

Ascension of the Sylvan Cosmos.

Chapter 46. Requirements to build a house.

After Liu Shu heard her story, she was thoughtful for a while. Her mind pondered between how her instincts told her how to act and what she had just heard.

As a World Tree, Liu Shu had a natural predisposition to be an observer. As long as she was not being threatened, she would rarely act. This was not because she was indifferent, but because World Trees perceived living beings differently from others. For them, a life being ended was part of a natural cycle, regardless of how it happened.

The only thing that World Trees would never allow was danger to themselves since, as living beings, they had the right to protect themselves as much as any other or to fight for their existence, what Liu Shu had been recently doing about fighting nearby trees that reacted violently to her expansion was a nice example.

But now, the idea of interfering and saving those close to her was presented to her rather eloquently. Hearing such a tale, Liu Shu bounced back and forth between her current role and what the elderly Rose Fairy spoke about. 'Protector? Do I need to become one?'

But, at the end of the day, her mind was too different compared to that of a human to delve into the moral and ethical reasoning behind this conundrum. So, while the thought was there, she didn't act on it and rather placed it in the back of her mind.

Did this mean that World Trees were ungrateful toward creatures that took care of them? It did not. From the very beginning, Liu Shu never really cared about what or who took her fruits. At first, they were birds, then some insects also came, and finally, the Rose Fairies arrived and settled around her.

Did she have some sympathy for them? Naturally, that's why when the Thornstrides attacked, Liu Shu was ready to fight back together with the Rose Fairies. But even then, her mentality as a World Tree never got compromised or changed. She just acted on the situation as it was the most profitable for her own safety.

Placing her thoughts aside, Liu Shu focused on something she had wanted to do for a while: build a <Basic house>!

<Basic house (F Rank)>: A very basic structure that has enough rooms and space to make it habitable for one creature. The walls are somewhat sturdy and won't go down with common natural phenomena.

Materials needed: Sapalignwood x 100 (F- Rank), Sprout heart x10 (F Rank), Budbark x1 (F+ Rank), Pebbleheart x100 (F- Rank), Earthmud x100 (F- Rank), Yellow Cotton (F-Rank) x10.

[System Hint: If you want to create a <Basic House> to house races of similar stature to <Rose Fairy>, you will need 40% of the materials, rounded up.]

Liu Shu read the system hint with curiosity. 'Rounded up? That means that... Ah! I need the <Budbark> still, not just a fourth of the <Budbark>.'

The materials needed were relatively easy to get. During these two months, Liu Shu used the corners the Fairies created to ask for materials. Sadly, she couldn't ask for materials which they didn't have because there wer, so she was still missing the <Budbark>.

Still, the Rose Fairies were very diligent and had gathered enough materials to build three <Basic Houses>, not counting the F+ Rank material.

'Hm... I have most of the materials, but...' Similar to the weapon situation, Liu Shu was clueless about how to build a house. 'What size does it need to be? How should the rooms be aligned? How do I shape it? QAQ.'

Liu Shu was again stopped by the significant barrier known as "knowledge."

'What to do... How do I even ask about this to them...'

Liu Shu knew some basic information about life, the system, and many more matters as a part of her "instincts." But more technological issues were utterly out of her "basic understanding."

After thinking about it for a while, Liu Shu reached one conclusion that would lead to her getting the knowledge: Whine to Flor until Flor understood what she wanted.

And so, she began.

'Flor! Floooooor~, Flor? FLOR! FlorFlorFlorFlorFlor. Hehehe, FloOoOoOr! Come Flor~, Flor I want to build a housssseeee.'

Meanwhile, the Rose Fairy Queen's brain started throbbing as messages at the rhythm of a drum roll hit her one after another. This time, Flor was not lazing around as many Rose Fairies had come with reports of nearby intelligent creatures appearing with increased frequency. 'Hm... This is important, but if I don't go to Liu Shu, my head might explode from all her calls.'

Flor looked back toward Liu Shu, who was around 60 meters away and spoke, knowing that the World Tree could easily hear her from there. "I'm going, I'm going! Stop calling me Liu Shu. I heard you!"

