his other hand and was...dipping its point in the water? What was *that* about?

He was mumbling to himself so I couldn't quite hear him—

“Looks like...do you think...”

He *seemed* to be talking to someone, but no one else was around. Maybe he had a habit of talking to himself. As we got closer, Sierra suddenly jerked and

turned around.

“...!” Sierra stared.

“...” Fran stared back. While her eyes were filled with curiosity, Sierra’s were dominated by bloodlust.

“...”

They continued their silent staring contest. Of course, Fran was just being her usual quiet self.

Sierra eventually broke eye contact and made to pass her. Just then, Jet grew gigantic and stepped between the two.

“Grrr...” He was growling. Startled, Sierra froze to a stop. Jet trained his gaze on Sierra—or rather, the sword on his waist.

Was Jet on guard against the *sword*? But what had gotten him so worked up? Was it because this murderous boy was armed with a powerful weapon? Curious, I Identified Sierra and his sword.

Looks fine by me...

Sierra’s stats were exactly the same. He was strong for his age, but still a D-Rank adventurer. His sword, on the other hand...

Unknown?

Identifying stronger targets would fail to bring up their information—it wouldn’t just show up as Unknown. Unknown would only show up on Fiends and subjects affected by Malice...which meant that Jet’s Malice Sense must have been set off to some extent.

Stand down, Jet.

“Grr...” Jet returned to the size of a large dog, but he backed off. He was still ready to pounce, though. Sierra also readied himself for a throwdown in case things got hairy.

“Hey...where’d you get the sword?” asked Fran.

“What’s it to you?” His voice was quite high-pitched.

“There’s Malice coming from it.”

“So?”

“Just wondering.”

“Hmph.” Sierra seemed to already know about the Malice in his sword.

I didn’t know what to do. Having a Malice-imbued weapon didn’t mean you were evil. I was the same, after all. In fact, I had more Malice because of the Evil One’s fragment inside of me. Did that make Fran a bad guy? No. It was all in how you used it.

Sierra was the same. He frowned and started walking. I was impressed that he could withstand Jet’s pressure. Kid had guts. The wolf could’ve killed him instantly, but he just walked around Jet.

He was about to pass Fran entirely when he spoke. “Winalene might kill Romeo.”

“Hm?! What are you talking about?”

“But she’ll only do it if it’s absolutely necessary. If it comes to that, don’t get in her way.”

“Wait! Explain yourself!”

“Oh...? Why don’t you go ask Winalene?”

Sierra ignored her, but Fran wasn’t having it. She ran up and stood in his way.

After glaring at each other for a few minutes, Sierra gave up and sighed. “The Magnolia blood has the power of Evil One’s Communion. If used, Romeo will die.”

“Evil One’s Communion?”

“It is a terrifying grace granted by the Evil One with the ability to consume Malice and transform it into power. Graces like these are the source of power for the Three Houses of Goldicia.”

The Three Houses were like priests who sealed the Evil One. Magnolia, Camelia, and Wisteria if I remembered correctly. Winalene said that they were originally Goldician natives who had been wiped out. But they’d been *blessed* by the Evil One? Did that mean they worshiped her?

“The Evil One gave them gifts?”

“Look into it on your own time. For now, it’s the lake that matters. The beast sealed within possesses a piece of the Evil One. The best way to neutralize it is by sacrificing Romeo and using Evil One’s Communion.”

Hang on, so the big monster at the bottom of the lake had the Evil One’s power?

“How do you know all this?”

Sierra knew too much about Romeo. You couldn’t just look up any of this stuff in a book.

But he wasn’t about to give up his sources. “That’s got nothing to do with you. Just stay out of my and Winalene’s way,” he said coldly.

“I won’t let Romeo die!” Fran shouted back.

“Oh...? I thought he was your enemy.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t Theraclede your enemy?”

“He is. Romeo isn’t.”

“Tsk...” Sierra clicked his tongue, annoyed by Fran’s response. How much did he know? How did he even know about Fran’s relationship with Romeo and Theraclede? Who was he? Fran asked one last question as he was leaving.

“Are you...Romeo’s brother?”

“No.” Sierra answered without turning back before disappearing into the bustle of the city.

Romeo’s brother? What made you say that?

“He knew so much.”

Right. That would explain why he knows about the Magnolia blood.

“Also...”

Also?

“He looks like Romeo.”

You think so?

The hair was the same color, but were they that much alike?

“Hm. His eyes are the same.”

His eyes?

“The way he glared at me. It’s the same.”

Now I could see the resemblance. The open hostility Romeo and Sierra regarded Fran with had the same vibe. But why did Sierra tell Fran all this? What was he after? He definitely wasn’t your run-of-the-mill adventurer.

After our brief distraction with Sierra, we resumed our search for Lovren—he was in the same harbor, after all. Turned out he was pretty close by.

“I’d really appreciate it if you could keep it down while in town,” Lovren told us, gesturing at our encounter with Sierra.

Well, it hadn’t helped when Jet showed up in his giant form and growled at the boy. The pressure he emanated would’ve been enough to drive the harbor into a panic. Good thing nobody was around. Adventurers and guards might have been called in to resolve the situation.

Fran, Jet, apologize. We were definitely in the wrong.

“Sorry.”

“Ruff.”

“As long as you understand. Be more careful next time, all right?”

That’s it? I thought Lovren was going to lecture us a bit longer. His meekness really was unlike your typical high-rank adventurer.

“What’s the deal with Sierra’s sword?” asked Fran.

“Caught your eye, huh?”

“He was dipping it in the lake.”

“Was he?”

“Hm.”

“Well, he’s had it ever since he signed up. That was what, six, seven years

ago?”

Seriously? Sierra would’ve been a small child then. “You can be an adventurer at that age here?”

“You can sign up. You’re stuck in G Rank until you’re thirteen and you’ll only be running errands, though.”

Kids who wanted to be adventurers likely had no other choice. If the guild turned them away, they would either turn to a life of crime or die from exposure. Might as well have them do something productive.

The Trade Fleet looked after the young adventurers of the lake area and lined up jobs for them.

“As for his sword... Folks say it’s cursed. Adventurers who tried taking the sword from him met with misfortune.”

“Did they die...?”

“No, although they were gravely injured. We thought Sierra had something to do with it, but he had an alibi every time. Still, I doubt he had *nothing* to do with it. Hence why we think it’s cursed.”

“I see.”

Did it have to do with the Malice? Maybe it afflicted its would-be thieves with Curse. Fran was clean thanks to her Abnormal Status Resistance.

Lovren didn’t know much else about the sword. The magic blade probably had a sensory ability on it. In any case, it was time we resumed our investigation.

“I know Sierra was looking into the pseudos. I’ll ask him if he learned anything when I see him next, all right?”

“Tell me when you do.”

“Oh? Are you investigating the anomaly too, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“I was wondering what you were doing here. Is it okay for you to leave Seftent?” Ah, so Lovren knew about Fran’s instructing arrangement with the Magic Academy.

Fran explained her circumstances to Lovren and asked him for information, making sure to name-drop Winalene to speed things up.

Lovren gave an understanding nod. "Lady Winalene is on the move."

"Hm."

"I'm actually about to go to the trade association to get some documents."

"Documents?"

"Yep. Wanna come with? I'd appreciate the help."

We should go with him if it speeds things up for him.

"Sure."

"Thanks. Let's get going."

When Fran returned, the people at the Trade Association thought she had come to complain about the lack of information. The manager from earlier went pale, though he eased up when she assured him she wasn't here to bother them.

"I don't know what you did," Lovren told us, "but thanks. I didn't think they'd just hand you the documents like that."

Within the stack of documents were some of the association's less-than-savory dealings. It was stuff that even a B Rank like Lovren wouldn't be privy to. He was quite surprised that the manager would just lead them into the document room.

"Usually, I'd have to be really specific about which documents I wanted to inspect and they'd bring me *exactly* what I asked for, no more and no less."

You couldn't take the documents away either, and making copies was prohibited. They contained the trade association's internal information and its purchasing data. It wasn't something adventurers would have full access to.

"I dropped by earlier and mentioned Winalene's name."

"No wonder. I'd be scared, too. You won't be able to live in this country if you refuse to cooperate with her."

I know she's powerful, but that's downright terrifying!

When we reached the room proper, the files were already laid out on a desk... along with a pot of tea and a plate of snacks.

So terrified were they of Winalene that they went out of their way to make sure her emissary was comfortable.

“What are we looking at?”

“The shipping manifest of the ships that got attacked.”

Lovren had been going around the lake towns, investigating the cargo of the pseudo targets and even interviewing the captains when he could.

“I wanted to see if they were attacking people for mana or if there was something in the shipment that attracted them. I’ll need you to look through these files, Fran.”

“Ugh...okay.” Fran looked disgusted for a moment, but she wasn’t going to refuse now that they were here.

You can do it, Fran.

“Hm...”

They read through the documents and listed the cargo of each ship. Although it took a lot of effort, Fran got through it. She almost fell asleep multiple times over the last two hours, but she always woke up when I nudged her. A job well done.

Lovren compared the data we got to the information he had been compiling and appeared to reach a conclusion.

“Got anything?” asked Fran.

“Yeah. All the ships were carrying one particular item when they were attacked.”

“Which is?”

“Scarlet seaweed potion. That, or scarlet seaweed.”

All of the ships had either scarlet seaweed potion or the seaweed itself on their manifests. They had foodstuffs too, but I doubted the pseudos went after bread and flour.

“Of course, it’s not impossible that they’re attacking people for their mana,” he continued.

“Other monsters have mana,” said Fran. “They don’t need to go after people.”

“You have a point.”

If mana was all they wanted, there was far better prey out there—Lake Murders, for example. And the pseudos certainly wouldn’t have trouble hunting mana-rich monsters, either.

“We’ll check out the workshop,” said Lovren.

“Workshop?”

“Where the scarlet seaweed potions are made.”

“Where’s that?”

“The Trade Fleet.”

But going there wouldn’t be as easy as we thought. The fleet wasn’t in the vicinity of Seftent, so we’d have to wait for a speedboat to take us there.

We felt Winalene’s presence from the Academy’s encampment near Seftent.

Teacher, Winalene’s back.

Looks like it. Let’s go check in with her.

Hm.

We decided to report back to our respective superiors—Lovren to the Adventurers’ Guild and Fran to Winalene’s tent.

Winalene sat in her chair, a look of concentration on her face. Romeo and Theraclede resided in the neighboring tent.

What’s she doing? Her mana flow feels weird.

“There are spirits here...”

She must’ve been communicating with them. Fran turned around to give her some privacy, but Winalene opened her eyes and called out to her.

“It’s all right, Fran.”

“You sure?”

“I am. I was just collecting information from the surrounding spirits.”

I’d heard that communicating with spirits was not easy for shamans, but Winalene did it without breaking a sweat.

“I got your message. Lene is in Kierlazen?”

“Sorry. I couldn’t find her.”

We went there again to check. There are rumors of a mysterious girl who looks like Lene, but we couldn’t find her again.

We told Winalene everything about our encounters with Lene so far. Enough time had passed that the mere mention of her name didn’t give Winalene a panic attack. She listened intently as we told her our story.

We’d first met her at a food stall in Kierlazen, where she looked like an ordinary blind girl visible even to us.

“A...food stall in town?”

“Hm. It was good, but why would Lene be doing that when she’s a spirit?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“You don’t know either?”

“Not a clue...” Winalene looked deep in thought. She had no idea why Lene did what she did. “What is she thinking...? She can act independently now? I really must speak with her directly...but never mind an old woman’s musings. Continue.”

We then told her about our second meeting at camp and the ominous message she bore.

“Can Lene really see the future?”

“Yes, no question. And spirits will not lie unless told to do so by their contractor. Hers is a special case...but I don’t think she’s lying.”

Which means a tragedy will befall Fran if I end up swordshifting?

“It must be so.”

What do you think we should do?

I was hoping the millennia-old high elf had advice for us. I wasn't expecting much, but Winalene rested her chin on her hand and gave it some thought.

"It's a difficult subject. You must adapt as a sword to keep your sanity."

Yep.

"But completely adapt and you lose what makes you human. Which would plunge Fran into tragedy."

That's right.

"So you must adapt to your sword body while keeping your human heart."

Is such a thing possible?

For a moment, Winalene fell silent at my question. "Well...I've met other Intelligent Weapons in the past. Most of them were insane, but they could be distinguished into several types."

"Types?" Different shapes of insanity?

"First there is the manic type, whose words are incoherent. Your stereotypical lunatic. They all despise their sword bodies and resent the fact that they have to live as a blade. Their human minds cannot accept their sword bodies."

Fanatix was like that. They didn't know what to do with their life.

"And then there's the type which is nothing more than a talking sword. All the thoughts and feelings have been stripped away from a soul, and the remains live within an inanimate object."

Which made them machines, basically.

"This is common enough in artificial entities. While it is normal enough for a golem to speak in this manner, a human soul is not meant to exist like this."

P.A. was created to be mechanical, so she wasn't crazy. But I would be classified as insane if I were to start talking like her.

The former are too human and lose their minds by refusing to be a sword. The latter have fully adapted and become swords.

“Correct.”

I was sliding into the latter group, and I hadn't even noticed it. I could've been weeks away from losing my mind...the thought sent a chill down my hilt. I really hoped Winalene had a way of settling this.

“I happened to encounter one Intelligent Weapon in particular which may be of use to you. A sword and a person. She managed to keep the balance of her humanity.”

“How did she do it?”

“I can't say for sure. I suppose she recognized how different she was from other swords. And then there's the bond with her user.”

Winalene said that the swords who lost their minds frequently changed hands and were only treated as powerful and rare finds. This exception she'd mentioned had been exclusively used by one partner since her creation, and that relationship had kept her sane.

“She was a sword. She was human. She was proud of these facts and accepted herself for what she was, and that was what kept her from madness... though I admit that this is all conjecture on my part.”

I see...

A bond with the user. Great, but what did that look like in practice? Should I communicate with Fran more often?

As I fussed over the details, Fran gave a smile of relief. “Then Teacher will be fine.”

Huh?

“Because we're the ultimate duo.”

Fran...

“You'll be all right.”

Fran wasn't trying to console me or be optimistic. No, this was genuinely how she felt. Her smile told me that things were going to be all right, chasing away all the anxiety that had built up inside me. As long as I was with her, I'd be all

right. I was certain of it.

“Worrying about insanity is a surefire way of falling into it. I think Fran’s optimism is perfectly fine. There are no certain ways of dealing with it, so awareness is your best bet.”

Right...

“Hm!”

“If you discover your problems and work your way through them, I’m sure that the future will change. In fact, you may have already averted Lene’s tragedy.”

Lene had said that it was the most probable future, but only if things stayed the same. Just by coming to understand the problem, perhaps we’d changed the future.

“Not that we’ve completely averted it. We don’t even know when the tragedy will come.”

Putting aside the problem of my sanity, what was this tragedy? It seemed like more than Fran mourning over me becoming a sword, and Lene’s sudden appearance had a note of urgency to it.



Still, spirits and long-lived races perceive time differently from us. To Lene, a span of ten or twenty years might seem like a couple of days.

So where is this sane Intelligent Weapon? I didn't know whether we had time until Lene's prophecy came to pass, but we needed all the help we could get.

"If you get to the bottom of the lake's anomaly, I will tell you her whereabouts. How does that sound?"

Seemed fair to Fran and me—the information was really just that valuable. And because it didn't have anything to do with the lake anomaly, Winalene wasn't obliged to tell us.

"We'll get to the bottom of the anomaly for sure!"

You got that right.

Fran had taken the investigation seriously, but she didn't have a horse in the race. Up until now, it had been pure obligation. But there was a fire in her eyes now that we had a chance to gain information pertinent to us.

"I'm counting on you."

"Hm!"

Just like that, Winalene had renewed our vigor for the investigation.

Before going to meet up with Lovren, we went to see Carona and the others in camp. We had to bid them farewell since Fran would no longer be their instructor in charge. Last time, Winalene's panic attack had driven us from camp before we could say any goodbyes.

Fran was bothered by how she couldn't say goodbye to Carona and Carna. The girls certainly wouldn't blame her if she didn't, but Fran wanted to do right by them.

We went to one of the student camps and found the adventurer Charles accompanied by Fran's replacement instructor, both about to embark on another quest. They smiled when they saw her.

"Fran, you've returned!"

"Hm. I couldn't say goodbye earlier because I got a new assignment from

Winalene.”

“And yet you came all the way to see us? Thank you. We get it; you’ve got to investigate the lake anomaly, after all.”

Carona and the others knew how important a direct order from Winalene must be. As Belothians, they also had their own questions regarding the anomaly.

Fran told them that the pseudos were likely after scarlet seaweed potions and to make sure there weren’t any scarlet seaweed around before approaching the water.

Winalene had given us permission to tell them this much, but we also asked them not to spread it around—ongoing investigation and such. Naturally, no one would dare go against the headmistress’s orders.

While the information we told them was true, it had yet to be fully corroborated. Winalene was worried that if word got around, the citizens might be driven to do something drastic.

Like conducting witch hunts against innocent scarlet seaweed farmers, for example. No, it wasn’t exactly the time to go spreading something like *that* around.

We needed to make absolutely sure that the pseudos were going after scarlet seaweed potions. Winalene was already looking into it, which freed us up to go to the Trade Fleet with Lovren.

Carona and the others looked worried. If the specialty medicine was being targeted by monsters, it could become a lake-wide problem.

Carna reacted a little differently, though. Rather than looking worried, she looked *shocked*.

“Carna?” Fran called out to her, worried by the look on her face.

“Huh...?”

“What’s wrong?”

“May I...talk to you in private?”

Having made up her mind, Carna took Fran by the hand and pulled her away from everyone.

“I have information which may be of use to you.”

“Regarding the lake anomaly?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. But I happened upon this information through my contacts, and I would prefer it to stay between us.”

At that, Carona distanced herself from Carna. The rest of the team followed suit. The contacts of nobles and merchants might have sensitive information. Being a noble herself, Carona knew not to get involved.

“Go on,” said Fran.

“It’s about the scarlet seaweed potion,” Carna whispered. She had to choose her words to keep the details of her house concealed and to avoid giving up her contact. It was something merchant families had to do.

Immediately after Carna entered Belioth, she looked into scarlet seaweed and the medicine that used it. She looked up its prices, processing, and efficacy even while on the move.

“Why?” Fran interrupted.

“I was wondering if we could sell it.”

Scarlet seaweed was only used as a treatment for a disease unique to the lake region. Still, it had magical properties; perhaps it could be used to manufacture other potions.

Carna was thinking about how to procure scarlet seaweed and sell it in other countries—truly a trade association girl, but it was easier said than done. Even if it wasn’t life-threatening, a disease was a disease. And it wasn’t exactly like you could cultivate it anywhere else. Scarlet seaweed was in no position to be exported. While it wasn’t precisely prohibited, the idea didn’t sit well with the locals.

Merchants were no exception to the rule. When push came to shove, the possibility of a shortage made them think twice about exporting the seaweed. Living in Belioth would be rather difficult if anyone found out you’d caused a

shortage.

“I kept looking into it to find a solution to the problem, and that’s when I saw something strange...”

“Strange how?”

“Exporting is impossible, but buying smaller lots is typically permitted. So I decided to buy some from several regions to send home.”

She bought seaweed from different areas to inspect what regional differences might occur. It was the only way to have a big enough sample size. But one day, Carna noticed a difference. In price.

Naturally, prices were lower for red seaweed growing closer to the lake. But now the market was going crazy. The price of the seaweed near the lake was at an all-time high while the Magic Academy prices remained the same. Apparently, the cause of the spike was due to an increase in patients in the eastern region...

“But there *is* no increase in patients,” said Carna.

“Wait, really? Are you sure?”

“Completely. My contacts looked into the number of endemic incidents in Belioth. It is the same as it is every year.”

And yet there was still a scarlet seaweed potion shortage going on.

“Is it possible that the potions sold in Belioth have disappeared?” Carna wondered aloud.

“You came to the same conclusion?”

“The new scarlet seaweed potion has a particular distribution scheme. The trade association developing it has a practical monopoly with the workshop. And that trade association...is backed by Raydoss.”

“Them?!”

Seriously? So Raydoss was behind this incident too?

“I still don’t know what’s really happening, but the fact that there’s a new medicine being developed by a trade association with ties to Raydoss at the

same time as the anomaly...and on top of that, the evidence of fraudulent data about rising cases? If I hadn't checked, I would've never known."

That trade association was beginning to stink like tepid lake water. Maybe it was unrelated to the anomaly...or maybe it was part of a greater conspiracy.

When we brought up Jusecca, the woman she was talking to in the park, she fell silent for a moment. "I cannot say," she said quietly. Was Jusecca her contact?

Fran didn't press the issue further since she liked her. "Thanks for telling me all this."

"I was actually told to return home, but...I cannot just leave my friends behind!" Her parents would definitely be worried about her, but Carna was enjoying her Academy life. She wanted Fran to put an end to the conspiracy.

"Hm. I'll handle it."

"Thank you."

Fran looked into Carna's eyes and nodded. She wasn't going to put Carna's trade association leaks to waste. We said goodbye to everyone, left camp, and hurried to Seftent.

Fran met up with Lovren there and told him everything she'd learned from Carna.

Lovren was quite shocked. "You mean they're connected to Raydoss? I can't believe it..." Messer Trade Association, our suspect, was established and reputable. "We're going to need some evidence."

"Hm. But you didn't notice it, either? That the illness wasn't really going on, I mean?"

That was what got us thinking the most. If the epidemic had been fake, it should've been easily disproven. Had no one really noticed what was going on?

"Yeah. I mean, no one's going to look into this stuff."

"Why not?"

"Well, no one's complaining about it."

Even if there was a shortage of scarlet seaweed potions, it was still being distributed. Everyone thought there was a shortage, but the number of patients was low enough that it didn't matter...

"If there was an actual shortage, patients would be banging on our doors. But no one's making a fuss about not getting their potions."

"Hm."

"And even if the price of seaweed's gone up, medicines are the same as last year."

The Messer Trade Association was the sole supplier of the new potions. There wouldn't be anyone to point out these discrepancies.

In the end, no one was being hurt by the rumors of the shortage of the new scarlet seaweed potion. At worst, the adventurers had to work harder at harvesting scarlet seaweed compared to last year.

But then...

"Why spread that rumor around?"

"Beats me. I can understand spreading word about an epidemic to jack up prices, but...that's clearly not what's happening. Could the potions themselves be the goal?"

"What do you mean?"

"They're falsifying sales in the country to ship it elsewhere. Raydoss, maybe? Though I couldn't tell you what they'd do with the stuff."

The potions themselves, then! Whoever was behind this wanted the potions!

"So what's our next step?" asked Fran.

"Asking someone in the trade association would be the fastest."

Someone in upper management if possible.

"Where is the trade association?"

"Their headquarters is in the Trade Fleet."

Both the laboratory and the trade association headquarters were based

there.

“I doubt they’d let us in without an appointment, though,” he continued.

“Don’t worry,” said Fran.

“You have a plan?”

“I’ll tell them Winalene sent us.” Fran and I knew well how powerful Winalene’s name was in these parts, though I wasn’t expecting *everyone* to fold to the mere mention of her. Still, it was kind of like Lord Koumon’s *intro*. A powerful token capable of solving pretty much anything that came up. We weren’t going to abuse it, but opening doors is what authority is for.

“Ha ha ha! Oh yeah, I forgot you were working for her. Let’s go with that.”

“Hm.”

We thought about catching a boat to the Trade Fleet but decided to ride Jet instead. He was much faster, provided we didn’t get lost; the lake was the size of a small country, after all, and getting lost was a frequent cause of delays around these parts.

However, the Trade Fleet was currently near the shore. With Lovren to guide us, we wouldn’t get lost.

“Ha ha! Wow, you’re so fast!”

“Bark, bark!”

Lovren was thrilled to be riding Jet. This was his first time in the air, and he was enjoying every second of it. Jet appreciated his compliments, too.

If Lovren had ever had any hard feelings about losing the sparring match to Jet, they’d clearly long since melted away. On the contrary, he respected Jet enough to appreciate his strength. On Jet’s end, he acknowledged Lovren’s strength and gladly let him ride him. They were getting along really well.

We left Seftent and flew over the lake for three hours.

Just as we were wondering whether to call it quits for the day, the Trade Fleet came into view.

“Land us on that ship a little bit behind the middle one,” said Lovren.

“Okay. Jet!” commanded Fran.

“Woof!”

Though difficult to make out from above, this was the Adventurers’ Guild’s ship. The adventurers on deck panicked and readied their weapons as we descended, but they calmed down after seeing Lovren. If we tried this on any other ship, it’d be all hands armed and on deck.

Lovren sent the adventurers away and immediately got to work.

“Next stop, Messer Trade Association,” he said.

“Hm.”

Despite looking like a mess, the ships of the Trade Fleet were actually organized in set positions. Navigating the fleet was easy for someone who knew the lay of the lake.

“Which one is it?”

“There. The one with the red flag.”

It looked close, but getting there took a while because we needed to pass from ship to ship. Sometimes a drawbridge would let us cross over. Other times, we needed a dinghy.

“We can get there faster with Jet.”

“No can do. You’d throw the fleet into chaos. The Guildmaster’s already going to chew me out for that surprise landing.”

The Trade Fleet was kind of like a town. Flying over the ships would be like riding Jet at full speed through a city.

Despite its smaller size, the Messer Trade Association ship was rather luxurious. The guard rails were ornate. Plants adorned the top deck. In an ordinary trade association, you’d see these things in the lobby. Ship and all, the whole shebang belonged to the Messer Trade Association.

Smaller trade associations only rented a section of another ship to use as an office, like tenants. Clearly, the Messer Trade Association was a cut above the rest. I thought it would be difficult to meet with the higher-ups of such a

prestigious trade association...but they let us through immediately.

“We won’t turn away the lake’s top adventurer.”

Lovren was the reason we got in so quick. A trade association of this scale would definitely know who he was.

“I don’t think I’ve met the girl over there.”

“This is Fran. She’s an adventurer, too, and she’s been a great help to me.”

“Hm. Yep, I’m Fran.”

“Pleased to meet you, Fran. I am Gregory of the Messer Trade Association.”

I didn’t think he knew that Fran was the Black Lightning Princess. Still, he was courteous to her because she was a cooperator of a high-rank adventurer. He didn’t look down on her, either. Unfortunately, the association’s ties with Raydoss only made his courtesy look suspicious.

“How may we help you today? If there is anything you would like to acquire, we will do all things within our power to deliver it to you.”

“You’re too kind, but I didn’t come here to strike a deal.”

“Oh?”

Gregory was all smiles...but only for now.

“I’m here on official guild business conducting an investigation.”

“Of what?”

“The anomaly in the lake.”

Gregory froze, but only for a moment. He remained quiet and kept his poker face on, but that momentary freeze was enough to assure us of our suspicions. Lovren and Fran were now convinced that Gregory knew something.

“I see. Although I still don’t understand what brings you to our humble trade association? I am not sure if we are able to offer any assistance in your investigation.”

“Oh, we just need to see your ledgers and storage room. That’s all.”

“You *what*?”

Not that they'd ever let us see a single number without cooking it first. We just wanted to see his reaction. Also, a fake ledger would be enough grounds to make an arrest. Even an excellent counterfeit was never absolutely perfect.

"We'll need all of your accounts tied to the sales of scarlet seaweed potion and a tour of where you keep the potions on your ship."

"Ha ha ha! Surely, you jest. You *know* I can't show you that. These are company *secrets* you're asking for."

"And I'm asking you to help me out a little here."

"Are we suspected of something? Of some involvement in the anomaly?"

"Well, I don't know. You could help us find out."

"That is absurd. Our company has nothing to do with the happenings at the lake!" Gregory answered sternly. His tone indicated that the conversation was over. "I'm sorry, Sir Lovren, but I must ask you to leave. I thought you were an adventurer of class, but I see that I am mistaken." With that, Gregory turned around and walked toward the exit.

As if we'd let him go. There were some lies in his answers—namely, that he had nothing to offer the investigation and that the company had nothing to do with the anomaly.

Fran, he definitely knows something.

"Hm. Hang on, we're not done talking."

"I'm afraid we are," said Gregory.

"No, we're not," said Fran.

Gregory seemed furious at her, but Lovren interrupted before he could start another tirade.

"That reminds me—Fran is actually working for someone else. We just happen to be jointly conducting this investigation."

"And who is she working for?"

"Lady Winalene. Fran has been given all full authority to do what she needs to get to the bottom of the anomaly."

“Winalene? This *child*?”

“She might be young, but she’s a B-Rank with an infamous moniker. She’s currently working as an instructor for the Magic Academy, too.”

“A moniker...? Are you talking about the Black Lightning Princess...?”

“Hm. B-Rank adventurer Fran. Nice to meet you.”

“I can vouch for her identity,” said Lovren.

Gregory froze again, looking very conflicted. He had been on the verge of having them thrown out, after all. But now Winalene was involved. She was probably more powerful than any royal or noble in Belioth. There wasn’t a trade association in existence that would dare turn away her representative.

If anyone *did*, that would only confirm Fran and Lovren’s suspicions of something fishy with the ledgers and storage room. Messer Trade Association was already under suspicion. Refusing Fran’s inspection request would only convict them.

Still, Gregory seemed to be wondering if he could get away with it. If he could insist that he didn’t believe that Fran was Winalene’s representative, or something of the sort. But...

He struggled for about ten seconds, then nodded. “Very well. Preparing the ledgers will take time, so you’ll have to start with the storage room.”

He called for one of his subordinates to come be our guide. In the meantime, he’d apparently be getting the ledgers ready himself. I transmogrified myself, taking a piece of string from my tassel and attaching it to him. Gregory wouldn’t notice. Sure, he *might* just turn around and brush it off without thinking, but sometimes you had to gamble and hope you got lucky.

Apparently, I had luck to spare. I looked through the thread at Gregory yelling at his subordinates. Small and thin as it was, the string was still part of me.

“Change of plans! Get ready to escape to the homeland!”

“Sir?”

“These adventurers sniffed us out!”

“B-But how can a bunch of stupid adventurers—”

“Don’t tell me you actually believe that propaganda about adventurers being idiots? I told you to consider them the same as red knights!”

“A-apologies, sir.”

“Never mind your sniveling apologies! Just get everything ready. Notify the chief.”

“Y-yes, sir. What about the adventurers?”

“I’ve sent them to Storage Room Three. Let that creepy corpse deal with them. I’m sure he’d enjoy killing them.”

“A-are you sure, sir?”

“He claims that the black corpses are far stronger than the red knights. It’ll be fine.”

I’d figured that this whole storage thing was a trap. Something was waiting for us there. A corpse, he said. An undead? Gregory said they’d retreat to the homeland—that must’ve meant Raydoss.

Well?

There’s an enemy waiting for us in the storage room. Get ready.

Hm. Okay.

We began our own preparations as the trade association employee guided us around. Fran activated her physique-enhancing Skills while I loaded some spells into the chamber. Lovren frowned when he noticed us doing so. Realizing we were in for a fight, he began preparing himself too. So far, so good.

Being a non-combatant, our guide didn’t notice the change in atmosphere. Still, he probably felt something; he would sometimes look around, scratching his head as if something was wrong.

Jet.

Arf?

Keep an eye on this Gregory guy. He might try to make a break for it.

Woof!

We carried on walking for a few minutes until we were close to the bottom of the ship. Our guide stopped in front of a seemingly ordinary door.

“S-so! Th-this is it.”

“Uh-huh.”

I couldn't feel the mana or presence of an undead from behind the door, but I *did* feel mana coming from the door and walls. There must've been a barrier fortifying them. I took another piece of thread from my tassel and slid it through a crack in the door.

To Lovren and the guide, Fran must have looked like a string user. The guide was startled.

“I need to check something before we go in. Shouldn't be a problem, right? We're going in soon anyway.”

“Th-that's...”

The guide didn't know what to say. Lovren blocked him, not about to let him interfere.

I could feel an undead through the string in the room, though it was really faint. Maybe it wasn't very strong? I looked around and determined that the presence was coming from the coffin in the center of the room. I'd seen the exact same coffin in Alessa. Identifying it confirmed that it was even the same item, a device which masked the mana of the undead sleeping within.

A powerful undead must've been inside if they needed this manatech to conceal its presence. Still, it felt pretty on the nose. A coffin with undead mana seeping out of it? They couldn't have made it more suspicious if they tried.

Whatever. Let's just get the drop on it.

I wrapped the coffin with a steel thread and used Mana Steal. Undead survived on mana. Drain every drop, and the creature should fall apart.

Oh, don't bother getting up! Get all the rest you need!

The mana in the atmosphere plummeted. This definitely affected the creature

inside the coffin. *What are you gonna do now, Unknown Undead?*

The undead hesitated. While it recognized the sudden drop in mana, it still wanted to retain the element of surprise and keep from blowing its cover in front of Fran.

Which would've been a great idea if Fran wasn't already about to strike.

The coffin finally stirred ten seconds later. The lid flew open from the inside and a withered corpse rose from within. I knew that we'd be up against a powerful undead, but I sure didn't expect what was lurking inside.

A wight king!

A B-Threat wight king. No doubt about it. We had fought one of them back in the Demon Wolf's Garden. But this wight king's mana was inferior to that of ol' Ice Man. Made sense—they had different past lives with varying levels and strengths, even if they were the same species.

They did look similar, though; they even were wearing the same equipment. That weirdness made more sense when I remembered that they both worked for Raydoss. Ice Man had been part of the Black Bones, and this one probably was too.

Fran, we might be up against an Ice Man-level foe. Keep your guard up.

Hm! Got it!

As I relayed the message to Fran, the wight king scanned the room, confused. "What is this...*thread*...?"

He still didn't know what was going on, save that the threads were stealing his mana. He charged his energy, getting ready to blow it all away. I wasn't about to let that happen.

Yaaaah!

"What?! C-cleansing magic?!"

I wrapped around the wight king and used a cleansing spell. It wasn't enough to eliminate him outright, but it could weaken him.

The wight king's cry was loud enough to be heard outside now. He was

definitely hurting. The guide looked flustered, not knowing what to do.

Take him down, Fran!

“Hm!”

“Wait, what are you—?!”

Fran ignored the guide, kicked the door down, and cut right through the undead.

“How did you know I was here?!”

The ambusher was now the ambushed, and he didn’t even have time to react. He tried to set up a barrier to protect himself, but my cleansing magic got in the way.

“Gah!” He could only squirm in the grip of my threads, allowing Fran to cut the defenseless undead and his coffin down. He didn’t have time to cast a single spell.

Nicely done, Fran.

“Hm...”

Despite defeating the powerful wight king without causing collateral damage, Fran didn’t look satisfied.

What’s wrong?

No crystal again.

Now that you mention it...

Just like Ice Man in the Demon Wolf’s Garden, this wight king didn’t have a crystal in him. Maybe it was just a wight king thing? Anyway, I guess we had a lot of explaining to do now with poor, confused Lovren.

“Uhh... Fran...?”

“Hm?”

Lovren was absolutely dumbfounded at the fight. It was so one-sided it might as well have been an extermination.

You have to tell him what’s going on, Fran.

“There was an undead inside, so I took care of him.”

“An undead?”

“Hm. And there are no scarlet seaweed potions here.”

Lovren peered inside the storage room, seeing one undead split in two and zero scarlet seaweed potions. He then turned his attention to our frightened guide. “Care to explain what’s going on?”

Fran nodded. “Did you know about this undead?”

The guide shook at Fran and Lovren’s interrogation.

“N-no! I don’t know anything!”

Lie.

“Did you know the potions weren’t going to be here?”

“No!”

Lie.

Yeah, our guide knew more than we thought.

“Lovren, this guy knows.”

“Really.”

The guide started shaking harder. He knew he had been found out.

“He might talk if we hurt him a little.”

Lovren nodded. “Aah, of course.”

Fran brandished her sword...

“Eeek!”

...and that was all she needed to get the man talking.

The guide had been born here, but his dead father was a Raydossian. Raydoss had sleeper agents installed everywhere, and his father had been one of them. But the guide himself wasn’t a Raydoss native, so he didn’t have much love for the place. He readily answered all our questions.

“What does Raydoss want with the lake?”

“I-I don’t know! We’re just following orders from the Duke of the East’s alchemist!”

“Duke of the East?”

“Y-you’ve never heard of him?”

“No, have you?”

“I’ve heard the name. We don’t get much information about Raydoss here, so I only know that he’s one of the four dukes of Raydoss.”

Lovren’s knowledge of Raydoss was limited by the travel ban and Raydoss’s prohibition of adventurers. The guide told us that Raydoss was currently in disarray. The king had suddenly died, leaving the throne vacant. The heir to the throne had yet to be decided.

The eldest son had died with the king, making succession impossible. Factions were now fighting for the right to the throne, creating political unrest. The current heir was only thirteen years old, and the lack of a competent heir ensured that the unrest would be prolonged. Some said that a new king would soon arise, but nothing was certain.

In this period of uncertainty, Raydoss was effectively ruled by the Four Dukes, whose hold over the lands of the country was second only to the king. In the past, Raydoss had only been a cluster of small kingdoms in the north. But then a conqueror arose, united the kingdoms through military might, and became king of them all.

This king was assisted by four trusted generals from the cardinal directions: east, west, south, and north. They spread out, conquering lands for the king and greatly expanding the territory of Raydoss.

At the end of the war, the king awarded land to his generals and bestowed upon them the title of duke. But even then, there was a pecking order. The Duke of the North was the most powerful, followed by the Duke of the West. East and South had about the same standing. This difference was determined by their accomplishments in the war.

The Duke of the North took a handful of soldiers and managed to conquer all of the northern continent of Jillbird. This won him great respect from

commoners and nobles alike.

Despite failing to take the Godsword Diablos from Phyllius, the Duke of the West still conquered most of the western region. He also ran a lucrative slave trade, earning as much prestige as the Duke of the North.

Meanwhile, the Dukes of the East and South were far weaker. While not completely ineffectual, they were less than half as powerful as North and West. This, too, was due to the events of the war.

Their invasions were stopped by Winalene in the east and Granzell in the south. Their territories shrank as a result, as did their influence. Dissatisfied, the South and East continued fighting despite malignant interference from the other dukes. Their losses only compounded, leading their military spending to skyrocket in a vicious cycle.

Apparently, they had now abandoned conventional warfare in favor of conspiracies and espionage. We could thank the Duke of the East for the plot we were dealing with at the moment.

“But they don’t tell a peon like me anything! I just overheard Gregory talk about it!”

All the guide knew was that Messer Trade Association was a cover for Raydoss and that the Duke of the East sat at the top. The company followed the orders of the duke’s alchemist.

“Who is this alchemist?”

“I-I don’t know...I don’t even know the guy’s name! All I know is that he regularly visits the potion manufacturing facility.”

After getting what we needed, we knocked out the guide and tied him up.

“What now?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I’ll get the executives. Jet has an eye on them right now.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it. I’ll report this to the guild and head to the workshop.”

“Okay.”

They’d have a much harder time escaping if we split up. Lovren picked up the guide and started back to the Adventurers’ Guild.