Her tone was helpless yet pampering, like that of a mother to her young child.

Liu Shu stopped calling her while giggling in her mind. 'Hehehe, it is so fun to see her face change. Hahaha.'

The Rose Fairies around Flor laughed as they teased her.

"Queen, how does it feel to take care of Liu Shu?"

"Right, right. You are really similar to a mother now, hahaha."

Flor's eyebrow twitched. "A mother, who me?"

Clavel was also around and smirked. "You wouldn't be cursing at me sometimes in your sleep for discovering Liu Shu, wouldn't you?"

Flor shook her head helplessly. "You are all too mischievous. Now, go! Send someone to inform Ignatia as well, although she probably has already realized the strangeness." She added with a serious tone. "If you don't want to become the next ones to die, be careful of ambushes and be alert!"

The Rose Fairies nodded. "Understood, Queen Flor!"

Flor turned around and flew toward Liu Shu, who was patiently waiting for her. "Well, I'm here. What's wrong?"

The Rose Fairy Queen heard a sound and looked over only to see the <Lignified Vault>'s door being opened. Taking the cue quickly, she commented. "Okay, hold it there, I'm going down."

Liu Shu held the door until Flor entered, and having learned from her previous mistake when she almost chopped one root with the door closing, she slowly lowered it.

Although it happened a few months ago, Flor naturally understood why Liu Shu was so gentle with the door and laughed. "Are you afraid of getting hurt again, Liu Shu?"

Receiving a sincere yes from her reminded Flor that the World Tree was still young and somewhat innocent. She couldn't help but sigh with a smile. 'We are lucky and somewhat unlucky as well.'

Between discovering a new or old World Tree, there were advantages to both. Old ones were more likely to become guardians instead, while young ones could benefit entire races by growing together with them.

Flor didn't know as much about this, but thanks to Verdantia providing some interesting books about World Trees, she learned a few extra basic facts that she hadn't known before.

Once inside the <Lignified Vault>, she looked over toward where the roots were pointed and was surprised to see a very large pile of materials. Around a fifth of every material inside the room was stacked in a large mound. Flor asked with a doubtful look. 'So... What's this?'

The Fairy Queen approached while floating down and began grabbing the materials one by one. "There are branches, flowers, rocks... What do you want to do with this, Liu Shu?"

Liu Shu answered confidently. 'A House!'

But the message was communicated similarly to gibberish, making Flor confused yet again. Flor rubbed her forehead. "How do I even do this... Think, think, what needs all this material? It is enough material to make a freaking house!"

Flor sighed, but as she sighed, her brain almost shut off as Liu Shu spammed her signals as if she had gone haywire.

'YES! FLOR YOU ARE SO AWESOME! A HOUSE! A HOUSE! I WANT TO BUILD A HOOOOSSEEEEEEEE!!! WHAHAAHAH! FLOR IS AMAZING!'

Flor, this time, almost got light-headed for real. "Wait, wait. Liu Shu, stop. You are making me feel dizzy!"

Liu Shu stopped, but the happy mood radiating from the tree was easy to feel.

Looking at the large stockpile, Flor muttered. "So... You want to make a house with these? Hm..." She asked. "Did you call because you wanted to tell me about- oh."

Flor paused as a feeling of deja vu hit her. "You don't know how to build one, right?"

A very confident and happy "Yes!" slammed into her brain. Flor's lips twitched. 'Well, being honest with one's ignorance is the first step toward becoming knowledgeable.'

Flor nodded. "Okay, I'll ask Verdantia about those things as well. I just hope she can get them like the rest."

Flor learned from the Fairy assigned to carry over the books that she couldn't keep them for too long. While Verdantia seemed willing to give them to them, they were, at the end of the day, books that taught people how to raise a World Tree.

While other books were not that relevant, she could get away with, "I put them on piles and never managed to find them." Books about World Trees were something precious. Destroying, losing, or even damaging them was considered an act of vanda vandalism.

Flor rubbed her chin. "Perhaps I'll go in person another again? While I feel that Verdantia is strangely unstable, perhaps she will get better after a while."

When Flor was about to go out, she noticed something at the corner of the room. It was not conspicuous or even exciting to look at. However, once Flor saw them, she rushed over while asking. "What's this, Liu Shu? Did you produce those weapons?"

Our World Tree looked over at what they asked and sent an affirmative signal. She wanted to create them when she was at Level 4, so she did.

Flor couldn't help but look into the stats.

[Level 4 Wind Leaf Amulet (Basic-Grade Flawed Level)]

+40 Aether Mana

Aether (+8)

[Windy Currents (active)]: Use to increase movement speed by 20% for a short 2-second duration. It can be used every 10 minutes or by using 10 Aether Mana.

[Level 4 Wind Leaf Amulet (Basic-Grade Complete Level)]

+72Aether Mana

Aether (+12)

[Windy Currents (active)]: Use to increase movement speed by 20% for a short 2-second duration. It can be used every 10 minutes or by using 10 Aether Mana.

There were four of the Flawed kind and one of the Complete kind. "When did you finish these? I didn't even notice!"

Flor looked at them with an awkward gaze. 'I didn't remember I finished that. Well, now she can have them, I guess.'

Flor looked at the stats and nodded. "Not bad, really not bad. Just the additional skill can be a life-saver, not to mention the stats it gives. Thank you, Liu Shu."

Liu Shu giggled. 'No problem, Flor~!

Chapter 47. Level 10 vs World Tree.

When Flor came out of the <Lignified Vault>, she saw a nervous Rose Fairy flying around and waiting for her. "Leader! We need help! The Thornstrides are back but with many more creatures than ever!"

The Rose Fairy's anxiety was palpable, her voice trembling as she called out to Flor. Sensing the gravity of the situation, Flor turned to Liu Shu. "Liu Shu, I must leave immediately. Be prepared to defend yourself if needed."

Then, our World Tree saw many Rose Fairies fly off her vision radius while Flor called the combatants and brought them out with her. Flor chose to leave Clavel and Zinia behind since they were strong and influential enough to guide the Rose Fairies in case of an emergency.

Clavel spoke aloud, calling all the Rose Fairies left behind. "Come and gather around Liu Shu. It seems that this time, the situation is dire! Remember to follow our words and avoid getting too far away."

The Rose Fairies gathered around while Liu Shu looked at them with a pondering expression. 'Hm. I wonder if they will be able to fight this time. Flor looked quite worried.'

As she thought about that, her <World Tree Eye> caught movement, and she hastily focused on that area, trying not to be as noticeable as she was when looking at Rose Fairies. While <World Tree Eye> was a powerful skill, it also carried her presence. So, while observing creatures as a whole was possible to do relatively silently, when she focused on something, that creature would feel her gaze.

<World Tree Eye> worked by manipulating the energy in the air to be transmitted through her roots and transformed into images. As a World Tree, Liu Shu didn't really have a "brain" like a normal creature.

Her entire body had the ability to "think" while her <World Tree Heart> served as a place to keep her knowledge safe. In short, while the whole body had the capacity to process and hold information, <World Tree Heart> was the place that constituted Liu Shu's core.

'Hm? River Beavers?' Liu Shu focused and saw increasingly more creatures entering her detection range. Moreover, they just didn't come from one direction. While this tactic didn't work on her since she had 360° spherical vision, that was not the case for the Rose Fairies.

Looking at Clavel's face, Liu Shu was quick to understand that she hadn't realized yet. She sent a message with the feeling of "Danger" so that she would realize that something was wrong.

Clavel was looking around when her brain was hit by a powerful energy wave that screamed danger to all her instincts. She was momentarily confused about why Liu Shu would do something like that, but her eyes widened as she realized. She shouted. "Quickly move toward the <Lignified Vault>! We are being attacked!"

Liu Shu was quick as well, opening the heavy door with her roots and allowing all Level 4 and below Rose Fairies to rush inside. The rest stood outside.