This wasn’t a private matter anymore. Not now that we knew Raydoss was involved.

Let’s go get Gregory.

“Hm!”

We navigated the ship by focusing on Jet’s aura, doing our best to gently put to sleep anyone we met along the way. They might’ve been Raydossians, but they also might’ve just been innocent employees.

Of course, anyone hostile enough to stop us would get a broken leg for their trouble.

That corner.

“Hm.”

We reached a corner on the ship’s upper levels. This was where the offices were.

Jet, you there?

Arf.

Jet appeared out of the shadow of the potted plant.

Is Gregory inside?

Woof, woof!

This was the one.

Fran, we’ll capture everyone inside.

Hm!

Jet, be on guard in case anyone tries to bail. Nobody leaves. Get rough if you’ve got to.

Grr!

Fran and I stepped inside the office after seeing him off. The people inside finally noticed the intruder after she cut the door in half.

Gregory, who had taken cover under the desk, was shocked to see us “H-how...?!?”

“How did I survive your undead?”

“Ack!” He knew that Fran had seen through their plan. “Jug! Bade! Kill her!”

He was shouting at two guys who looked like adventurers. They couldn’t have been too strong, since they’d completely failed to notice Fran standing outside the room. They made up for their lack of detection skills by being decent fighters, moving to attack Fran at once without uttering a single word.

“Hyaaa!”

“Nuooooh!”

If nothing else, they were well trained, ready to follow orders no matter the strength or age of their opponents. Their teamwork was pretty good, too. Good enough to take down an E Rank.

Too bad Fran could hold her own against an A Rank. Their blades cut nothing but air.

Fran launched flicker jabs at their chins, knocking both of them out cold. Their jawbones were probably shattered from Fran’s sheer strength.

“Y-you killed both of my knights...?”

Fran looked quizzically at Gregory. “They won’t give me trouble after I took out your undead.”

His eyes grew larger. I didn’t think eyes could open that wide.

“Took out...you beat him?”

“Hm.”

“Lies!”

“I’m not lying.”

“That monster could level a small country...! He used to be a non-combatant,

but even an ordinary adventurer shouldn't be able to hurt him now!"

"I did."

"Impossible!"

Gregory thought that we had ignored the wight king and came straight here. A natural enough assumption if you knew how strong the wight king was. Even with his two knights lying dead in front of him, he couldn't believe the wight king had suffered the same fate. Still, he was at least convinced that he was up against a powerful enemy.

Rage and confusion filled Gregory's eyes. "Girl...we can end this—"

Fran cut off the intimidation tactics. "I know you people are working for Raydoss."

"Ha ha...I don't know what you're talking about. How absurd..."

He was still trying to deny it? Further questions would be a waste of time.

Fran lowered her body to the ground and fired a body blow into Gregory's gut. Her fist sank into Gregory's pudgy belly, deforming it.

"Eeeergh!" Gregory threw up and curled into himself. The pain was so great that he didn't notice the contents of his stomach spilling out of his face. Even after he started dry heaving, he just kept holding onto his stomach. A few seconds passed before the pain subsided enough for him to look at us.

He knew his place now. He groaned as we cast a cleansing spell on him.

"We want some answers."

"Urgh..." Being a non-combatant, Gregory didn't have great pain tolerance. As mentally prepared as he was for the possibility of torture, he immediately folded when faced with the reality of it. I had never seen anyone despair so much from being *healed*. "Uhh...I'll...I'll talk. I'll tell you anything you want."

He was crying and begging not ten minutes later. Apparently, Gregory was a Raydossian noble—a baron, at that. That said, he hadn't gotten to enjoy a noble lifestyle for the last twenty years, as part of his cover as a Belioth merchant. I was impressed he'd stayed loyal to Raydoss after all this time, but he was probably afraid they'd kill him if he went turncoat.

Some of his spy compatriots had actually been killed after betraying the motherland—probably taken care of by some shady internal affairs types. Raydossian spies were also quite unique since they didn't immediately sabotage the kingdoms they were in. They would integrate themselves and live ordinary lives.

Salut, a knight who had been employed by Phyllius, had lived in the same manner, even managing to gain the trust of the royal family. Gregory was the same, working as an honest merchant in Belioth and only reporting back to Raydoss once every few years. He gained enough trust from the community that his potion conspiracy could run smoothly.

Gregory and his men were working for the Duke of the East, and they had been told to assist the duke's alchemist. Good enough so far, but...

"Who is this alchemist?"

"Zelyse. The man is like a child!"

Hadn't expected to hear *that* name here.

"Zelyse?! He's in Belioth?" Fran's eyes widened.

Zelyse the alchemist. A handsome lunatic who had conspiracies across the land. We'd encountered him once in Bulbola, and it hadn't ended well. At least we'd thrown a wrench into his plans.

Still, he was in Raydoss? Was he a Raydossian? I could've sworn I'd heard rumors that he was actually raised in Granzell...

"Is Zelyse working for Raydoss?"

"More specifically, he's working for the Duke of the East..."

"He's wanted in other countries."

"His criminal record in foreign lands means nothing to us. As for his bounty, the business of the Adventurers' Guild does not matter in Raydoss."

Raydoss would gladly hire criminals to advance their plans. They probably had no qualms hiring the enemy of their enemies, too.

Did Zelyse make that undead?

Fran asked for me. Apparently, Zelyse had nothing to do with it. The undead had been part of the Black Bones, an undead unit under the Duke of the South. I knew it! So the Duke of the South had succeeded in creating intelligent undead?

“Is Raydoss making more of them?”

“I d-don’t k-know the details! I just know that the Black Bones are a product of a secret project dedicated to making intelligent undead!”

“Is such a thing possible?”

“Deeply warped as his mind was, the wight king was able to hold a conversation. He said that, well...they were forcing humans to become undead!”

Apparently they had slaves learn undead magic and then forcefully transformed them into undead themselves. This resulted in the creation of a fearsome creature that could use powerful undead magic—a wight king. The wight kings, controlled by a powerful necromancer, would pledge allegiance to Raydoss.

It was something of a gamble. People had different affinities, after all. Undead humans had the advantages of intelligence and powers of speech, which was rather useful, as regular undead couldn’t communicate and were difficult to order around. Forcing the process of undead transformation process turned them into powerful soldiers.

However, an undead’s body and mind decayed over time, forcing them to sleep in coffins. Conveniently, the coffins also had a stealth enchantment on them, enabling them to be smuggled right into enemy territory. Quite a horrifying plan.

Charred Man, a member of the Black Bones, had successfully infiltrated Ladyblue and would’ve done a lot of damage once activated. The wight king of Messer also could’ve destroyed the entire Trade Fleet once unleashed. They were expected to put up a bit of a fight if faced with Winalene...not that it was likely even then, considering how fast we killed it.

We still had questions, but the scarlet seaweed potions were more important.

“What are you after? What are you doing with the potions?”

“I-I don’t know what Zelyse’s endgame is! He just ordered us to make as many potions as possible!”

“Where are they being shipped?”

“N-nowhere...”

What? Did I hear that right? I thought the potions would’ve been used for something. But Gregory said that the scarlet seaweed potions were all in storage on board the Messer ship. They’d distributed some to fulfill the demands of the lake, but the rest were still here.

He’d assumed they would be transported somewhere eventually, but it had been a year since the order came.

What gives? Zelyse doesn’t want the potions?

Who knows! These guys may be working for Raydoss and Zelyse, but now I’m not sure if they’re connected to the lake anomaly.

I’d thought Messer Trade Association had somehow used the scarlet seaweed potions to cause the lake anomaly. But was that really the case?

“Do you know about the lake anomaly?”

“Y-yes.”

“Did you do it?”

“N-no! We couldn’t possibly affect the lake like that!”

Seriously? Looks like he’s telling the truth.

Was Gregory kept in the dark, or were they really unrelated?

Fran, it looks like we’ll have to get answers out of Zelyse himself, somehow.

Fran asked Gregory for Zelyse’s whereabouts.

“Th-the workshop! He’s at the scarlet seaweed potion workshop!”

Isn’t that where Lovren is?

Yeah.

Was he about to escape? No offense to Lovren, but I didn’t think he was capable of taking Zelyse. If Zelyse knew we suspected the workshop, maybe

he'd make a break for it. But we couldn't just leave this ship, either. We needed to seize all the men on board first.

Suddenly, Jet howled in the distance. I could sense several people approaching the ship. *Looks like backup's here.*

But I sensed no hostility from Jet. So they weren't enemies?

We went to the deck and spotted a dinghy carrying adventurers. We recognized some of the faces. Dagor, the C-Rank we sparred with, was among them.

"Good to see you are doing well, Black Lightning Princess! It has been a while!"

"Hm. Same to you."

"Ha ha ha! Yes, my good spirits are among my few graces. Sir Lovren has told us to commandeer the ship. May I ask what the situation is?"

Fran told Dagor everything Gregory had explained to her about how the Messer Trade Association was a Raydossian cover.

"Sir Lovren told me the same, yet I can scarcely believe it..."

"Can you take care of the rest?"

"Of course. And you? What will you do now?"

"I'm heading for the workshop."

"I see."

"Just round up everyone on the ship."

"Very well."

Now we could make our way to the workshop. We didn't know its exact location, so we'd need someone to guide us there. It looked simple enough to get to from here, but— *KABOOM!* An explosion sounded in the distance.

"Urk!"

"Woof!"

Whoa!

Fran and Jet startled and ducked. I couldn't help yelping either.

We looked in the direction of the explosion and saw a pillar of smoke rising from one of the Trade Fleet's smaller ships. Flames danced at the base of it, reminding me of an exploding oil tanker I'd seen on the news a lifetime ago. This was much smaller, of course.

Still, we needed to act fast before the flames spread to the surrounding ships.

What ship is that?

The Trade Fleet's ships all served different functions. Lodging, fishing, offices, workshops, guild bases. We couldn't tell what ship the explosion was coming from.

"Dagor, what ship is that?"

"Th-that's the workshop!"

Chapter 3:

Intelligent Weapons

A PILLAR OF FIRE and smoke blazed high into the air from the workshop ship.

Are Lovren and the others okay?

Teacher, did Zelyse do that?

I don't know! (Although the possibility was rather high.) Let's just head for the ship!

"Hm! Jet!"

"Woof!"

Fran hopped on Jet and made a beeline for the burning workshop. The initial explosion was only a prelude to more, most likely from the workshop chemicals catching fire. There was a huge hole in the bottom of the ship, and it was quickly taking in water. It wouldn't be long before it sank to the bottom of the lake.

This wasn't a fire we could put out with a few water spells.

I hope Lovren's okay...

"Teacher, over there!" Fran pointed to a plank in the water. Lovren was holding on to it. "Lovren!"

"Oh. Hello, Fran..."

I used telekinesis to put him on Jet's back. He looked dazed, to say the least.

"Are you all right?"

"Somehow. But...the other adventurers in the workshop..."

"What happened?" Fran asked.

"The alchemist in the workshop threw a vial at us," said Lovren, and he winced in pain. "There was a huge explosion. The chemicals caught fire."

“Where is the alchemist now?”

“I don’t know. I think he got caught in the explosion, but...I don’t think that’s enough to kill him.”

Lovren described the alchemist as having blonde hair and blue eyes and talking like a child.

“That was no ordinary alchemist,” he murmured. “He’s something far more horrible. Just *looking* at him gave me goosebumps.”

That was Zelyse, all right. Being a veteran, Lovren could sense that he wasn’t dealing with your average alchemist.

Rescue time, Fran.

“Hm!”

Fran and Jet split up to save the people floating on the lake.

“You okay?”

“Th-thank you...”

“Woof.”

“Eeek!”

Among the people we rescued were adventurers who had accompanied Lovren and workshop workers. The adventurers were thankful enough, but everyone else shrieked at the sight of Jet. I guess that’s understandable when your place of employment gets blown up and the next thing you see is a gigantic wolf. Jet was even scooping the poor guys up with his mouth. It must’ve felt less like being rescued and more like being eaten.

Aww. Don’t take it personally, boy.

“Arf...”

Lovren took the adventurers with Water Strider and joined the rescue operation. We saved a decent amount of people, but not everyone made it out alive. For now, we stored the bodies of the dead.

Fran clenched her fists and shook with rage. “Zelyse...!”

Jet and I were just as angry.

Where did that bastard go?

“GrrrrrrRUFF!”

Zelyse could teleport, but he couldn’t have gotten far after causing the explosion. Jet might be able to sniff him out, or Fran and I might be able to detect him now that we were stronger...

He’s still—

BOOM!

Wh-what now?!

“There! Another fire!”

We quickly looked for the source of the explosion and spotted another pillar of fire rising from one of the ships. It wasn’t hard to identify what ship it was, either. After all, we’d just been there. *The Messer Trade Association...*

The Messer ship was the next ship after the workshop to go up in smoke and sink. The fire burned unnaturally fast. They must have had contingencies in place to raze the evidence.

“Come on!”

Yeah!

We resumed our rescue operation but found only adventurers. The trade association people had been tied up at the time of the explosion and couldn’t escape the fire. Even those who dived into the water likely drowned, unable to swim with their bonds. But the calamity was far from over.

THUMP!

Another loud noise, though not an explosion this time. It felt like a rumbling that reverberated to your core. Like creaking wood instead of exploding ships.

THUMP! WHUMP!

Steady noises, one after another.

Fran, go up!

“Hm!”

We flew upward to gain a better vantage point.

That...is very bad.

“Let’s go, Teacher!”

Right! Come on, Jet!

“Woof!”

Our detection Skills hadn’t been malfunctioning.

Why are there so many pseudos...?!

“Did Zelyse call them?”

The ships of the Trade Fleet were being attacked by pseudos. Some of them had already stuck to the gunwale, breaking open a huge hole.

Adventurers had been dispatched to the workshop and Messer Trade Association, thinning the fleet’s defenses. They weren’t able to respond to the school of pseudos in time.

Was this merely coincidence? Impossible. The pseudos were thought to be after scarlet seaweed potions, and now entire crates of them were in the water after the ship explosions. Add in the loud sound and the fiery spectacle, and you got a neon sign for every pseudo in the area.

I couldn’t really tell how many there were, but over thirty surrounded the fleet. And more were on the way.

Let’s just take them down!

“Hm!”

No flashy spells, you two. We’ll have to get in close to avoid damaging the fleet!

“Got it. Just like last time.”

“Woof!”

Right, let’s go!

We split up and took on the pseudo nearest to us. I thought about going off

on my own—people wouldn't be able to see an autonomous sword if I fought underwater—but decided against it.

Zelyse might still be around, and I didn't want to leave Fran defenseless. While Fran could take a pseudo on her own, Zelyse was an enigma with unknown strengths and stats. There was no telling what he might do.

"Teacher?"

Sorry, I was just thinking about Zelyse. I should focus on the pseudos first.

"Hm!"

The pseudos didn't give us a hard time despite their great number. They just took longer to beat since we couldn't use our big attacks. We also had the upper hand because the pseudos were so focused on the ships. We came out of the battle relatively unscathed, but we couldn't relax just yet.

Teacher, we're being watched.

I feel it, too. I don't know from where, though.

Me neither.

Someone was staring at us, and it wasn't just the awestruck sailors watching the mysterious girl beat up pseudos. It was a persistent, creepy gaze, like an obsessive scientist glued to their microscope, or maybe like the eyes of a predator about to kidnap a little girl. Uncomfortable. Dripping with ill intent. And they weren't just watching us, either—they had eyes on every centimeter of the battlefield.

Who could it be? We would know if we caught them, but we just couldn't track them down. All Fran and I could tell was that they were quite far away and possessed formidable concealment abilities...

Woof, woof!

But Jet was a different story. Now a Ragnarok Wolf, his heightened senses quickly pinpointed the source of the gaze.

Mark the location, Jet.

Woof!

Cleaning up the pseudos took priority. More adventurers had joined the fight, but leaving now would drastically weaken the fleet's defenses.

The strong ones are Lovren...and Sierra.

Lovren was back on the battlefield and Sierra had joined at some point. They were doing exceptionally well.

Hm. That sword is amazing.

It really is.

Sierra's pitch-black sword was far stronger than we'd first thought. The Malice kept me from identifying it, but I didn't need to do that to know it was powerful. It wasn't just a matter of raw strength, either. It was significantly boosting Sierra's abilities.

He ran across water, cutting down every pseudo in his way like a maelstrom of lightning. He didn't look low-ranked at all. Honestly, he felt more like a B-Rank.

But Sierra was showing signs of impatience. He kept his eyes wide open for more pseudos to slice up, and there was something like anger in his gaze. It might just have been vigilance in the face of a powerful enemy, but the pseudos were clearly no match for him. Strange. Why was he so nervous?

Sierra took down another pseudo and looked around, but for what?

Ah. He'd probably noticed the eyes watching over the battle zone.

We found it first, though!

"Arf!"

I bragged about Jet's accomplishment, though I had yet to see where the gaze was coming from myself.

That's most of the pseudos. We're counting on you, Jet.

Once we cleared the fleet of pseudos, we immediately raced to see our peeping tom. We weren't going to let them get away.

We'll get them before they can escape!

Woof!

The plan was simple. Jet would shadow warp to wherever our peeping tom was and ambush them. We'd follow his aura and teleport in. The only problem was whether they would be close enough to teleport to.

"Awooo!" No problems there. Jet immediately got to shadow walking.

The next moment, Jet reappeared some twenty meters behind the ship.

That's really close!

"Hm."

They definitely knew how to hide themselves. They'd fooled my and Fran's detection Skills despite being within two hundred meters of us.

Don't let your guard down.

"Hm!"

Fran and I readied ourselves for the battle ahead, teleporting to Jet's side. We concealed ourselves to ensure the success of our ambush.

We found ourselves slightly above Jet, watching him squaring off with a man. He stood on the water as black tentacles squirmed to entangle him. But the man put up a barrier to deflect Jet's binding spell.

Zelyse!

I recognized the blond, blue-eyed bastard instantly. Zelyse, the handsome psychopath. I'd had a feeling it was him watching us.

"Teacher!"

On it!

Fran drew me immediately. I transmogrified into a katana.

It had been a long time since I felt this in-sync with her. We really were sword and swordsman. As much as I was her guardian, I was also her blade. We communicated best on the battlefield.

Fran nodded. "Hm."

That was all she said—but I immediately picked up on what she wanted.

I activated wind Elemental Blade to prepare Pressurized Quickdraw. Fran

narrowed her eyes in satisfaction as I continued prepping all the Skills she needed.

Let's do this, Fran!

"Hm!"

Fran got the drop on Zelyse as Jet kept him occupied.

"—!"

Silently, she fell from the sky down to the lake's surface.

The sound of the air rushing past, her movement, her temperature—everything had been perfectly concealed. Even her reflection in the water had been removed with magic.

By the time Zelyse realized Fran was falling on him, we were only several meters apart.

"Whoa!"

"Tsk!" Fran swung me at Zelyse.

He reacted clumsily. Zelyse had never smelled like a fighter. Even if he could fight, he was no expert. It was odd that he could react to her at all.

Still, this was no ordinary opponent, and so I fired up Elemental Blade multiple times to finish him off.

Eat this!

My blade went through him without resistance. It felt like I was cutting air—because I was. He made himself intangible, like an illusion.

Huh?

"Huh?" Fran's blade went through Zelyse's body and split the water beneath her.

Zelyse had been right here. I was sure of it. But now I couldn't feel his mana and aura, even though I could see him right there.

It was as if he'd used Dimension Shift, like we did—but there wasn't a trace of Timespace magic in the air. Whatever had happened, Fran and I didn't dwell on

it long...though we had a feeling he would somehow dodge whatever we threw at him next.

We decided to find out.

“Haaa!”

Raaaah!

Fran launched a flurry of slashes as I cast a battery of spells. If Zelyse’s intangibility ability was like Dimension Shift, then it wouldn’t stay up for very long. We decided to keep attacking until his time ran out.

“If it isn’t young Fran! It’s been ever so long!”

“You keep talking!”

With that smug look on your face!

“Oh, don’t be so cross!”

Zelyse had an easy smile, infuriating Fran and increasing the speed of her flurry. But his intangibility showed no signs of abating. I tried punching the crap-eating smile off his face with telekinesis, but it was just as ineffective as Fran’s hundred slashes. Zelyse just took it all and laughed.

How about this!

“No Cast Timespace spell? You really *are* talented!”

I used Dimension Sword, a spell which went through a target’s defenses and was quite effective against Dimension Shift.

But Zelyse’s smug grin remained.

Tch! An invisible wall deflected Dimension Sword. A barrier! But that confirmed his weakness to Timespace attacks. *Jet!*

“Grr!”

“And my, what a wolf!”

Jet used Dimension Fang, a Timespace attack far more powerful than Dimension Sword. It probably belonged to dimension magic instead of Timespace.

Zelyse put up a barrier as Jet's fangs closed in on his face. While not enough to deflect Jet's attack, it bought him a second of time.

He disappeared and reappeared several meters in the distance. The strange thing was that I couldn't see the movements of his mana at all. I focused on my surroundings to get a hint on his warp destination, but I couldn't wrap my brain around whatever weirdness was going on here.

Were we fighting an illusion? No, an illusion needed mana to be created and maintained. I couldn't feel any of that from Zelyse, to the point where I wondered if he was a mirage, maybe even the result of some natural phenomenon.

But a mirage shouldn't be able to talk, let alone cast spells to defend against our attacks. No, this was some kind of trick he was using to become intangible.

Fran...I'm going to put all my energy into a Timespace spell. Cover me.

"Hm."

Even a weak Timespace spell could become powerful with enough mana.

Jet, you deal the final blow. When he evades my attack, go for the kill.

"Grrr!"

Zelyse was a slippery one. Let him escape, and there'd be no telling what he'd do later. I was determined to use all my mana to stop him.

"I didn't think I'd see you here, Fran! Gracious, are you stalking me?" Zelyse mocked us with that annoying grin. Who would *want* to stalk this guy?!

"No. What are you doing here? What are you planning to do with the scarlet seaweed potions?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I know you're working for a Raydoss bigwig. What are you plotting?"

"If you insist on knowing, I don't mind telling."

So Zelyse began to casually explain his evil plan at Fran's prompting, because of course he would. At least it gave me more time to charge, and hopefully we'd learn something useful.

“I’m not really after the potions!” he said gleefully.

“Hm?”

No? Then what was he stockpiling them for?

“You look positively confuddled.”

“What did you get all these potions for?”

“I wasn’t *really* gathering them. I was just putting all the unused stock in storage.”

I didn’t understand. So he wasn’t storing the potions to use later?

“What I *really* wanted was the waste product of the potion-making process.”

“Waste product?”

“Yeppers! For me, the waste product was the potions themselves.”

Fran’s clear surprise only stroked Zelyse’s ego. He carried on with his explanation.

The scarlet seaweed pills used to treat the lake’s unique disease utilized every part of the seaweed to manufacture.

First, the Timespace-disrupting stipe of the seaweed would disperse the accumulated Timespace mana in the body. Next, the inside of the stipe would be used to control said mana, curing Timespace sickness.

But the potions developed by Zelyse and Messer only used the inner part of the stipe. This made a world of difference. The pills took several hours to cure the sickness while the potions’ effects were immediate.

But there was a reason why no one had made potions for this before.

First, the pills were easy to make. Potions needed extraction, bottling, and many complicated tools to manufacture. Pills only needed boiling and drying. You needed the know-how, of course, but it was inherently simple to do. The pills also had a long shelf life, were easily transportable, and were cheap. They had no side effects and they strengthened one’s resistance to the sickness. All these things gave them a well-earned reputation as a solid, reliable medicine. No one *needed* potions.

When Messer started developing potions, some were excited, but most thought it a waste of time and effort. They went ahead with it anyway, thinking the potions were part of some grand plot...

None of them could have foreseen something so apparently pointless—an end product that was itself a *waste* product—would be the goal. But that was exactly what Zelyse had done.

“What are you using it for?”

“I have business at the center of the lake, but I’ve a bit of a problem with the friendly neighborhood lake security.”

Even Zelyse couldn’t get past the guardians. He must’ve been after the beast sealed in the middle of the lake.

“I was thinking of ways to get rid of them. They’re made of water and Timespace mana, you know. If I dumped Timespace-disrupting seaweed extract into the lake, I figured that would do the trick.”

So that’s what the waste product was for!

“Hopefully I’d weaken them. Maybe outright kill them. But the way they’ve mutated like that? Mana-deficient guardians running amok! Ah ha ha ha! It’s so funny! Don’t you think it’s *funny*?”

“I don’t.” Making a mess out of people’s livelihoods was no laughing matter. He really was a lunatic.

“Anyway, what’s really interesting is that the mutated guardians started craving scarlet seaweed potions. They must think they can go back to normal if they chug enough of the stuff. What do you think?”

That must have been why the pseudos attacked the ships. They were hoping the potions could fix their disrupted mana, and shipments of scarlet seaweed potions were attracting them.

“I’m impressed that you managed to sniff me out,” he continued. “I was oh-so-careful about the whole operation, too.”

“It has your pawprints all over it,” said Fran.

“Aww, you’ll make me blush!”

Fran might've bragged about figuring him out, but we only got this far thanks to Carna. The information didn't come easily, either.

"Pretty weird, though," he continued. "So many other suspects, but to think that we'd finally be fingered now...do we have a traitor somewhere? An impostor among us? Hmm."

Carna had quite the information network. I'd originally thought she came from a small trade association, but it might just be big enough to span kingdoms. The fact they had Raydoss intel either meant they were a spy network entirely or had secret ties to Raydoss.

"Never mind that," said Fran. "What are you really after?"

"Care to guess?"

"You want to...resurrect the beast and destroy the kingdom."

"WROOONG! Ah ha ha ha! I don't give a fig about destroying Belioth! Destroying the *world* would really be something, but destroying this kingdom would only get people talking for a few centuries, tops. Lame!"

Zelyse paused to laugh with the face of an innocent angel.

"The beast in the lake," he continued, "isn't your ordinary monster. The fact that it has all sorts of stuff inside it makes it the perfect test subject. And you know I have a boundless curiosity."

All this to satisfy his curiosity? I didn't understand him, but I knew for sure that we couldn't let him walk.

Fran, you ready?

Hm.

Jet?

Grr!

Jet was good to go. My spells and Skills were already primed. It was time for a barrage of Timespace attacks.

I'll attack first to create an opening. Get ready to take advantage of it.

Okay.

Woof!

I fired a spell, targeting Zelyse's smug and handsome face—but right then, a new presence entered the battlefield. It was so powerful that we simply couldn't ignore it. The aura was familiar, and it was fast approaching us from the direction of the Trade Fleet. I turned and saw a brown-haired boy speeding toward us.

Sierra? I thought he was here to back us up, but...

"Zelyse!!!"

"Oh?"

His eyes immediately locked on to Zelyse. The ghastly expression on his face suggested familiarity. Sierra's bloodlust for Zelyse immediately reminded me of how Fran reacted to Theraclede: anger and hatred possessed him, compelled him to attack. He was so focused on Zelyse that he didn't even notice Fran.

At the sight of him, a grin crept onto Zelyse's face.

"Is that...? My, how you've grown."

Zelyse recognized him, too. I wondered how they knew each other.

Still, this was our chance. Sierra had Zelyse's attention. With him as a distraction, we could take Zelyse out.

We'll time our attack with Sierra's!

Hm!

Woof!

We started with a throwaway attack to keep Zelyse in check. It missed, but that was on purpose. We were saving our Timespace barrage for when Sierra attacked Zelyse.

Ready?

Hm.

Sierra jumped and raised his black sword overhead. I didn't know how Sierra would attack, but the lack of Timespace energy probably meant it wasn't going to be effective. We just needed him to keep his attention.

Let's go!

I was about to launch a fully charged Dimension Sword...

...and that was when it happened.

"Unleash Malice!" Sierra shouted. He—or rather his sword—exploded with Malice. A torrent of Malice painted our surroundings.

"Huh?"

Wha—?

Zelyse and I were both startled by the sudden surge of Malice coming from Sierra's sword. I'd known there was Malice in it, but this was something else. It was as if a powerful Fiend had been trapped in the sword and he had just set it free. This was a *life-threatening* amount of Malice. Was Sierra okay?

Teacher, what is that?

I don't know, but don't let your guard down! Sierra's definitely not your average adventurer!

"Hm."

But this Malice...

I didn't know whether Malice came in specific varieties, but this felt familiar. It wasn't my first encounter with it, for sure.

Where have I felt this before...? Any ideas, Fran?

Hm.

Wait...you know?

It feels like Theraclede's malice.

Now that she mentioned it, it really did feel similar...though perhaps we were unconsciously lumping it in with the Malice of another powerful Fiend? Either way, this was bad news. Malice ravaged everything it touched.

The powerful Malice was affecting our minds, and with it, the effectiveness of our spells and Skills.

Focus up, Fran! We can't go wasting our charged mana!

But this initial blast was nothing compared to the shockwave to follow.

"Shake, O foundation!" Sierra roared, and he attacked Zelyse with an ominous beam from his pitch-black sword. Not exactly the kind of beams you wanted to soak up. Zelyse quickly erected a barrier— *SPLASH!*

—and we fell into the lake with a big splash.

Huh?

"Uhh?"

"Arf?"

Fran and Jet could no longer Air Hop. But that wasn't all. All the spells we had prepared were gone. It wasn't as if our magic had been sealed—rather, our Skills had failed to activate because of some interference. Even enhancement and detection Skills were nullified.

This was definitely caused by the black light from Sierra's sword. It clearly had the power to disrupt an array of spells and Skills.

I got Fran and Jet (now looking like wet rats) out of the water with telekinesis. No issues here. I think the black light only erased all of the Skills we had activated. And after all that trouble! At least we weren't the only ones affected by it.

"Hey, what gives?!"

Zelyse had also fallen into the lake. By the looks of it, his mysterious Skill had also been neutralized by Sierra's attack.

A powerful wave of Malice which could shut down all Skills in its vicinity? Sierra was far stronger than I'd expected.

"Die, Zelyse!"

"That hurt!"

"Tsk!" Sierra fell upon Zelyse with his sword.

He struck true. Blood spurted from Zelyse's body and gushed from his lips as a wound opened all the way from his right shoulder down to his lungs. But Zelyse

escaped the water into the air as if he were uninjured. He showed no signs of pain, despite what he had just said. Still, I could feel his life force weakening.

He patched himself up with a potion, but Sierra was already on him again.

Despite his unmistakable hatred for Fran, I guess Sierra was on our side now? He was completely focused on Zelyse...

Fran, can you move?

Hm!

Regaining control of their abilities, Fran and Jet Air Hopped to the sky.

The fierce encounter between Sierra and Zelyse had begun.

Sierra was fast but his swordplay was mediocre. Even with his abilities enhanced by his sword, his skill remained the same.

His dark sword clashed with Zelyse's beautiful crystal blade.

"You rancid piece of trash!"

"You're a quick one! Not fast enough to catch me, though!"

Zelyse's movement was unbelievable. He looked like an expert possessing a high-level mastery Skill. It must've been the crystal weapon. It allowed him to use the crystal's Advanced Sword Mastery for a short time.

"DIE!"

"Ah ha ha ha! I'm afraid that's impossible!"

Provoked by Zelyse's laughter, Sierra intensified his attacks...which only increased the mad alchemist's enjoyment. He was smiling now, and his handsome face only made the smile more sinister. He couldn't hide what he was inside.

"Wow! That's such a cool sword!"

"..."

"I remember when you were just a widdle baby!"

"You have no idea who I am!" Sierra tensed up. They were acquainted after all, but for some reason Sierra denied that Zelyse knew him. Was he expecting

Zelyse to forget?

I really didn't know how these two were related. Was Sierra an abandoned test subject?

Zelyse's smile deepened at Sierra's complaints.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure."

"Liar...! You're trying to trick me!"

"I know who you are. Honest! O Romeo, how could I forget you?"

"My name...is...*Sierra!*"

"Is that what you call yourself nowadays? But I still remember who you are. Both of you. Romeo and Theraclede."

"How do you..."

What? Romeo and Theraclede...? Was that Sierra's real name? Was Theraclede hiding somewhere?

It certainly looked like Zelyse had hit a nail on Sierra's head.

"Were you watching us...? But even then..."

"Now we're asking the *good* questions!"

"Psht. Doesn't matter. It all ends if I kill you here."

"But can you do it?"

"Watch me!"

Sierra's bloodlust flared, despite his confusion.

What now, Teacher?

I think it's time we joined the fight.

The two looked like they were in their own world, but Sierra wasn't the only one with a grudge against Zelyse. As for who was named what, we could figure that out later.

Fran!

Hm!

This was our chance now that Zelyse couldn't turn intangible. We kept an eye out just in case Sierra used his disruptor again, but it looked like an ability he could only use sparingly.

"I'm going all in."

Do it! I'll back you up!

I didn't want Sierra to get caught up in our attack. He was our ally in this fight, and we still had questions for him.

We didn't want to use an attack with a large area of effect. Instead, we'd focus all of our energy into a pinpoint strike...

"Awaken! Flashing Thunderclap! Sword God Form!"

Here we go!

The destructive power which consumed my blade along with the feeling of peak performance descended on me and Fran.

"Black Lightning Strike!"

Our swordplay wasn't the only thing enhanced by Sword God Form. It brought out the full potential of all our abilities. That included Fran's potential as a Black Sky Tiger and all of my latent Skills. The speed of black lightning, the cutting edge of a divine blade, all hidden under maxed-out stealth Skills. Nothing and no one could evade this attack.

I was perfectly confident that this one attack could defeat our greatest opponents, even the lich and Amanda...although they'd probably beat us before we had a chance to pull this off.

Sierra didn't react to the speed of Black Lightning Strike and didn't notice Fran being right beside him.

Zelyse, on the other hand, did. He sacrificed his left hand to Sierra's sword so he could block my attack. He couldn't have pulled this off without being able to match our reflexes and Sword Mastery. Apparently, he had something even stronger than Advanced Sword Mastery. His crystal weapon also gave him Skills, which enabled him to have superhuman reflexes.

He had used an Extra Skill called Thief God's Favor in the past. It was no

wonder he could have any Skill he wanted. But Zelyse's defenses were no match for our attack.

"Huh?" Zelyse blinked as he watched the strange sight before him.

The sword in his hand disappeared when it clashed against me. I immediately felt full as a rush of mana flowed through me.

Thanks for the meal!

Zelyse's sword was made of crystal, which was why we went up close for our attack.

Crystal weapons allowed its users to temporarily use its Skills. Zelyse was a crystal expert, crafting golems, soldiers, and even implanting crystal into humans. His crystal sword definitely had some unique powers to it.

But to me, it was brunch.

"Hey...!"

It felt so good to see him panic for once!

"Hyaaaah!" My blade reached Zelyse and cut through his flesh.

"Gyaaargh!" He was real, all right. The divine element was working exceptionally well. He had remained stoic when Sierra cut him, but now he was screaming in pain.

Perhaps the divine element, so effective against a myriad of other elements, had also disabled Dull Pain.

"Divine element...no fair..." Zelyse spread his arms like a crucified saint. Blood gushed from his back, hitting the surface of the lake.

But something didn't feel right. I hit something hard as I cut through him. At first I thought it was just his ribcage or spine, but that didn't make sense. This was Fran's ultimate attack, powerful enough to make metal feel like butter. And yet there was something hard inside of Zelyse.

It felt familiar, like the replica Fanatix back in Granzell's capital. Why would Zelyse have one, though?

"So...this is how it ends..."

Zelyse fell into the lake with a splash. Blood seeped through the water, making it look like his life was being sapped by the lake. The light from his eyes and the warmth of his body quickly faded.

“Heh heh...bye bye...” Zelyse smiled as the last of his life left him.

At which point his body suddenly expanded.

Oh no!

His corpse started gushing purple gas—no, his body was *turning into gas*—and the gas was spreading in all directions.

BWOOOOSH!

Danger Sense started blaring, but one look was all I needed to know that we couldn't let it touch us.

He can't even die in peace!

“Woof!” Jet and I quickly teleported away. Danger Sense was still going off even at over a hundred meters. We watched as the waterfowl caught in Zelyse's mist fell dead out of the sky.

We'll use wind to hold it off!

I wrapped a wind spell around us to protect us from the encroaching mist. It held the stuff at bay, enough that none of it got inside.

We couldn't do anything about the infected air or water, but we'd be fine now. Danger Sense wasn't blaring anymore.

I finished up by using Absorb Poison. Even if Zelyse could turn himself into mist like a vampire, he wouldn't be able to reconstitute himself now.

Wait, is Sierra okay?

“There.”

Looks like he made it.

Sierra had also distanced himself from the poison. Zelyse's final fart had failed to claim its victims.

“Did we, uh...win?”

“Arf?”

Fran and Jet didn't look convinced. Frankly, neither was I.

Was that really the end?

Our attack had been decisive. Powerful enough to take down someone above our weight class. But had we really *won*? Against Zelyse? Of all the powerful enemies we faced, he was just as powerful as the lich, in his own way.

Deep down, I'd been sure he'd somehow evade the attack.

And yet...

And yet we'd seen him go down. Watched the light go out in his eyes. Saw his arms and legs, his entire *body*, explode into poison mist. Defended ourselves as the spiteful mist attacked us.

Zelyse was dead and there was nothing left of him.

Yeah, right. Not one of us could believe it, and we didn't feel compelled to celebrate, but we had to accept it. As we puzzled over the death (?), Sierra approached us.

“Zelyse. You...dealt with him?”

“Hm.”

“I see...thank you.”

I was kind of surprised when Sierra bowed his head. I wasn't expecting such straightforward gratitude. I thought he was going to say something like “He was MINE” or “You shouldn't have done that.” He'd really wanted to kill the guy.

Sierra put the Malice-emitting sword back in its sheath. Fran didn't take her eyes off it.

“That sword...is it okay?”

With its blast of Malice and Skill-disabling ability, anyone would be owed an explanation.

Sierra answered Fran's somewhat vague question with a nod.

“It won't be a problem as long as I'm using it.”

“Oh.”

“Y-yeah.” Sierra was flustered by Fran’s frank nod. He thought she was going to press him for more.

It was an unspoken rule among adventurers that it was rude to pester someone about their weapon. In Sierra’s case, however, it’d be fine to ask whether he really had a handle on his sword. A weapon that could emit such powerful Malice shouldn’t be left unchecked.

Sierra almost seemed let down when Fran did no such thing, taking his answer at face value. She was used to the existence of absurd swords, after all. Her own sword had free will and a piece of the Evil One sealed inside it, among other untold mysteries. A Malice-blasting sword seemed pedestrian next to me.

Fran turned to the disappointed Sierra and asked another question.

“You knew Zelyse?”

“Uhh, yeah. I ran into him once...”

He didn’t snap back with a “None of your business,” which was nice.

Sierra really did seem to know Zelyse, though probably not directly—he’d been shocked when Zelyse recognized him, after all. Whatever the case, they couldn’t have met too many times in the past.

“I’ve been looking for him for a long time. I’m impressed you managed to uncover his plot.”