While the combatant Rose Fairies numbered less than 15, Clavel and Zinia were wearing one of Liu Shu's amulets each. Moreover, they were the Level 4 ones, increasing their strength a notch. Their Aether Mana reserves and attributes were equal to Amapola's, who was a Level 9 creature one tier higher than them.

Clavel and Zinia were F Tier creatures, while Amapola was a Level 9 F+ Tier powerhouse. The amulet's ability to make them close to that was enough to leave Clavel and Zinia with astounded expressions when they first wore them.

But even with two "Amapola-level" Rose Fairies, their faces were not relaxed at all. The reason was that a larger-than-normal river beaver appeared. This creature's eyes were much sharper than the others, and its body felt strong at a glance.

Clavel's face became ashen as she bit her lips. "Why is he here...?"

Liu Shu's <Charm of the Seedling> triggered.

[[<Charm of the Seedling> has attracted a <Level 10 River Beaver>. Proficiency increased by 100.]

The World Tree's aura made a change as Liu Shu's entire being utterly focused on the task ahead. A Level 10 was a threat that she had to take seriously, no matter how strong she currently was.

Her mind sharpened, her processing speed increased, and when her entire attention was gathered, she became cold and threatening.

Whoosh!

All River Beavers paused when the almost 7-meter-tall tree's aura released. A feeling of mortal danger overcame everyone as all creatures within Liu Shu's <World Tree Eye> felt as if a superior being's eye had just opened above their heads.

Some weaker beavers took a few steps back, looking up at the clear sky in fear. Clavel's eyes widened as well because Liu Shu's aura was indiscriminate due to her lack of control.

While she knew that Liu Shu was a friend in her mind, her body couldn't help but flinch and sweat coldly. Clavel, Zinia, and the other Rose Fairies moved a bit away from her and turned around to look at the tree with flabbergasted expressions. Clavel stuttered. "W-When did she become so strong?"

Zinia commented with a solemn expression. "Even with the amulet... I feel like I'm nothing but prey in front of her."

The Level 10 River Beaver that appeared with an army of 40 other River Beavers paused, his feelings of taking it easy disappearing right when the aura hit him.

Unlike the Thornstride leader, this Level 10 was not an intelligent one. While he was much cleverer than a typical beast, it was to the level of a smart dog. Moreover, while Liu Shu felt threatened, the Level 10 beast had some pride in it. After all, it had lived as a king of the river for quite a few years already. It wouldn't be his first time fighting a relatively mighty tree.

But just in the same way that he fought other trees, thinking he would win, he had no way of knowing that the one standing tall in front of him was none other than a Sapling World Tree.

Clavel snapped out of her daze and hastily commanded. "Remain around Liu Shu. While she might look imposing right now, remember that she is a creature who has housed us for many months and given us all the berries you carry in the pouches. Trust in her!"

The rest of the Rose Fairies took a deep breath, and in a burst of trust, they all flew and floated by the currently imposing World Tree. In the first seconds, they were terrified, but after not feeling any enmity from the prominent being, the feeling of Liu Shu completely changed, becoming extremely reliable and motivating.

Zinia smirked. "It feels as if Flor never left."

Clavel grinned. "40 River Beavers? Tsk, tsk. They should've doubled the numbers."

Right after, the Level 10 River Beaver made a sharp yet penetrating battle cry.

All forty beavers, the smallest the size of a large dog and the biggest being the Level 10, looking like a small horse, rushed forward.

Clavel shouted. "Focus on the high-level ones and weaken them! The low-level beavers can't hurt Liu Shu! Also, wait until-."

As Clavel ordered, the beavers entered Liu Shu's attack range.

<Willow Strike>

WHOOSH

A single branch tore through the air and flew like a powerful whip, landing on a Level 7 River Beaver.

BANG!

The creature's body literally burst into blood as its life ended in a single instant.

After reaching Level 4 and gaining the Sylvanium Branch and Flor's pollination bonus effects, her Physique stat had reached an absurd 73 points.

Remember that creatures like that River Beaver had around 9 Physique stat points. The difference was abysmal.

However, this didn't stop the mass of creatures that were motivated by the Level 10 River Beaver. Liu Shu looked at them rushing at her with an extraordinarily cold mind. 'Foolish. Creatures that come and attack me shall become nothing more than fertilizer.' Her eyes locked on the Level 10 River Beaver, and her energy moved at once.

'Feel regret. <Willow Strike>.'

The Level 10 River Beaver managed to see the motion but was too late to dodge cleanly.

BANG!

The branch ended up landing on the side of the beast, throwing it sideways for several steps as a large [-624] appeared. This lowered the River Beaver's Phoe Body Shards from 6524 to 5900. The eyes of the creature widened, not expecting to be hit from such a distance away. One could even see a clear gash appearing on the side of the beast that spewed blood.

Angry, it tensed its limbs and lunged forward toward Liu Shu.

Clavel saw that, and her lips arched further. "ATTACK!"

All 15 Rose Fairies moved their Aether Mana and sent a wave of sharp wind blades toward the rushing creatures, aiming at the five Level 8s and two Level 9s.

Sounds of their attacks colliding were heard, sung by the distinctive echo of flesh being cut.

Clavel's and Zinia's attacks landed on the same Level 9, slicing around a quarter of their Phoer Body Shards. Liu Shu and the fairies shot a second volley, this time managing to score a few fatalities.

The Level 10 River Beaver was ready for Liu Shu's attack, but being closer, dodging was much more challenging, and he got hit either way. He managed to dodge it somewhat, so it didn't land on any vital part, resulting in a smaller damage number of 502.

Soon, the beavers crossed another landmark.

Energy rushed from her roots and coiled upward, rushing through her trunk in a fantastical sight of pure raw power and enveloping a few of her branches. Then, Liu Shu activated <Willow Strike Barrage>.

Eight branches independently moved as if they had a mind of their own and attacked the closest eight creatures; between them, the Level 10 and two Level 8s were present.

All beavers tried to dodge, still without success.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Seven bodies were instantly splattered on the ground while the Level 10 roared in pain as another 778 Phoer Body Shards were sliced off, leaving behind two-thirds of his entire Phoer Body Shard pool.

However, all this effort paid off as it managed to close the distance enough to attack finally... Or so it thought.

When he was about to lunge at the trunk and use his powerful teeth and claws, the floor before him burst in an explosion of dirt as roost covered in blue energy veins coiled around his entire body, holding him in place.

This was Liu Shu's new <Root Manipulation> skill being used. Then, the Level 10 River Beaver felt fear for the first time as the same phenomenon that happened before repeated.

Energy rushed from the ground toward the canopy of the World Tree, and the River Beaver could feel the utter disdain from the tree as the branches moved.

<Willow Strike barrage>

BANG!

[-457]

BANG!

[-685]

BANG!

[-825]

BANG!

[-545]

BANG!

[-986]

BANG!

[-476]

BANG!

[-624]

BANG!

[-22]

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 10>. You've gained 35 Experience Points.]

Chapter 48. Eliminating River Beavers, and New Arrival.

While Liu Shu was engrossed in eliminating the Level 10 threat, the Rose Fairies executed a cunning strategy. They managed to eliminate a Level 8 adversary and inflict severe damage on a Level 9. Their attacks, though not as potent individually, when used in succession, created lacerations that could cause a creature to bleed out rapidly. The depth of these wounds posed a challenge for healing, adding to the effectiveness of their strategy.

That's why Rose Fairies were so dominant; their attacks might not have been over the top in power, but the wounds they created were enough to make other creatures fear fighting them. Even if you won, the wounds they created could easily result in being lethal.

Because of this and their lack of raw power, their attacks weren't strong enough to stop the avalanche of creatures from reaching Liu.

The twenty-plus creatures that were alive after Liu Shu's and the fairies' attacks lunged at Liu Shu like ravenous beasts, wanting to topple the tree before it killed them.

The Rose Fairies saw how the beasts opened their mouths and attacked Liu Shu, and an uncontrollable rage boiled inside them. "FILTH OF THE FOREST, DIE!"