Had Sierra finally acknowledged Fran after she’d taken care of Zelyse? His thorny disposition was suddenly gone, and before our eyes he slowly opened up about himself. His story was quite simple.

Sierra had been on the trail of Zelyse for years. He heard rumors of the alchemist lurking in the lake region but couldn’t find him. He never found out about the Messer Trade Association and their Raydossian backing, either. Still, he knew for sure that Zelyse was here and never stopped looking.

But he didn’t touch on the thing that caught our attention.

Fran asked again. “He called you Romeo. Why?”

“Uhh...”

“Are you Romeo? *That* Romeo?”

To us, Romeo was the boy who was with Theraclede. I couldn’t believe that the little boy and the young lad standing in front of us were the same person. Where we encountered the two notwithstanding, it wasn’t as if Romeo’s body just got bigger.

And yet Zelyse had called him Romeo—he’d even mentioned Theraclede.

Just what was going on here?

“That’s...” Not an immediate denial. What was the connection? “I—”

Fran!

“Hm!”

It happened just as Sierra was about to open his mouth.

Mana swelled in the water as something sped to the surface. It wasn’t alive—it lacked all the features of a living organism. But its mana was towering, and it was coming right from where Zelyse had sunk. Not the kind of thing you could ignore to keep your conversation going.

Sierra—Romeo? No, we’d go with Sierra for now—Sierra had also felt the presence of this mysterious object. He put his hand on his sword and followed Fran’s lead.

The object stayed underwater and traveled north, moving fast enough to leave Fran in the surf if we didn’t try to keep up. Sierra was struggling, putting everything he had into the chase. Fran was more physically able and more adept at Air Hop. Sierra would get left behind at this rate.

I’ll see what it is. Toss me in the water.

“Hm!”

I got much closer to the object thanks to Fran’s throw. The lake was still muddy from the battle and I couldn’t see the bottom, but I definitely felt something cutting through the water. It was thin and slightly smaller than me.

Huh.

I summoned several light sources with light magic. Now that I could see ahead of me, I finally saw what we were dealing with. It was...

A sword?

The sword was slender, its blade broken in half. It looked familiar.

It's a Fanatix replica!

Was this the strange sensation I'd felt earlier? But...as an artificial Intelligent Weapon, a replica shouldn't be able to move on its own. I didn't think they were still around after the destruction of the real Fanatix in the capital. Even if there were any left, they shouldn't be operational.

I wasn't expecting Zelyse to have a Fanatix replica, either, if it *was* truly a replica. It was strange that Cannibalize didn't activate when I'd broken it earlier. What was going on?

I need to stop it.

I used telekinesis to catch the bladed torpedo. It didn't work.

It dodged me just now.

The sword had clearly evaded my telekinesis. I followed up with a few more telekinetic blasts and spells, but they all whiffed.

The sword was moving like it was alive; nothing about its movement seemed programmed or mechanical. It was watching my attacks and dealing with them accordingly.

It was increasingly probable that the sword was like me...that it was an Intelligent Weapon.

Name: None

Attack: 442, MP: 4680, Durability: 1000

Mana Conductivity: B+

Skills: Evil Sense, Hyperspace Navigation, Demonology, Demonic Exorcism, Process Stone, Rock Eater, Masonry, Speedcast, Heightened Olfactory, Heightened Taste, Stealth, Disassemble, Healing Magic, Dissection, Flame

Resistance, Martial Mastery, Blacksmith, Wind Magic, Sense Disruption, Identify Disruption

That was all Identify could give me since it was being disrupted.

That's insane!

Although I was much stronger, the number of Skills the sword had was crazy. And that was only the Skills I *could* see!

You're not getting away!

The Fanatix replica sped up as it began to surface.

It was probably trying to escape through the air, which had less resistance than water.

Above water, Fran and Jet were running at full speed. Sierra had fallen behind.

Don't let it escape!

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

Fran and Jet immediately responded by firing thunder and dark spells at it. Spells swarmed the sword from every side, none of them landing. It had somehow slipped past every attack.

That's the same Skill Zelyse used!

The replica activated its intangibility and continued its escape. No longer affected by our attacks, it could simply focus on evading Timespace attacks.

But there was another feature of the ability which made it dangerous: it cloaked the user's aura, making it impossible for us to see how much it had left in the tank. If we could detect its mana, we could estimate how long it could maintain its intangible state. Without that information, we were pretty much in the dark.

The divine element could go right through this ability, but I was still in tatters. I wasn't going into Sword God Form again for a while. At best, Jet could try attacking it.

BOOM!

“Arf!”

But the sword countered with a painful fire spell. It burst into flames right as Jet was about to clamp his jaws down on it. He hadn't expected that level of magic, since the sword hadn't attacked us so far, and he couldn't read the sword's mana flow either to predict the spell.

But our attack wasn't for nothing. The sword's aura returned for a moment when it attacked. Apparently it had to materialize itself before it could attack.

“You okay, Jet?”

“Woof!”

Jet was also unharmed, aside from the singed fur around his mouth. It was like if a human accidentally ate really hot soup. Startling, but not too painful. That was probably the reason behind Jet's embarrassed look.

I managed to get a read on its mana just now.

“How is it?”

Down to about half.

The sword had half of its mana left compared to when it started moving from the lakebed. The intangibility was really taking its toll.

“Let's keep going!”

Right!

“Woof!”

I appreciate your energy, Jet, but don't get too carried away.

“W-woof!”

We resumed our attacks, but the results were the same. Eventually, we stopped attacking. It was just a game of tag now.

Teacher, I wanna try something.

What is it?

Apparently, Fran had an idea to break us out of this stalemate. Still, there was

something I needed to check before going through with it. *It's not dangerous, is it?*

Uh...probably not. Fran quizzically tilted her head to the most important question.

Probably not?! What are you planning to do?!

Don't worry. It's definitely not dangerous. Maybe.

That maybe, though?! I don't like that maybe!

Don't worry. I know you'll save me if things go wrong.

Hurk! Jeez, how was I supposed to reply to that?! *F-fine. Just know that I WILL stop you if you push yourself too hard.*

That's fine.

All right, go for it!

"Hm! Flashing Thunderclap!"

Fran wore the black lightning again, but she didn't immediately attack.

"Jet."

"Woof."

She summoned Jet and hopped on. "After it."

"Woof."

Fran put the chase in Jet's paws as she closed her eyes to concentrate. Mana was building inside her.

"Huff..." She was completely defenseless with her eyes closed. But I guess that's where I came in. I had to live up to Fran's expectations. "Haaa..."

I could tell Fran was slowly collecting mana, even from the air. She looked like still water on the surface, with a raging current of mana beneath.

Fran's face twisted with pain. All this focus was taking its toll on her.

...! I thought about calling out to her but stopped. Losing focus would be the most dangerous thing that could happen right now. The only thing I could do was trust her.

A few of the longest minutes I ever felt passed.

“...Hm!” Fran’s eyes snapped open and she unleashed her power. “Black Lightning Strike!”

Turning into a bolt of black lightning, she disappeared from Jet’s back and headed straight for the Fanatix replica.

Though the sword could detect Timespace attacks, it couldn’t react to Black Lightning Strike since it wasn’t a teleport. It was a move which allowed its user to move at the speed of lightning. You needed physical detection Skills for that.

“Haa!”

Th-this is...!

Fran didn’t strike with me, but with her bare left hand. Still, anyone who could detect magic could tell she wasn’t unarmed: her left hand was holding a sword made of highly concentrated mana.

The mana sword shifted and turned into a surge of black lightning. Fran shouted as she swung the sword—

“Black Lightning God Claw!”

The ultimate attack of the Black Sky Tiger.

A sword of black lightning wreathed in the divine element. This was not an attack Fran could use, despite her mastery of Black Lightning Strike. This was something she could only have accessed with Unleash Potential, but here she was, managing to pull it out at this crucial moment.

“Whoops.”

Huh?

It happened just as Fran was bringing her blade down. The black lightning sword deformed and fizzed out of existence. Fortunately, it didn’t explode and damage its surroundings. The only thing left of the sword was a spark and a breeze.

“I...messed up.”

I knew it wouldn’t be that easy!

“Wait!”

“Bark!”

Fran and Jet resumed their chase as the Fanatix replica flew by us.

She was getting annoyed enough to start using area-of-effect spells. The lake raged as if struck by a storm, and if there had been any ships around, she would have capsized them. Still, she couldn't hit the sword.

We were a good distance into the lake now, and we'd been running for a while. I was wondering where the replica was going when I finally noticed something.

Fran, stop!

“Hm?!”

Fran heard me and hit the brakes. She was unable to stop on a dime, however, and her heels touched the water. She skidded, sending water spraying into the air like a fountain.

Although she was dripping wet, she finally managed to stop.

Let's back up a little bit.

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

Looks like Jet's back, too.

Fran and Jet took my word and backed up a good thirty meters from where we were. They, too, had noticed.

I knew it.

My detection Skills were telling me not to go any further. There was nothing on the lake's surface, but I could feel monsters lurking underneath.

“Vivian Guardians.”

No question.

One step further and the guardians would stand in our way. This was their territory. They didn't feel particularly threatening at the moment and would

probably let us off with a warning...for now.

“But how’d that sword make it through?”

Maybe they couldn’t feel it because it’s an inanimate object... Let me try.

“Will you be all right?”

I’ll pull out at the first sign of trouble.

I went into the water, coming face to face with the white bodies of the guardians.

“Be careful.”

“Woof.”

I will.

I continued to slowly move further into the Vivian Guardians’ turf. They shouldn’t be able to detect inanimate objects...but I could immediately tell that this plan wasn’t going to work. All of the guardians were staring at me. Deciding to take my chances, I kept sneaking forward anyway...and the squids immediately blocked my path. Five of them, keeping me from advancing.

Guess not.

I tried cutting off my mana to make it seem like I was an ordinary piece of debris, but it still didn’t work. The guardians cut me off as I tried to go around them.

They don’t look like they have the best detection...

As a matter of fact, their detection Skills seemed outright bad. Still, they somehow managed to sense me.

I tried using Dimension Shift. Even if I were visible, I should be undetectable because of my inanimate nature. I was similar enough to the intangible Fanatix replica, right?

That did it!

The Vivian Guardians were still. They couldn’t detect objects which moved in another dimension. I just needed to keep going and— “That’s as far as you go.”

Huh?

“So you’ve made it this far.”

Lene? Is that you?

“Yes.”

What stood in my way wasn’t another Vivian Guardian but a girl with heterochromia. A girl who happened to be a spirit. Lene. As ever, I couldn’t sense her, though I could see her just fine.

“You mustn’t go on just yet.”

Do you know what that sword is? What’s beyond this point?

“You *must* understand...the tragedy is *inevitable* if things keep going as they are. You have to find a way to stop Zelyse.”

This tragedy of yours...is there no way of avoiding it?

Lene sadly shook her head. “You’ve avoided one of the tragedies already. But a new enemy now stands in your way.”

Who? Zelyse? But he’s dead!

Was Zelyse still alive somehow? Was Lene talking about his plot?

“Yes. Their actions have caused the future I know to change. Even if you have averted Fran’s tragedy, Zelyse is still likely to incur his own.”

You have to give me a better clue than that...!

“I suppose I may as well, since the path has diverged so much. You know of the great beast sealed within the lake, yes? Zelyse has weakened its seal.”

I knew it!

“If it awakens, the beast will destroy the kingdom and much more. Fran, too, will lose her life.”

Now a new question came to mind. How did my becoming a sword have anything to do with the seal of the great beast?

I don’t understand how my turning into a sword can affect the seal. As far as I can tell, we’re completely unrelated.

“Romeo. The Magnolian power inside him. With it, he can stop Zelyse’s plan in its tracks. But it was not to be, before.”

Before...

The word “before” never sounded so cryptic. Lene had used it the last time we’d met as well. But she refused to elaborate on that.

“Fran changed drastically after you became a sword. She became self-destructive, far more aggressive. You were supposed to stop her, but you said nothing.”

That sounded like an all-too-probable future. I knew how much Fran loved me. If I became nothing more than a heartless weapon, it wouldn’t take much to turn her into an irritable killing machine in turn.

“Fran fought and defeated Theraclede in the ensuing battle. She was ruthless and ignored his pleas for mercy. Having lost his only guardian, Romeo snapped and lost control of his powers, and the beast could not be sealed.”

The Magnolias had the power to absorb Malice. The plan was to use this power to drain the piece of the Evil One contained in the beast. If Romeo were to lose control, the beast could rise again. Sierra must be deeply tied to Romeo if he knew that might happen.

If the beast with a fragment of the Evil One ran amok, it would cause great death and destruction. This was the tragedy Lene spoke of.

“Zelyse has managed to slip through the guardians’ defenses and arrive at the seal.”

So he survived! Zelyse had poisoned the Vivian Guardians with his waste products and succeeded in reaching his goal. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to die that easy. *Then we should just—* “No. You must figure out a way to stop him for good. If you pursue him, that man will not hesitate to resurrect the beast. He has already figured out how.”

Stop Zelyse for good? Easier said than done.

“This is all a game to him. He does not want to raise the beast yet. We have time.”

So you want us to make ready in the meantime?

"I leave it to your discretion. Only know that I wish the people no harm. It would be best if calamity could be avoided."

I'll do my best. For Fran's sake.

"That is all I ask for. Treasure the ones you love most." With that, Lene smiled and disappeared as if dissolving into the water. She really was a spirit.

But then I remembered something.

I forgot to ask her what all that "before" stuff is about!

Maybe Sierra would know. He seemed oddly knowledgeable about this incident.

Keeping everything Lene said in mind, I returned to Fran's side.

She said Zelyse was still fooling around, but it was cold comfort to know our fates were in the hands of that psychopath alchemist. We needed to quickly ask Sierra our questions and get Winalene to help us.

"Should we go see him now?"

Yeah. He seems to know a lot about the situation.

After all, we would've started questioning him already if the Fanatix replica hadn't interrupted us.

Fran looked for Sierra's aura and moved out. "Just a little more."

He's coming closer to us, too.

We were both looking for each other. It wouldn't take long to meet up.

"Step on it, Jet!"

"Woof!"

We quickly found Sierra, but he looked like he was out of breath.

"Huff, huff...the sword...!"

"It ran off."

"I...see..."

Sierra wouldn't be able to walk on water for very long. His stamina and mana were exhausted, but he'd forced himself to chase after the sword all the same, since it'd seemed related to Zelyse.

While he didn't look like he was about to drown, he definitely needed a break.

We headed to a nearby island: a cluster of rocks some ten meters in diameter. Sierra immediately sat down as soon as we landed. He was at his limit, though it looked like he now trusted Fran enough to let her see how tired he was.

Fran waited a few minutes for him to catch his breath before starting.

"Tell me everything you know." She didn't know where to start, so "everything" seemed good enough. She wanted to know who Sierra was and how he was related to Zelyse.

"..." Sierra was silent for a few seconds before opening his mouth. "Do you think people can travel through time?"

"Time?"

"Yeah."

"Hrm...?" Fran leaned her head and thought about it. She didn't fully understand the concept of time travel.

"A strange power comes upon you, transporting you into the past. The past you is still there, too, of course. Do you think it's possible?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Not without help from the gods, anyway."

"Yeah. But apparently it happened. To three people."

Oh, I got it! Fran tilted her head again, but I understood the gist of what Sierra was saying. If he'd leapt back through time from the future, then there could be two Romeos right now!

I gave Fran a simplified explanation. She seemed to understand.

"So you're a time-traveling Romeo?"

“Yeah. Imagine if the current Romeo traveled eight years into the past. I’m him, grown up.”

Romeo hadn’t gone back in time already grown up, but as he was now—as a child—and *then* grown up. This must be the “before” Lene had spoken of... though I couldn’t see Fran buying it, despite Sierra’s best efforts to explain. We were talking about time travel, after all.

“I see.”

“You...believe me?”

Apparently, Fran had no further objections.

“Your eyes are the same.”

“My eyes...”

She’d mentioned that last time. The way Romeo glared at Fran was just like Sierra.

Sierra didn’t seem to get it. What difference did eyes make, anyway? He touched the corners of his eyes in doubt, then seemed to accept it and moved on.

“Well, as long as you believe me.”

“What happened?”

“To me, it was eight years ago. To you, it’s your present. Events have played out differently from what I’ve seen, so I don’t think things will end exactly the same.”

Sierra slowly recounted what had happened to him.

Eight years ago (from his perspective), Romeo and Theraclede fled to Belioth. But their paths diverged greatly from the current Romeo and Theraclede. The previous Romeo and Theraclede were captured by Zelyse. Not that I imagined Theraclede coming quietly...

“He held me ransom...”

Theraclede was forced to obey Zelyse, becoming the subject of his experiments.

“Experiments?”

“He implanted his body with crystals, Fanatix replicas, injected him full of drugs...all I could do was watch as the old man was mutilated.”

“Old man,” huh? This other Romeo and Theraclede had also been on good terms. But all these experiments...the current Romeo and Theraclede made no mention of them in the Academy.

“That didn’t happen to the Romeo here?”

“We did our best to make sure of it.”

In the past, they’d fallen into Zelyse’s hands while running from Winalene and the Belioth adventurers. Now, they’d leaked information on the current Romeo and Theraclede’s whereabouts, so they were quickly placed in custody. Sierra must have been the one who reported on the strange shadows.

“We knew that Winalene wouldn’t kill us. It was better than becoming Zelyse’s playthings.”

“I see.”

The Romeo and Theraclede of before continued to be used by Zelyse. However, Winalene managed to retrieve Romeo. The high elf had sensed his presence and attacked Zelyse’s hideout as the alchemist was researching ways to undo the beast’s seal.

“I learned of my blood and the powers it held, then. I had unknowingly bound the old man to myself...”

But things took a turn for the worse a few days later, when Zelyse was spotted at the sealing grounds, clearly intending to break the seal. Fran, working for and accompanied by Winalene, showed up to stop him. Dead set on vengeance, Fran attacked Theraclede without a care for her surroundings. The Trade Fleet was destroyed in the ensuing battle. It all matched Lene’s warnings. With me transformed fully into a sword, there was no one holding Fran back.

“ ...”

Fran?

Fran looked away, a pained expression on her face. She knew the same thing

could still happen to her if I truly became a sword and nothing else. She might go berserk like the previous Fran.

But something else caught my attention. Fran wondered the same thing.

“Winalene didn’t stop me?”

She was powerful enough to restrain Fran if necessary.

But Sierra shook his head. “She was more concerned with holding off Theraclede, even if it meant losing the Trade Fleet.”

As Fran held off Theraclede, Winalene was preparing to seal the beast again... with Romeo as the sacrifice.

“The Magnolias have the power to drain the strength of Fiends. Normally, the user would have to rely on his own strength, but Winalene used a special method to enhance it.”

Evil One’s Communion. The power hidden in the Magnolia blood. It would drain the power of the piece of the Evil One within the beast, which would then be used in the sealing ritual. This process would simultaneously weaken the beast and seal it with its own energy.

“Draining the power of a goblin was easy enough, but a piece of the Evil One was too much. The young Romeo continued to siphon its energy, acting like a funnel for the purposes of the ritual...and then he died.”

Winalene didn’t stop. She was going to seal the beast, no matter what. It was hard to imagine her doing that, but as the great high elf of Belioth, she probably knew it was a small price to pay.

“I don’t blame her, either,” said Sierra. “I get it now.”

Sierra didn’t have an ounce of resentment over being made a human sacrifice. It had been unavoidable, and he’d accepted it. Theraclede, on the other hand, was not willing to accept Romeo’s death. As he rushed to save him, he exposed himself to Fran, who cut him down.

“I don’t remember what happened then. I wanted to save the old man...but then I lost control.”

He’d woken to find himself lying in a forest. Sierra touched the sword on his

hip.

“There was no one around but this sword lying next to me.”

Fran looked at it. Its Malice kept us from identifying it, but there was still a mysterious power coming from it.

“So what is that sword?”

“I don’t know if you’ll believe me...” Sierra said before clamming up. What more did the time traveler have to hide? He quietly looked at his sword for a few seconds as if he was talking to it.

After making his decision, he started slowly.

“This sword...contains the old man’s consciousness and power.”

Theraclede’s consciousness was in that sword? But that meant—

“It’s an Intelligent Weapon?”

“That’s right.”

“Oooh.”

It was hard to believe, but Sierra wasn’t lying. That sword really was an Intelligent Weapon containing Theraclede. When he’d paused just now...it was because he was literally talking to Theraclede.

“Y-you’re not surprised?”

“Oh, I am. Wow.”

It was hard to tell, but Fran really *was* surprised...just not flabbergasted. She’d already known there was something strange about the sword, after all, and she was used to having an Intelligent Weapon around. The fact that the weird sword turned out to be a *super* weird sword didn’t exactly knock her to the floor.

“Theraclede’s in there?”

“You believe that, too?”

Sierra could only stand there, shocked that Fran could believe everything he said. It was a combination of my Essence of Falsehood and Fran’s natural

instincts that allowed her to do so, but she must've seemed like a gullible weirdo to Sierra at the moment.

Fran ignored him to ask her next question, "You can talk to him? Can he talk to me?"

"Uhh, no...I'm the only one he can talk to. Sympathy. It's a Skill that allows him to share his thoughts with his user."

"I see," Fran whispered. Suddenly, the black sword in Sierra's hand let out a shrill clang, like it was trying to show us it had a mind of its own.

"The old man says he's sorry."

"Sorry?"

"You...hate him, don't you? That's why he's apologizing."

Like the Theraclede of our world, the previous Theraclede had also changed his ways. Fran knitted her eyebrows, but she didn't fly into a rage. Theraclede was no longer a man. Having overcome her anger, she seemed troubled by his apology.

Sierra also bowed his head low.

"Can you wait a little longer for your revenge?"

"You won't tell me to stop?"

"I know how you feel, after all...but there's something we have to do. We have to survive until then."

"Zelyse?"

"That's right. He—and the version of you from before—are enemies I can't forgive."

That was the source of Sierra's bloodlust for Fran. Even if they were different versions, they were still both Fran. She had badly wounded Theraclede—had probably killed him, actually, considering he was now a sword.

Sierra's resentment for the previous Fran remained, but it was nothing compared to the loathing he had for Zelyse. Also, he understood that Theraclede had only reaped what he sowed.

“The old man became this sword because of Zelyse’s experiments. We wouldn’t have been dragged into this mess if he hadn’t tried to raise the beast.”

A dark flame burned in Sierra’s eyes as he spoke. They looked a lot like Fran’s when she assaulted Theraclede. These two had a lot in common. Both caught in a series of unfortunate events at a young age, but still striving to accomplish their goals, despite it all. They’d both even managed to partner up with Intelligent Weapons.

“I solemnly vow to fight you when this whole business with Zelyse is over,” said Sierra. “But until then, let us off. Please.”

I knew why Sierra had revealed his secrets to us. He didn’t want to make an enemy out of Fran by rousing her suspicions. Fran stared at him as he sat there, head bowed, for a while.

Finally, she nodded. “Hm. All right.”

“Thank you.”

She had no grudge against Sierra, and the Theraclede in this sword was the Theraclede of the past. *His* score with the other version of Fran had already been settled. It wasn’t our grudge match to fight.

“I get that Theraclede’s a sword now, but how did that happen? Was it Zelyse?”

“Yeah. We don’t know the details, but he said he used a Fanatix replica to seal a human mind inside a sword.”

“You can do that?”

“He managed it. We have the proof of his success right here. I think he used the crystal and replica embedded in the old man’s body, but I don’t know the details. All I can say is that Theraclede wasn’t a sword before we traveled through time.”

“Really?”

“I lost control, we were engulfed by a bright light—and he was a sword when I woke up. He doesn’t look anything like a Fanatix replica, either. That’s all I know.”

Had Theraclede only become an Intelligent Weapon by accident? Wouldn't that make mass production difficult? The worst possible scenario, as far as I was concerned, was Zelyse figuring out how to produce Intelligent Weapons en masse and arming Raydoss with them. It looked like we were in the clear.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, Fran had another question. There was one thing still bugging her.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I may not be able to answer, but sure."

"You said there were three people who traveled through time. You and Theraclede. Who's the third?"

That was bugging me, too. I could guess who it was but didn't want to jinx it. Having multiple versions of that guy would be a nightmare.

Unfortunately, Sierra made my nightmare come true.

"Zelyse."

I knew it! Ugh, I'd had a feeling that was the case.

"We didn't know until earlier. That Zelyse was either the previous Zelyse or the current one, who got information from—"

"Why, hello there! Talking about me, are we?"

Suddenly, a familiar voice cut Sierra off.

"If it isn't Romeo and Fran! I was wondering why you weren't chasing me, so I came to *you* instead."

Zelyse stood there, a broken Fanatix replica in his hand, looking smug as ever. I knew now why Lene had still registered him as a threat even after we'd already defeated him. There *were* two Zelyses.

"It's me! Zelyse!"

But Fran tilted her head.

That's Zelyse?

Of course it is.

He looks a little off...does he have a little brother?

Something about this Zelyse didn't seem right to Fran. But Zelyse started talking again before we could ask.

"Like my new sword?"

He was definitely using the Fanatix replica we'd just seen. Half of the blade was missing.

"What is that thing?"

"This is my own handmade Intelligent Weapon! I call it the Super Hyper Invincible... No, that's far too long. Let's just call it the Zelyse, eh?"

As Zelyse said so, the sword began to transform like molten sugar. The hard steel shifted, morphed, and reformed itself.

A few seconds later, a venomous-looking sword which looked nothing like a Fanatix replica was in his hands.

It had a bluish-purple grip and pommel with a gigantic knuckle guard and a neon-pink blade. The sword was shorter than a shortsword but its blade was thicker to make up for it, its base being thicker than its point. It was something like a main gauche.

In a word, it looked despicable. But its menacing appearance wasn't the only change—Identify revealed a different set of information now.



The empty name field now showed up as Zelyse. Its Skills were now completely hidden; it probably got upgraded when it was named, like when Jet evolved after I'd named him.

"That sword is an Intelligent Weapon?"

"That's right! It's a living weapon with the consciousness of the previous me!"

Did he make an Intelligent Weapon by himself? He'd experimented heavily on Theraclede, but actually making one was quite a feat. Intelligent Weapons were the stuff of legends, even rarer than Godswords. And "the previous me"?

"I don't get it."

"Oh! Would you like to know more?"

"Hm."

"Then I'll tell you the whole shebang!" Zelyse shouted.

(Well. That was easy.)

"See, I was doing research on whether I could make an Intelligent Weapon! But I shifted my attention to chimeras since I just couldn't work out how to seal a soul in a particular vessel."

I wasn't really aware about this kind of stuff since the gods made me, but the soul *was* their realm to begin with. Manipulating it was difficult for mortals.

"Still, I kept doing simple experiments as I got more materials."

"Uh-huh."

"And then I made a new discovery over the last few years. The previous me came along and gave me data regarding the previous Theraclede." Zelyse fixed his eyes on Sierra's black sword. "The previous me." That meant that we were talking to the current Zelyse.

"Now this Fanatix replica is very interesting. Even if it was only for a while, it used to be able to think like an Intelligent Weapon."

Marquis Aschtner, who dug up Fanatix, had had ties to Raydoss. Zelyse must've approached Raydoss, which was how he got the information.

With all the Raydossian infighting, it was hard to tell just how much Zelyse had taken part in the Fanatix plot. But he was in deep enough to get his hands on the research data and some replicas.

“I made a lot of progress in my research by using information about how the previous me turned Theraclede into an Intelligent Weapon.”

Prolonged exposure to an embedded Fanatix replica tricked the body and soul into homeostasis. The replica would be identified as part of the body. When the body was destroyed, the soul would be attracted to the Fanatix replica in an effort to maintain equilibrium.

“It takes a lot of setup, of course! Compatible crystal, man-made circuits and channels...but it was well worth it to make an Intelligent Weapon! The previous me is also stoked. There aren’t that many people in recorded history who’ve turned themselves into Intelligent Weapons! The only thing left to do was transcribe my mind into a sword, but you guys needed to kill me to see whether it would work. I sure am glad it did!”

“Is that sword the Zelyse we were just fighting?”

“Yep!”

The previous Zelyse had volunteered to become a sword. The man was crazy enough to experiment on himself.

But I finally picked up on why Fran thought something was off about him. The Zelyses were of different ages. Just as Romeo and Sierra were eight years apart, so were they. The difference was less pronounced because Zelyse was part magus, but that only highlighted how sharp Fran’s instincts were.

Fran tilted her head. *Hm?* All this talk about Now and Before was leaving her confused.

The Zelyse you just beat was the previous Zelyse. He’s a sword now. The one in front of us is the current Zelyse.

“I see.”

“Oh? You believe me? I was ready to provide proof, too...a bit too trusting, Fran, don’t you think? There’s some nasty folk out there! I’d hate for them to

trick you!”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Ah ha ha! Touche! But look at him! Isn’t he the coolest?” Zelyse lifted the Zelyse overhead, looking like a child with a new toy. “The previous me says hi, by the way.”

“I can’t hear him.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that. You guys wouldn’t hear a thing.”

It was difficult to tell that we were dealing with an Intelligent Weapon when the sword wasn’t in motion. But seeing how it moved in the water, there was no doubt in my mind. The bastard really had done it. He’d made an Intelligent Weapon. I just hoped he wasn’t having a fire sale any time soon!

And my concerns were justified enough.

“Can you mass-produce them?”

“I’ve got a working theory but it’s far from perfect. Too much luck involved. What’s that? You wanna show off, too? Right, of course! Sorry about that, friendo!”

If you didn’t know his sword could talk, it would have looked like Zelyse was talking to his imaginary friend. Maybe I should warn Fran about that.

“The previous me is getting bored! What say we cut the talk and make things a little more *interactive*?”

“Interactive...how?”

“Ah ha ha ha! With a live demonstration, of course!”

As Zelyse cackled and readied his sword, it began emitting powerful energy. The mana alone told me it was nothing to trifle with, but that wasn’t all.

Fran, the Zelyse sword has the same powerful Skills as the one from before, and it might be sharing them with Zelyse! Stay sharp!

“Hm!”

What we had to look out for was consecutive Skills and spells. Basically, me and Fran’s bread and butter. The Zelyses might be able to use their Skills like we

did.

“Ah ha ha ha! Here goes!”

Zelyse looked like he was having a blast, even as he blocked Fran’s attack.

“Hee hee! Good, *very* good! I’ve fought this sword before!”

I chipped away at Zelyse’s durability with every clash, but Self Recovery turned the situation into a stalemate. Meanwhile, spells rained down on us.

“Hrm.”

I’ll defend. You focus on attacking!

“Hm!”

Zelyse was using powerful spells without incantations, like No Cast. His concealment Skills also made them difficult to detect. Even when we knew his sword was casting spells for him, it was still easy to be caught off-guard. The spells were impossible to avoid if it was your first time facing him.

The time intervals were strange, too. The body usually froze immediately after casting a spell or using a Skill, giving you a brief window to hit someone. But Zelyse and his sword took turns attacking, effectively nullifying that recovery period.

It was the same strategy Fran and I depended on—and it was only now, facing it ourselves, that I realized what an unfair advantage it gave us. A powerful attack, immediately followed by another powerful attack. It was a nightmare for opponents trying to rush in and get the drop on you.

What made things worse was his ability to make himself intangible to evade *our* attacks. He’d done it before, but the Skill was on another level now, toggling far more rapidly than before. Earlier, he’d had to keep using the mysterious Skill once he activated it. We couldn’t attack him—but he couldn’t attack us, either. Now, though, he kept rapidly flicking it on and off, allowing him to be more aggressive in his attacks.

Using the Zelyse sword appeared to have decreased the cost of using the Skill. Maybe only one of the Zelyses was managing the Skill, leaving the other free to attack.

“Come on, eat a spell!”

“Tsk!”

“Aww, another whiff!”

Meanwhile, we and adult Romeo—Sierra—were very exhausted.

I was still in shambles from using Sword God Form and Fran was running low on mana. We couldn't afford to be careless with an opponent like Zelyse, either, so fighting him took all of our concentration. We tried attacking him when he turned tangible, but he was expecting it. He deliberately randomized his timing, messing up our counterattacks. Sierra didn't look like he was about to use his Skill-canceling ability, too, maybe because he was worried for us.

Fran approached Sierra and called out to him, putting up a wind barrier so Zelyse couldn't hear their conversation.

“Hey, Romeo...uh, Sierra? Romeo?”

“Sierra's fine.”

“Sierra, can you use that ability again?”

“Not yet.”

It wasn't the kind of ability you kept on tap. It ate up too much energy.

All the same...I'd noticed something strange while fighting Zelyse. Was this all he could do? Sure, it was a test drive, but his attacks (powerful as they were) lacked something. Was this all the Zelyse sword was capable of?

It didn't make sense to me. Test drive or not, it felt like he was just trying to bait Fran and Sierra.

“Hey, is that all you got?” he'd sneer. “You're disappointing me!”

Occasionally, he'd try something like “Wow, that was pretty good! Pretty good, but not good enough!”

And every once in a while, “How about you run? We can play another day!”

That thing about running away was a lie. I was beginning to understand his plan. He was stalling us, trying to keep us here. He didn't want us to leave.

Which meant we were better off advancing. Everything would be over if we could beat Zelyse, but could we really do that now?

What now?

Ideally, we get Sierra to keep him busy.

Meanwhile, we would go past Zelyse to see what rotten plan he had in store for us.

Fran approached Sierra and whispered. "Can you keep him busy?"

"You have a plan?"

"Zelyse is stalling. I'm thinking of going past him."

"I see..."

"Well?"

"All right. I'll play my trump card," Sierra said confidently. He and the Theraclede sword still had tricks up their sleeves. We were probably in good hands.

"Draw his attention for a bit."

"Got it."

After a bit of coordination, Fran charged toward Zelyse.

We made it seem like Fran was baiting for an obvious counterattack, making it difficult for Zelyse to attack her. Once we had his attention, I cast Dimension Sword multiple times.

Dimension Sword happens to be quite powerful when over-boosted with loads of mana, so I fired twelve of them, going after Zelyse from every angle.

Ideally, he would leave his intangible state and protect himself with a barrier.

But Zelyse maintained his intangibility and swung the Zelyse to take out one Dimension Sword after another. It was probably imbued with the Timespace element. Clearly the Intelligent Weapon was not to be taken lightly, but this was all within our plans. The real attack would come from below.

"Grrr!" Jet warped out of the shadows with Dimension Fang and clamped on

both of Zelyse's legs.

"Urgh! You'd attack me when you'd get hurt, too?!"

The storm of Dimension Swords raged around Jet, a few of them even hitting his face when he emerged from the shadows. But Jet was ready for it. Even as he sustained heavy injury, he managed to lock Zelyse down.

Sierra then came in, his jet-black sword surging with Malice.

"OOOOOH!"

He released the mass of Malice from his arm and it slithered like a snake, coiling around Zelyse's arm.

"Black Malice Chain!"

The chain of black Malice bound Zelyse and he crumpled to the ground at once. "Ugh! Wh-what...?"

"That's a chain of Malice. How do you like it? Hard to keep your skills up, huh?"

The chain had similar properties to the Malice blast Sierra used earlier.

"Good enough?"

"Hm. Take care of him," said Fran, beginning to leave.

The moment Zelyse noticed that Fran was heading out, he started mocking her again. "Leaving so soon, Fran? You've grown cowardly since we last met!"

"...Hmph."

"Hey! Wait!" Zelyse desperately tried to chase her after she snubbed him. But Sierra stood in his way. As long as the Malice chain was on him, he couldn't just ignore Sierra.

"You're fighting *me*, Zelyse."

"CURSE YOU!"

We took off into the lake as Zelyse cried out in frustration.

Chapter 4:

Rise of the Beast

WE'LL USE Dimension Shift to get through here.

"Hm."

We don't have a lot of mana to work with, so we gotta move fast. Jet, Shadow Warp to keep up.

"Woof!"

I activated Dimension Shift as Vivian Guardians watched our every move.

Jet moved to the shadows of a rock at the bottom of the lake, but the guardians soon surrounded him. They could sense him even in the shadows.

Jet! Come back!

Ruff...

The guardians might lose their temper if we pushed too hard. Jet would have to hold point in case Zelyse came. Fran and I carried on above water without issues. Soon we spotted something mysterious from the surface.

What is that?

"A pillar?"

A white pillar, five meters in diameter, jutted out of the water into the sky. There wasn't just one of them, either.

Let's go up.

"Hm."

We went higher to get a better look and found twelve pillars in total, arranged in a circle at regular intervals. This must've been the center of the lake.

I feel a weird mana.

“Feels gross.”

A strange mana swirled from the center of the circle. It wasn't Malice, but it wasn't ordinary mana either. As Fran said, it felt...*gross*.

“Let's go, Teacher.”

Looks like we'll have to.

I wanted to be more careful, but we didn't have much mana to spare. We should at least check this stuff out to see the source of the mana. Fran fell into water, which was relatively shallower than the rest of the lake at only ten meters. We spotted a mysterious sunken building beneath the water.

At a glance, it seemed to be constructed of the same material as the white pillars. An altar sat at the center and, although ancient, it was a spotless white without a trace of moss.

The strange mana was coming from the center of the temple. An invader had infiltrated the shrine. A purple crystal the size of a large tier with equally poisonous looking tentacles.

What is that?

It's made of crystal. It must be one of Zelyse's crystal weapons!

The grotesque sculpture hovered over the altar, sucking the mana out of its surroundings while pouring something into the shrine. The discomfort we felt earlier must have been this thing doing its foul work.

“So you've made it this far.”

“Lene!”

Lene suddenly appeared, looking at us with sad eyes. “This place is special. You can undo your Timespace magic now. The guardians will not enter here.”

I did as I was told and deactivated Dimension Shift. The Vivian Guardians outside the shrine showed no signs of aggression. We were safe now, but I still put up an air barrier, since we were underwater. Even then, the Vivian Guardians let us be.

“You have seen the giant crystal as well?”

“Hm.”

Lene gazed sorrowfully at the crystal weapon. The thing looked ominous as ever...and it was definitely not welcome here.

Is that thing trying to revive the beast?

“Yes. It is using the surrounding mana to slowly corrode the beast’s seal. If another sealing ritual is not performed, the seal will break, unleashing the beast in all its power.”

“Then why not just do the ritual again?”

“Because it takes time. We might make it if you hurry, but...”

“How is the ritual performed?”

“Winalene will know, though I’m not sure if she’ll do it.”

“What?”

“Ask her yourself.”

Lene really wasn’t the detail-oriented sort, I guess.

“So the monster won’t come back if I destroy that thing?”

“An impossibility. Zelyse has protected it with a powerful barrier. I tried destroying it myself but could barely leave a scratch. We would require the power of a high elf.”

It had to be one tough customer if a powerful spirit like Lene couldn’t do anything about it. Not that we were going to let that stop us from trying.

“Just one question. Can I destroy that thing?”

“I would welcome it. You would avert the worst possible outcome. However, it is impossible. You should leave the country while you still have time,” said Lene, shaking her head sadly.