The Rose Fairies, driven by their burning anger, unleashed a barrage of spells. Their Aether Mana plummeted without control as wind blades rained down on the creatures, aiming for their necks. The attacks were primarily successful, slicing important veins and causing devastating hemorrhage.

Meanwhile, Liu Shu was swarmed by more than twenty creatures, many teeth, claws, and other attacks, landing on her one after another. Notifications of damage appeared one after another, filling Liu Shu's mind with their sound.

However, she wasn't rushed at any moment. While there were plenty of notifications, none of the attacks overcame 30 Phoer Body Shards. With her almost 4,000 Phoer Body Shards, despite the onslaught she was receiving, they were quite literally tickling her. In this small instant, when Liu Shu was finishing off Level 10, she received a total of 400 damage.

Her thick bark, reinforced by her 72 points of Physique stat, was sturdy enough to completely block all attacks from Level 5 and below River Beavers.

Not only was Liu Shu not affected by their initial attacks, but after scratching the surface of her body and not managing to do any more actual damage, some notifications of creatures dealing zero points of damage appeared quickly.

Once done with the main threat, Liu Shu's <World Tree Eye> focused on her immediate surroundings.

Unlike those times when she cried in pain when she was hurt, this time, her mind was crystal clear, and she completely ignored the painful sensations in order to focus even more.

Cold, brutal, ruthless.

A World Tree that had been provoked would rarely give mercy to her enemies.

Once her overpowering gaze landed on the creatures that the Rose Fairies were desperately trying to keep off her body, they couldn't help but freeze for a moment as the dreadful feeling of death enveloped their beings.

Liu Shu sentenced them with an indifferent tone. 'Now that you've done your part scratching my bark die and become my sustenance.'

<Willow Strike Barrage> and <Willow Strike> were unleashed once more, consuming a decent part of her Anther Mana and Anima Energy reserves.

At the same time, <Root Manipulation> also appeared, her enchanting roots bursting from the ground around her while coiling like snakes around the beasts.

The three skills were devastating and did quick work of the River Beavers. More than one of them fell each second, making it a hellish-like moment for the River Beavers. While their intelligence was not that high, seeing their fellow creatures smashed by the whip-like branches was terrifying.

The Rose Fairies shot their skills enough that one of the weakest ones hit almost zero and suddenly lost strength as her eyes rolled and her brain shut down from lack of Aether Mana, causing her to fall from the air.

The World Tree had cleaned house by then, leaving only seven alive who were about to meet their doom. But, unlike what she expected, one of the beasts saw the Rose Fairy fall and didn't lose its chance.

Liu Shu was focusing on the remaining seven River Beavers when she saw one of them jump upward and use her trunk as a springboard to attack the falling Fairy.

The movement was swift and took the other Rose Fairies by surprise. Clavel realized what was happening and wanted to rush forward to catch her, but she quickly realized that she was too late. 'Oh no!'

Her face twisted as she saw the River Beaver's last struggle about to reach that falling fairy, but before she could despair more at the tragic outcome, a thin shadow appeared on top of the River Beaver's head. 'Wha-'

BOOOM!

Clavel saw how the <Sylvanium Branch> of the World Tree descended with such strength that the creature shot down like a meteor and cratered into the ground in a burst of gore. The loud, explosive sound was like a cannonball being shot.

Following that, Clavel and the other fairies felt the powerful Aether Mana pulse climb up the bark and gather on the leaves. Zinia condemned with a mocking grin. "Die for provoking a being you shouldn't!"

Several other branches lashed out toward the remaining River Beavers and slaughtered them all in cold-blooded murder. Each branch sank deeply into the beast, slicing through their defenses as if they were nothing and bursting their internal organs.

The last one was killed right as the falling Rose Fairy was caught by Clavel. Clavel quickly maneuvered to avoid falling onto the ground and flew up, laying her on one of Liu Shu's inactive branches.

One Rose Fairy shouted, her breath ragged. "We won!"

Another one smiled tiredly. "We did. I honestly didn't expect Liu Shu to be so powerful."

All the other Rose Fairies similarly sprawled themselves all over Liu Shu's canopy, feeling extremely tired.