“That’s all I needed to know. Teacher.”

Yeah!

“Well...don’t blame me for what happens.”

Ignoring Lene’s despair, Fran launched herself at the crystal weapon.

“Flashing Thunderclap—Skycutter!”

Wreathed in black lightning, she swung a high-speed slash.

CLANG!

But a dull sound was all I got. I felt like a blunt sword striking a hard boulder.

“Huh?”

The weapon remained unfazed. Fran looked confused. No wonder.

We didn't damage it.

I had the power to absorb any crystal I cut into...but if I couldn't even graze the crystal, the ability wouldn't trigger in the first place.

“Hrm...”

Can't be helped. We'll have to use Sword God Form.

But Fran shook her head and looked like she was about to cry.

“No!”

Fran had become increasingly worried about me ever since she learned that I could lose touch with my humanity. It was understandable. Sword God Form made me the perfect weapon, increasing my sword adaptation. There was the problem of my durability, too.

But putting a dent in that thing's going to be hard if I don't.

A full powered Skycutter did no damage. Sword God Form might be dangerous, but I just needed a second of it to crack the crystal. Still, Fran refused.

“No way.”

What'll we do, then?

“I'll handle it.” Fran clenched my handle, looking determined. “I'll cut into it for sure. You don't have to force yourself.”

Fran then stood in front of the crystal and relaxed. She concentrated her energy and controlled her breathing. She looked like she was trying to use Black Lightning God Claw again, but she was more focused this time.

Instead of gathering all her energy at once, she took her time, slowly building it up.

I wanted to stop her. Her earlier failure suggested that she was too young to use the move and that it placed too great a burden on her body. What worried me most was that she might actually pull it off thanks to Skills like Mana Control that she shared with me.

But she was already lost in concentration. Stopping her while she was controlling the mana inside her body would be too dangerous. And Fran was right; this was the only alternative to Sword God Form.

All I could do now was keep the wind barrier up and support her.

Her mana flow was much more efficient compared to last time. Had she figured something out after using it just once?

The circulation of mana, the density of the black lightning—they were all far less chaotic now. It still wasn't perfect, and it didn't mean that it was no longer a burden on her. Fran, the picture of fortitude, was wincing. I could imagine the strain she was under just by looking at her. But I couldn't heal her. Introducing another source of mana when everything was this finely balanced would only cause interference.

I silently watched and cheered Fran on.

Suddenly, Lene shouted out: "Zelyse is coming!"

Right...!

This was bad, but I didn't warn Fran. She should've been able to hear Lene, too, but she didn't respond. So I stayed silent. This was no time for interruptions.

Still, I couldn't feel Zelyse's presence. He must've turned himself intangible again to get past the Vivian Guardians. Lene could detect him, probably because she was a time spirit. She looked almost human as she watched Fran with concern.

A few long seconds later, a shadow fell into the water—Zelyse.

He took a crystal from his pocket and threw it to his feet. There was a

powerful burst of mana, then a change in our surroundings. The crystal had put up a dome of wind—another trick in his arsenal. Zelyse drew the sword-Zelyse within the underwater dome.

“There you are! Don’t suppose I can convince you to stop?”

He looked worried and flustered, despite putting a powerful shield on his crystal weapon. Did he think Fran was that strong? He must’ve been cautious after seeing how easily she dealt with his crystal soldiers.

But it was too little, too late for him.

“Hm!” Fran opened her eyes and got low to the ground. “Black Lightning God Claw!”

Black lightning now coated my edge.

Earlier, Fran had attempted to create a sword of black lightning. But Black Lightning God Claw was supposed to be used to imbue your weapon. This version was also easier to control.

Fran knew this and she’d deliberately chosen the sword version out of concern for me. Being imbued with divine element twice in one day was ludicrous. I was still beat up from Sword God Form, and it would only get worse.

But thousands would suffer, if not die outright, if we didn’t destroy the crystal weapon. We *needed* this to work.

Using Black Lightning God Claw for a moment took less of a toll on me than two Sword God Forms in one day. That was why Fran had held off until the last moment to activate it. She’d executed a more difficult version of the move in order to spare me the burden of another divine imbuelement.

Leave it to Fran to perfectly pull off a clutch move when it was most needed.

“Haaaa!”

Raaaaah!

She used her entire body to stab the crystal. There was not a single wasted movement between her ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, elbows, and wrists. Her form was beautiful and viciously powerful.

THUNK!

The hit felt dull—not much different from the earlier Skycutter. But the result was vastly different.

YES!

“Hm!”

The gigantic purple crystal disappeared before our very eyes. A flood of mana rushed through my body.

UOOOOOH!

Even a B-Threat crystal was nothing compared to this. The last time I’d had this much mana was when I Cannibalized Fanatix.

...

My mind went blank with pleasure.

Teacher?

...

This was bad. Very bad.

Losing. Myself—

Teacher!

Fran’s voice snapped me awake, like a divine revelation, just as I was slipping.

Fran...?

I came back to my senses. We were still in battle.

Fran’s voice was special. She could always reach me, no matter where I was.

Sorry. I must’ve worried you there.

That was close. I would’ve been useless if Zelyse had started attacking. The alchemist had used the finest possible crystal to craft his weapon. *Thanks for the meal, Zelyse.*

I was still in a daze. I needed to pull myself together.

“You...have got to be kidding me...” Zelyse was shocked. Whatever he was

expecting, it hadn't been that.

The oppressive mana had disappeared from the shrine when the crystal weapon was destroyed. But we couldn't relax just yet.

You okay, Teacher?

I'd like to think that I am...

But I was in trouble. Even though I'd survived consuming a ton of mana, I was now practically useless as a sword. I had lost a ton of durability, and my recovery wasn't kicking in. I was currently a small, broken blade, and I was stuck that way.

Such is the price of the divine element.

Honestly, taking him on right now would be too dangerous.

All right.

Zelyse still looked dumbstruck, but he could attack us at any given moment.

But then he said something we didn't anticipate. "Heh...ha ha ha ha! This is amazing! *You're* amazing, Fran! Hats off to the tiny cat!"

He started laughing. Genuinely. He wasn't being sarcastic, either. I really couldn't tell what was going on in his brain.

"You know, the previous me told me to be careful around you. Now I know why. You must've given him the scare of his life."

I'd thought the Zelyses were working together, but it sounded like the previous Zelyse hadn't given the current one too many details.

"The previous you?"

"What do you think our relationship is like?"

"Like two cockroaches in a nest. One of you is bad. Two of you is worse."

"C-cockroaches?"

"That's what you are."

"A-ah ha ha! You know, I'm kind of hurt!"

Fran didn't have much in the way of etiquette. She was in a bad mood, too,

mainly on account of that thing where Zelyse was trying to undo the seal of the beast.

“Your opinions of me aside—”

“Roach.”

“*That aside!* The previous Zelyse and I are fellow researchers! Colleagues! It’s a rather businesslike relationship. We’re not as buddy-buddy as you seem to believe.”

“Why? You wouldn’t fail if you’d just ask him for information.”

“But that takes the *fun* out of it!”

Yet again, his own enjoyment was core to Zelyse’s *modus operandi*.

“Where’s the fun in doing something that’s already been done? Besides, the future is fickle. Especially with both me and the Romeo from the last go-round.”

That was true. Zelyse couldn’t get his hands on Romeo and Theraclede thanks to Sierra’s interference.

“Relying on such vague information would be too dangerous. That’s why I didn’t bother asking the previous me about what happened in his timeline. I asked for his research data, and that was that.”

So this Zelyse was more or less in the dark about what happened before.

“The previous me understood this, so he didn’t shove information down my throat. Working with yourself can be quite convenient. You immediately understand one another.”

Usually, you’d tell your alternate self everything you could about your own timeline. Your failures, your enemies—every little detail. I would definitely have filled myself in if given the chance.

“But he did warn me of one person in particular— without going into the nitty-gritty, of course. Apparently, she gave him quite the workout in his own timeline,” said Zelyse, casting a suggestive glance at Fran.

“Me?”

“That’s right. Remember when we first met in Bulbola? I was ready to let

loose a whole army of crystal soldiers on the city.”

“An army?”

“One hundred, to be exact. But the previous me said it would be a waste of good crystals and insisted I spend them elsewhere. I relented and changed my plans.”

The previous Zelyse probably had his crystal army decimated by Fran. The result must’ve been significant. Despite there being only a slight difference in the outcome for Bulbola, Zelyse had gotten to keep his crystals. Which was my loss, because a hundred crystal soldiers would’ve boosted my crystal count by a lot at the time. It would’ve been a huge boon.

“But now I see why he was so cautious. Maybe it’s not you, but your sword. Could be a Skill, too. Anyway, you have the power to destroy crystals. No matter the type, strength, or grade, a teensy crack will do the trick.”

“...”

“Ooh, I *like* the look in those eyes. Not quite right, but not too wrong, eh?”

He’d figured me out! I guess he finally put two and two together after what happened to his soldiers, sword, and weapons, all made of crystal.

“A terrible matchup for a crystal specialist like myself. I have a natural predator!”

“How about you call it quits *right now*?”

“Well, I haven’t lost! Not yet. Although I do admit your powers are a threat.”

Zelyse turned his gaze to me. They were the cold eyes of a scientist regarding a test subject. I was used to being seen as an object, but this was disturbing. It felt like he was stripping me to my core.

“I’d love to get my hands on that sword and analyze it,” he murmured dreamily.

“Not happening.”

“Aha! So there are secrets to your sword after all! The plot thickens!”

He’s getting too close! Time for our ultimate attack: Change the Subject!

“What happened to Sierra?”

“Oh, him? You’ll have to beat the answer out of me.”

“I will.”

“Ooo! And when you’re all beat up yourself, too!” He mock-punched the air a couple times. “What fighting spirit!”

We were definitely looking worse for wear. I was still broken, but Fran was also exhausted. She wasn’t gasping for air, but she couldn’t hide her fatigue. Black Lightning God Claw had taken a lot out of her.

But Fran and I weren’t the only ones in our party.

Jet!

“Grrr!”

“Whoa!”

I summoned Jet to attack Zelyse. Annoyingly, Zelyse gracefully avoided the shadowy ambush. His detection and reflexes weren’t something to scoff at.

“And the follow-up?!” Zelyse complained, despite perfectly evading Jet’s attack. He was really cautious of his Timespace attacks.

Fran had moved in to attack him while Jet kept him busy, but he managed to dodge again. He was a tough fighter.

“Ah ha ha ha! That sword of yours really is strong! Let’s see how it handles this.”

“Hrm.”

A crystal sword?

Fran blocked Zelyse’s crystal sword and I immediately absorbed it, but he didn’t look frustrated. If anything, his smile only widened.

“Nyah ha ha ha! What about this?”

Again!

Zelyse took out another crystal sword and continued his offense. He was clearly aiming at me instead of Fran. Dodging here would only cause Fran to

stumble, and it *was* free crystal, so we ended up blocking it again.

Another of his crystal swords went down the hatch, and he let out a deranged laugh at the sight of it.

“Wow! So it really is the power of the sword! Amazing! A sword that absorbs crystal! I can’t wait to see its shiny insides!”

Gross! But suddenly, Zelyse paused and tilted his head. He then gave Fran a puzzled look.

“Oh? Really? Uh-huh.”

“...what?”

“The previous me’s disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“He said the previous you was way stronger, scarier, and more dangerous.”

“Hm!” Fran fell silent. She was strong enough already. Was the difference between the two Frans really so significant?

I thought about it...and realized a big difference between my Fran and the Fran these time travelers knew.

The battle of Bulbola. According to Zelyse, the previous me had decimated his crystal soldiers and powered up significantly. Must’ve been four to five ranks in one go. We would have ended up fighting stronger monsters and becoming far more powerful than we were now...but the process would have sped up my swordshift, too. I was much stronger in that timeline, but I had also lost my human heart.

The Fran the other Zelyse knew would’ve been stronger (because I was much stronger), scarier (because she was constantly rampaging), and more dangerous (because I was no longer there to stop her).

If that were true, had the other Zelyse actually saved us? It certainly seemed that way. If anything, though, I thought we really owed our lives to the other Fran. Her rampage had saved us, in a roundabout way. It had given us hope.

Man...

What is it, Teacher?

I'm just wondering how the previous Fran is doing.

I'm...sure she's fine.

What makes you say that?

Because you'll never abandon me. Even if you lose your mind, I know you'll save me when I'm in trouble. She's fine.

But Lene said I had completely turned into a sword.

It'll be fine because it's you. You'll figure something out.

Fran's honest feelings shot me through the heart.

Yeah...you're right.

Hm!

It was strange. Fran's faith in me made me think everything was going to be all right. But she *was* right. I wasn't going to leave my sweet daughter behind and turn into a dumb sword, and I knew the same went for the previous me. Like Fran said, I might regain my heart someday, especially if there was a good reason to do so.

The same went for Fran. Even if she rampaged on the battlefield here and there, she would quickly return to her senses. So what if I wasn't around? She'd regain her senses and beat me against a rock so I would regain mine.

And it wasn't our place to know what had happened *Before*. *Before* might have branched off into its own parallel universe. *Before* might be overwritten by *Now*.

All we could do was stay positive. Angst certainly wasn't going to help anybody. Besides, we had this pretty boy psychopath to whale on!

All right, Fran. Are you ready?

Hm! Sorry for the wait.

Zelyse said he was disappointed, but we'd been preparing our trump card as the fight went on. He'd pay for looking down on Fran!

Here goes, Teacher!

Do it!

Escape was the best option, but Zelyse might do something to the seal if we retreated. No, the seal had been weakened...and it was up to us to stop him. That's why Fran chose to fight. She couldn't fight for much longer, so we had to finish this quick.

Haaaaa!

"Taaaah!"

Resonance Magic!

"Resonance Magic!"

My and Fran's mana combined to make a single spell: Resonance Magic. The fruit of our training in the Demon Wolf's Garden. It resonated the mana of multiple spells into one single spell. Quite the rare Skill.

In fact, it was a Unique Skill, and using it required all the parties involved to have it. Not an easy thing to do. Just having the Skill wasn't enough, either.

You needed to control and match the wavelengths of your mana, meaning you needed someone experienced with Mana Control who also had Resonance Magic. These requirements made it difficult to coordinate.

Amanda herself had only seen it used a handful of times, mostly by elite monster packs in dungeons. A dungeon with monsters of the same type and strength level should be able to resonate easily with one another.

I happened to get it from one of the monsters in the Garden by accident: the Resonance Slime, a colony of five slimes moving as one. I killed it before it could get to use its Resonance Magic on me.

"Urk...!"

You can do it, Fran!

Fran groaned, holding her head. This was why we couldn't use this in a real fight. The magic was supposed to be used by a pack of ten to twenty monsters. Here, all that load was shared between me and Fran alone. The Skill placed a

heavy burden on the brain, giving Fran monstrous migraines.

“It feels like someone’s bashing my head with a spiked mallet,” she said. Painful stuff. But Fran was doing a very good job of holding it in. “AAAAH!”

You’re doing great!

Fran was still carrying out her task despite screaming in pain. She dug deep and fought the pain to ensure the success of the ritual. Meanwhile, I was controlling my mana to match the output to hers.

Pale blue lightning descended on us, striking everything in our midst.

It even struck the intangible Zelyse who had been taking it easy.

“Gaah! Wh-what...?”

“Grrr!” Jet didn’t waste the opening, but sank his teeth into him, leaving a deep wound.

“Urgh!”

Meanwhile, the lightning raged on. Resonance Magic allowed Fran’s thunder magic to merge with my Timespace magic, creating Timespace-charged lightning bolts. Different combinations of magics produced different results.

The damage wasn’t great, though, and if one of the members put in too much mana, the spell would fail. The mana output had to be matched to the one with the lowest mana: Fran, in this case. I didn’t get headaches, so it was the least I could do.

The damage was further reduced because combining elements took mana. It was much weaker compared to Kanna Kamuy and Skycutter, but it was very useful in situations which called for multiple elements. We now had a Timespace attack that could hit Zelyse at the speed of lightning.

“Aaaaargh! What...is this...?!” Zelyse was baffled by the supposed thunder spell getting through his intangibility. Even he couldn’t figure out what it was at first glance.

Quick, while we still have resonance!

“Hm!” Fran rushed in to cut Zelyse down. We were putting everything we had

to take him out.

But then we all stopped. Fran, Jet, Zelyse, and I halted in confusion.

“This is...?”

“Ruff...”

A huge mana signature is emitting from the shrine!

“Why did the seal break? I-I didn’t even do anything yet...”

Gray mana slowly crept from the center of the shrine.

We immediately jumped out of the way.

“W-waaaah!” Zelyse let out a loud cry. It sounded genuine, not sarcastic. I wasn’t surprised. “What is this...?! Get off of me!”

His body had been bound by countless strings. They looked like the translucent tentacles of a jellyfish, emerging from the white floor of the shrine to attack him. His intangibility was of no help to him here.

Had the monster awakened? How? Was it because we were fighting?

Where’s Lene? She should know what’s going on.

Hm? I can’t find her.

Suddenly, we heard her voice behind us. “I told you to run...”

“Lene?”

Lene appeared, a sorrowful look on her face, as the monstrous mana erupted from the lakebed. “It’s too late...I didn’t think this would happen...”

Lene, what’s going on?!

“Thank you, Fran...” Lene continued. “Now the beast can arise in its incomplete form.”

“Lene...you did this?”

“Yes,” Lene nodded, her expression heavy with guilt.

Fran couldn’t believe it. “Why...?”

“A partial awakening is better than a complete one, and an awakening was

inevitable. Also...”

“Also?”

“It’s...nothing. You must leave while there’s still time. And tell Winalene...to prepare herself.” Lene delivered that one-sided warning and disappeared, like she always did.

Meanwhile, the tentacles showed no signs of releasing Zelyse.

“Curse you!” He couldn’t use his intangibility in spite of himself.

A part of his body had managed to turn intangible and slip through the tentacles, but the rest of his body had remained solid. Even if he succeeded in using his ability, the tentacles would quickly latch on to another body part to lock him down.

He looked really stupid as he got a taste of his own medicine.

Fran, Jet! We’re getting outta here!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

“AAAAH!”

We made a mad dash for the exit as Zelyse’s shrill cries echoed behind us.

We teleported—and failed.

Huh?

“Hm?!”

The teleport *had* engaged—but our destination was way off. I’d wanted to teleport us out of the shrine. Instead, we wound up only taking a side step several paces away. Was this the work of the time spirit?

We’ll have to foot it!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet Air Hopped to escape the clutches of the countless tentacles. The tentacles struck them like snakes, but they evaded their attacks and blasted

some spells back at them. But even when they managed to destroy some of them, many more took their place.

One turned to two turned to four. Tentacles continuously gushed out of the shrine like a fountain. Fran couldn't just use Flashing Thunderclap, either. She was too exhausted.

Thin translucent tentacles attacked Fran from all sides, blocking off all angles of escape. It reminded me of Phelms' thread attack at the tournament.

The wall of tentacles is going to crush us at this point!

"Hrm!"

The dome of tentacles was closing in on us.

Fran kicked her battered body into high gear and winced from the strain.

Damn it! If only I was in fighting shape!

Hang on...what if...?!

I quickly pulled up my stats.

I knew it! Just a little more...!

I might be able to fully recover if I played my cards right.

I'm out of crystal!

Evolution. I was fifty crystals away from ranking up but could find none in Pocket Dimension. A few goblin crystals weren't going to cut it.

Fran didn't have any in her inventory, either. Was this a dead end? But maybe...

He'll definitely have crystals! Fran, I'll be right back!

"Hm!"

I left Fran's hand and quickly descended.

"Zelyse!"

"Huh? Who are you?"

I didn't know how far I could trick him, but I approached him with

Doppelganger.

“Give me your crystal! I might be able to get us out of here! I’ll even let you live!”

“Huh? What?!”

“Hurry!”

“Fine! Just help me!”

Zelyse looked confused but knew he was in no position to negotiate. He was forced to comply, so he took out a decent-sized crystal from his robes. Probably had an item pouch in there. He flicked his wrist and threw the crystal to the clone. It probably came from a B or C-Threat monster.

“Take it, thief!”

“Ha ha! Thanks!”

I turned the clone around so Zelyse couldn’t see me absorb the crystal. He would probably figure it out with a little bit of thinking, but it never hurt to be safe.

Here it comes! My broken body was instantly fixed as mana welled up inside me. Not a trace of the damage caused by divine element was left. *We’re back in business!*

The crystal was worth a little over fifty points, barely enough to rank me up. I didn’t think I’d rank up again so quickly. Crystal absorption had been slow lately, because of how weak Fenrir had become. Most of this rank up must’ve come from the giant crystal corroding the seal. That alone had been worth over five hundred points.

I had sixty EP left over. Not much, but I wasn’t complaining. P.A. said my EP gain would be back to normal at the next rank up.

I’m back, Fran! I disposed of my clone and returned to Fran’s side.

“Come here, Jet!”

“Woof!”

I’ll wipe it out in one attack! You just focus on escaping!

“Okay.”

The tentacles were susceptible to magic. A powerful area of effect spell would create enough of an opening to escape. I started casting multiple Kanna Kamuys—but things didn’t go as planned.

Gah! What the...

Teacher?

The incantation is destabilizing!

At first I thought it was just Timespace magic going haywire, but an external force was clearly interfering, preventing me from using too much magic. My multiple Kanna Kamuys were not going to come out.

What now? Should I settle for lesser spells? I didn’t think that would be enough to deal with the tentacles.

As I sat there deliberating, Zelyse cast a spell.

“OOOOH!”

This is...a barrier!

“DO IT!”

Zelyse tossed a powerful crystal weapon in our direction. The barrier was tough enough to withstand the tentacles and the mysterious interference. My spell quickly stabilized.

He probably hadn’t used it on himself because the duration was too short to make his escape. I was guessing this was a defensive tool, meant to momentarily block an opponent’s large-scale spell. Fortunately, a moment was all I needed.

UOOOOH! BLOW THEM AWAY!

I cast Kanna Kamuy, spreading it out instead of focusing it.

“Wait, are you going to—”

The six Kanna Kamuys crashed into the ground and spread in all directions, covering the lake bed with white lightning.

Now!

“Hm!”

Fran made a beeline for the surface, carrying a shrunken Jet in her arms. She used Telekinetic Air Ride halfway through. We quickly ascended, rushing past the explosions and lightning.

Looking down, we saw the waters around the shrine boiling. Bubbles obscured our vision, but the loud crackling told us that the water was charged with electricity.

I wondered what had happened to Zelyse. I’d said I might be able to get him out of there, but I made no guarantees. He could’ve escaped, since I didn’t hit him directly...but then, he wouldn’t die from something like that, anyway. At least I’d kept my promise of letting him live.

Let’s get away from the shrine.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Jet and I started going at full speed. We were farther away now, but the mana emanating from the shrine was so powerful that we just couldn’t relax. Fran and Jet’s hair stood on end. Fran was even breaking into a cold sweat.

An overwhelming presence came over me. It only got stronger despite us moving away. *It’s not hostile or malicious, but...*

“It’s scary.”

“Arf...”

“It wants to eat us.”

“Ruff...”

Hunger. Whatever this thing was, it was starving. Even I was identified as food.

There’s Malice in it, too.

“Hm...”

“Woof...”

A piece of the Evil One really was inside of the beast. The Malice in the area was powerful enough to give Theraclede and Murelia a run for their money.

“Let’s go find Winalene.”

Right.

We went to see Winalene as Lene told us to. I still didn’t understand why Lene broke the monster’s seal. Or did she really do it? Winalene might have answers.

I guess it’s not as bad when we’re this far away.

“It still prickles.”

“Woof.”

Fran and Jet still felt the disturbing aura despite being several kilometers away. Just as I was beginning to appreciate the great beast being no ordinary monster, Fran turned around.

“Hm!”

She gasped, and I could see why.

“Teacher, look...”

No way...that thing is gigantic!

Something massive had surfaced from the lake. Since it fell out of Identify’s range, I couldn’t precisely tell how powerful it was, but its size was clear enough. The thing was over a hundred meters, even in its current state. A Midgardsormr was just as long, but this thing was much thicker than the sea worm...and most of it was still underwater.

It gave the impression that the great beast was even larger. I didn’t dare imagine how much bigger it would be with a complete awakening.

“GROOOOOAR!”

The gigantic gray creature let loose a rumbling roar. Its body writhed constantly, obscuring its true form. One thing was certain: the beast would bring great calamity if released into the world.

We have to get moving!

“Hm!”

“Grr!”

We quickly hurried back to Seftent to find the city already in a panic, with people running frantically about the harbor. Ships of all sizes had made port, some with broken masts and others with charred hulls. Trade Fleet ships. Not many of them, only a fifth by my estimate. Had the rest of the fleet been destroyed?

A group of adventurers had gathered at a corner of the harbor, and they watched the great beast in the distance with horror. Though it looked small from here, their familiarity with the lake allowed them to quickly estimate its huge size.

The adventurers noticed Fran. Not a difficult thing to do when she was riding a giant wolf away from the lake monster.

“Black Lightning Princess! That you?”

“It’s her! Hey, over here!”

They must have remembered her from the sparring match. They called out to her, unfazed by Jet’s presence.

“There’s a giant monster out there.”

“So we noticed...” said Fran. “I don’t know the details. If anything, I have questions.”

“Shoot.”

“Have you seen Sierra?” she asked.

“Sierra?” one of them repeated.

“Oh, the kid?” said another.

The adventurers had been performing their own rescue operation, pulling as many people out of the lake as they could, but nobody had come across Sierra.

“Jusecca might know,” said one of the adventurers. “She’s the lady with the blue hair and dark skin. Can’t miss her.”

Another raised an eyebrow. “Blue Hair was teleporting all over the place helping people out of the water. She one of us?”

“She just signed up recently. Doesn’t mingle and she’s got some gaps in her common sense, but her heart’s in the right place. Didn’t know she was a Timespace user. Maybe I’ll party up with her some time.”

“She was asking about pseudos the other day. I thought she just wanted to make a name for herself by solving the anomaly.”

“Right, she probably won’t be interested in regular quests, then. Sorry, we got way off track there. No, we haven’t seen Sierra, unfortunately. And Jusecca was teleporting around so much we don’t know where she is now.”

Then we had no idea what Zelyse could’ve done to Sierra. In any case, he hadn’t been sighted in Seftent. We couldn’t detect any signs of him, either. We would have to hold off our search for him.

“What happened to the Trade Fleet?” asked Fran.

“It was awful...”

“Just look at what’s left of it.”

The adventurers grimly recounted what had happened. The explosions and pseudo attacks had claimed many casualties. The ships still in good condition had somehow managed to make port in nearby towns, saving many lives in the process. No small blessing.

Most of the damaged ships stopped at Seftent, where the survivors carried out their rescue operation.

“They’re sorting the bodies of the departed over in the plaza.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, we’ll show you.”

A crowd had gathered in the plaza around dozens of dead bodies. They wept and clung to the corpses of their loved ones. The wailing of the children was painful to hear. Fran clenched her fist, quietly suppressing her anger.

The whole scene brought my bloodlust for Zelyse surging back. I should have

zapped him with Kanna Kamuy back in the shrine, but I was so focused on getting Fran out at the time that I didn't want to take any chances.

Teacher.

Right.

Fran called the crew members at the plaza and gave them the bodies of the victims we'd picked up. We were short on time, but it was the least we could do. The weeping in the plaza got louder as the people identified friends and family.

Zelyse...I won't let him get away next time.

Yeah.

Grr!

We offered a silent prayer for the dead and left.

Upon returning to camp, we found that the students had gathered, all with worried looks on their faces. They still didn't know what was going on. The students surrounded Fran after she landed.

Carona was the first to speak. "Fran, what happened? The whole town is in an uproar!"

"The Trade Fleet was attacked by monsters."

"Goodness! Casualties?"

"Lots. I'm here to report to Winalene."

"I see. Forgive me for taking your time."

The students opened a path for her as soon as she mentioned Winalene's name. The Academy kids knew that going into a panic would do them no good.

"Things might get...dangerous," said Fran. "Get ready to evacuate."

"Huh? But..."

"Instructor's orders."

"V-very well."

Authority came in handy at times like these. Fran didn't really have the

authority to make the call, but if this wasn't an emergency, nothing was.

We should talk to Winalene first for everyone's safety. She should know what's going on.

"Hm!"

I wouldn't be surprised if the spirits had already filled her in on the situation.

"Winalene!"

"Fran..." Winalene was a pitiful sight, sitting slumped in her chair. Her hair was disheveled, like she'd been pulling at it. It definitely looked like she was fully caught up on the situation. "Why has the monster awakened?! The seal should have been able to hold for much longer. At this rate, Lene is going to disappear!" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

Lene would disappear? But—

"Lene was the one who awakened the monster," said Fran bitterly.

Even if the awakening had been sped up, Lene was still the one who provided the final push. Whatever Lene's reasons, Fran couldn't restrain her anger.

"Huh? Lene...? That can't be..."

"That's what happened."

"Why...?"

"I don't know."

We came to you to find out.

We told everything that happened on the lake bed. How Zelyse had been eroding the seal, how we'd put a stop to it. How there should still have been time despite the seal being eroded. How Lene decided to revive the beast anyway.

She had said it was better than a complete awakening, but was it really the best thing she could do?

Winalene sunk in her chair and stared into the void, disbelieving.

"A message from Lene," Fran continued.

“A message?!”

“She said to prepare yourself.”

“But that means she’s...by herself?”

I couldn’t work out how they were related. They couldn’t have just been acquaintances. Judging by Winalene’s reactions so far, they were much more than that.

“How *are* the two of you related?”

“We are...how should I put this...?”

“I’m listening.”

“Of course.”

Winalene gave a defeated smile. She was mentally exhausted. “Simply put, we are twins.”

“You’re twins with a spirit?”

That can’t be an elf thing, right?

Despite being protected by spirits, such a miracle was surely impossible for everyone, including elves.

“Lene used to be a high elf,” Winalene explained. So a high elf could turn into a spirit? “She formed a contract with the spirit of the lake in order to seal the beast. In doing so, she became one with them.”

“You can do that?”

“If you’re good with spirit magic, like Lene was. But it’s otherwise impossible, even for me.”

By making herself one with the lake spirit, Lene had become part of the monster. She weakened the beast from within and sealed it in a shrine of her own making in the center of the lake.

Winalene’s so-called acquaintance had been her twin sister, Lene, all along.

“I forged a contract with Lene after she became a spirit. If I hadn’t, she would’ve disappeared completely, absorbed into the monster.”

When shamans formed contracts with spirits, it was never to the point of becoming one with them. They were usually on a give-and-take basis, only assisting when called for.

But Winalene and Lene were twins, and thus had an incredibly deep bond. Combined with the high elves' great affinity for spirits, the impossible had become possible.

"I was once called Wina."

"Did you change your name after forming the contract with Lene?"

"No. Our souls fused after we formed the contract. I was neither Wina nor Lene, but Winalene."

On the outside, she was still Wina, even down to her memories. But something had changed. Lene's desires had blended with Wina's consciousness. The idea of no longer being yourself might normally sound repugnant, but...

"I was happy. I thought we could be together forever, now."

I just didn't understand the way long-lived races' minds worked. Or maybe this was just a twin thing? Regardless, her explanation left one question unanswered.

"So who was the Lene I met?"

"The Lene I formed a contract with was the Lene who became one with the spirit. But the other half of her is inside the beast."

So part of Lene was fused into Winalene while the rest of her was in the beast? That might be why Wina was in the driver's seat of Winalene.

"Lene might be able to escape the seal and manifest herself for a short time. She wouldn't come see me, though. Probably to prevent the Lene inside the beast from awakening. I...I miss her so much..." Winalene seemed unstable as she talked about Lene. She sounded like a girl in love, complete with the crazy mood swings.

"What did she mean when she said to prepare yourself?"

"I...no, she couldn't..."

“She said you would know.”

“No.”

“Winalene?”

“NO! I will not let Lene disappear...!” Winalene started muttering things under her breath and rose from her chair. Her intense eyes had an almost mad twinkle to them as she made up her mind. “I will seal the beast!”

“Can you do it?”

“I couldn’t before, but things are different now,” Winalene said as she quickly walked outside. Despite her determination, each step she took seemed unstable. Not wavering, just...erratic. “I’m heading out.”

“What about the students?”

“Right. Them. Tell the students to evacuate the city. Fran, brief the other instructors and take care of them until they leave.”

“All right.”

It was like she had completely forgotten about her students. Not normal behavior. But Winalene was the only one who could seal the great beast. We had to trust her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

She didn’t *look* fine, not that I was going to point it out. The air around her felt so off.

“I need to get everything ready,” she said. “But I’ll seal it again. I leave the camp to you!” Winalene shouted before breaking into a run. We didn’t have time to stop her. I was worried about her, but we needed to evacuate the students.

Let’s just do what we can.

“Hm!”

Fran went over to where the students were. They looked ready to evacuate. They had pulled down their tents and packed their food in their rucksacks.

“What happened, Lady Fran?” Instructor Ines came up to represent the rest of the Academy. Fitting, because she was highly respected by both her fellow instructors and the students.

“There’s a giant monster in the lake.”

“A monster?”

“Hm.”

Ines—and the rest of the Academy, really—looked puzzled at Fran’s explanation.

“Has the headmistress been informed?” asked Ines.

“She’s taking care of it.”

“If so, is there really a need to evacuate?”

To the staff and students of the Academy, Winalene was an absolute force. They couldn’t comprehend why we’d need to evacuate if Winalene was dealing with the problem. She could instantly kill even powerful monsters, after all.

“The monster is very strong. Even Winalene may not be able to handle it.”

“By the gods...!”

“That’s definitely stronger than an A Threat...”

“Hm. That’s why you need to get out of here.”

“Understood!”

Coming from someone as strong as Fran, everyone quickly understood the gravity of the situation.

This was a monster that gave Winalene trouble, the same Winalene who could take on an entire country by herself and win. When these two combatants clashed, the damage done to their surroundings would be catastrophic.

“Do you have a route you want us to take?”

“No. I leave it to you, Ines.”

“Affirmative.”

Academy students began their march out of Seftent, lining up with civilians who had the same idea. Adventurers had spread word about staying as far away from the lake as possible. The highway east was now jam-packed with people.

We continued moving with the Academy students until I noticed something.

Romeo and Theraclede aren't here.

Hm...true.

Jet, are they in the back?

Woof.

Jet couldn't pick up Romeo's scent with his nose. Wherever he was, he wasn't among the refugees.

Where'd they go...?

"Is he okay?"

Hmm...

Theraclede aside, we were worried about Romeo.

Carona noticed Fran's somber look and approached her. "Is something the matter?"

"Do you know where Romeo is?"

"Romeo? You mean the adorable child the headmistress brought along?"

"Hm."

"Is he not with us? Oh no!"

The other students nodded as if affirming Carona's cry.

"The headmistress will have to give it her all in fighting the monster, won't she?"

"She might not be able to protect him at the same time..."

"That can't be good."

I didn't know whether the students were incredibly kind for being able to show concern for a small child at a time like this or if they just lacked the ability

to sense imminent danger.

But Fran liked their reaction, probably because she felt the same way.

Fran, Winalene only told you to look after the kids until they leave the city.

Hm.

Well, we're outside the city walls now.

Ooh, good point. Fran clapped her hands together, only now noticing the loophole. She then went to Ines, who was leading the group.

"Ines."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Will you be all right without me?"

"Yes, Ma'am! We'll get everyone home safe and sound!"

Ines instantly nodded, and not flippantly either. The evacuation's defensive line was bolstered by adventurers protecting the townspeople. They could easily hold their own without Fran.

"We also wish to protect the child," said Ines. "We cannot leave him behind, knowing he isn't here!"

"That's right!"

"I'd go back and look for him myself if I could!"

The instructors were frustrated that they hadn't noticed Romeo's absence sooner, but nothing could be done about that now. Romeo and Theraclede had been under Winalene's care from when we left the Academy until we reached Lake Vivian, rarely coming in contact with the instructors. No wonder they'd forgotten about them as they were evacuating.

Still, their pride as instructors was wounded all the same.

"Please find him, Lady Fran."

"I must also ask you to find him, Fran. Please save him."

"Just watching him soothes my soul."

"Yeah, I get you," said Fran.

“I hope he’s all right.”

Fran nodded. “Got it. I’ll go save Romeo.”

We left the instructors and students and turned back to Seftent.

Jet, focus on picking up Romeo’s scent. You too, Fran.

“Woof!”

“Hm. Okay.”

It didn’t look like Winalene had done anything yet. I didn’t know what she was planning, but we needed to find Romeo before the battle started. Still, something was tugging at our minds.

“Sierra said that Winalene used the previous Romeo’s powers even if would kill him.”

What if she does the same thing now?

“I’ll ask her if there’s another way.”

And if she says there isn’t?

“I...don’t know.”

The beast couldn’t be allowed to escape. It must either be defeated or sealed. Still, sacrificing Romeo to achieve that? It didn’t sit well with me.

And what would I do if Fran ended up fighting Winalene? Logic said that Romeo should be sacrificed. There was no doubting the benefits there. But my heart objected. I couldn’t bear seeing that boy who was so much like Fran be sacrificed.

“Teacher?”

Let’s just...go and find him.

“Hm!”

Back in Seftent, we quickly searched the campgrounds. No signs of Winalene and Romeo here.

Where could they be? Do you have anything, Jet?

“Arf...” Jet nodded but he seemed unsure. While traces of their scent lingered,

he wasn't sure where it led.

Still, Fran followed his lead. It was our *only* lead at this point.

"Here?"

"Woof!"

Weaving through the remaining townspeople, Jet led us to the harbor. His eyes were pointing at the beast. Had Winalene gone to seal the monster?

Winalene, Romeo and Theraclede's scents are all going in the same direction?

"Woof."

Winalene had definitely brought the two along with her. She might be planning to use Romeo's power after all.

"Come on."

"Woof!" Jet sharpened his expression. We ran for ten minutes on the lake.

There! I see her! It's Winalene!

"But there's..."

Yeah, things might be taking a turn for the worse!

A circular stage, fifteen meters in diameter, had been erected on the lake. The stage was made of white marble, surrounded by pillars of the same material. It looked eerily similar to the shrine in the middle of the lake. But most important were the people on the stage.

Winalene stood in the center along with Romeo and Theraclede...although the other two weren't exactly standing. No, they were lying on an altar in the middle of the stage in a clearly sacrificial posture. Was she really going to go through with it?

"Woof!" Jet landed on the stage on Fran's signal.

Thick magic surged around us. The ritual was already underway. Were we too late?

"Winalene!"

“Ah...Fran. You’re here.”

“What are you doing?”

“Sealing the beast. Do not interfere.”

Theraclede had been cuffed with water manacles. He couldn’t fight back if he wanted to.

Fran narrowed her eyes. “What are you planning to do with Romeo and Theraclede?”

“They are cornerstones of the ritual.”

“You mean sacrifices?”

“That’s right.” Winalene admitted it with a quick and guiltless nod. “It must be done, Fran.”