Zinia approached Clavel and asked. "How is she doing? Why did she suddenly fall?"

Clavel shook her head. "She has Aether Mana deficiency. Her Aether Mana hit zero, and she fainted. It will take a few days for her to wake up. Let's hope that the backlash from reaching zero Aether Mana doesn't hit her."

Zinia commented. "Well, with Liu Shu's fruits, she will wake up much earlier, and chances for that are also very slim. Also, we should respect family members who risk their lives for the mission. She fought bravely."

Clavel nodded and sighed frustratedly. "What were these River Beaver's doing here? If it weren't for Liu Shu having Leveled Up recently, we would've been in real trouble."

Zinia looked down at the massacre and sighed. "I don't know. However, knowing that the Thornstrides also attacked or at least pretended to, right at the same time, it can't be a coincidence, right?"

Clavel nodded in agreement. "I think that you are right- Hm?"

Zinia also noticed and asked quickly. "Hm? What's that sound?"

Clavel's face fell as she received another signal from Liu Shu, this time about danger. "How is your Aether Mana doing?"

Zinia smiled wryly. "Does it matter? We have to fight even if we just throw stones at whatever is coming."

Still, once they saw the people appearing, their determined faces faltered. 'What are humans and Sylvans doing here!?'

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Flor arrived at the place where the reporting fairy had told her to go and saw a large group of creatures advancing. There were at least 400 beasts of many different species, making Flor falter about her original plans. 'I wanted to challenge and kill Froorar quickly to make the beasts he has untied disappear, but...'

Flor was hidden in the trees' canopies, using her tiny body to her advantage to observe from a safe distance. 'There is more than one Level 10+ speaking over there. If I were to go and challenge him, I would probably be hunted down until I become their trophies and experience points.'

Honestly, Flor felt helpless this time. 'Even if Ignatia and I join forces with Liu Shu, it probably is not enough; I've spotted around 6 Level 10+ creatures. There might be more hidden in the crowd, but it is too difficult to spot them.'

Analyzing a creature with the system required, first of all, knowing that creature somewhat or understanding the "presence" it gave off, and second of all, being close enough for your senses to pick it up.

Flor didn't fulfill these requirements for all the Level 10 creatures there. Hence, she couldn't tell the precise number of Level 10s and above.

Flor returned toward the small army of 80 she had gathered and looked at them with wry expressions. 'Not enough. Even if Ignatia's army had joined, we would probably not have been enough.'

Flor sighed and passed her hand through her red hair. "This is really, ugh. So frustrating. Should I call the River beavers and try to do a pact with them?..." Flor laughed in ridicule. "Nah, I can't do this. How could I collaborate with those tree eaters?"

With another rueful sigh, she asked no one in particular. "What should I do? Where and how do I find people strong enough to help?"

After speaking like that, she paused. Her face became strange. 'Do I really have to call that woman? But...' Flor was struggling. 'I really don't trust her. What kind of Level 4 Sylvan does not flinch and is proactive when a Level 12 monster is right in front of them?'

However, she really didn't have better options. Flor knew that she was strong but strong enough to beat so many? She was far from it. 'I'll have to return quickly and made a plan to buy time to go to the city for Verdantia's help.'

"Let's return; we can't do anything for now." Flor had never felt this cornered in her life, so she didn't really know what to do. The problem was that, unlike the typical attacks where they could flee, the being they were protecting was a stationary tree.

The Rose Fairies followed her command and flew back toward their base, arriving a few minutes later. Flor's face changed completely when she saw the situation and rushed forward at her fastest speed. "Who dares!?"

The bloodstained floor and the situation around Liu Shu were worrying to the point that the only reason she had not started throwing spells was that the Humans and Sylvals

that were facing off against the group of Rose Fairies were seemingly in a defenseless position. Some of them had their arms up in the air, while one of them was eagerly speaking something to Clavel.

Clavel saw Flor arrive, and her face brightened. "Finally! Queen, quickly tell these people to scram! They are crazy and want to analyze Liu Shu, her branches, and her fruits! This Sylvan, in particular, is... umm... strange!"