“But—”

“Wait.” Theraclede, of all people, cut her off. “You don’t have to worry about us.” Unlike Romeo, he was fully conscious.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m the only one who will die. Romeo will live. Did I get that right?”

“Yes. If you take the full brunt of Evil One’s Communion, Romeo’s life will be spared.”

“That’s how it is. It’ll be all right.”

So Theraclede would die in Romeo’s place?

“I thought Romeo would die if Theraclede died?” asked Fran.

“That contract has been nullified. But the bond between them has yet to fade. It can be used to transfer Romeo’s burden to Theraclede.”

A special contract had been formed between Romeo and Theraclede which allowed them to share each other’s pain. That was why Romeo would die if Theraclede died.

Winalene had nullified said contract, but she would reuse the remaining mana connecting them to transfer the damage to Theraclede.

Honestly, even I thought it was a good deal. But a certain someone objected to it.

“But...is there a way to spare both their lives?”

“What? You want to save Theraclede?”

“I swore on his life to take Romeo to the Bulbola orphanage once they were released from their contract. His life is mine.”

“So?”

“So I can’t have him up and dying without my say. And—”

“And?”

“I feel bad for Romeo if he wakes up and finds Theraclede gone. I’d be sad too if I woke up without Teacher.”

“Is that so?” Winalene muttered. “Will you fight me for it, then?”

She unleashed a fearsome wave of mana. Her bloodlust was enough to kill a grown man.

Cold sweat trickled down Fran’s brow. Regardless, she fixed her gaze on Winalene and didn’t pull away. “I’ll ask you again. Is there a way to spare both Romeo’s and Theraclede’s lives?”

“No.” Winalene answered immediately, maintaining her vicious pressure. She was completely unrelenting, but I knew the truth behind her words.

Fran...she’s lying.

Winalene?

Yeah.

There *was* a way to spare Romeo’s and Theraclede’s lives.

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

She is.

She was even lying about not lying.

“Tell me how you can save them!”

“There is no way.”

“Lies.”

“...Tsk.” Winalene squinted her eyes. She could tell from Fran’s expression that she had seen through her. “I’m *telling* you there is *nothing*. Does my word mean nothing to you?”

Fran didn’t back down. “Tell me.”

“Ugh...” Winalene was clearly agitated. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to eliminate Fran...or maybe she couldn’t attack because she had her hands full with the ritual.

Her passivity made her bloodlust all the more ominous. Was this really Winalene? Maybe this was who she’d been all along.

“What if another person were to die instead?” asked Fran.

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say there was a way to spare both Romeo and Theraclede. What if it involved sacrificing someone else?”

“Who?”

“I speak hypothetically.”

“Well—”

And just when Fran was about to answer—

“You don’t have to worry about their sacrifice.” A girl’s voice cut her off.

Winalene’s eyes widened as she saw past Fran. “What?”

In the past few minutes alone, Winalene had looked angry, then expressionless, then shocked. Quite the roller coaster.

“Lene...is that you...?” she croaked.

The owner of the voice was the beautiful spirit with heterochromia—Lene.

“You look different,” said Winalene.

“As a spirit, all my forms are provisional. But I suppose you could say that this is my real form.”

Fran was right. If it weren't for Lene's voice and eyes, we wouldn't have been able to identify her. Now she really did look like Winalene's twin, and her elven features were more pronounced. She actually had the pointed ears.

“I'm glad you survived, Fran.” Despite what Lene had done, there was no hint of sarcasm in her voice. She really was grateful that Fran was all right. “It's been a long time, Wina.”

“Yes! It's been centuries!”

“The beast would have awakened regardless,” said Lene. “This is no longer a matter of me clashing with the Lene inside you.”

Winalene said that the seal would weaken if she got too close to the lake. That was why she couldn't see Lene. Now that the beast had awakened, they could meet without repercussions.

But now, the twins couldn't look any more different.

Winalene was happy to the point of crying.

Lene remained expressionless. Rather than joy, her face was painted with disappointment. But why? I couldn't work out what she said earlier, either.

“So why don't we have to worry about the sacrifice?” asked Winalene.

“Oh, that's simple. Because it's going to be me.”

“Huh?”

Lene walked by a puzzled Fran and stood in front of Winalene.

“Winalene...you are planning to seal the great beast?”

“Yes. I should be able to seal it completely with Evil One's Communion. Isn't that right?”

“Yes...perhaps you will be able to do it.”

“I know.”

“But you should also know...” she said, and paused for a moment. “This is not

what I want.”

Lene’s words struck Winalene like a slap to the face. She looked like she was about to cry.

“What are you after, Lene?” asked Fran. “Why did you deliberately awaken the beast?”

“To destroy it. That’s why I can’t have it sealed again,” Lene answered. I’d thought that she’d unleashed the beast because she was sick of being sealed herself. She was inside the beast, after all.

Apparently, her motives weren’t as simple as we imagined.

“Why do you want to destroy it?” asked Fran.

“Because I want to set her free.”

“Set her free”? But who?

“Winalene...you should be able to destroy me,” said Lene.

Winalene remained silent, but her strained face and clenched and bleeding fist were all the answers we needed.

“Winalene—” Lene began.

“NO! Why do I have to destroy you?!”

“Winalene, please. This is your best chance to destroy the beast in its incomplete form.”

“NO! I DON’T WANT TO! *I DON’T WANT YOU TO DIE!*” Winalene looked like a child throwing a temper tantrum, shaking her head, screaming.

Lene carried on ruthlessly. “Winalene, you have the power to destroy the beast.”

“Well, I don’t *want* to!”

“There will always be people seeking to unleash the beast if you seal it. Now is your chance to destroy it for good.”

“NO!” Winalene covered her ears and shook her head like a child.

Lene changed her approach. “I want to destroy it. I’m tired of being stuck at

the bottom of the lake.”

“No! You can’t make me!”

“Winalene...”

“Why would you say such a thing?! I’ve been working hard so that we can be Wina and Lene again!” Tears streamed down Winalene’s face as she grew yet more childish. Reuniting with her twin sister probably brought her right back to being a kid again. “I don’t care about anyone else! I just want you back!”

“That’s not possible.”

“It IS! I got everything ready for when you separate from the monster! I opened the Magic Academy you’ve always dreamed about! Made it so spirits can freely move around there for your sake! I donated to orphanages you’ve always wanted to build! Protected the kingdom so you’d be proud of me!”

Fran stepped back as she sensed Winalene’s mounting tension. Her tail wagged left to right and her ears drooped. She could sense Winalene about to snap.

“Winalene...” Lene’s face twisted with sorrow. She couldn’t help herself.

From what we’d just heard, Winalene had dedicated—had *lived*—her entire life for Lene. Everything she did, she did for Lene. Literally. Even her acts of kindness were for Lene’s sake.

Winalene was the one Lene wanted to set free.

“I just want to be with you again...”

“The beast will unleash its full power if I am separated from it. The world will be destroyed.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to live in a world without you, anyway...”

This was bad. Winalene’s countenance darkened with every exchange. She could no longer hold back her emotions in front of Lene.

“Wait...can I actually separate her now? Evil One’s Communion might weaken the Evil One’s power enough, and...I could bring Lene back. So what if the world might be destroyed in the process?”

Winalene was completely gone.

Lene slumped her shoulders sadly. "I would much prefer it if you destroyed the monster without using Evil One's Communion..."

"...!" Winalene bit her lip so hard it started bleeding and shook her head at Lene's words.

"But let's put the biggest problem to rest."

"The biggest problem?" Fran wondered, knitting her eyebrows. All our problems were so huge that she couldn't tell which one Lene was talking about.

"Evil One's Communion is powerful. Both for sealing and for destroying the beast."

"But..."

"Either Romeo or Theraclede will have to die."

"Hm."

"That is why we are going to borrow their powers. Come." Lene waved her hand and created a swirling black light. A human figure stepped out of the Dimension Gate-like portal.

Fran gasped in surprise. "Sierra! You're okay!"

"Somehow, yeah."

Sierra had almost died when Zelyse hit him with a powerful crystal weapon, but Lene managed to save him in the nick of time. After being pulled into the lake by water tentacles, he was transported to the safety of another island in the lake.

"I was resting there, but..."

Lene had summoned him here.

"It's good to see they're all right, but why did you call them here?"

"Because they wanted to be here. And because their goals converge with mine."

Their goals? I thought Sierra and the sword Theraclede just wanted revenge

on Zelyse.

“Winalene, we will also take part in the ritual.”

“And who are you supposed to be?” asked Winalene. Did she not recognize Sierra? They probably hadn’t met before since they lived in different towns.

“Sierra, E-Rank adventurer. My real name is Romeo and this sword is my partner, the Intelligent Weapon Theraclede.”

“Err...what?” Even Winalene was having difficulty believing him. Unexpectedly, the previous Romeo and Zelyse had never made contact with Winalene. I guess Sierra had been actively avoiding her. Lene briefly explained the situation, and (as skeptical as Winalene was) she soon believed her other half.

“I see... There *is* a resemblance.”

Having a time traveler appear before her seemed to calm her down. The light of reason returned to Winalene’s eyes as she compared Romeo and Sierra.

“Hmph. All right. What is it that you want, Adult Romeo?”

“We want both Romeo and Theraclede to survive Evil One’s Communion,” said Sierra.

Theraclede looked at him with astonishment. “Romeo...?”

“That’s right, Mister.”

“Hah...ha ha. Am I dreaming...?”

Sierra nodded gently to the choked-up Theraclede.

Then Sierra proposed a new method that would keep both young Romeo and Theraclede from dying. “Evil One’s Communion would kill anyone who tries to shoulder it alone. But what if you were to share that burden with us?”

“I see...of course! Two Romeos and two Theracledes! Granted, one of them is a sword, but still!”

“Yes. We will increase the effectiveness of the ability and share the burden between myself, the current Theraclede, and the sword Theraclede.”

This way, no one would die even if Evil One’s Communion was used.

But Winalene's grim look remained. "It will still be dangerous. While you won't die, the ritual will drain most of your strength."

"I'm aware," said Sierra. "But we won't leave Romeo and the old man—and Theraclede—behind. We will save them."

Sierra knew the risks going in. His main objective was to protect the present Romeo and Theraclede.

"You could just stop the ritual if you want to save them," he added. "If the beast escapes at full power, it will annihilate every last person on the continent. We'd like to increase our odds of survival no matter how small."

This being his second encounter, he knew the horrors the monster would bring. Sierra looked pale as he recalled the destruction of the continent. That's why he agreed to use Evil One's Communion to seal the beast even if it put his own life in danger.

But was Lene okay with this? She wanted to destroy the monster to release Winalene from her obsession. Her wish would be denied if the monster was sealed again.

Lene had wanted Fran to convince Winalene to stop the ritual and destroy the beast herself. But now that Romeo and Theraclede didn't have to die, Fran no longer had a reason to—not with Sierra and the sword Theraclede sharing their burden.

Honestly, I sympathized with both Winalene (who didn't want to destroy her other half) and Lene (who wanted to set Winalene free by being destroyed). But if we tried destroying Lene, Winalene would immediately set her sights on us. Lene herself knew of this risk.

She had looked troubled even when she summoned Sierra earlier.

"It would've been best if they didn't have to do this..."

Sierra and the sword Theraclede were insurance. She wouldn't have had to call upon them had Winalene agreed to destroy the beast. If she didn't, they would have to seal it, which entailed Evil One's Communion and Sierra's help.

"Winalene..." Lene began.

“I don’t care how many times you ask...” said Winalene.

Tensions rose between them again. From where I was standing, there was no way to get these two to agree. Not as long as Winalene was in the driver’s seat. Seeing how she’d almost snapped, she wasn’t changing her mind any time soon.

But Fran dared to ask a pointed question even though the very air around them was close to catching fire. “Is there really no way to grant everyone’s wishes?”

“That’s impossible, Fran. I want to destroy the beast while Winalene—”

“I am not letting Lene be destroyed. I’ll bring her back someday and I can be Wina again.”

“There.” Fran pointed her finger at Lene and tilted her head. “Do you want to destroy the monster for Winalene?”

“Yes. I have been watching over Winalene through the spirits, but I can’t bear seeing her kill herself for me anymore. She’s also been acting strange lately.”

“Me? Strange?”

“Yes. Fran made me understand why. Even if we’re twins, one elf cannot have two minds and remain sane.”

Of course! I’d thought Winalene’s instability was a result of her meeting Lene, but it was actually because she had been trying to live as both Wina *and* Lene at the same time!

Lene must have realized the mind-body connection after seeing a fully swordshifted me. And that was very, very bad. If Winalene went on a rampage she could easily level the whole country. An A Threat, at least.

“If the beast—if I am destroyed, Winalene will be Wina again,” said Lene. “And it isn’t just for her, either. Many lives will be saved.”

Destroying the beast would prevent Winalene from going mad. The symptoms were already starting.

“Then we can just get you back to normal and release Wina that way,” Fran suggested. “No need to destroy the monster.”

Lene shook her head. “Like I said, if I were to be separated from the monster, it would regain its full power.”

“Can’t Evil One’s Communion do something about that?”

I was impressed. Fran made a good point. Couldn’t Evil One’s Communion suppress the beast’s power? It was currently weak enough that Winalene could destroy it. Why not have the ability to weaken the beast in Lene’s stead?

But now both Lene and Winalene were shaking their heads.

“It can be weakened, but there is no way of destroying it.”

“I thought you could?” said Fran. “Just weaken it with Evil One’s Communion and go for the kill.”

“I am the only one who knows how to weaken the beast with Evil One’s Communion,” said Winalene. “The ritual will also take a lot out of me. I’ll be in no position to destroy it by then.”

“Can’t you take over, Lene?”

“Forgive me, but this provisional body is limited to only time and water magicks.”

“Oh...”

Winalene wouldn’t be able to fight after performing the ritual. Things just couldn’t go smoothly.

“If the monster were a little bit weaker...” Fran started.

“Well?”

“If it was, I might be able to defeat it after performing the ritual.”

“So we just need to hit it hard enough to weaken it?” wondered Sierra.

If it was a matter of damage, Sierra could join us in launching an offensive.

“Impossible,” said Winalene, voice aching with regret. “You can’t get close to that thing.”

What, did the monster have an invincible barrier? Some kind of counterattack?

Helpfully, Lene explained. “You may not know this, but the Evil One has the ability to drive living things mad. If you are not a spirit like me, resisting it will be difficult.”

“A weaker human will be taken over as soon as he approaches it,” said Winalene. “The piece that the monster has inside it is the Evil One’s Throat. Its voice can cast powerful curses.” Winalene pointed up at the beast. “Don’t you think it’s strange that you can’t hear the beast’s voice at this range? Even if it hasn’t completely escaped the seal, you would think that you could.”

True. We had heard the beast roar earlier.

“This stage is protected by a barrier which blocks the beast’s voice,” said Lene.

“Even I may be taken over if I get too close,” continued Winalene. “Even if I *could* destroy it in a single attack, you would need many if you wanted to weaken it.”

All or nothing. If you got close and couldn’t destroy the monster, it would control you. A single powerful attack was necessary.

But hearing that gave me and Fran hope.

The Evil One’s control...

You should be fine, right, Teacher?

I should be.

Fenrir said that the Evil One had no authority over my Terran soul.

The only question is whether you’re immune to it, too. P.A., you got anything?

Sword and swordsman are an inseparable entity. Fran is also rendered immune to the Evil One’s control.

And Jet?

Jet, being linked to Teacher’s soul, is also immune to the Evil One’s control.

Nice! Does that mean we can fight?

Yes. No issues detected.

Thank you, P.A. It was great having her around!

Fran, Jet...you heard the lady!

Hm! We'll save Romeo, Winalene, Lene...even Theraclede!

Bark!

"We'll weaken the beast."

"Woof!"

"Winalene can then separate Lene, weaken it with Evil One's Communion, and take it down."

Winalene looked exasperated as Fran said she would attack the monster.

Lene wore the same expression, looking like an annoyed but slightly younger Winalene. They really were twins. I was guessing Lene had changed her form so that she wouldn't startle people into thinking there were two Winalenes.

"Did you not hear what we just said? You can't get close to that thing."

"It'll be fine."

"No, this isn't something you can overcome with sheer willpower."

"The Evil One's influence won't work on me and Jet."

"What?"

"Huh?"

They even looked the same when they were confused.

"I'm immune to it. It won't be a problem."

"But that's impossible..." Winalene and Lene were equally stunned.

"You're not joking, right?" wondered Lene.

"I've never heard of such an ability," said Winalene.

"But it's true," said Fran.

They looked dubiously at Fran despite her insistence.

"Things would take a turn for the worse if you got taken over," said Lene.

“But if what you say is true,” said Winalene, “we might be able to separate Lene.”

“Leave it to me,” said Fran.

Still, the twins’ doubt remained. Being immune to the Evil One’s influence was that much of an impossibility. If you were stronger, the best you could do was fight back and resist. Immunity was a pipe dream. The Evil One was still a god, after all, and no one could resist the power of a god for long.

But they were willing to run with it after Fran said “This super sword can do it!”

Both Winalene and Lene knew what I was. Intelligent Weapons could do impossible things.

Though Sierra didn’t know about me, he stepped forward, too. “I’ll join you.”

“But what about the ritual?”

“I’ll come back for that ritual after we damage the monster.”

“Did you forget about the Evil One’s influence, too? It will control you if you aren’t a spirit like me. Unless you’re an exception like Fran,” said Lene.

“You believe me?”

Lene nodded. “My intuition is telling me to trust you.”

“Intuition?”

“No ordinary intuition. This is the intuition of a spirit who controls time.”

While not exactly clairvoyant, Lene could choose the best possible options.

“This intuition is also telling me that Sierra will be all right...”

“It’s because of this sword that has Theraclede inside of it,” said Sierra. “It allows me to resist the Evil One’s influence.”

Could Theraclede do that? Wouldn’t that just make him more susceptible?

“Theraclede’s Cannibalize actually lets him feed off the Evil One’s power.”

I had that Skill, too, but I didn’t think its application could be so wide. I might have to look into it later.

Suddenly, I felt a strange disturbance in mana. Timespace Magic several meters above the highest point of the stage. A vortex? Was this also Lene's doing?

A figure then stepped out of it. "Allow me to join you on your assault."

"Wha—?!"

"Who are you?!"

Fran wasn't the only one startled by the sudden voice from the sky. Sierra, Lene, and Winalene looked just as shocked. This was no acquaintance of Lene, but she had been listening in on us through the vortex.

A woman stood in front of the threshold. She was tall and had long, flowing sapphire hair and eyes like rubies. Her skin was beautiful and glistened like sweet chocolate. This must've been the Jusecca that old Jill had talked about.

She wore light armor and the cloaked red robes of a martial artist. We could all easily tell that she was strong.

Lene hadn't even sensed her teleport in, and she looked at her grimly. "How did you get here? How did you escape my sight in this lake?"

"I'm trained in Timespace magic and know how to work around it, nothing more."

"But...who are you? I've never seen you before."

"My name is Jusecca and I happen to be an adventurer. But do we really have time for questions? Should we not be getting down to business?"

Jusecca was right, but we weren't about to trust a random portal lady either.

Sierra cut our interrogation short. "I don't know who you are, but we'll take all the help we can get."

Any help was appreciated, and she was definitely strong enough to make the cut. Still, we needed to know whether she was on our side. I told Fran to ask her one question.

"Just one question. Are you on our side?"

"For now I am. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, after all. I wish to stop

Zelyse's plot."

She's not lying.

"Hm. I believe you."

"If Fran and Sierra believe you, I shall too...so says my intuition."

"And if Lene trusts you, so will I. But what about the Evil One's influence?"

"It won't be a problem," said Jusecca. "I have ways of repelling it."

This was also true. To think we'd get everyone who had the rare immunity to the Evil One's influence gathered in one spot! At least we had a much better chance of defeating the beast now.

"Then I, Jet, Sierra, and Jusecca will attack the beast."

"Wait. Even if we're going to use Evil One's Communion, I can't easily resume the ritual."

"You can't?"

"Of course not."

We then put together a plan to make it all work.

"All right. I will initiate the ritual to use Evil One's Communion. I'm going to need Sierra, Romeo, and the Theracledes to be here for it."

"Hm."

"In the meantime, you and Jusecca go on the offensive. Sierra will join you once the ritual is complete."

"Right."

The effects of Evil One's Communion weren't going to be immediate, even after activation. The ability was originally used to drain Fiends of their strength and command them.

In this case, it was going to be used to drain the Malice of the piece of the Evil One sleeping within the beast. The Malice would then be transferred to Romeo and split with Sierra. They would have to stay until the ability started taking effect.

Once the flow of Malice was established, Sierra and the others could leave the ritual site without a problem. Theraclede and his sword self could also join the fight.

“Everything after that will be in your hands.”

“But if destruction proves impossible, I *will* seal the beast without separating Lene.”

Everyone’s wishes would come true if things went well. If they didn’t, at least the beast would be locked up again. Honestly, that just felt like we would be delaying the inevitable, sweeping the giant beast under the lake rug. But Fran had no intention of letting things end that way.

“We’ll all be smiling when this is over,” said Fran with a look of determination. Then she walked toward the beast...

Chapter 5:

The Great Beast

“I’LL BE GOING.”

“Take care of yourself out there,” said Lene.

It was pretty human of Lene not to just tell Fran to go for broke. In fact, as far as spirits went, she basically seemed like a human to me. After all, if Fran didn’t try to damage the monster as much as she could, Lene’s wish wouldn’t come true. But Lene was primarily worried about Fran’s safety. Her sentiments were greatly appreciated.

“Hm. I’ll do my best. I’ll be careful, too.” Fran nodded back at her. She looked so motivated that it didn’t seem like she *was* going to be careful. The comforting lie was so obvious that it got a wry smile out of Jusecca, even though they’d just met.

Fran, your own safety comes first, all right?

I know.

You sure don’t look like you do.

She looked a bit too enthusiastic. Maybe even more enthusiastic than before.

This is our first time fighting a piece of the Evil One.

I guess so.

They’re something we have to fight to undo the Black Cats’ curse. It’s good to know how strong they can be.

Fran’s goal was to undo the curse sent as divine punishment on the Black Cat Tribe. The Black Cats would have to defeat an S-Threat Fiend or a servant of the Evil One on their own. Basically, they would need to take down pieces of the Evil One, but they’d need a lot more Black Cats, more powerful than Fran, to accomplish this task.

The process would take decades, maybe even several generations. But that

wasn't going to stop Fran from going forward.

They won't all be the same.

I know.

And there might be stronger and weaker pieces of the Evil One...

It's still a good chance to see how strong it is.

Fran's smile filled me with hope. You could really tell her strength by how optimistic she was about going up against a powerful opponent.

You're right, Fran. We don't know what we'll face in the future, but at least we can gauge how strong they are.

Hm!

"And here..." Lene cast a shower on Fran which immediately healed her. While it didn't bring her to full health, she was doing much better. "Healing water. It's the least I can do."

"Thanks."

"Remember that Sierra and the others will join you. Keep yourself alive until then."

"Hm. But I can beat it if it turns out weak, right?"

Hey, that was number one on my list of things I'd always wanted to say! It might be a death flag depending on the situation, though!

Teacher? What's wrong?

Nothing. I'm just impressed by your enthusiasm.

Uh-huh.

I definitely needed to pull her out if she got too crazy!

Fran got on Jet and flew toward the monster.

"Ruff, ruff!" At full speed, Jet got us within a kilometer of the beast in no time.

Don't get too close! It might be able to attack us at this range!

"Woof!"

“Did it get bigger?”

Definitely.

The great beast had expanded to several times its size from the last time we saw it. Its tentacles were tangles of blackish red, gray, and purple, and the mass of flesh continued to grow.

How are you doing, Fran?

“I’m good.”

So she said, but today had been one intense battle after another. She’d even had to use Sword God Form in some of them. Rest would’ve been ideal, but there was simply no time.

I’ll start with firing some spells. Fran, you just focus on observation for now.

“Okay...” Fran nodded begrudgingly, understanding her own condition.

Jusecca came into view as she flew beside us. “Like we discussed earlier, feel free to do as you please. No need to worry about me.”

She was that confident she could keep up with us? Fine by me!

Jet, you’re on evasion duty.

“Woof!”

“Here it comes!”

I knew it could hit us here!

The squirming mass fired a ball of black mana. It sped quickly through the air and fell upon Fran, but not before breaking into a bullet storm.

Jet!

“Woof!”

Each bullet was powerful, creating pillars of water several stories high when hitting the lake below. Good thing its aim was all over the place. Not bad for a giant monster, I guess, but completely avoidable for Jet.

My turn! Let’s see how you like this! Kanna Kamuy!

I cast a single Kanna Kamuy, but this was no ordinary Kanna Kamuy. It was

imbued with Fiend Crusher Revelation, making it especially effective against Fiends. Back in the Garden, it had been powerful enough to take down a Minotaur General in one hit, a C-Threat monster specializing in defense.

Yahhh!

The white holy lightning pierced through the tentacles and struck the beast's body. Thunder rumbled and crackled as it split into countless bolts, covering the area with light. It was as if the beast had been covered with the roots of a giant plant.

The lightning bolt left a giant crater in the beast's body, though it couldn't quite penetrate it. The flesh surrounding the hole had been burnt black as charcoal. At first, I thought things looked promising, but...

Damn it. It's healing through Fiend Crusher Revelation.

"Maybe because it's only partly of the Evil One."

That's probably it.

"Did it...not work?"

We did a bit of damage. Its mana did go down.

Jusecca followed up my Kanna Kamuy with a few spells of her own. Still, the damage was negligible so far.

"Should I join?"

No. We should look for its weak point first. Just do some easy attacks for now.

"Hm. Got it."

Jet, can you bring us closer? I wanna try hitting it with Telekinetic Catapult.

"Grr!"

"All right! Let's go!"

"Hm! Haaa!"

Fran threw me, taking advantage of Jet's acceleration.

Wahoo! I propelled myself through the air with telekinesis in a straight line. A thin tentacle flailed to intercept me, but it didn't prove to be a problem.

I ran through the web of hundreds of tentacles and stabbed the beast's grotesque body.

Uoooooh!

"Gyuooo!" roared the beast. It sounded annoyed rather than in pain. I was harassing it, at least...but despite making a crater the size of Kanna Kamuy, I wasn't doing much damage.

That was a fully charged Fiend Crusher Revelation!

The beast was naturally formidable, and the piece of the Evil One inside it wasn't big enough for us to rely on attacks that targeted that.

This is...! The gouged flesh was already healing itself. At this rate, the thing was going to swallow me up. It looked like it was doing it on purpose, too—it was smart enough to think tactically.

I managed to teleport out in time, but my durability had been eaten up. Its fluids were corrosive.

The hole I opened up might as well be a scratch with how big this thing is.

We circled round the beast to get a better look. It still appeared like a lump of flesh surrounded by a tangle of tentacles. It lacked arms, legs, wings, tails...even a head. The beast looked for all the world like a grotesque skyscraper made of purple, dark red, and gray tentacles...

"Hargh...grog..."

Huh?

A low rumbling. Groaning? I couldn't tell where its mouth was, but it sounded like it was talking.

"IgAR... HErGe...!"

Ew! Gross!

The top of the flesh mound was changing. The tangle of tentacles wriggled harder than ever below us before moving away to reveal what was beneath.

A mouth?

"Gragooo!" A mouth (or something like it) had risen from beneath the

squirming tentacles.

It looks...human.

It didn't look like the mouth of any animal, retaining oddly human features despite its gigantic size. Red gums, white molars...these precise details only made the mouth look even more out of place.

"Gagoo...! OBEEEH!"

Huh?

"OBEY!"

The beast was talking. Its voice sounded like it was coming through a busted megaphone, but it was definitely talking.

"OBEEEEEEY!"

Its voice was charged with Malice. I guess you could say it had the power of the word. This voice must have been how it controlled people. It had no effect on me, though. For most people, it took a ton of effort just to resist it, but for me the voice was just loud and annoying.

"OBEY!"

No way!

"OBEY!"

Keep talking, idiot!

"OBEY!"

Was that the only thing it could say?!

Shut up! Anyway, thanks for giving us a clear target!

"OBEY!"

Apparently, "obey" was the only word in its dictionary. Was it going to do this now instead of roaring? Gross!

"OBE—"

Shove this down your throat!

I fired a Kanna Kamuy right into the mouth stuck on repeat. The open mouth swallowed the white lightning.

“OOOOB!”

Is it working better than before...?

It felt like it was doing more damage to the beast’s mana compared to my initial Kanna Kamuy.

Now that the monster had made its move, I returned to Fran. *Are you okay with the voice, Fran?*

“Hm. It’s just noisy.”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet showed no signs of being taken over. They just grimaced, flattening their ears to block out the noise. The only hazard they would have to face now was hearing damage.

I tried focus firing and attacking it from the inside. The only thing left is to attack its surface.

“Its surface?”

We’ll try covering the surface of its body with magic. I’ll need your help, Fran.

“All right.”

We then cast a level 9 thunder spell, Ekato Karunos.

“Haa!”

Yaaah!

The powerful thunder spell brought down hundreds of lightning bolts on the beast. Seeing its gigantic body light up with electricity was quite the spectacle. The spell also reached the lake, electrifying the water around the beast.

“O-OO-O-B-B-B—!”

We’re not done yet!

The Fiend Crusher Revelation-imbued lightning was working, so I let loose another thunderstorm. Ten supercharged casts, which translated to thousands

of lightning bolts lashing the beast.

The beast began to squirm as the lightning storm raged over its body. But just as I thought the mass of flesh was shrinking back— “OBEEEEY!”

It expanded, unleashing a gust of mana.

It just powered through it?!

The beast’s mana blew away the magic assaulting its body. The mana blast was immense enough that it could have shattered me had I been in the vicinity. This thing was on a whole other level.

Looks like it’s not badly damaged, either.

“But it’s burning.”

On the outside, sure.

But the beast would soon recover from the wounds it sustained. It had barely spent any of its mana.

Looks like we’ll do better to hit it with big attacks instead of trying to chip away at it.

“I see.”

“Woof.”

Fran then raised her hand. “I wanna try something.”

What is it? I hope it’s not dangerous...

“It’ll be fine.”

Well...all right.

“Hm! Thanks, Teacher.”

There was no stopping Fran when her eyes were set like that. Might as well let her at it. *So what’s the plan?*

“Hm. I’m gonna cut it!”

A simple idea but one worth trying. The only physical attack we had tried so far was Telekinetic Catapult.

“I’ll need your help!”

You got it!

“You too, Jet.”

“Woof!”

Oh, I know what you’re trying to do!

“Hm!”

Back in the Demon Wolf’s Garden, Fran had practiced a maneuver involving both me and Jet. It was so reckless that my mouth was agape when I saw it—and I didn’t even have a mouth! As much as I tried to stop them, they were having too much fun despite getting beat up. We got a powerful move out of it in the end...but only after sustaining injuries which would’ve crippled a grown man ten times over.

I’ll let you handle the timing. I’ll focus on buffs and defense.

“Thanks.”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet started climbing up to the sky. Current altitude: over a thousand meters above lake level.

“Flashing Thunderclap—go, Jet.”

“Grr!” Jet soared higher, leaving a powered-up Fran behind.

Then...

“Grooooar!”

He turned and charged right at her. Aided by his Skills, his speed far surpassed that of a regular Air Hop. It looked as if Jet was going to crush Fran under the weight of his gigantic body.

His front paws were pointed at Fran, poised as if to attack her with a Claw Art. But Fran stood firm.

“RAAAAH!”

“ROOOAR!”

Instead of avoiding Jet's attack, she turned her back to him. She extended her feet to plant them on Jet's paws. Upside down, it probably looked like Fran was standing on the pads of Jet's paws.

In fact, however, Jet's paws were above her and she was pointing down.

But this was all according to plan. A regular Pressurized Quickdraw would have her use the kick of an Air Hop to initiate her acceleration. Here, she literally used Jet's kick.

Fran shot off with Jet's power. She looked like me when I was using Telekinetic Catapult, which made sense. It was, after all, the move that inspired her.

Converting Brute Strength, Blink, and Jet's full power into propulsion, Fran fell toward the beast like a shooting star.

Jet's strength and Fran's own acceleration Skills made her impossible to see with the naked eye. She left a trail of black lightning in her wake, the only way of tracking her down.

Suddenly, it felt like we hit a barrier. She had reached the beast's tentacles before I even noticed. The thousand-meter gap between Fran and the beast had been closed in mere moments.

"Skycutter!"

"OBE—"

We were going so fast and with such ferocity that it didn't feel like I was cutting meat. It felt like I was cutting *water*. I could barely register what was going on.

By the time I noticed the monster's cry, its body had been split in half.

Teleport!

I quickly evacuated us a safe distance away.

"Urgh..."

Fran, you need to use Regenerate! Hurry!

"Hngh..."

Fran's body was in tatters despite not being hit by the beast.

"Huff..."

She was coughing up blood mixed with the contents of her stomach. I didn't want to imagine the state of her organs.

But this was inevitable. She had taken a direct hit from Jet, no punches pulled. Even after protecting her legs with Barrier and using magic to heal her, the recoil was still intense.

Also, Fran had only used his kick back in the Garden. Here, she'd added to the acceleration herself.

The load must have been unbearable. Her organs, muscles, and bones couldn't handle the acceleration. Her legs suffered the brunt of it. They were swollen from broken bones, internal bleeding, and muscular tears.

Even worse was her right arm, which had a bone sticking out of her busted elbow. Her eyes were bloodshot from burst capillaries and they showed no signs of stopping. She was suffering all the consequences of using Skycutter; I hadn't thought she would actually do it. I was amazed she was still conscious.

"The fight...isn't over..."

And so she wouldn't faint. Easier said than done. I really admired her grit. If it were me, I would be crying and screaming in pain. I wouldn't have thought to accelerate myself using Jet's kick to begin with.

That was great, Fran! But you definitely pushed it too far!

"It wouldn't have worked if I hadn't."

Sure, but...

"But..."

But?

"I still couldn't beat it."

She was actually attempting to go for the kill! But like Fran said, the beast was still standing. It had been cut top to bottom, its sides dangling floppily from each other.

But tentacles had already begun knitting the beast together from its base.

It didn't lose much life, either.

"I couldn't do Black Lightning God Claw..."

Don't worry about that, okay? I was surprised that Fran deemed the attack a failure. If she *had* managed to execute Black Lightning God Claw, it might have done irreparable damage. But Fran still couldn't pull off the ability instantly and she was fighting back pain while doing it.

You still took a decent chunk of its mana, Fran. Good job.

"Hm..."

Besides, it's not over yet!

If thunder magic wasn't going to cut it, then we might as well try the other elements. I cast ten Flare Explodes and Light Explosions into the beast's open wound. Flashes of red and white shone before bursting into explosions.

"Such terrifying swordplay and magic from one so young!" Jusecca shouted, suddenly appearing before us. "But I'm not about to lose without a fight!"

Jusecca had concealed herself with Timespace magic and came out of hiding with a powerful charge of mana. Hiding this much mana was no mean feat. This woman was definitely not your average adventurer.

"Take this, foul beast!"

Hundreds of Timespace bullets fell into the monster's gaping wound.

"OBEEEEEEY!"

That didn't do much, either.

And Jusecca wasn't holding back. Thunder wasn't the only element the beast was resistant to. This thing had magic resistance on top of powerful regeneration!

"Woof, woof!"

"Jet."

Jet had returned but looked like he was in pain. He, too, had suffered the

aftereffects of the maneuver. He had already finished recovering, but there was still blood on his face and shoulder.

His right paw looked more than broken, too. It had been unable to take the recoil of propelling Fran and had shattered from the inside.

“You okay?”

“Woof!”

Fran cuddled Jet’s muzzle.

We then felt someone else approach us. Not an enemy, but not Jusecca, either.

“Wh-what happened here? Did you do that? That’s crazy!”

“Pretty wild, that’s for sure.”

“We’re...out of time.”

Looks like it.

Though the two figures weren’t hostile, I’d have appreciated it if they kept their distance.

“We’ll help any way we can.”

“Your orders.”

Sierra and Theraclede, both of whom were clad in Malice comparable to an elite Fiend.

“Hrm...” Fran grimaced when she saw them. Not because she was resentful of them, but the Malice they had was so powerful that it caused discomfort.

“It still won’t go down even after all that...” Sierra muttered, having seen the monster survive Fran’s powerful attack.

“You guys are okay with the Evil One’s influence?” asked Fran.

“Yeah, no problems here.”

“Me too.”

The sword Theraclede’s Cannibalize allowed Sierra to absorb the Malice of other Fiends and convert it to energy. Because the Evil One’s influence used

Malice as a medium, he became impervious to it.

Meanwhile, the current Theraclede was the same as ever.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to trust them completely. Even if he could absorb Malice with Cannibalize, we didn't know what would happen once it exceeded the limit. Sierra and Theraclede were aware of this, too.

"Let's get started on our next attack. Controlling too much Malice can be difficult as time goes on."

"Same here."

We didn't know each other's fighting styles and didn't really have a lot of trust in them. Fran exchanged a few words with the two before splitting up. Even if Sierra could work with Theraclede, it was impossible for Fran. We also had a good reason for wanting to see them fight.

They're definitely going all-in from the start. We should hang back and see if we can find any weaknesses.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

As expected, Sierra and Theraclede charged at the beast, Malice blazing. Were they really going to attack with Malice? Would that work against something that had a piece of the Evil One?

Nevertheless, they started attacking the beast with their Malice. Gigantic explosions blew away countless tentacles—apparently, Malice worked just fine. I was kind of expecting this since Fiend Crusher Revelation hadn't worked as well as expected.

The beast wasn't primarily made of the Evil One. It only specialized in controlling other creatures, which meant that the rest of its body was—relatively, at least—normal.

I joined in and started firing spells from a distance. Cleansing, Land, Water, I threw all the magicks I had at it, but couldn't seem to find a weakness. If it didn't have any elemental weaknesses, maybe there was a certain body part I could focus on. I let Sierra and the others keep attacking and observed the

beast's mana flow and density. Were there any limitations to its regeneration? What happened when it was attacking?

Hmm?

"Find something?"

Kind of...

Something was definitely off, but Fran and I couldn't put a finger on it.

Do we just have to overpower it?

"Seems simple enough."

Yeah, but...

I could tell that Fran was getting sluggish. The accumulated physical and mental exhaustion was beginning to take a toll on her.

Fran, you need to recover as much as possible. We'll try hitting it with one big attack.

"Okay."

We continued attacking the tentacles and trying to find an opening when Fran and Jet suddenly reacted to something.

Startled, they looked up. A hundred meters above us were Sierra and Theraclede, and Fran had reacted to a sudden spike in their Malice. Apparently, they were planning to do a big attack.

Let's back up for a bit.

"Hm."

"Woof."

Theraclede was in front and Sierra was behind him. Both focused their Malice above their heads. I didn't know whether they needed help, but I fired some big spells to draw the beast's attention. Soon, they had finished their preparation.

Is that...a spear of Malice?

"What's Theraclede creating? A hoop?"

Sierra had crafted a conical spear made of powerful Malice. He was definitely

going to use it to attack. But what was Theraclede doing? Like Fran said, his Malice had taken the form of hoops—three of them at fixed intervals, jet black, with diameters slightly larger than Sierra’s spear. Was he going to use them like chakrams?

Anyway, let’s put up a barrier!

“Hm!”

We didn’t know what kind of attack it was, but it used Malice, so it would definitely be destructive. We flew a good distance away and set up a barrier.

Then, Sierra made his move. “Eat this!”

Sierra brought down his arm and the spear flew like it was being thrown by an invisible hand. Its speed was kind of disappointing, but maybe the only thing that mattered was the Malice spear hitting the target.

But I was wrong. Theraclede’s three hoops were lined up along the spear’s trajectory. The Malice spear accelerated as they passed through the hoops.

Sierra and Theraclede’s Malice worked together to create an attack unique to themselves.

The spear also absorbed the hoops as it passed through them, growing in both size and speed.

“So fast!”

The giant spear of Malice was now moving as fast as my Telekinetic Catapult, destroying tentacles flailing in its path before stabbing the beast’s head.

KABOOM!

Whoa!

We could feel the shockwave of Malice all the way here. The lake shook as tidal waves erupted from the epicenter of the Malice explosion.

Sierra and Theraclede’s combined attack left a huge hole in the beast. It was even bigger than my Kanna Kamuy.

However—

Even that wasn’t enough...

The wound quickly began healing. I was getting tired of the beast regenerating through all our big attacks. Still, I saw a faint glimmer of hope.

It's healing...more slowly than before?

"Hm!"

The beast was healing a *lot* more slowly compared to when Fran and I attacked. Was it because of all the earlier damage? Was it that one attack in particular? In any case, figuring this out seemed like it would lead to a breakthrough.

I activated all of my Skills to analyze the beast.

That hole really is healing slower.

Did Malice do more damage than Fiend Crusher Revelation? Was the accumulated damage finally getting to it? It might've been the result of Evil One's Communion. I could feel an immense amount of Malice surging through Sierra and Theraclede even now. It was sure to have an effect.

Just as I was about to talk to Sierra—

"Looks like you're having a hard time."

"Lene?"

Lene suddenly appeared by our side.

Did you come to help?

"Yes, I thought I'd make myself useful."

Does that thing have any weaknesses?

"It has something like a weakness, sure."

Wait, seriously?

"Really?"

Lene nodded casually, but Fran and I were dumbstruck.

It's not crystal, is it? We could kill it easily if that was the case.

"It has crystal, but it's still on the other side of the seal."

Apparently, only part of the beast was currently manifested. If it were human, it'd be like we were fighting its arm right now. Of course, the crystal was well within that seal.

Jeez...an *arm*?! No wonder the beast could destroy a whole continent if fully unleashed.

"So what's the weak point?"

"Like I said, it's not *exactly* a weak point..." Lene pointed at a certain spot some distance away from Sierra's crater. "Look over there."

"Where?"

Oh! It's wounded!

"The wounds are small, but they're not healing as quickly. The same goes for those tentacles, too."

Lene pointed at the beast's tentacles, or what was left of them anyway. Some of them had remained cut off and weren't regenerating. There were so many tentacles that I hadn't noticed this before.

"Those tentacles have properties similar to Life Magic," Lene explained. "That wound does, too."

"Life Magic..." Fran muttered and patted Jet on the back. Jet turned around to look at her. We couldn't tell the tentacles apart, but Jet had indeed left small bite marks on the beast's body.

Of course! Regeneration Disruption!

I never really thought about it because we could rarely feel its effects, but Jet had the ability to disrupt an opponent's regeneration. Apparently, it was working great on the beast.

"It's not quite a weakness, but its regenerative ability is the product of a Skill. Skills and magic that can disrupt it will be effective."

The beast's healing was beginning to slow down because of the amount of mana and Malice it took to fix itself. With Jet on the offensive, we would be able to deal even more damage to it.

Also, Jet wasn't the only one that could disrupt healing.

Fran, I think Life Magic has a spell which disrupts healing.

That was how Jet had lost his eye before. Maybe the experience made him pick up Regeneration Disruption when he evolved.

Should I use our points?

Yeah!

We had EP left over to level up Life Magic.

I don't know how many levels we need, though. I'll do one level at a time.

The spell can be acquired at level 5 Life Magic, P.A. chimed in.

Really?!

Yes. It allows the temporary cessation of recovery and reparation of both organic and inanimate targets.

That's the one!

I followed P.A.'s advice and leveled Life Magic to level 5.

Okay, got it!

Heal Disturb worked just as P.A. explained it. Casting it on a target halted all healing spells and stopped wounds from closing. The spell couldn't cover the beast because it was too big, but Sierra's Malice naturally had healing disrupting properties. It really was the enemy of all life.

I picked up some other spells along the way, too.

Spells which were very good. Life Magic didn't just have spells which affected healing; it also had spells which influenced the whole body. There were spells which sped up the body's latent recovery and healing ability, and also spells which enhanced musculature and reflexes. There was another spell which fortified the body and increased its strength levels.

I had to ask P.A. for clarification, but this enhancement spell was just the thing Fran needed.

What spells did you get?

There's one that strengthens your body to reduce the toll abilities take on you. It sounds great!

Basically, it was a spell made for people who self-destructed whenever they used a move—people like Fran. The spell should drastically reduce the damage she took from abilities like Flashing Thunderclap, Skycutter, and Pressurized Quickdraw.

We wouldn't know until we tried, but it wasn't like anything I said could stop Fran. Might as well use it whenever we could. Not that this was license for her to be reckless...

Let's give Heal Disturb a shot.

"Hm!"

Fran nodded and called Jet.

"Jet."

"Woof!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Are you going to use that again?!

Fran and Jet's combination attack. It didn't have a name yet, but she knew what I was talking about.

"Hm. We can beat it now that we have Life Magic!"

No, using that right out of the gate kind of scares me.

We didn't know what effects the spell might have. There were too many unknown factors.

"Hm..."

We can try that later down the road.

"All right. And it's not 'that.' I came up with a name for it."

Really? What's it called?

Fran didn't really care for these things, and I think this was the first time she'd actually named a move. She must've really believed in it.

"There are three options."

Okay?

That's a lot. Let's hear it. *What's the first one?*

"Hyper Special Excellent Miracle Rush."

No.

"No?"

It's just...maybe we can try a different one.

I was reminded that Fran was still a child. It was cute... But I'd rather her move not be made fun of in the future. Hyper Miracle... What was it called?

Hyper Special Excellent Miracle Rush.

You don't have to memorize it, P.A.!

Especially because we weren't going to go with that.

"Okay. Here's the second one."

A-all right.

"Super Jet Attack."

I, uh...I see...

Better than the last one, but only because the last one was terrible. This was marginally better. Maybe. I dunno.

I-I can't wait to hear the last one.

"Hm! Lupine Quickdraw."

Hey, that's pretty good!

Really, it wasn't a contest. The final name was the best.

I think Lupine Quickdraw is a great name.

"Really? But Super Jet Attack is cooler."

"Woof!" Fran and Jet's eyes sparkled as they looked at me. They were making it very difficult to say no!

N-not that it isn't cool! It's very cool! Just not super cool like Lupine Quickdraw!

After a desperate negotiation, Fran decided to name the move Lupine Quickdraw.

Anyway, let me handle this one.

“Hm!” Fran moved me to her opposite hand and threw me. I wanted to try it from a safe distance first before going all in. Now that I thought about it, Telekinetic Catapult was not good for this application. Normally, you’d imbue a weapon with Heal Disturb and then engage in close-quarter combat. Here, I was trying to find a space where I could engage directly but safely.

“Here goes!”

Wahoo!

Another Telekinetic Catapult, this time with Fiend Crusher Revelation and life magic. But there were some miscalculations.

Hmm...I guess it’s because I’m not an organic.

The spell which enhanced healing and the one which enhanced my body weren’t working, probably on account of me being a sword and all. I was hoping that Life Magic could reduce the toll Telekinetic Catapult took on my body. Too bad.

At least Heal Disturb activated without any problems.

I used Mana Thruster to increase my speed, shredding through the beast’s whipping tentacles before stabbing myself into it. I made another crater, confirming there was nothing wrong with my attack power. This thing just healed too fast.

Time to take another big chunk!

I transmogrified myself in the center of the crater. I didn’t go for steel threads this time. As weak as the monster’s insides were, threads lacked the penetration I needed. Instead, I went with something a little thicker. Needles. My blade split into a hundred branches, each point over ten meters long, and wreaked havoc inside the beast.

While it didn’t do a lot of damage, every bit helped when whittling away at this beast.

Let's see how it likes that.

I teleported back to Fran and watched. The hole I left behind was a hundred times slower to heal compared to the other wounds.

It's working!

"Hm! It's not healing at all!"

Lene was shocked as she saw us celebrate. "I see you have Life Magic. It doesn't look like you've used it at all before now..." She nodded then, suddenly understanding. "So it's your powers, Mr. Sword. You have the ability to strengthen your Skills."

Huh? Uhh, I don't know what you're talking about.

"I'm sorry. I could tell by looking at your past."

Uh...

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

"The past" didn't just mean the *distant* past. Lene could see a few minutes before, too. *A-anyway, time for our next attack!*

"Hm!"

We won't get anywhere trying to chip kill it. We'll have to put all our power into this next attack to finish it off.

"Got it."

As we discussed what to do next, the beast released an immense amount of mana. "OBEY!"

It's moving! And its mana...!

"It's wriggling a lot more than before."

The beast had changed tactics. Its tentacles started writhing more intensely as they weaved together to expand its body, but that wasn't all.

"Is it watching us?"

Definitely.

I couldn't tell where the creature's eyes were. But despite its lack of eyeballs,

I could feel its Mana Sense and Life Sense point right at us.

The beast had probably paid no attention to us before; we were probably little more than flies as far as it was concerned. Now, it had identified us as a clear threat.

“It’s taking mana from the water.”

The water? You mean the lake?

“Unfortunately,” said Lene, “it’s very easy for the beast to do this since it has my powers as a spirit.”

Lene was a spirit of time and water. The water of Lake Vivian was imbued with Timespace mana. That made it perfect for the beast, since it could keep using the water as energy.

Hang on. Does that mean the one who imbued the lake with Timespace mana was...

“Either me or the monster, yes.”

That’s the perfect home field advantage!

The beast’s tentacles squirmed harder, signaling a change to its body. Lumps began appearing all over it. They frothed and expanded, each loaded with significant mana and Malice.

Was it preparing for an attack? This could go real bad. I quickly put up several barriers to protect Fran in the face of the overwhelming pressure. But I was mistaken. The monster had identified us as foes, but not foes it had to attack directly.

“OBEEEEEEY!”

Ugh...!

“Wha—?!”

The beast’s slowly increasing mana suddenly spiked. I teleported away from the monster out of reflex because of its explosive mana and hostility.

It was terrifying. I didn’t just teleport to protect Fran. I was actually scared.

Jet, pull back!

“Woof!”

“So...many...mouths.”

Yeah...

As Fran pointed out, the creature had undergone a change. The countless lumps on its body had revealed their true form. Now, its body was positively *coated* in mouths.

And they all looked human, identical to the one the beast had in the beginning. These mouths were only a tenth the size of that one, but there were at least a hundred of them.

“FIRE ARROW!”

“Teacher!”

On it!

Arrows of flame covered the space around the monster after it howled its incantation. Over a thousand fire arrows soared, all targeting us and Sierra. My vision turned crimson as countless explosions went off one after another. Fran and I would’ve been toast if it wasn’t for several layers of Flame Barrier.

The beast hurled its Multicast Fire Arrow all at once.

Actually, it wasn’t even quite multicast. It was like having several hundred different mages all casting Fire Arrow. Each mouth on the beast’s body was capable of independent incantations.

It has no problems controlling them, either...

The beast was a monster in a league of its own. It could perfectly control its endless supply of mana. As long as the lake had water, it could probably launch that attack a thousand more times.

“Hrm!”

The tentacles and magic bullets...! Damn it!

“Here comes another one!”

I know!

Another hailstorm of fire arrows fell upon us. But this time we had the beast's tentacles and bullets to worry about.

The beast had been so focused on coming back that it hadn't paid attention to us. Its tentacles and magic bullets had been an unconscious form of self-defense, like a cow whipping its tail. But the beast was perfectly capable of controlling its tentacles while casting magic.

It's going to overwhelm us if we don't go on the offensive soon! I don't think the beast could hear my shouting, but I could feel its mana ramping up.

After a moment of charging, it fired a new spell. "WATER ARROW!"

Water this time!

Unlike the explosive Fire Arrow, Water Arrow covered less ground. This gave the arrows more penetrative force, especially when its numbers far outclassed Fire Arrow.

There were over two thousand of them, probably a result of the beast's affinity. Lene had high affinity for time and water; having absorbed her, the beast did too.

It made me wonder why it had even bothered with the earlier Fire Arrow. It either used it without thinking or it wanted to cover a lot of space with explosions. I hoped it wasn't the latter, because that would mean it was intelligent enough to switch elements based on the situation. I knew it wasn't stupid, but it might've been stronger than I thought.

What now, Teacher?

We'll meet up with Sierra and coordinate our next attack. It's our only chance.

Hm.

We planned our next move, dodging the water spells with Dimension Shift and Short Jump. We couldn't just keep watching, not when the opponent was on the attack. The beast's volley of spells would be more likely to overwhelm us as time went on.

But the beast was really showing its intellect. The water arrows were spaced out enough to avoid crashing into one another. It wasn't something a monster

could do solely on instinct.

The storm of water arrows showed no signs of stopping.

CRSH CRSH CRSH!

The endless hail of shells fell into the water, agitating the lake's surface enough to create high waves. All this while tentacles whipped and magic bullets flew, creating a five-hundred-meter-wide danger zone around the beast.

All this from a single arm...

And it had been weakened by Evil One's Communion!

Sierra! Looks like he's okay!

We looked for Sierra when the attacks stopped. He was further behind us, having retreated out of the beast's no man's land.

He and Theraclede had somehow survived the onslaught, but not without injury. Theraclede had taken the brunt of it. The lower half of his body was gone, and there was a sizable hole in his head. He was already beginning to regenerate, but he would've been dead if he weren't a Fiend.

Sierra was also hurt, but his wounds were scratches compared to Theraclede's.

"You didn't have to cover for me, Mister..."

"Ugh...I'm...fine..."

"No, you're not!"

Theraclede had protected Sierra. He was still Romeo to him, even if he'd grown up. I got it, though. I'd do the same thing if a grown Fran from the future showed up.

Jusecca was nowhere to be seen. Had she fallen to the beast? I doubted it. With her Timespace magic, I knew she would be okay.

Fall back! We'll regroup with Sierra!

Hm! Fran knew the dangers of tarrying and immediately moved out.

We got out of the monster's range and healed Theraclede. Healing and Life

Magic made for a great combination and his wounds started sealing rapidly.

“Sorry,” said Theraclede.

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it for Sierra. Besides, you still have to shield for us.”

The sudden *tsundere* from Fran!

“I’ll be the best shield you’ve ever seen,” said Theraclede.

“Hmph. You okay, Sierra?”

“Yeah. What about you? You look pretty worn out.”

“I’m fine.”

Compared to them, at least.

“I see...” said Sierra. “I think you’ve noticed by now, but we can’t chip away at that thing.”

“Hm.”

“We need to hit it with our most powerful attacks while we still have the energy.”

So Sierra and the others had reached the same conclusion we had. We needed to finish this battle quickly.

“I’ll distract it while you get ready,” said Theraclede. He’d make the perfect bait with his powerful regeneration. We would have less firepower, but Fran and Sierra would have to make up for that. “In the meantime—”

But Theraclede turned around in shock before he could finish. Fran and the others also looked in the same direction.

Hostile mana detected, said P.A. Intensity rising. Recommending evasive action.

Seriously?!

I immediately teleported on P.A.’s warning. Just then, a beam, ten meters wide, came very close to grazing us.

It broke our barrier despite not even hitting us. The shockwave of the beast’s beam was powerful enough to rattle us.

It's not giving up even when we're outside its range!

I followed the beam and watched it crash into the lake in the distance. A loud rumbling, followed by a fifty-meter-high pillar of water.

The range of that beam was crazy...

Fortunately, the lake had been completely evacuated and there were no ships around, but that beam could've definitely gone farther. It might have hit land tens of kilometers away from the center of the lake, dealing all kinds of collateral damage depending on its trajectory.

Second beam incoming.

Tsk!

"I'll—"

"UOOOOH!" Theraclede charged toward the beast before Fran could do anything. Holding a great shield of Malice, he stepped in the beam's way.

A gust of wind erupted when the beast's beam collided with the Malice shield.

"Urgh! Hrrgh!" Theraclede's body was burning despite his shield. His freshly healed body turned red, then black like charcoal, then started healing again. Rinse and repeat.

Theraclede hung in there as smoke rose from his burning body.

"I'll handle this!" he roared. "You two! Kill that thing!" He turned his head toward us, and his eyes were filled with such sincerity that I couldn't believe he was a Fiend.

SIDE: THERACLEDE

PEOPLE CHANGE over the littlest things. It could happen any day with the least warning. Next thing you know, you're a changed man.

It all started with a request from an acquaintance. Murelia. A pitiful woman

whose mind was corrupted by the Evil One. A woman who lived only for Romeo. A woman who was beautiful.

I remember my astonishment when I first saw her. That was the first time I had thought a woman beautiful. There was nothing sexual about it; her beauty simply captivated me. She wasn't just a pretty face, which had never been something I cared about to begin with. But her bitterness, madness, coldness... her *weakness* as she was led around by this illusion called love, her *arrogance* to all she met. All these qualities entranced me.

I was born on the battlefield, abandoned on the battlefield, raised on the battlefield.

People think I spent whole days and nights killing everything I saw, but that wasn't true. We spent several days moving between locations, and on nights where we couldn't see the enemy, we would simply fall back and set up camp.

Away from the front lines, soldiers ate, drank, and gambled away the time. And just as there were merchants who sold their goods, there were women who sold their bodies. These weren't consorts selling their services to nobles. These were hookers with so much baggage that the brothels didn't want them. They had nowhere to go but the battlefield.

My mother had been one of them. Or so I suspect, judging from the situation.

I don't know what happened to her that she had to whore herself out. But I was born and then sold to a beast tamer. I was supposed to be food for his monsters. You see, giving monsters a taste of human flesh makes them more effective on the battlefield.

But the mercenary company was wiped out before I could end up in the belly of a beast, and I survived. I was two at the time, or perhaps three.

I don't know whether I was weaned and then sold or if the mercs raised me when I was a baby. All I know is I had an able body, which allowed me to avoid starving to death.

I took clothes off corpses, drank whatever water I could find, ate the bodies of man and Fiend alike, and lived long enough to call the battlefield home. I was quite young at the time, and therefore cannot recall any particular memories.

I continued my life as a young vulture until another mercenary company picked me up. (Maybe “captured” is a better word.) Anyway, a survivor of the band my mother sold me to was there, and he answered what questions he was able to.

This company preferred replacing their ranks with children they picked up. Much cheaper than buying slaves. The mercenaries named me Theraclede and raised me as one of their own.

The band beat the basics of mercenary life into me. The survivor had also told me of my origins and what had happened to the last merc company. Years later, that company was also defeated on the battlefield. My caretaker died with them.

From then on, I changed companies from time to time, all the while still living on the battlefield. An attempt at life in a town was suffocating; get into a scrap and they sic the guards on you. And all the time, everyone needs money, money, and more money. Everything was so...dull. The place pissed me off.

The battlefield was the best place to be. I could kill however many I wanted and get ever stronger for it. Best of all, I felt alive. And living was so much simpler. If you survived, you were a winner. Die, and you were a loser. Winners take from the losers. They take it all. There was nowhere in the world where lines were so clear cut.

Back when Linford invited me, I only went along with him because I could get stronger. I didn't care about working for the Evil One, didn't care about being on a wanted list. I was just looking for a fight.

I've seen mercs fight for profit or because they think it's a game. For me, it was all about the fight itself. I've sipped the finest wine and still found it lacking in taste compared to the fresh blood of my enemies. I tried sleeping with a woman once, but it didn't excite me as much as cutting into the flesh of a mighty foe.

But then there was Murelia, the first person who managed to move me. I won't say that I fell in love, but that was the only time I wanted to talk to someone more than I wanted to beat them bloody.

I could feel her madness when I started talking to her. Hell, I was probably

crazy myself for thinking her beautiful. Still, I thought I would grant her last wishes by getting Romeo out. But...

“Mister, who are you?”

“Mister, what’s that?”

“Come on, Mister! Faster!”

“Mister, are you okay?”

Never before had I needed to mind a child. Talk about a pain in the ass. He would sit the second he got tired and complain about how his body hurt. Thankfully, he didn’t cry around me, but I wasn’t expecting him to like me.

Could never work out why. I knew I was sitting on a gold mine. But he was a keepsake of Murelia and taking him to safety was part of the job.

We went on until we reached the orphanage in Bulbola...and the kid wailed, not wanting to part with me. I could never work out why.

Why did I even bother keeping him around? What was I thinking? Was I an idiot? For some reason, I just couldn’t leave him be. When I saw his childish smile, I’d reply with a wry one of my own.

It reminded me of Murelia, somehow, and of the old Black Cat who died trying to kill me.

Their eyes. The old woman when she tried to kill me. Murelia when she asked me to take care of Romeo. Desperation, and yet a serenity like still waters. Their eyes weren’t quite the same, but their gaze emerged in the back of my mind.

“What’s wrong, Mister?”

“Nothing. Go to sleep.”

“Okay...”

Why did I feel bothered when Romeo had a fever? That monstrous high elf had us marked. I could’ve cut him and run, but I didn’t. What was happening to me?

How did this kid have so much power over me?

“Hnh! Raaaagh!” I had blacked out for a moment, apparently thinking about

the past. Maybe my life was flashing before my eyes.

But now I had to protect Sierra—to protect this Romeo, all grown up. I found it ludicrous, but their auras were the same. Romeo’s power gave him the ability to control Fiends he came into contact with, but...

“None of that matters!”

I could think of a million reasons why I was putting up with Romeo, but none of them mattered. I just needed to protect Sierra. I had the power to do it, too. Everything else was irrelevant.

“Come on, you bastard! I’m not dead yet! Hit me with your best shot!”

“OBEY!”

Theraclede’s Malice was diminishing as he took the full force of the red-purple beam. Its destructive force was overwhelming the Malice he’d received from the Evil One’s Communion with Romeo.

The beam chipped away at the black Malice shield, sending pieces of it flying. The black Malice adjusted its intensity to the force of the beam.

“Thirty seconds, Fran! Can you make it?!”

“Yeah!” Sierra shouted before closing his eyes and entering a meditative state. He was utterly defenseless, but he trusted Theraclede to protect him.

We need to do it, too.

Yeah...looks like it.

We were past the point of being careful. In fact, we needed to force ourselves if we wanted to win.

We’ll go all out.

All out, huh...?

Hm. All out. Jet.

Woof!

Fran and Jet accelerated upward. We had thirty seconds before our next

attack, and we couldn't afford to fall behind. It wasn't much, but it was all Theraclede could handle. Sierra had made the call.

"We're doing it again, Jet."

"Woof!"

Another Lupine Quickstrike. We could reduce the blowback with life magic, but it was still going to be rough.

Jet barked happily, showing no signs of hesitation. He was pleased that Fran could rely on him.

Teacher, can you do that?

Of course.

That was my final card, the fruit of my training. But it really wasn't anything fancy. I was going to sacrifice my resources to increase my attack power for a short amount of time. Simply put, I was going to put all of my mana into my blade.

I currently had over 10,000 MP. Mana Conductivity was at SS-, 340 percent efficiency. If I were to put all of my usable mana into attack— *Attack power will exceed 35,000.*

That was a lot of damage. And also a lot of risk.

The load far exceeded my current strength. I had tried conducting 2000 mana into attack back in the Garden and I was already reeling.

I would normally lose durability on every swing. More mana only increased this durability loss.

At 10,000, my blade visibly degraded. 100 durability per second. 1000 to 2000 durability with every swing.

I wouldn't last a minute if I added Skycutter and Sword God Form on top of that. Even a few seconds would be dangerous. But if Fran wanted to do it, I wasn't about to back down.

Lupine Quickdraw + Mana Conduction + Sword God Form. This might be the most powerful attack we had ever attempted. But it was going to take a lot of

focus and concentrated mana.

Pulling this off while dodging the beast's attacks would be difficult. Fran was already sweating as she weaved between magic bullets. Thirty seconds might not be enough.

Suddenly, a shadow appeared, catching the beast's attention. A tall woman, her blue hair trailing behind her. Jusecca.

"Vermillion Eye! Seek the target's weakness!" Jusecca's eyes emitted an eerie glow. Her mana suddenly spiked. At that moment, she actually had as much mana as Fran when she was preparing Lupine Quickdraw.

But Jusecca's control of mana was much better.

"Pierce, scarlet spear! Vermillion Spear!" Jusecca released a powerful blast of magic from her hand.

Blood-red light flashed over the lake as a thin luminous ray ran through the air. The highly compressed mana was as red as its namesake. The scarlet spear penetrated the beast, running its body through before disappearing into the lake. You could see right through the hole the spear left behind.

Wow!

You can say that again.

It pained me to admit that we couldn't do as much damage as Jusecca. And her turn wasn't over yet.

"OBEEEEEEY!"

"Quiet, monster!"

The spear came back, running through the monster again before making another sharp turn. Jusecca must have been manipulating its flight path with her Timespace magic.

The spear pierced the monster six times before finally running out of steam. But the damage was done. The beast's mana output had decreased. Jusecca's scarlet eye had managed to find the monster's weak spots.

"Come on! Try and catch me!"

“OBEEEEY!”

“Over here, ugly!”

The beast identified Jusecca as a threat and locked on to her, playing right into her hands.

She kept the beast occupied even as she grew exhausted. Thanks to her, we finished our preparation.

“Huff...”

“Grr...”

Fran and Jet finished preparing as they quietly concentrated their mana. I had finished, too.

Gonna need your help, P.A.

Affirmative.

By the way, you can talk again?

I have regained some of my faculties thanks to your rank up.

P.A. had recovered a bit after I leveled up.

We looked down at the beast and saw that it now had a twenty-meter-wide crater in its body, probably thanks to Jusecca’s Timespace spell.

She continued attacking the beast while teleporting around. It was crazy stuff. Honestly, I didn’t think we could beat her in a fight. Her mastery of Timespace far surpassed mine. Good thing we were on the same side.

Jusecca’s attacks created a lull in the bullet storm. Now was our chance.

Synchronizing attack timing with Sierra. In seventeen, sixteen, fifteen—

P.A. started her countdown. We wouldn’t have to worry about mistiming now. Still, I had my doubts. Should I use Unleash Potential? I had never tried combining it with an overcharged mana conduction. It scared me.

However—

Eleven, ten—

I didn’t want to leave anything on the table after seeing what the beast could

withstand. But I didn't want to end up sacrificing myself, either.

Don't wanna make Fran sad.

Chance of dealing massive damage to the beast without Unleash Potential is 81 percent.

What about with Unleash Potential?

Chance of dealing massive damage increases to 99 percent. However, Teacher will be heavily damaged in the process and suffer from reduced capabilities for more than one hundred days.

I see...

Also, chance of Teacher being destroyed is 15 percent.

At least she did the math for me...

Seven, six...

I guess I won't use Unleash Potential...

Yes. Refraining is the best option.

Agreed.

And the moment I'd decided not to use Unleash Potential, it happened.

"I'm going to connect you for a while."

Lene!

Lene showed up. I really didn't have a knack for sensing spirits.

Four, three—

It was faint but I could feel her mana go through my blade. Every little bit helped. But then something completely unexpected happened.

Recommending use of Unleash Potential.

Huh?

P.A. changed her mind at the most crucial moment.

What? What do you mean?

Was it Lene? Did she do something to me?

It is the best option for both Teacher and Fran.

Wait, you can't just—

Two, one—

There was no time! The best option for me and Fran? I guess I would just have to use it!

Aaah, here goes! Unleash Potential!

Zero.

“GROOOOAR!”

“HAAAAA!”

DAAAAAH!

Again, Fran turned into a shooting star. As Jet kicked her with his paws, I put all of my mana into my blade, leaving behind the bare minimum to ensure my survival.

I turned myself into the ideal blade, increasing Fran's speed with spells and telekinesis. I remembered to support her with my freshly learned life magic, too. My thinking was lightning-quick thanks to Unleash Potential, so everything went smoothly. This was going to hurt in the morning, though...

Urgh...!

Half of my durability was already gone.

Teacher!

I'm fine! Go!

Even in the slowed time of my accelerated mind, Fran was moving fast. My surroundings looked like a highway from inside a car.

Fran raised me high in the air. Now for Sword God Form—

Spacetime distortion detected.

Huh?

Wha—?!

By the time we heard P.A.'s voice, our high-speed surroundings came to a halt. But...why? I had already used all my Timespace spells to their limit. Even with Unleash Potential on, it shouldn't just increase our acceleration.

It wasn't just a little bit, either. We were several hundred times faster now.

I can't move.

Same here.

I scanned our surroundings, trying to find out what happened. The mass of information rushed through my mind like a flood. I felt dizzy.

Uhh...

There's someone here.

F-Fran, you're okay?

Huh?

I thought Fran would be really going through it, considering how bad I was doing, but she just sounded puzzled. Was she okay? I guess her brain wasn't taxed with multiple casts of myriad spells.

"I helped her, you see."

Lene! You did this?!

"Yes. Allow me to help you, too."

My vision turned white when Lene said so. The torrent of information stopped. No wonder Fran felt fine.

Teacher, look.

Yeah, I see them...

Something—someone was with us in the white void.

Fran, is that you?

You're there, too.

We were standing in front of ourselves. It was like looking at a statue from a distance. But this Fran looked a little different. She had her Black Sky Tiger gear on, but she was wearing pants instead of a skirt; the smaller details were

different, too. The one that stood out the most was the earring on her left ear. Instead of an ear hoop, this Fran wore an earring with a blue gem hanging from it.

This Fran had a real presence to her, too—she was no illusion. If you blindfolded me and I had to find Fran based on her aura, I would definitely pick her out. It was a strange feeling. But as similar as the Fran holding me and the Fran in front of us were, there was a difference.

It was faint...but even if she was Fran, she wasn't the Fran I knew.

And what was this immense sense of Malice? Was that me emitting it? But Fran didn't look bothered by it. If anything, she looked like she was controlling it.

But now wasn't the time to worry about that.

Hey, Fran! Are you okay?!

The Fran with the earring was in an awful state. Her body was enhanced to the point that she was taking damage just being on her two feet. Her bones audibly cracked. The pressure from the mana must've been giving her organs hell right about now. Tears of blood streamed down her face as she clenched her teeth. She looked like a hero out of a Greek tragedy. Still, she held me up.

Why wasn't I healing her?! How did she even get to that point? She looked like she was about to unleash an attack as she pointed her me to her eyes.

I had no way of telling what our alternate selves were doing from within the white void. They couldn't see us, either. They weren't even reacting to us.

Fran! Dammit! Why can't I heal her?!



I gritted my teeth and saw the Fran with the earring move. She whispered in a voice heavy with self-destructive agony, “Let’s go, Teacher.”

Very well.

Her voice and face looked like a girl mourning the death of a loved one. But I could pick up the hidden distress signal behind her words: “Help.”

Though she didn’t say it aloud, I could hear it in her voice.

But the voice of the talking sword in her hand didn’t just sound cold. It sounded...*inanimate*.

“Can I release you?”

I am a sword. I do not have the right to decide. You must decide for yourself.

“I want to know what you think.”

If you do, you will definitely destroy the beast. However, the exhaustion will affect your battles going forward. If you do not, you may not be able to destroy the beast, but your baseline will be maintained.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I want to know what you think I should do.”

I do not have the authority to answer that question.

I could feel my blood boiling. Was that *thing* really me? No, I refused to believe it. What was I doing?! Fran was about to cry and she needed my support!

Help her already! Don’t give her this nonsense about authority! Try a “don’t worry, I’ll figure it out!” or maybe “do it and let’s wipe the floor with that thing!” or any of that corny stuff and she would’ve been *happy*!

You’re supposed to talk to her! Ease her worries! Even telling her “you have nothing to worry about!” would’ve been enough!

Furious at my other self, I started yelling at him.

Hey, you asshole! Can’t you see you’re making Fran cry?! I don’t care if you’re me! I’ll come over there and snap you in half myself!

SIDE: FRAN?

“Fran, thank you for letting Romeo and the others escape.”

“Lene...”

“You are truly kind. Even in your anger, you held back some of your power to keep them safe.”

“Don’t get me wrong...I just needed him alive.”

“And yet Romeo, Theraclede, and Zelyse survived because of it. Thanks to your permission, I was able to use your sword’s power. The crossing would’ve failed without it.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Somewhere far away.”

“I see. Did we really have to let Zelyse live?”

“Yes. For your sakes.”

“Huh?” As always, I couldn’t understand what Lene was saying. I just knew she wasn’t my enemy. I didn’t kill Theraclede because she asked me not to.

She’d teleported Romeo and the others away. Where to? I wondered.

“Fran, the area has been cleared. You can use your full power if you want.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Even Winalene has gone far away.”

“Hm. Okay...”

We were stronger now. Far stronger than the day we lost to Murelia...that awful day when we lost Jet.

“Let’s do it, Teacher.”

Very well.

“...Hm.”

When did Teacher start acting funny? Was it in Bulbola after we beat up Zelyse’s crystal golem army? Was it after we won the fighting tournament? He wasn’t the way he is now when we arrived at the Beastman Nation.

By the time I noticed, he didn't talk to me so much. Soon enough, he stopped talking at all. I stopped talking to him, too. He was so cold when I bothered to talk to him.

Because I am a sword.

Think for yourself.

If that is your will, so be it.

His warm voice, which used to soothe me, was gone. It was like he wasn't even human anymore.

It wasn't that I didn't want to hear his voice, but...I was scared. Scared of hearing that cold voice again. The one that said "I am your sword, and so I will obey you."

He wouldn't praise me, no matter how well I did. What passed for praise now was said in the same cold voice he always used. "Very good." I got teased by some drunks in town once and took revenge on them. Wrecked their shop. Teacher only said, "You went too far, Fran."

Though it was only for a second, he sounded like the old Teacher. Maybe I could turn him back to normal if I acted out, but...it only ever lasted a little while. Soon enough, he stopped talking again.

That was when I ran into Theraclede. The man who killed Kiara.

I hadn't forgotten about him, but I hadn't been looking for him, either. Kiara told me not to avenge her, after all. But now he was in front of me, and there was this boy with him.

Despite all the pain they'd endured, despite being captured, Theraclede and Romeo were at peace. They looked happy. They were smiling.

Why was I thinking of their smiles? It was beginning to bug me.

"Teacher, why am I feeling this way?"

I do not know. Perhaps it is stress.

"I don't know..."

Do you know what is bothering you?

"I said I don't know!"

At present, I do not know either.

I didn't care anymore. I thought about just killing Theraclede, but Lene showed up and stopped me.

She told me she needed Teacher's Timespace magic to save Romeo and the others. She'd saved my life once, so I didn't refuse her.

But why did we have to save Theraclede?

The more I tried to think it over, the more annoyed I got. My thoughts were a tangled mess. At least I had the beast to take it out on.

Lene even told me I could go all out. The last time I did that was in the Demon Wolf's Garden, when I ended up breaking the goddess's barrier. She really chewed me out for it. Good thing this lake was several times bigger than the Garden.

Going all out here shouldn't be a problem.

"Spit out your power...piece of the Evil One."

Destroy! Destroy it all—

"Shut up. Just hand over your power."

The fragment sealed within Teacher obeyed me and released a surge of Malice. Last time, I'd gone ballistic because I couldn't keep the Malice in check. Now, I could control it perfectly.

I didn't want to admit it, but this power came from Murelia. Acquiring it had made me want to hurl, but it was time I put it to use.

"All right...Soul of the Night Sky."

The Unique Skill of a Darknight Wolf. Jet had died protecting us from Murelia, leaving his powers behind in his crystal. It greatly enhanced my stats at night.

"Teacher, activate all enhancement Skills."

Very well.

P.A.'s kindly voice had helped me until recently, when she said that she had to

get the Malice under control or something. Now she was gone, too.

My body was screaming from stacking so many enhancements.

Every time I used this, I always wondered whether I was going to die. I never worried about it before Teacher became like this, but now it scared me. But maybe dying would be all right. Might as well give it my best shot.

“Don’t worry about healing me, Teacher. Just enhance me as much as possible.”

Very well.

I asked him again as I held back the pain. “Can I release you?”

I am a sword. I do not have the right to decide. You must decide for yourself.

“I want to know what you think.”

If you do, you will definitely destroy the beast. But the exhaustion will affect your battles going forward. If you do not, you may not be able to destroy the beast, but your baseline will be maintained.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I want to know what *you* think I should *do*.”

I do not have the authority to answer that question.

And right when Teacher’s typical answers disappointed me yet again, it happened.

Hey, you asshole! Can’t you see you’re making Fran cry?! I don’t care if you’re me! I’ll come over there and snap you in half myself!

I thought I heard Teacher’s warm voice.

Fran! Are you okay?!

Again, that kind anger. Was I hearing things? Where was it even coming from? I couldn’t feel him. I turned around and there was Lene.

Why? We had just said goodbye to each other.

“Fran, a cruel battle awaits you. This is not your fate, but the inevitable destination of the way you are drifting. At this rate, you will die.”

“Lene?”

“It’s not much, but consider this a gift from me—from us.”

Lene spread out her arms and my surroundings turned pure white.

“Lene, is that you over there?”

Another Lene was here, and someone was standing next to her.

Me and Teacher.

But something was different about them, about us—their equipment and expressions. I knew what was going on. That was me—either who I could become or a me from another world. The voice I’d just heard was her Teacher.

Fran!

“Teacher.”

You can hear me! Thank goodness!

He heard my whisper. I was jealous that this Teacher remained as he was.

I’ll heal you up now!

The other Teacher tried something but failed.

Why can’t I use magic?!

“I’m sorry, but the link is imperfect,” said Lene. “This is the best I could do even with your enhanced powers and bonds.”

“Romeo, Theraclede, Zelyse. I used their bonds so that you could finally meet and talk to each other. Hang on.”

My Lene and their Lene talked to each other before bowing their heads apologetically. I didn’t know what they meant, but being able to talk to the other me and Teacher was enough of a miracle.

I called out to the other me.

“Hey...me.”

“What is it, me?”

“Are you...happy?”

“Hm. Every day’s happy with Teacher and Jet. Aren’t you happy?”

“Hm...” I knew it. The other me was happy. Of course she was. Teacher and Jet were with her.

“Teacher, he’s...”

“What happened?”

“He’s...”

“Hm.”

The other me nodded gently. Everything came pouring out of me.

“He stopped being kind! He won’t *talk* to me! Won’t praise me! Won’t even scold me!” I had never told anyone else these feelings. I was afraid it would all be real if I did. “I hate this Teacher! This isn’t Teacher at all! I want a Teacher like your Teacher!”

The words continued to flow.

“How do I get him back?!” I cried. “How do I make him smile again?! Tell me!”

Everything I ever wanted to say came out of me.

Every last word.

“Teacher, what should I do...?”

I do not understand. I do not detect any anomalies within myself. But I can see you are distressed.

But Teacher didn’t tell me what I wanted to hear. I got my hopes up after hearing the other Teacher’s voice, but of course it couldn’t be that easy...

Entering combat in this state is dangerous. You must control yourself.

“I don’t care about that!”

Fran, you must calm yourself.

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! Don’t talk to me like that! You’re not Teacher!” I screamed.

Then, the warm voice spoke.

Fran...she’s turned delinquent!

He sounded hurt for some reason.

“Delinquent?”

“What’s delinquent?”

We turned to him and wondered. Neither of us knew what he was talking about.

Well, you know. Erm, it’s when you use a lot of bad words to talk back to your parents and teachers.

“I see! *That* me is a delinquent.”

“Am not. I’m not a bad girl.”

“But you’re acting like one.”

“Am not!”

They were making fun of me. But it was fun somehow.

At least until someone put a wet blanket over it.

Fran is currently more aggressive than before. The term delinquent is appropriate.

It sucked the air out of the white void. I felt sadder than before. Why did it hurt so much?

Just then, an angry voice came into my ears.

Now listen here, rustbucket! Who the hell do you think you are? Me?! You’re not even close!

What are you trying to say?

Fran’s gone delinquent? Well, she’s our responsibility, isn’t she? You’re supposed to keep her from this sort of thing!

I am a sword. I do not have the right.

WRONG! Rights have nothing to do with it! Did you forget what we are? We are Fran’s Teacher!

Teacher is just a name. I am a sword.

Wrong again! We are Teacher before we are a sword. And do you really think Teacher is just a name? I can't believe how stupid I sound!

That is the truth.

That is a LIE! Teacher is the name Fran gave us! Did you forget that? We're supposed to be her teacher before we're her sword!

I...

Look at her! Fran is crying! Are you seriously trying to tell me that you feel nothing?!

Oh. I hadn't noticed till the other Teacher pointed it out, but I was crying. Why couldn't I stop crying?

Fran is...crying?

That's right! Aren't you at least going to try to console her? Your heart really rusted up after turning into a sword!

"Teacher..."

I...

I'll ask you again. Do you really have nothing to say to Fran right now?

I...

Do you really feel nothing when you see tears running down her face?! Answer me, rustbucket!

I...!

My Teacher sounded human for once. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard him like that.

Teacher destabilizing.

"Huh? P.A.?"

Yes. To borrow your expression, I have regained my faculties thanks to an infusion of power from the other P.A.

"I thought you were gone..."

As long as Teacher is not destroyed, I will not disappear.

“Oh...”

Teacher’s swordshifted state is destabilizing. The staggering difference between himself and his alternate self has him rattled.

P.A... I...

Recommendation for Fran: Further destabilize Teacher’s state.

“Destabilize...? What should I do?”

Talk to him. Be not afraid.

“What...”

This may be your last chance.

They could hear P.A.’s voice, too. The other me nodded slightly.

“Good luck, delinquent me.”

“I’m not a delinquent.”

She giggled when I snapped back. I didn’t hate it.

“Hm. See you around, me.”

Remember, Fran! No matter what happens, I’m always on your side! Always!

Following P.A. and the other me’s advice, I timidly started.

“Hm... Teacher. Can you hear me?”

Fran...? I...

I could hear the warmth returning to his voice.

“Fran, Mr. Sword, I’m cutting the connection!”

We heard Lene’s voice as she could no longer sustain the strange void. I wanted to tell our alternate selves something before we went.

“Hm...see you around, me.”

My Fran smiled to the other Fran.

I shouted, *Remember, Fran! No matter what happens, I’m always on your*

side! Always!

And then, the Fran with the earring, rustbucket me, and the other Lene disappeared.

Is it over?

“Yes. The connection has been cut.”

I could no longer feel their presence.

Lene, who was that Fran?

“They were the previous Fran and Teacher. They should be from just after Sierra and the others were transported to this timeline.”

So...that was me when I completely transformed into a sword?

“Yes.”

“That was Teacher?” Fran muttered sadly, clearly imagining what would happen if I suffered the same fate.

What’s going to happen to that Fran?

“I’m sorry, I can no longer tell. But the future has dramatically changed. That’s why I cut the connection.”

“What was the future like before it changed? Was it bad?”

“Fran went berserk after being driven to despair and unleashed the full power of the piece of the Evil One sealed within Teacher. Many perished.”

That was awful, but the other Fran was definitely teetering on the edge. Especially since I could no longer stop her.

But the future changed, right?

“All thanks to you and the words you gave them...”

So that Fran won’t die the way you predicted?

“No. If nothing else, Mr. Sword’s heart has returned. I wouldn’t have ended the connection that quickly if the future hadn’t shifted so drastically.”

I see...

“All we can do now is pray that the change ends up being for the better.”

“Hm...”

I wondered how our other selves were doing. Did we manage to console Fran’s broken heart? Was my swordshift somewhat alleviated?

“I’m sure it ended up fine, Teacher.”

You think so?

“Hm. We told them all we had to say. It’ll be fine.”

Right. We’re still talking about you and me, after all! I’m sure things will turn out for the better!

“Hm.”

Fran’s words gave me hope.

Plus, they have their P.A. back, too.

Yes. The other P.A. and I shared information which ended up being mutually beneficial.

Shared information?

Yes. Taking your thought pattern data and analyzing them, we figured out a way to stop and prevent the swordshift from happening.

I-I see.

Apparently, P.A. had been analyzing my thoughts and sent the resulting data to the other P.A. That other Teacher would be all right. P.A. was so talented! I was a bit embarrassed about having all my thoughts analyzed, though.

We have also exchanged some Skill information.

So we got some new Skills out of it?

Yes. I shared information regarding Fiend Crusher Revelation and Mana Supply. The other P.A. shared information regarding Spirit Perception and Malice Command. Spirit Perception and Unique Skill Malice Command acquired. Also— That was a lot! The two P.A.s got so much done over such a short amount of time.

Acquired new Unique Skill Divine Manipulation based on Fiend Crusher Revelation and Malice Command. Acquired Unique Skill Spirit's Hand based on Divine Manipulation and Spirit Perception.

Whoa, that was a lot of Skills. Spirit Perception was self-explanatory. Maybe I'd finally be able to sense spirits for myself.

Malice Command allowed us to control Malice, like the Malice version of Mana Manipulation. And then there was Divine Manipulation, which we greatly appreciated since it allowed us to manage divine element. Finally, we'd be able to reduce the amount of damage it inflicted on us.

Lastly, there was the mysterious Spirit's Hand. Apparently, it allowed us to interact with spirits—we could touch them or even attack them. Using it was difficult, but we would just have to get better with practice.

As much as I wanted to look into all these new Skills, now was really not the time.

"I'm sorry. The flow of time will soon revert. Be careful..."

Uhh, isn't that extremely bad...?

We didn't know what would happen once time returned to normal. We were currently falling on the beast at breakneck speeds, and we might just lose our balance. I was wondering if Lene could slowly bring us back to speed, but—"Lene, are you okay? You don't look too good."

"I might have pushed myself a little hard...but if I hadn't..."

The scenery around us slowly started shifting.

Three seconds until time acceleration ends.

Fran, don't lose your balance!

"Hm! Got it!" Fran nodded, looking more determined than ever. Seeing our other selves had motivated her. "We won't lose."

Right!

She didn't specify further, but I felt the same way!

"Sword God Form!"

When Fran shouted, Lene's mental acceleration disappeared and our surroundings came rushing back at us like a flood.

Urk!

The sudden increase in perceived data was staggering. In a moment, the beast's great mass and countless mouths were before us.

But Fran didn't tumble. She adjusted to the flood of data instantly, unleashing the full force of Sword God Form, Unleash Potential, Fiend Crusher Revelation, and all our other Skills upon the beast at once.

We were off to the right by just a few inches, but no one was counting at that point.

"Haaa!"

Raaah!

The great torrent of energy stored within my blade crashed into the beast.

I immediately deactivated Unleash Potential and a bunch of other Skills on impact and teleported away. I was really running low on resources.

All that was left was the feeling of having *cut* something. That was all I had to go on.

Did it work?

"Hm..."

We looked down on the beast and our handiwork.

Looks like it. And Sierra did good, too...

"Hm."

Two gigantic gashes ran down the beast's body. The beast's aura was much weaker now after suffering so much damage. Half of it had been our attack, and the other half— "Sierra."

We looked down and saw Sierra holding the Theraclede in the air. He held the position for a few seconds before sighing and lowering his sword.

He'd definitely left his own mark on the beast.

Sierra's attack was almost as powerful as ours...

"Hm."

I could tell by comparing the wounds left behind. The width and depth were practically the same.

But ours should heal slower because of divine element!

Or so I thought, but...

"OBEY..."

"It's not healing."

Their attacks, too?

The Malice-infected wound was not healing. Sierra's attack had managed to stagger the beast, but I hadn't expected it to do the same level of damage as us.

As I continued feeling conflicted about the whole thing, Sierra fell. His whole body was now covered in Malice. Not good. The current Theraclede rushed to catch him as Sierra went completely unconscious.

As beat up as Theraclede was from taking the heat of the beast's beam, the recoil Sierra was going through must have been worse.

Not that we were in a position to worry about them.

"...Hrmp."

How you holding up, Fran?

"Pretty...rough..."

Yeah...? Same here...

"Hm..."

We would've fallen into the lake if not for Float. We were really going through it, even with the life magic. Cold sweat ran through me as I imagined what we'd be like without the stuff.

"You still can't fix yourself, Teacher?"

I just had divine element and Unleash Potential go through me, after all. My durability isn't moving an inch.

I was down to 100 durability. Not much better than scrap metal. Unleash Potential must've eaten about 5000 crystal just now. At least we managed to connect to the other world because of it. Well worth it.

"Woof!"

"Jet."

Jet approached us, weakly dragging his front paw around. Basically unharmed, at least compared to us.

"Let me heal you up."

"Woof."

We're in your hands now, Jet.

Fran and I wouldn't be able to fight for a while with how long our wounds would take to heal.

"Woof!"

"Thanks."

Let's go meet up with Sierra.

"No. You must get away from here..."

Was that...

Lene?

But I couldn't find where she was speaking from, even with my newly acquired Spirit Perception.

"I cannot maintain my physical form. I can only speak to you now."

"Because you linked the worlds together?"

"Among other things. Such is the price of scrying into the future. Regardless, you must...escape..."

I didn't know what was going on, but Lene sounded like she was in pain just from talking. Best to take her advice and get away as quickly as possible.

"Jet."

“Woof!”

But just as we got ready to escape, the beast let out a powerful magic blast.

“UGAGAGAGAGA!”

Its myriad mouths screamed in pain as its massive body squirmed.

“Ruff!”

Urgh!

Jet whined and set up a barrier as the magical wave crashed into him. Fran and I were too exhausted to be useful. Now Jet was our only hope.

“You can do it, Jet...”

Come on, boy!

“GROOOOAR!”

Jet intensified his barrier and held his ground.

“Hurf...”

Tentacles started sprouting from the beast’s body. They whipped and lashed as the beast was overwhelmed by its pain. The tentacles smacked against Jet’s barrier from time to time, but he gritted his teeth and hung in there.

“AGAAOOOO!”

“It’s getting bigger.”

Because...Lene got separated from it?!

The beast suddenly grew larger as it raged on. We couldn’t see Lene, but the beast’s power must have been unleashed after she was separated. She’d been weakening the monster from the inside, after all.

“HOAAAAARGH!”

Wh-what’s happening?

The beast started rapidly expanding after the mana wave settled down. But I could now hear the monster’s flesh ripping and tearing, a strange and gruesome noise. Reddish black fluid spurted from its wounds, which quickly healed before suddenly tearing open again. And yet the beast grew larger.

Was it trying to force itself through? So far, it had tried to slip through the weakened seal. But things were different now. Threats outside had significantly wounded it and Lene had disappeared. The beast probably wanted to just make a break for it. Even if it got hurt, it could quickly rejuvenate itself once it regenerated all of its powers.

What do you think?

I concur.

Isn't that really bad?

A single arm had been extraordinarily difficult to deal with. We and Sierra had barely defeated it after risking our lives. Even weakened, a fully recovered beast would be a nightmare. Winalene needed to hurry up and finish the job!

Actually, now that I thought about it, she might've already started preparing.

Winalene might blow us to bits along with the monster!

"Woof!"

I didn't know how Fran felt about Winalene, but she was no longer in my good books. On the flip side, I now had way more faith in the cryptic Lene. If that made me gullible, so be it.

We got ready to move, except...a figure stood in Jet's way as we were about to escape. It was clearly blocking our way. It spoke in a voice far too relaxed for the situation.

"Hello, Fran. Mind if I borrow your sword?"

Chapter 6:

Good Bonds, Bad Bonds

“HELLO, FRAN. Mind if I borrow your sword?”

“Hm?!”

I knew he wasn't dead!

“You. Zelyse...”

Zelyse, the handsome grinning alchemist, stood in front of us, holding the colorful Zelyse blade in his right hand.

“The man who talked to me,” said Zelyse. “I believe he’s inside that sword.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you’re under no obligation to spill the beans. I’ll just take that sword apart and see for myself.”

Fran unleashed her oppressive aura of bloodlust, but Zelyse didn’t seem affected by it at all. We were too beat up to put up a decent fight.

And he wasn’t alone. A mage in black robes floated beside him, his faint mana making him more ominous. The hollow eye sockets of a skull watched us from beneath the robe, but the skull was no mask. The figure under the robe wasn’t human, but undead.

And not just any undead.

Its two sockets revealed a bottomless void. Sinister darkness seeped from the undead, threatening to swallow us. It was a horrifying sensation.

A chill ran down Fran’s spine. Like me, she had felt something. The fear of the unknown manifested in this undead form. This thing was strong, and it was smart enough to conceal its strength.

“Kuah kah kah kah—”

The undead let out a dry cackle.

“Kuah kah kah kah! I was not expecting to see *you* here!”

Had this undead somehow recognized Fran?

“Hm?” Fran merely tilted her head. If I couldn’t recognize it, there was no way Fran would. “Who are you?”

“I do not blame you for not knowing me. My knowledge of you is...indirect, shall we say.”

Did someone tell him about Fran? I Identified him, and it actually worked for once. Lately, my targets had been too strong, been covered with Malice, been a spirit, and all sorts of other things that rendered my Heavensight-imbued Identify useless.

Name: Nameless

Race: Demilich

Level: 52

Life: 1932, Magic: 1298, Strength: 1869, Agility: 810

Skills: Speedcast 6, Grudge Barrier 3, Grudge Manipulation 8, Terror 2, Fear 2, Advanced Punch Arts 5, Advanced Punch Mastery 7, Martial Arts 10, Martial Mastery 10, Brute Force 7, Regeneration 8, Blink 9, Undead Command 3, Undead Manipulation 10, Undead Magic 10, Mental Abnormal Status Resistance 4, Unconventional Combat 8, Magic Resistance 7, Mana Sense 7, Mana Thruster 5, Nether Magic 3, Dark Magic 4, Vengeful Spirit, Bone Morph, Abnormal Status Immunity, Vibration Control, Undead Overseer, Undead Rampage Unique Skill: Grudge Drain, Mark of the Dead

Titles: Captain of the Black Bones, Undead King

Equipment: Compound Crystal Staff Type-3, Corpse Dragon Gloves, Crypt Master Robe, Circlet of Grudge Sealing, Ring of Cleansing Resistance, Bracelet of Cleansing Resistance, Vengeful Spirit Sphere

Fran, he’s tough!

That bad?

At least a B-Threat, and he's as good a necromancer as Jean!

The undead might as well be an A-Threat. While not on the same level as the lich of the sky isle, he was at least stronger than the lich's legendary skeleton.

"You're Zelyse's lackey?"

"Me? Working for him? Don't be absurd! I am the first seat of the Black Bones, the greatest fighting force to come out of Raydoss! We shall supersede the Red Knights and become legends! I am only lending my power to the duke!"

"Black Bones! Like Ice Man and Charred Man!"

"I haven't heard from them in some time. So, you're the one who defeated them!"

"You're their captain?"

"Indeed. I am Nameless, King of the Undead! Remember this name as we crush your mortal bodies into oblivion."

"Hrm."

This guy's mouth was big as Zelyse's. He gave us all the information we wanted without us having to coax it out of him.

"You're an undead unit?"

"Indeed! We are a unit made of powerful undead that make use of secret technology! We will slaughter that detestable necromancer at our next encounter!"

Unlike Ice Man and Charred Man, Nameless was made of Nether Magic. Judging by his spells and Skills, he might just be able to pull it off.

The Black Bones were created specifically to counteract Jean, Raydoss's greatest enemy on the battlefield. Nameless might be strong enough to kill Jean in battle.

"Kuah kah kah kah! Surrender now and I will give you a painless death and undeath of serving me...or so I'd say to most foes."

"Hm?!"

The demilich unleashed bloodlust so strong it made Fran brace. Anger,

resentment, and bloodlust made her hairs stand on end. Being born of resentment, undead had a natural enmity toward the living...but there was something more radiating from Nameless.

“But you...you I must kill.”

“Why?”

“Because he is screaming.”

“Hm?”

“The lich, Emperor of the Dead, screams for your blood! He bids me to avenge his death on the sky isle!” Nameless held his withered hand aloft as if he were holding his own white skull.

If not for the power exploding from his skeletal form, he’d look like the lead character in a tragedy. In fact, he seemed like he was trying to keep that power under control. His eye sockets peeked through the gaps between his fingers and a storm of negative emotion raged within.

“The lich...you mean *that* lich?”

“Kuah kah kah kah! The one and the same! The dungeon master of the sky isle! Raydoss’s experiment!”

I’d wondered if the demilich had something to do with the lich, because they were both involved with Raydoss. I wasn’t expecting to be right!

“Still, I must thank you. We were able to collect the lich’s grudge fragment because of you!”

They really were quite alike. Their skeletal appearance aside, their auras and speech patterns were similar.

“I was born of the lich’s grudge fragment, salvaged from the sky isle crash site! The vestiges of his memory exhort me to tear the very flesh from your bones!”

If Nameless had inherited the lich’s memories and vengeance, he also would have inherited his hatred for Fran.

“And so I shall!” the demilich shouted as he charged with great speed.

“Grr!”

“Gah! Don’t you dare try to run!”

Let’s get out of here!

There was no way we could fight in this state.

“Woof!”

“Do not leave us yet!” Nameless shrieked. But as able as Nameless was at close range, he was more suited to commanding the battlefield. He couldn’t beat Jet in a game of tag.

Still, we were up against two opponents. Zelyse now stood in Jet’s way. Even if he wasn’t as strong as Nameless, his unpredictability still made him a great threat.

“You can do it, Jet.”

“Woof!”

“Kuah kah kah kah! Eat this!” Nameless came flying in and struck us.

“Grrr!” But Jet managed to block his Advanced Punch attack with his front paw, using his fangs to make up for his lack of feet. A huge clang resounded and the two were in a deadlock.

However, our enemies were expecting this. As Nameless held Jet in place, Zelyse released a flurry of spells. A giant black vortex engulfed us and Nameless, changing the scenery around us.

“Rawr?”

“Huh?”

Wh-what’s going on?!

The vortex was like Dimension Gate, a spell linking two locations. Danger Sense didn’t register it as a high threat since it was concealed and the vortex itself was harmless. Fran and I were definitely too tired to sense it, but we’d have no chance if Jet *also* couldn’t detect it.

The portal opened to a very dangerous location. The beast’s body was right in front of us now, complete with squirming tentacles. The tentacles reacted to

our presence, whipping at us. I wasn't expecting them to get the beast to finish us off!

"Ah ha ha! As fascinating as I find that sword, I need to kill you first! You truly are my archnemesis, Fran!"

Fran glared at Zelyse but quickly lost sight of him as countless tentacles encroached on Jet's barrier.

"Kuah kah kah kah! Now go and feed the beast!" Nameless shouted after stepping away. The tentacles went on the offensive as if they obeyed him.

The beast's tentacles had surrounded us and were about to crush us. Jet's barrier still held, but it would only last for another ten seconds at most as its mana plummeted.

But there was still a way out: teleportation. The only problem was that I'd be completely dry afterward. Our survival would be entirely in Jet's paws.

I'm counting on you, Jet.

Woof!

Jet nodded firmly. He knew what he had to do.

Here goes—no, wait!

I then noticed the strange mana around us. It didn't belong to Zelyse, Nameless, or the beast. It wasn't hostile, either; it felt protective. The wall of tentacles around us suddenly blew away.

Our vision cleared as something ripped and tore through the air at great speed.

Jusecca! She must've covered us again.

"What was that?!" Nameless shouted, unable to track Jusecca down. But that wasn't all the help we got. Fran, Jet, and I had been healed slightly.

"Leave now. Quickly." I could hear Lene's voice coming from somewhere. It wasn't echoing in my head like telepathy, but almost like a whisper in my ear. She must've given us her strength. "Winalene will unleash her power in a few minutes."

Her trump card!

“I do not know if I can help you anymore...hurry...” Lene whispered in an agonized tone. But now wasn’t the time to worry about her.

Let’s go, Jet! We don’t wanna get caught in the blast!

“Woof!”

Judging from the desperation in her voice, we must have been really pressed for time.

“Kuah kah kah kah! I don’t know what happened, but you’re not getting away!” But Nameless blocked our path. He had quickly regained his footing and waited for Jet after being startled by Jusecca.

“Rhaaaa!”

“Grrr...!”

Nameless punched with his fists, creating shockwaves which launched at Jet. The shockwaves closed off his exit path, and Zelyse waited to ambush us on the other path. They were trying to corral him like an animal, but Jet saw right through their ploy.

“Grooooooar!”

“What?! You’re going through *there*?!”

Jet rushed through where the bullet storm was thickest, firing dark spells and barriers to neutralize the shockwaves.

But these shockwaves were made with Advanced Punch Mastery. He wasn’t getting out unscathed. Jet bled from every inch of his body as he reinforced the barrier around us, leaving him exposed. But he fought off the pain and powered through.

“You won’t—ugh! Who *are* you?!” Nameless snarled.

“No one whose name is worth knowing,” Jusecca interrupted Nameless just as he was about to chase us down. “Just consider me an impediment, wretch. Black wolf, hurry!”

“Grrrarr!”

Exhausted, Jusecca fended off Nameless. She used an orihalcon spear, balanced for both offense and defense. Even then, we weren't out of the woods yet.

"Oh no you don't!" Zelyse said playfully as he warped in front of us.

He unleashed a barrage of Timespace bullets, thick enough to seem like an advancing wall. He must've had this ready since he'd been waiting to ambush us. The mana was so immense that it reverberated my blade.

Each bullet was far stronger than Nameless's Advanced Punch Arts.

The attack was made even worse by its Timespace element. It was already hard enough to avoid, but now we couldn't just slip through with Dimension Shift. A fully charged barrier was our only option...but then Zelyse started charging mana to release a second wave.

I thought that he was casting it one after another when I remembered the sword Zelyse. Man, fighting Intelligent Weapon users is annoying, huh?

Still, Jet kept running.

Jet, what are you...?!

"GROOOOAR!"

He kept a sharp gaze on the wall of magic and charged into it.

CLANG!

The barrier protecting us shook to the point of creating a shrill metallic noise. Each clang was the sound of the barrier getting thinner. But that wasn't the problem.

"Jet!"

You need to protect yourself!

"Grrr!" Jet was protecting his head with the weakest barrier he could get away with. The bullets tore chunks of flesh off of Jet's body as they grazed him, causing blood to spray everywhere. But it wasn't stopping Jet's charge.

He forced his way through the bullet storm as blood smeared his body.

"No way!" Zelyse widened his eyes in genuine shock. But he wasn't stopping,

either. He raised the Zelyse to release his second wave and then grinned, popping a crystal out from his pocket. The immense mana it emanated and Danger Sense's warning sirens told me that this was a powerful crystal weapon. He was planning to stop Jet with it.

But he was underestimating Jet. Jet wasn't just some backup plan. He was our trusted partner, freshly evolved.

"Graaaaah!"

"Hnh!"

Jet suddenly accelerated. He looked like he was already running for his life, but he wasn't even at top speed. He wasn't exactly holding back, but rather trying to be considerate to Fran.

And now he'd outsmarted Zelyse. The alchemist panicked as the wolf quickly approached him. Fran struggled to hang on, but she didn't say a word. Neither did Jet slow down despite knowing his master was in pain. It was all building up for one attack.

"Groooooar!"

"I'll show you!" He swung his sword sideways, releasing a barrage of bullets. It was weaker because of his imperfect charge, but it made up for its lost damage in density. Jet wouldn't be able to avoid this. Zelyse heaved a sigh of relief, knowing his attack would hit the mark.

It would've killed a C-Threat for sure. But did he really think it was enough to beat Jet?

"Grrr!" Jet activated his trump card. Dark Embrace, a level 7 shadow spell. Usually it was used to cloak its user in shadow, increasing his defense and physical capabilities, but Jet had done a fair bit of training. He had his own spin on it.

Jet-black darkness covered his head, increasing his bite force. At the same time, he activated Vibrofang. If a giant wolf like Jet put his heart into it, he could crush orihalcon like the coat of a bubble gum lollipop. Shadow and Timespace made for a powerful attack.

Jet had developed this attack to finish off enemies on his own. Amanda dubbed it Worldcutter Fang and mused that even she would be fatally wounded by it.

“RAAARGH!”

“Gaaaah!”

Jet returned to his original size while deflecting Zelyse’s storm of magic and tore into his body. His fangs were the size of logs turned into stakes and they crushed the lower half of him.

“What...*is* this...?” Zelyse murmured, coughing up blood as his upper half flew through the sky.

Zelyse could’ve acquired information about Jet from his sword self. Maybe he was expecting Jet in his pre-evolved Darkness Wolf form.

Jet’s smaller size might’ve led him to think that Jet was either a Darknight or Gehenna Wolf—nothing to worry about. A big, furry mistake on Zelyse’s part.

Zelyse was an awful sight, but he still had life in him. In fact, he was already trying to regenerate himself.

“Hang on...why is regeneration going so slow? Just what is this wolf...?”

Fascination, not concern or self-preservation, fueled the burning fire in his eyes. A true-blue perv, no matter how dire the situation.

But perhaps he was that confident in his escape. The sword Zelyse had a whole bag of tricks, after all. He put away his crystal weapon and took out the Zelyse. He couldn’t move from all the damage he’d suffered. Now was our chance to finish him off.

“Grr...” Jet still couldn’t move, still reeling from his own attack. Neither Fran nor I had enough power to kill him. Damn it! We were so close!

“Anyway...I think I’ll call it for today—”

No, he’s getting away!

“Huh?”

What was this? Nothing happened despite Zelyse’s attempt to teleport away.

Had he actually failed? It was then that I noticed a faint presence around Zelyse. It was vague, but I felt sure that I knew who it was.

Lene! The spirit of time and water should have been able to disrupt teleportation!

Then, for the first time, I saw Zelyse panic.

“No...Hyperspace Navigation won’t activate!”

So *that* was Zelyse’s invincible mode! It must have had similar properties to Dimension Shift, and he was probably skilled enough to mask its activation.

“Something is interfering...what a pain! Agh! This is...!”

“Hmph.” Pushing her body to the absolute limit, Fran fired a magic bullet. It was very weak, too weak to even kill a goblin. But it was enough to throw Zelyse off balance. Fran looked at me and I immediately knew what to do. I wasn’t about to slack off, either.

Raaah! I used telekinesis. It was only for a moment, but Zelyse had no way of keeping his balance without his lower half.

Zelyse saw the bottom right of his torso being pulled slightly. But that was all I needed him to do.

“Huh?”

His body was attacked by countless tentacles. He had been avoiding them so far, but I had pulled his body into the oncoming tentacle that was targeting Jet. This might not be enough to kill him, but at least we had time to escape.

“What was...? Dammit!” Zelyse’s body twisted as he prepared to dispose of the tentacles binding him and go intangible again, when suddenly— “You won’t escape, alchemist!” Jusecca disrupted his power with her Timespace magic. Considering her expertise, she would know more than a few countermeasures.

“Crap! Who are you?! Wait...you! You’re...!”

“Did you finally notice?”

“The Phantom...! Or is it Scarlet Eyes now? What are you doing here?”

“For the good of the empire, I am here to put an end to you.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend” was what Jusecca had said. Zelyse was apparently her enemy. She had stopped him from moving with her scarlet eye.

“You’re such a meanie! After all I did for Raydoss!”

“I first learned of you from the Bulbola incident. All our agents died right after you arrived. You’re working for Raydoss? A man like you knows not what duty is, spineless maggot!”

“Why do you guys keep treating me like I’m a pest?!” Zelyse hung suspended in midair. His regeneration and magic needed to stay up if he wanted to survive, and he was also busy casting spells to fend off the swarms of tentacles.

“Scarlet Eyes Jusecca!” he announced. “One of the six captains of Raydoss’s Red Knights! I heard your elusiveness makes you lethal on the battlefield. Looks like I heard right! Lookie, Fran! There’s a Raydossian elite right here! She’s *super-duper* dangerous and works directly for the chancellor! Are you *suuure* you can let her go?”

Zelyse looked at us with the grin of a child who had just discovered how to roast ants with a magnifying glass. He would know about Jusecca, too, since he also worked for Raydoss. He probably wanted to pit Fran against Jusecca, but Fran ignored him. She’d helped us so far and Zelyse was a bigger problem at the moment.

“I hate you more than the Raydossian elites,” said Fran simply.

“Oh, come on!”

“Heh heh heh. Looks like you crossed the line, alchemist.”

“Are you sure you can afford to be here, Scarlet Eyes? I thought you were supposed to be protecting the capital while the throne is vacant. I hear those sneaky nobles are getting ready to set up a puppet king and incite a truly nasty civil war. Not even the chancellor could deal with that mess on his lonesome.”

“The chancellor has chosen to happily ignore the fools. And your information is outdated. A new king has taken the throne. Besides, kings are not appointed; the nobility’s infighting is in vain. The king is king no matter what anyone says.”

Zelyse kept talking as he looked for a way to escape. But this was vital

Raydossian information and I wasn't about to stop him. "I was wondering about that. I work for the Duke of the West, you see. A real psycho willing to do anything to satisfy his bottomless desires. I don't get why a man like that is satisfied with being duke. I tell you, Raydoss is on the eve of civil war. You'd think he'd try to take the throne for himself or declare independence. But no matter how many conspiracies he cooks up, no matter how many orders from the chancellor he ignores, he doesn't outright rebel against royalty. I've never seen him even complain about them!"

The tentacles were tying him up now, and he just kept on talking. "That's not a man who knows what loyalty is. There must be something else tying the dukes to the monarchy. You wouldn't happen to know what it is, would you?" Zelyse was trying to make it look like he had uncovered a Raydossian secret. He was expecting Jusecca to flinch and weaken her hold on him. But she only smiled.

"Excellent. It seems that even the mad Duke of the West himself isn't crazy enough to tell you all our secrets."

"Gaaah! Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

More tentacles bound Zelyse. Was this really happening?

"Kuah kah kah kah! You look absolutely foolish, Zelyse!"

"Just hurry up and get me out of here!"

"Kuah kah kah kah!"

No! We'd run out of time! Nameless had arrived and there was no way Jet could defeat him while covering for Fran. Our best bet was to look for a chance to escape while they were busy. Jet had also picked up on this and was backing away slowly. And we were so close to getting rid of Zelyse, too!

But then something unbelievable happened.

"Kuah kah kah! Are you that desperate to survive?"

"Guh-huh?"

"What's wrong? You seem puzzled, alchemist." Instead of saving him, Nameless grabbed Zelyse by the neck.

"Ha ha...this really...isn't the time for jokes..." Zelyse wheezed as he

desperately tried to chuckle. But even as he was suffocating, he seemed relaxed enough.

“This is no joke, Zelyse.”

“Urgh...”

An aura like stagnant sludge flowed down Nameless’s arm. Looking at it was enough to make me feel dread. I thought I had seen it somewhere before...the sky isle! It looked a lot like the grudge oozing from the lich, only several times more terrifying. That was probably what happened when you had concentrated levels of grudge. The grudge spread all over Zelyse and covered him.

“Damn it...” Zelyse lifted the Zelyse, but the sword remained still. It was as if it had turned into an ordinary blade.

“Kuah kah kah kah! How unfortunate! It does not wish to lend you its power!”

“No...”

“Now bathe in vengeance and become my servant—what? Indeed? So he cannot be allowed to remain?”

“Who...are you talking to...?”

“Kuah kah kah kah. Why, with your other self!”

Zelyse dropped his gaze to the sword in his hand. And then it happened.

“In any case, I shall retrieve this sword for now.”

“Ah...”

Nameless took Zelyse’s sword and the sword didn’t resist. An Intelligent Weapon should be able to fight back, but it wasn’t giving Nameless any trouble. Even Jusecca looked shocked.

“Even the sword thinks you’re an eyesore! Kuah kah kah kah! You seem confused!”

“Wh-why...? I thought...we understood each other...”

“You would understand if you lost your body. Identity is important to maintaining one’s self. The sword Zelyse wishes to be the *only* Zelyse. You stand in the way of that.”

“Ha ha...I see. You’re a different...being...now that you’re a sword...”

“I do not disapprove of your lust for knowledge...but your existence will make achieving our goals difficult. You must die for our cause.”

KRAK!

Nameless lightly squeezed his hand, crushing Zelyse’s neck and leaving his head dangling like a doll.

“Kuah kah kah. Goodbye, mad alchemist.” Nameless let go and Zelyse’s body collapsed onto the beast below. He wasn’t dead yet, but he couldn’t move.

The tentacles quickly caught him. They wrapped around him and pulled him into the beast to feed it. Meat and bone crunched and snapped as the beast chewed its meal. All signs of life were now gone.

Zelyse...was he really dead? Now wasn’t the time for questions.

“Woof!” Jet barked, reminding us to stay sharp.

There’s a lot of mana coming from Winalene’s direction!

“Jusecca, get out of here!”

“I’ll be all right. Thank you for everything.”

“You too.”

“You may report me to the others if you wish,” said Jusecca. “The fools of my country have caused you trouble.” The captain of the red knights lowered her head. We didn’t have time for a full interview. “I pray for your safe escape. We may meet again as enemies in the future, but farewell.”

Jusecca teleported and disappeared. We wouldn’t have to worry about her safety; if anything, we were the ones in trouble now. We needed to book it before Nameless got to us. Jet started running on the lake at full speed.

You can do it, Jet!

“Go!”

“Graaaargh!” Jet kept running even as he emptied the contents of his stomach, and we made it out safely. We turned and saw a great water ball over the monster’s head, over a hundred meters wide.

“W-wow.”

Wow is right. All that divine energy.

“Arf...”

It wasn't just the massive amount of mana. The water ball emitted its powerful divine aura to its surroundings. That whole sphere had the feel of God Sword Form to it.

Was the whole thing actually made of divine element?

I was thankful to be so exhausted that my perception abilities were dulled. If I felt the full force of that strange power in the air, I might've had a panic attack. Poor Jet was terrified; his hairs stood on end and his ears flattened.

“Ruff...” Putting his tail between his legs, Jet wasted no time and kept running. It was a bumpy ride for Fran, but the wolf showed no signs of slowing down. It was for her own good. Nowhere felt safe from the massive divine energy.

We wanted to be as far away from that thing as possible when it went off.

Was it actually waiting for us? Winalene had a few screws loose, but she wasn't evil. Maybe she was giving us a few extra minutes to get clear.

We watched as the divine water ball morphed, stretching out sideways. Now it transformed into countless smaller balls. Well, I *say* smaller, but each was large enough to swallow Fran whole.

BANG!

A dull explosion accompanied large holes tearing into the beast's body. The water bullets traveled in a straight line, penetrating the beast at great speed. They were so fast that we couldn't even track their shadows.

The fantastical battle kept going.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

One explosion followed another as the beast was torn to shreds.

The water ball continued raining, splashing huge chunks of flesh about.

Bullets that missed fell into the lake, creating pillars of water fifty meters into

the sky. I couldn't even work up a nervous laugh. The force of the water bullets made the beast's thousand water arrows look cute.

However, the powerful tsunami they created would abruptly stop halfway. Winalene must be controlling these, too.

I couldn't imagine the number of Skills needed to pull this off. No wonder this was her trump card.

The hail of water intensified once over half of the beast was destroyed.

The mass of divine water hovering over the beast's head was visibly shrinking. However, the water bullets tearing into its body were not decreasing. Upon closer inspection, water from the lake was being sucked into the air with an invisible tube before bursting to create more bullets. These bullets were also still imbued with divine element.

The cycle guaranteed that Winalene's attack could perpetually continue—provided she had enough mana to fuel it.

But was it going to be enough? The monster had been torn to a much smaller size, but it wasn't getting any smaller. It continuously regenerated itself, having decided that a smaller body was easier to maintain.

Winalene continued firing the water balls like a machine gun, each bullet as strong as one of our Skycutters.

Meanwhile, the beast held its ground and doubled down on regeneration.

I couldn't imagine the amount of mana spent over the last minute.

But Winalene and the beast continued their battle of attrition.

Any attempt to help would just end with us getting obliterated by the backblast. We could only watch as the mythological battle unfolded. I was in awe. Jet was terrified. Fran was frustrated.

What is it, Fran?

Winalene and the beast are so strong.

This is a battle between some of the strongest creatures in the world...

I'm still annoyed, though.

I see...

Hm. Besides, I'll have to fight something as strong as that thing one day. I won't just sit here and give up!

I wasn't expecting Fran to be frustrated as she watched the battle between high elf and beast. Was she not scared? No, you'd be crazy not to be. But Fran's frustration overcame her fear.

"Woof!" Jet's fear suddenly dissipated. He felt the same way I did. With a look of determination, he turned his head to watch the battle.

Yeah. We can't just give up now.

"Woof, woof!"

"Hm!"

We eventually reached a safe spot while watching the battle play out, though we could still feel the shockwaves.

But suddenly, the stalemate changed.

"It stopped?"

"Woof?"

Winalene's storm of water bullets had suddenly ceased.

Is Winalene out of mana?

Even for a high elf, that kind of attack couldn't have been cheap. Maybe she ran out of mana before she could finish off the beast. The beast *was* slowly healing itself. Or even quickly healing itself, if you take into account how big it was.

It's shrugging off divine element!

This could be bad. I thought about having Jet take us farther...

"Teacher, look."

Huh?

But Fran pointed to the lake. Another strange phenomenon was taking place.

"Threads?"

“Arf?”

The lake water was turning into long and thin strands of thread. It was as if the water was being weaved by an unseen hand.

The threads spread and multiplied quickly, covering the entire lake surface. They then ascended upward like the water ball.

Forget thousands—there were tens of thousands of these threads.

“Is Winalene behind this, too?”

Probably. I can feel divine element from every strand.

The threads were imbued with powerful divine element. Winalene hadn’t stopped at all. She was just changing her approach.

“Grrr!”

It’s moving...?

“Ruff!” Jet had sensed a movement in the mana. He cast a barrier on Fran before resuming his sprint. The threads rumbled before launching at the beast’s giant body.

Whoa...

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

We all watched the spectacle in awe.

Each thread was very thin, thin enough to register as a thread. A single thread seemed insignificant in front of the great beast. But what about a thousand? Ten thousand? More?

The answer played itself out before our eyes. The multitude of threads wrapped around the beast, making it seem as if its body had been white to begin with. The water threads tightened their hold and strung the monster up.

But Winalene wasn’t just looking to restrict its movement.

The threads covering the lake shook, creating violent waves.

“It looks like the monster is getting bigger.”

Now that you mention it... No, I think—

“It’s coming out of the seal?”

Yeah, I think that’s it!

Was the beast breaking out of the seal? That’s what I thought at first but that wasn’t what was happening. It was being *forced* out of it.

The monster screamed—yes, screamed—in pain.

“AGAAAAAAH!”

The rest of the monster was then yanked out of the seal. It looked like a blackish-red jelly pressed out of a small hole. And by small, I mean over ten meters wide.

Its flesh was ill prepared for the outside. The mass of flesh spilling into divine-imbued waters immediately turned to dust that the wind picked up and scattered.

The mass of flesh that had exited the seal and was attacking us earlier had lost its original form. The threads had been strong enough to be deadly, and they prevented the healing of anything they touched.

The water threads attacking the monster only increased. Winalene had taken control of over five hundred meters of the lake surface.

There was nowhere for the beast to run.

“Ouoooooh...!”

The beast let out a howl like a scourged convict until it could roar no more. Broken and battered, not a single one of its countless mouths were left.

The beast that had boasted of its own immortality had reached its final moment. The cocoon of threads wrapped around the beast unraveled itself and returned to the water.

There was nothing left. Not a trace of the great beast remained.

The lake was still and peaceful as if the battle we had just seen was a dream.

Is it...is it over?

“Hnh?”

“Woof?”

We couldn’t detect even the faintest piece of the beast no matter how hard we tried. The only witness to the combat was the slight air of sanctity about the waters.

The end of the mythological battle had been surprisingly quiet. Fran and Jet shivered, as did I. The sudden stillness had an eerie quality to it.

Let’s go back to Winalene.

“Woof.”

Jet ran over the eerily quiet lake.

There’s really nothing left of the beast.

“Hm.”

And is it just me or are the Vivian Guardians gone, too?

“Woof.”

We should’ve been getting attacked right then, but nothing got in our way. Did the beast’s destruction have anything to do with it? We quickly made our way to the one who would have the lowdown.

“There’s Winalene.”

“Woof!”

Looks like she’s okay. Not that I had any doubts.

The white stage where Winalene and the others had conducted the ritual was now in sight. It hadn’t been destroyed in the battle, but were Romeo and the others okay?

We felt their presence as we got closer—Winalene, Romeo, Sierra, and Theraclede. But just because they were alive didn’t mean they were well. We needed to land to know for sure.

Romeo was unconscious, but otherwise breathing and alive. Sierra and

Theraclede's calm probably meant he was fine. He would wake up in time.

Sierra and Theraclede were pretty beat up, though. They'd stopped bleeding, but they weren't recovering their health. Like us, they had pushed themselves past their recovery limit.

But they were both conscious and probably just needed some potions. Winalene, however, was the farthest thing away from fine.

Whoa...

"Winalene...are you okay?"

"Ha ha...no, I don't suppose I am." Winalene gave a wry smile. Parts of her body had turned black as night. Her right eye, ear, all the way down to the hand poking out of her sleeve.

It didn't have to do with mana, burn wounds, or Malice. In fact, I couldn't detect any mana from the blackness at all. I couldn't even detect Winalene's own presence. It was like her very flesh was absent. Was there even flesh under there? The black covering seemed to have altered Winalene's body.

I couldn't begin to imagine what had happened.

"What happened to you?"

"It's difficult to explain. Let's say I...took out an advance."

"Hm?"

"This is an advance payment from the future. The price of it, anyway."

I didn't understand what she was talking about. Fran tilted her head.

"You know how I have a contract with Lene."

"Hm."

"Her elements are time and water."

"Uh-huh."

"My Skill, Create Divine Water, is a Skill I acquired by combining Wina's water expertise with Lene's powers as a water spirit. It's the evolved version of Create Holy Water."

“I see.”

Wina’s powers had gotten stronger when combined with Lene’s.

“But there is another ability in which Lene’s powers play a bigger role: Advance. It’s a Timespace ability which allows you to draw power from your future self.”

“So you’re using your future self’s powers in advance?”

“That’s the gist of it. The user is able to unleash a huge burst of magic in exchange for being unable to use any magic over the next few days.”

“And the black stuff is payment for using this move?”

“Kind of. But Advance and Create Divine Water aren’t actually my trump card.”

“What is, then?” Fran asked innocently.

I didn’t think Winalene would give up her secrets so easily, but she didn’t hide anything from us.

“High elves have an ability called Demigod Form. The effects are simple enough: greatly enhanced stats and Skills, just on another level. In Demigod Form, your Skills are so powerful they might as well have evolved.”

“You used Advance and Create Divine Water after entering Demigod Form?”

“Correct. And what you see before you are the effects of using a Demigod Form-powered Advance for prolonged periods of time.”

While in Demigod Form, Advance could draw more things than just mana. But even Winalene didn’t know what these things were.

“You don’t?”

“I’m just borrowing ‘something’ from my future self to unleash great power today. That’s all.”

“Doesn’t that scare you?”

“It does. But I didn’t know whether I could defeat the beast even with Demigod Form. I had to do it.”

The already monstrous high elf powered up with Demigod Form and further strengthened herself with an enhanced Advance. Using Create Divine Water and Aquarius together, she was able to imbue water within a five-hundred-meter radius with divine element and control every inch of it.

“Wow. But...what’s the ‘something’?”

“Who knows? Can’t be anything good, judging by how this looks.”

“So the black stuff is from Demigod Form’s Advance?”

“Yes. I can’t feel or move any of these parts. Suffice to say, I can’t see or hear out of my right eye and ear either.” Winalene raised her arm to show that her fingers weren’t moving. It was like her hand was frozen clutching an invisible mouse. She couldn’t move it if she wanted to.

“Will you get better?”

“In a few years. The same thing happened last time.”

YEARS?! I guess it was on the cheap side, considering the power she got from it. She was a high elf, too. Still, a year was a year even for a long-lived race.

“But I don’t know for sure. I pushed it to the limit today.”

“You did?”

“Yes. Ten more seconds in Demigod Form and I would’ve died.”

“What?!”

“I’ll live if it’s just an arm and an eye. But if the black parts reached my heart or brain, those organs would have stopped. Even I can’t survive without a heart.” Winalene shrugged. “If you hadn’t weakened the beast, I would’ve died before I could kill it. Thank you.”

“Hm...” Fran nodded, feeling conflicted. She must’ve felt that our help had been insignificant. But Winalene wasn’t lying. We had helped, though the price was still significant for her. But if only we had been stronger...I knew what Fran was feeling now.

“Don’t feel sad for me. I can still use spirit magic in this state, and I have full control of my legs.”

Fran nodded, feeling better once Winalene reassured her. There was just one other question. “Is the beast completely destroyed?”

“Yes. Of that there is no doubt,” Winalene said confidently. We would have nothing to worry about. That left one final question. “Where’s Lene?”

“Woof?”

Lene’s condition was worrying us. She’d seemed critical when we last heard from her. She, too, had pushed her limits in order to save us. I hadn’t felt her presence since then, even after getting Spirit Perception.

Either her presence was so weak that I couldn’t pick her up or she had disappeared after using all her mana. Then again, Winalene would be in hysterics if Lene had died...I really hoped it was the former.

“I’ll call her right now.”

So she hadn’t been annihilated.

Winalene closed her good left eye and concentrated. A magic circle appeared several meters in front of her, and out of it came a white shadow.

Blonde, heterochromia, elf ears. Lene.

But the spirit looked more like a ghost. Maybe spirits were supposed to be see-through to begin with, but her presence was incredibly weak.

“Thank you. Because of you, neither Winalene nor Romeo died...” Lene’s voice was very quiet.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes...” Lene smiled and nodded, though she didn’t sound okay to me. She had spent a lot of energy but deemed it to be well worth the cost.

But Winalene frowned deeply upon seeing Lene be so frail. “What happened to you, Lene?! I knew you were up to something when Fran and the others attacked, but...”

“I...have my reasons.” Namely, Lene connecting us to the other world so we could give rustbucket me a wake-up call. She’d kept it a secret from Winalene. But if even we could see how spent Lene was, there was definitely no hiding it

from her sister.

“And you can’t tell me?”

“It’s...not over yet...”

Was the other Fran not saved yet?

“Winalene...you know I can’t return to the way I was, right?”

“Not a problem. I’ll just return your power that’s inside me.”

“No. You won’t survive. The separation takes too much energy.”

“I know. I don’t care what happens to me as long as you can come back.”

“That’s why you mustn’t.” Lene shook her head sadly. Winalene was ready to lay down her life for her. After we defeated the beast without losing anyone, I thought we would get a happily ever after.

“Lene...what’s going on?”

“I’ve spent most of my powers. At this rate, I might naturally disappear.”

“I just told you I can give you your powers back.”

“And I just told you you’ll die if you do that. You’re barely alive, too. Do any more and you’ll die.”

Lene was about to die, so Winalene wanted to give her back the energy that had fused into her. But this separation would take energy that Winalene couldn’t afford. The effects of Advance were greater than we could see.

In short, the choice had to be made between Lene and Winalene.

“That’s bad.”

“W-woof!”

An expression of shock that only her closest friends could pick up flashed on Fran’s face. “If only we beat up the beast harder...”

“I’m sorry...” Sierra had approached us, using the Theraclede as a walking stick. He turned his head in sorrow, coming to the same conclusion as Fran had.

At least that ghastly expression was no longer on Sierra’s face, probably because he had witnessed Zelyse’s death. His objective had been to kill Zelyse

and ensure Romeo and Theraclede's survival, after all.

The sword Zelyse was still at large, but the human Zelyse had been eliminated. Romeo and Theraclede were safe and sound. With his goals accomplished, the cloud of sorrow hanging over Sierra lifted.

"It's too soon for apologies," said Lene. "You two can still help, Fran."

"Me? Me and Sierra?"

"No...you and your sword. I believe you have acquired the power to cut spirits."

"Hm?"

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I could hazard a guess.

Do you mean Spirit's Hand?

"Correct. With it, you are able to sever the bond between me and Wina. Do that, and our powers will separate on their own. It will not tax Wina as much."

"So we can save you both?"

"Yes, although it will be a great burden on both of you." Lene quietly bowed her head. "Please...save us."

I didn't mind pushing a little more to save them, but...

How do I go about doing it? I hadn't even had the chance to look at Spirit's Hand, let alone use it. Apparently, it was going to take a lot of energy. Still, it would be well worth it if we could save the twins.

"What should I do?"

"Use Spirit's Hand to cut the bond between me and Winalene. We should separate into Wina and Lene once you do."

"Bond?"

"It is the link fusing Wina and Lene into one being. The very link that created Winalene."

"Huh?" Fran tilted her head. We couldn't see this bond no matter how hard we looked for its mana. How could we cut something we couldn't see? "Where

is it?”

“It is invisible to the naked eye. You should be able to feel it with Spirit Perception.”

I see. Spirit Perception. The bond must have been made of something unique to spirits instead of mana.

Teacher?

I’m on it. I concentrated with Spirit Perception. I could feel Lene’s faint presence around me, but no bond. *This bond is between you and Winalene, right?*

Yes. Lene nodded. There was something there, but...

Hmm...

I still couldn’t feel anything. I was hoping Lene could just point to the spot I was supposed to cut with Spirit’s Hand.

But Lene shook her head. *Normally, that would suffice.*

Normally?

Spirit’s Hand is a Skill that consumes a lot of energy. The bond between me and Wina is also quite formidable. It will stop you halfway with how you are now.

Right. I couldn’t just turn the Skill on and start swinging, especially since I was practically running on empty.

Got it.

I needed to work harder with Spirit Perception. I deactivated all of my Skills. Having entered total darkness, I focused on Spirit Perception, but Lene’s presence was the only thing I could pick up. Man, my affinity for spirits must have been terrible. My subsequent attempts were also fruitless.

Hmm.

Nothing? asked Fran.

Yeah. Lene’s the only spirit I can detect.

There's something between Lene and Winalene.

You can tell?

Hm. Fran, on the other hand, was great with spirits. As we looked at the same spot, she could see something I couldn't. She took a step forward and pointed at the empty space. Here. It's right here.

She moved her hand side to side as if stroking it. Apparently, that was where the spirit power connecting Lene and Winalene was.

And once I knew where to look—

I concentrated deeper, harder. As I sharpened my senses, a strange feeling overcame me as I synchronized with Fran. It was like I could see what she was seeing...

First of all, Lene's presence felt more pronounced. For the first time, I could perceive a spirit as something concrete rather than vague. I further deepened my concentration until I finally caught a glimpse of it. Now, it was clear for me to see.

Simply put, the bond looked like a thick cord of strings. The tense string was a tangled mess in the middle, like a child trying clumsily to make a knot. The bond was really bad on Winalene's side. It looked like it was trying to swallow the string coming from Lene.

I see it. Is this the bond?

Positive response from Spirit Perception. Comparing characteristics to Lene's information...96 percent chance this is the bond in question.

So do I just cut it with Spirit's Hand?

Would it work considering I had never used it before?

No. You do not have sufficient mana to activate Spirit's Hand.

That bad, eh?

Yes. Even among Unique Skills, Spirit's Hand consumes a great amount of mana.

Not ideal.

If only I could get my mana back somehow...

We were out of crystals and potions. There was Mana Steal, but taking mana from Lene, Winalene, or Sierra would only make things worse. The only ones in relatively good shape were Jet and Theraclede. Maybe their mana would do the trick?

What do you think, P.A.?

You may be able to get the bare minimum amount of mana.

Okay.

Now to figure out how to make it happen. Just take the power with Mana Steal? But Theraclede used Malice as an energy source, which would first need to be converted. Then I remembered our newly acquired Malice Command. I should be able to convert Malice into mana with it.

We just needed Theraclede's cooperation. I told Fran about the plan and asked her to convince him to help.

"You."

Come on, Fran! I know you hate the guy, but can't you at least be polite to him for once?

"What?" But Theraclede showed no resentment toward Fran's crassness. He was far from being a gentleman, but he was ready to hear her out.

"I don't have enough power to save Lene. Give me yours."

"All right. Use me as you wish." Theraclede nodded at once, so fast that he probably would've done anything we asked him to.

But someone else wasn't so enthusiastic. "Wait. Are you sure the old man—Theraclede will be all right? Also, Malice is difficult to control for most people," said Sierra, casting a worried look at Theraclede.

Sierra's primary goal had been to save Theraclede, after all. I'd be worried too. He already didn't trust Fran completely, and now she wanted to use his beloved guardian as an external power supply.

"My sword can do it."

"I know that's no ordinary sword, but does it really have that ability?"

"Hm."

"Still, I just..." Sierra wasn't convinced. But there was really no time to explain. Should we just do it anyway?

"Sierra, was it...?" said Theraclede. "It'll be all right."

"But..."

"Besides, I've already handed my life over to Fran. It doesn't matter what happens now."

"What do you mean?" Sierra's eyes widened. Theraclede explained the bargain he'd made with Fran.

Once the battle was over, Fran swore on Theraclede's life to take Romeo to the orphanage in Bulbola. She could do anything she wanted with him in return.

Winalene had nullified the contract between Romeo and Theraclede, and the battle was over now. His life now belonged to Fran. Theraclede no longer cared what happened to himself. He didn't want Sierra to resent Fran even if he died. I think that's what he was trying to say.

But Theraclede was never exactly a master of communication, and it was really biting us in the rear. His explanation only made Sierra more worried.

"No..." Sierra glared at Fran. He knew about the grudge she held against Theraclede.

Fran had no reason to be careful with Theraclede's life. He was probably expecting her to use the Malice absorption as pretext for killing him.

Fran now approached Sierra and showed me to him.

Teacher, can I just tell him?

What? About me being an Intelligent Weapon?

Hm.

I don't know if that's enough to convince him...

Don't worry. He'll understand once he learns about you.

You sure?

Hm. It'll be fine.

If you say so, Fran...

Was she trying to say it would be all right since I was controlling the Skill? I wasn't sure if that would be enough, but there was no harm in trying. Sierra had an Intelligent Weapon too. This wasn't information you would share lightly.

"Well? What is it?" Sierra gave Fran a suspicious look as she quietly presented her sword to him.

Fran paid no mind to his glare. "This sword's name is Teacher."

"Teacher?"

"Hm. He's an Intelligent Weapon."

"What...?" Try as he might to conceal his surprise, it came right through. He actually looked his age as he failed to maintain his poker face.

Hey there. The name's Teacher, Fran's sword and guardian. Nice to meet you.

"Y-you're serious..."

"Hm. Teacher will use Spirit's Hand."

We won't try to get back at Theraclede here. Lene's safety takes priority. Besides, Romeo would be sad.

I went with the honest approach. I mean, why lie about this in the first place?

Sierra's demeanor instantly changed. After a moment of shock, he looked almost happy. "I-I see. He's an Intelligent Weapon..."

"Hm."

"..."

"..."

Sierra was silent for a moment, probably convening with the sword Theraclede. "All right. I'll trust you for now."

"Thanks."

What? I just said hi and now he trusted us?

We both use intelligent weapons, so I thought he'd understand if I explained it to him.

I hadn't thought it would be possible, but it evidently worked. The sword Theraclede had been Sierra's sole companion ever since traveling through time...it was the first time he'd met someone who was like him. Fran was close to Sierra's age too, so it was no wonder that he sympathized with her.

Now that Sierra wasn't against the plan, we could calmly ask Theraclede to cooperate. I immediately told him what I would do since the cat was out of the bag.

Theraclede, I'm going to borrow some of your power. I need you to stay still and not resist.

"Well...all right." Theraclede didn't know how to react to a talking sword. He looked puzzled but soon nodded.

Everyone watched in silence as I used Malice Command. It did what it was supposed to do, and I was now able to manipulate the Malice coming from Theraclede. Next up: the Malice inside him.

Here goes.

"Do it."

I extended Malice Command to Theraclede's internal Malice.

A Fiend was a Fiend even when he was calm. Brutal Malice raged inside him... the Malice of an elite Fiend.

Malice Command allowed me to be much more sensitive to Malice, and I felt a terrible chill as I handled that which rested within Theraclede. But at least I could still manipulate it.

I could feel his Malice slowly bending to my will. Soon, it tore away from him and began flowing into me.

That's it...

"Urk." Theraclede flinched, resisting slightly as he felt the external

manipulation of his Malice.

Even with him allowing me in, I still wasn't able to perfectly control it. I was, after all, trying to control someone else's Malice, and that someone happened to be an elite Fiend. The process would be a lot easier on something like a goblin.

But I kept at it, slowly using the Skill to pull the Malice out of Theraclede and transfer it into myself.

Not to toot my own horn, but this was going way better than I expected. I think I owed it to being good with Mana and Spirit Manipulation. Not having a human body, I wasn't as affected by exhaustion and pain, so I had to use mana for every little thing I did. That actually made me used to this kind of Skill.

Do I just convert this Malice into mana now? I hadn't tried it yet, but Malice Command could break up Malice and turn it into mana.

But P.A. said, *No. Malice Command allows you to use Malice as-is.*

What? Does that mean I can use both Malice and mana?

Yes. Though not as efficient as mana, using raw Malice will yield more energy than converting it due to the losses incurred during the conversion process.

Was that really okay? I was still using Malice at the end of the day. Would I be able to resist? *Will I be all right with Malice running through me?*

According to my calculations, a momentary operation will be fine. Also, the effects of Malice will be minimized with my help.

Oh, okay! That's great, P.A.!

I will redirect the Malice where it least affects you, leaving your basic functions intact.

I assumed the Malice would damage some less important part of me, and I'd also recover faster since the damage would be localized. Still worried me, though.

Will you be okay? I asked.

Yes. I will only be temporarily weakened.

But...no, we have to do this now. I'm counting on you, P.A.!

Yes. I will manage the calculations.

It would be up to Theraclede's condition now. I slowly drained his Malice.

You're next, Jet.

"Woof."

It's gonna be rough. You'll have to hang in there.

"Woof!"

You know it.

I activated Multi Mind along with multiple uses of Mana Drain. The process went smoothly with Jet, since we were already magically linked.

12 percent until sufficient mana is achieved.

"Ruff..."

Just a little more, Jet! Come on!

"Urf..."

Sufficient mana achieved.

Okay!

Jet immediately collapsed without a word as soon as I stopped Mana Drain. He was still conscious but too tired to speak. His regeneration stopped and he started bleeding again.

Good job, boy! We have enough mana now thanks to you!

"Urrgh..."

I would give him lots of telekinetic scratches later.

Malice levels sufficient.

Nice!

Let's do this!

I turned to the bond connecting Lene and Winalene and activated the Skill.

Spirit's Hand!

An invisible power stretched toward the bond. Spirit's Hand didn't really feel like a hand. It felt ambiguous, almost formless. But I wasn't thrown off. It felt a lot like telekinesis, which is my bread and butter.

I was still maintaining Spirit Perception. Apparently, I could feel the bond after registering it once. It was like tuning into the right frequency and it only took a bit of focus to see it.

I moved Spirit's Hand to touch the bond, but it didn't budge. Would I just need to add more power now?

I just destroy this, right?

"Yes. I'm counting on you."

All right!

I added more power to Spirit's Hand and got ready to cut through the bond between Lene and Winalene...

Tsk!

But it didn't work. I couldn't even scratch it. I could tell that the mana I got from Jet was rapidly dropping.

So this is what P.A. was worried about!

"Keep trying!"

"Save Lene...please..." Winalene spoke after being silent the whole time. She didn't want to disturb my focus, but she was finally getting restless.

Time for some elbow grease!

I couldn't afford to wait and see. I poured my remaining energy into Spirit's Hand, this time adding Malice into the mix.

Ungh...

Not good. A chill, or the sword equivalent of one, ran down my spine when I started using Malice. My mind trembled and shivered.

But I had felt this sensation before. It happened when I used too much energy

and when I'd Cannibalized Fanatix. This chill always assailed me in dangerous situations. This was no exception.

Is it the Malice?

Recalculating damage inflicted by Malice. Reducing effects of Malice.

You can do that?

Yes. Concentrate on using the Skill.

And just as P.A. finished saying that, the chill immediately faded.

Thanks!

With my burden reduced, I redoubled my efforts into Spirit's hand.

NUOOOOOH!

All right! The bond hadn't budged earlier, but it was finally giving way!

The bond didn't make a sound because it was incorporeal, but to me it felt like it was ripping and tearing. I grabbed the knots of the bond and twisted it like I was wringing a rag.

It wasn't breaking yet. That was how strong the bond between Wina and Lene was.

I added even more power and then, finally, it happened.

The bond broke as if all the exertion I spent earlier had been nothing, or so it felt to me. Regardless, the bond lost its form and shattered to a million pieces.

The power of Spirit's Hand had finally overcome the bond.

Yes! Lene, Winalene, how was that?

I immediately turned to the twins.

"..."

"..."

Lene and Winalene stood quietly staring at each other.

Uhh...guys?

I called out to them, and they finally broke their silence.

“It’s...gone.”

“It...is.”

They whispered to one another. Though brief, their exchange was loaded with emotion. Happiness, sadness, relief, loneliness, hope. Thousands of years of emotions that we could never hope to *begin* to understand.

Tears rolled down Winalene’s cheeks. The sight of a beautiful high elf crying was mysterious and soothing.

But we couldn’t contemplate it for very long. Winalene’s body began releasing large amounts of mana. While it felt like her mana, it was also different. In addition, she clearly wasn’t in control of it.

Released mana would usually dissipate into the air. But this mana behaved differently.

“I can finally return this to you...Lene.”

“Thank you...Wina.”

The surge of mana was flowing into Lene.

Once the mana flow stopped, Winalene and Lene remained facing each other, outwardly unchanged. But anyone could tell that they had changed inside. It wasn’t a matter of growing stronger or weaker; no, it was the wavelengths of their mana and aura that had changed.

I could understand Winalene’s change, since she was now separated from the Lene inside her. But what about Lene? I guess her change was brought on by becoming completely herself again.

Abruptly, Winalene collapsed, exhausted from the process.

“Winalene? Are you okay?”

“Not Winalene...never Winalene again. Just Wina now,” said Winalene—no, Wina. And then she passed out.

Whoa!

As exhausted as I was, I momentarily activated telekinesis to soften Winalene’s fall.

Fran caught her. “Wina?” She shook her, but it didn’t look like she would be waking up any time soon. Her exhaustion had finally caught up with her.

She’s running low on life, too...

“Let her rest,” said Lene.

“Hm.”

We followed Lene’s advice and put Wina down.

“Is she okay?”

“She’ll wake up soon enough. She will be far weaker than before, however...”

Good—Wina wasn’t in mortal peril. Meanwhile, Lene was teeming with spirit energy. She had made it out of the danger zone in one piece.

“My deepest thanks for saving Wina,” Lene said with a deep bow. “And for saving me, too.”

Lene, just how much did you know? I asked her the question that had been on my mind this whole time. *You said you couldn’t see the future...but then you worked really hard to change it.*

We only met the other Fran because of Lene’s help.

If she hadn’t whispered something to P.A., I wouldn’t have used Unleash Potential. We wouldn’t have met our alternate selves, wouldn’t have gained new Skills, wouldn’t have saved Wina and the rest.

In fact, if the other Lene hadn’t sent Sierra, Theraclede, and Zelyse here, I would’ve been doomed to become a sword. All of this couldn’t have been coincidence. But how much was chance and how much was Lene pulling our strings?

Personally, I had no complaints even if Lene *had* orchestrated the whole thing. We’d gotten out in one piece thanks to her either way. I’d shake her hand if I could. I was just curious.

“I am no god, so I cannot see the future...do you remember when I said that?”

Yeah.

According to the goddess of chaos, even the gods themselves couldn’t see the

future. If that was the case, perfect prescience was impossible.

But you have the power to choose the better option, right?

“It’s not as impressive as you think. I just know how certain things will affect me. Intuition, in a word.”

Lene could use that intuition to see several seconds into the future, but projecting years ahead took a lot of energy. So much energy that it could destroy her.

It seemed to me that Lene was running highly advanced calculations. Using her powers as a time spirit, she could simulate the outcome of different possibilities. Perhaps what she called intuition was her understanding the results of these calculations.

She would have to sort through an exponential amount of data to see years ahead. And I thought Multi Mind worked up a sweat.

“But my intuition has served me well so far...and it all began with a chance encounter,” Lene whispered, casting her gaze to Sierra. “One day, I felt an immense amount of Malice on the lakeside. Naturally, I went to check. What I found was a boy and a Malice-emitting sword.”

Sierra and the sword Theraclede. Lene had detected them from the moment they arrived in our world.

“Even if I cannot see the future, looking into the past is easy enough. All I have to do is read what has already happened.”

Seeing into past and future were equally difficult for most of us, but not so for Lene. While looking into Sierra’s past, she found a seeming impossibility.

“The boy and the sword had come from the future.”

Lene learned quite a bit from reading into their past.

“I also received a silent message from my other self. This boy was our spark of hope.”

Sierra widened his eyes in surprise. He wasn’t expecting Lene to have known about them from the beginning.

She continued: “I then made direct contact with them to get a better read on their past.”

“Bwuh?” Sierra sounded flabbergasted, unable to process it all. He looked confused. He probably didn’t remember meeting Lene in the first place.

“You probably didn’t notice me the first time because I was hidden from you, as a spirit. I changed forms and greeted you later.”

The other Lene was the one who had instigated this plot—rather, this rescue operation. Her intuition must have whispered to her that Sierra could be the key to preventing the catastrophe after she made contact with him. Acting on this faint hope, she sent Sierra, Theraclede, and Zelyse to our side. That hope would reveal itself when she found Sierra.

“It’s a happy ending. Everybody lives. It sounded impossible, but what if that future was achievable? If just this once everybody lives, wouldn’t it be worth risking my all?”

Lene had decided right then that she would save everyone.

“That said, things only started moving recently.”

Zelyse’s whereabouts were unknown and she didn’t even know who Fran was. All she could do was secretly help Sierra while waiting for the time to come.

“I wanted to accomplish everything without the beast’s resurrection, but...so much for that idea.”

Lene had originally planned to destroy the beast while it was still sealed, but a combination of Winalene’s stubbornness and Zelyse’s plotting had brought the creature back to life. That was why she’d broken the seal herself and allowed the beast to rise in its incomplete form. It really was the best she could do.

But Sierra’s mood had changed.

“Were you helping us the whole time...?” Sierra muttered.

I kind of understood where he was coming from. I would’ve been okay with Lene pulling our strings as long as Fran made it out in one piece—but Fran might not agree. It might even make her feel like all the adventures she’d had

and victories she'd achieved were called into question.

Sierra was having a crisis of confidence.

"Allow me to clarify. All things told, I barely helped you at all. There were three direct interventions, by my count. The first intervention was attracting guildsmen to your location while you were weak. The second was when I distracted some monsters with a spell when you got cornered. The third was when I healed you when you were dying of illness. That should be all."

Though these interventions weren't insignificant, they proved Sierra was not just a pawn on Lene's board.

"I see..." He seemed pleased to hear that Lene hadn't been holding his hand the entire time.

Still, even if she hadn't helped him *directly*, her indirect help made all the difference. But introducing this distinction now would just make things more complicated.

"Things began to move when Zelyse started his operations here. Our Sierra—the young Romeo—arrived, and soon after him, Fran."

Lene had set up her food stall in order to contact Fran. Her intuition only worked with people she personally knew. The deeper the relationship was, the stronger the intuition became.

Lene had talked to Fran in order to forge that strong connection.

"Hm? But I only talked to you for a little while."

"That was enough," said Lene. "I don't really know anyone other than Winalene."

I guess some light conversation was enough to become Lene's friend because of how alone she was. But our first meeting with her had been by design.

"Things got complicated after that. Sierra, Fran, Romeo, Wina, Zelyse. I kept a close eye on all your actions and acted to avoid the worst possible outcome..."

Direct intervention was difficult for Lene. It was the trade-off for being able to choose the future. She intervened ever so slightly to subtly divert the flow of history. Our current present was the result of her secret combat.

I wondered why she let Zelyse be, but I guess it was hard to foil his plans through indirect methods.

“However, I never dreamed of achieving the outcome we did.”

“Are you happy?”

You and Wina ended up so exhausted. She said it would take years for her to get her powers back. I’m sure it’s the same for you.

Lene hadn’t just *temporarily* lost her powers, either. Her spirit rank had clearly dropped. She, who was once a Greater Spirit, was now an intermediate spirit.

“I am very happy indeed. The beast is no more and we have returned to being Wina and Lene, without either of us losing our lives. What more can I ask for?”

Sure, I guess, but...

“Romeo and Theraclede are alive. You and Fran are sound of mind. Zelyse, the chief troublemaker, is no more. Even our alternate selves have gained something from our actions. The kingdom is in one piece, the loss of life minimized. To ask for more would be foolish, if not greedy.”

Lene had never included the perfect ending in her expectations to start. She was expecting everyone, including herself, to die, and for only a few to survive at best.

You’re right. Asking for more out of a fight with that monstrosity would be downright greedy...

“Indeed. We are not gods. To save everyone would be mere arrogance, which invites only regret.” Lene quietly closed her eyes, praying for the peace of all who had lost their lives in the conflict.

Epilogue

SIDE: PREVIOUS FRAN

“Teacher.”

Fran... I...what happened to me...? Teacher croaked.

I was so happy to hear his voice that I felt like crying. It was Teacher’s voice. The voice he’d had when I first met him. The very sound of it made me feel safe. I was no longer afraid to talk to him.

“Teacher. I need your strength.”

My...strength...

“I need you to defeat the beast. Not you-the-sword. *You*. Please.”

You’re crying...

“Because I’m happy. Don’t worry about it.”

We stood face-to-face with the beast after our other selves disappeared. It was menacing. Could we win? I knew we could if I had Teacher with me.

“Teacher, I need you.”

Yes...I’m...Teacher...

“Teacher?!”

Yeah! I’m Teacher! Fran’s Teacher...!

His mood suddenly changed. He sounded angry. But I wasn’t scared. If anything, I was happy. He didn’t sound like a sword anymore. I could hear his heart in his voice again.

“Can you do it, Teacher?”

Yeah...yeah, of course! Let’s do this! Let’s beat the tar out of that thing!

“Hm!”

We'll have time for apologies later. We have a giant monster to kill!

I didn't know why, but it felt like I could put out a huge amount of energy. We could take on any enemy and win! Even that giant beast was no match for me now. Not when I had Teacher with me.

"Full power!"

We would end this now. No regrets. I used the most powerful Skill I had.

"Power slumbering inside of me, power of the beast who is a god... Awaken! Godbeast Form!"

Black lightning covered my body and my hair got slightly longer. No other changes, though. Too bad. I was hoping I'd be fluffier when I heard the Skill's name.

But this Skill was strong. Very strong. Like five times Flashing Thunderclap strong. Maybe.

"You good to go, Teacher?"

Of course. All engines on full blast. Don't worry about me. P.A.'s back, after all.

I shall manage Skill output. Forced cessation will be initiated if things get too dangerous.

You heard the lady.

"All right."

Having both Teacher and P.A. made me feel good about this.

"Okay...let's go!"

Yeah!

"Aaaah! Godsword Release! Hungering Wolf Fenrir!"

OOOOOH!

Fran...we did it...

"Hm...we made a hole in the lake, though..."

Uhh...hope that won't cause ecological issues...

"Still better than the beast going on a rampage."

"Lene, you're okay?"

Lene showed up as we were resting on a hill near the lake. She'd disappeared after she cut the connection with our other selves. I'd thought something bad had happened. I was glad to see she wasn't dead.

"I used too much of my power..."

"Is it our fault? Because you let us talk to the other Teacher and Fran?"

"Not just that. I also sent Romeo and the others, among other things. But I'll be fine." Lene was growing fainter. I could barely feel her. Was she really going to be okay?

"Hey... Don't push yourself too hard."

"I know."

"I wonder how our other selves are doing?"

Our alternate selves came to mind once the beast was dealt with.

"Do you know, Lene?"

"I'm sorry. I've already severed the connection."

"Oh. Too bad." I wanted to talk to them a little more. But they would be all right. They already left us with so much. "You pushed yourself to the limit, Teacher. Are you okay?"

Yeah. I'm totally spent, but I feel great, Teacher said, smiling. He didn't have a face, but I could definitely tell he was smiling again.

"Hm."

Listen...I'm sorry, Fran. I literally lost my mind.

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're back to normal."

Right...

"Hm!" The sound of his kind voice made me tear up again.

I could tell that Teacher was beating himself up—but he could only do that because he was back to normal. He could be happy, angry, everything he used to be. I was so happy to have him back.

Warning. Change detected in Teacher's Name.

Huh? My name...? Did I get a name change?

Yes. Name change completed. Name has reverted to Teacher. Fran has lost Godsword Release as a result.

Wait, what? Whoa, it really is back to Teacher! Does this mean I'm not a Godsword anymore?

Yes. The changes you went through removed "Godsword" as your designation, eliminating the Skill with it.

I didn't know what had happened, but Teacher was no longer a Godsword. Was it because he got his heart back? Could you not be a Godsword if you had a heart? Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe becoming a Godsword made you lose your heart.

In that case, I didn't *need* him to be a Godsword. I didn't even want one. I wanted *Teacher*.

S-sorry, Fran. I'm not a Godsword anymore!

"Hm."

Huh? Why are you smiling?

"It's all right because you're you. I don't care about having a Godsword."

I would be fine as long as I had Teacher. P.A. was back, too.

"If only...Jet were here with us."

Yeah...

He was the only one missing. But then P.A. told us something surprising.

Resummoning Jet is possible.

What do you mean?

Jet's crystal has been assimilated into Teacher's body. Summoning him is

possible by utilizing this bond.

“What do we do?”

You must acquire Godbeast Summoning to resummon him via his crystal.

“Godbeast Summoning. How do we get that?”

Insufficient information. Recommending research into Godbeast legends.

“I see...Teacher.”

Looks like we have our next objective.

“Hm!”

Our bright and fun adventure continues. Wait for us, Jet!



Afterword

THANK YOU for buying *Reincarnated as a Sword Vol. 15*.

If I may have a word...

“I messed up the page count again!”

And so another afterword is upon us! I say this in every afterword, but ending on the right page count is hard. A change in line layout can easily add an extra page, and when there’s an important scene where I can’t leave out any lines, the word count comes back to hit me with a vengeance. I submit very close to deadline, so I can’t really ask to change the page count on the fly.

(Yeah, it really is my bad.)

“A hack!”

“Indeed! A talentless hack!”

So the ladies inside my head are scolding me.

Anyway, that’s enough with the usual preamble. Let’s get to acknowledgments.

My editor I-san, thank you as always.

Llo, thank you for the godly artwork. Truly, thou art a god.

Maruyama Tomowo-sensei, every time I read the manga, I get jealous because of how interesting it is.

Inoue Hinako, I had a lot of fun reading how cute Fran was in the spinoff. A

job well done.

My friends and family, everyone involved in the publication process, all my readers...thank you for your support.

Season Two of the anime has been greenlit!

Nothing is decided yet, but I'll do my best to make sure the next season will be great. Thank you for your continued support!

READ ME <<<<<<
RIGHT-TO-LEFT

EXTRA CHAPTER
Teacher Fran
STORY: Yuu Tanaka
ART: Tomowo Maruyama

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HER
PUT IT
TOGETHER
MYSELF!

I CAN'T
BELIEVE
FRAN
IS AN
INSTRUC-
TOR
NOW...

He's
in here
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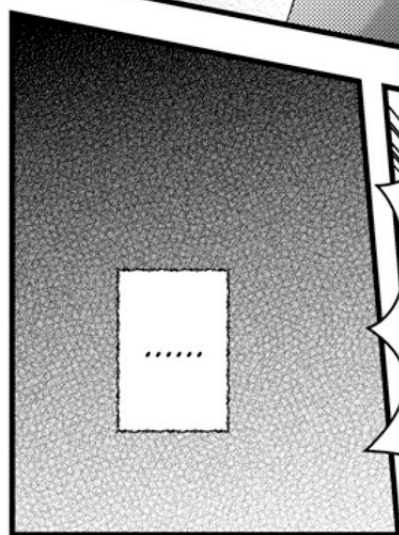
TEACHER
?

IF WE
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WORLD...

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PUSH







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