Flor looked at the Sylvan and Human group, and between them, she spotted a peculiar one that reminded her of Verdantia, it was the Sylvan pointed at by Clavel as well.

'A Fire Aether Sylvan?'

Chapter 49. Setting off toward the Golden Sap Forest.

After Ciderielle set off alone, she chose to go eastwards from Fortuna City. This was the most direct way of traveling toward the Golden Sap Forest.

She walked through the streets with a marching rhythm, her steps neither hurried nor slow. She didn't take long to reach the wooden walls surrounding the city where a large gate was built.

There was an open plaza with plenty of carriages of different sizes. Some carriages were pulled by animals, while others didn't have anything pulling them. Still, Ciderielle knew that those carriages were usually pushed through internal circuits.

They were quite advanced pieces of technology, so Ciderielle didn't know much about them other than they could move without the help of beasts. 'Being a driver of those is complicated enough that only Level 10s and above usually drive them.'

Of the tens of carriages in the large plaza, there were only two high-level ones. Ciderielle didn't have that much money, so she ambled toward one that looked affordable. As she approached, she had an idea. 'I can find a group that doesn't have to be high-level people and act as an escort for a while. I might even get paid instead of paying.'

"Excuse me."

A man who was resting while sitting on the side of the carriage heard a pleasant voice and looked over to its origin. He was dumbfounded as the gorgeous woman approached with a smile and a stature that was quite intimidating. 'Wow, tall. Also, that hair color... A Sylvan? Didn't this missy see that this is an all-human caravan? Well, let's answer and see what she wants.'

"Hello! What do you need, beauty?"

Cinderielle grinned at the compliment and answered. "Hello, gentlemen. I was thinking about going toward the Golden Sap Forest, but it would be my first time going. Therefore, I came to speak with you to ask if your group is going that way. If it is, I can act as a guard."

The man's eyebrow raised. 'Hm, she is trying to get a free ride. Well, does she have what she needs to do so?'

"I see. That would be interesting. There are almost never enough guards, hahaha." After a sincere laugh, he smiled with a shrewd look and asked. "What Level are you, missy? I don't want to ask rude questions, but you look quite young."

Cinderielle frowned and commented. "Look, I can tell you that my primary stats is over 50. Not to mention, my destructive capabilities as a Sylvan who controls fire are superb in the offensive. My skill set should be enough even if Level 10 monsters or bandits appear."

The man rubbed his bearded chin and commented. "Is your level so low that you can't tell us?"

Cinderielle crossed her arms and looked at him. "While it is indeed low, I've just told you that my stats are not low at all. Any Level 9, as long as they are not wearing something crazy as equipment, is not my opponent. I have three pieces of Basic Rank equipment, two of them at flawless levels as well. I can also tell you that I'm Sylvan, and I have unlocked transformation."

When the man and those behind her heard the last sentence, their eyebrows raised in surprise. "You've unlocked that pre-level-ten?"

Seeing their looks change that much, not at all the other things, but the fact that she had unlocked her transformation confused her. While it was true that Level 6 was almost the fastest that a Sylvan could get when unlocking that inborn skill, she had seen other Sylvans do the same.

This fact was like telling her that it wasn't that special. However, what Cinderielle didn't know was that 99% of Sylvans failed to unlock it before Level 15. In contrast, those Sylvans that unlocked it below Level 10 were nothing but a fraction of the general populace of Sylvans. Most of that extra one percent were Sylvans who unlocked it between Level 10 and 15.

Hence, Cinderielle, who thought that the other things were much more important, was confused by their reaction and nodded unknowingly. "Yes, it is true. What's wrong?"

The man changed his tone and smiled genuinely. "You are welcomed into our <Sunflower Caravan>. No need to pay for the trouble or act as a guard; just be sure to use our services in the future, missy."

Cinderielle blinked twice, her orange-colored eyes showing clear confusion.

Seeing the previously cool, calm, and confident woman show such a clueless expression made the caravan leader and the others behind him laugh. Cinderielle snapped out of her daze and protested. "Hey, what are you laughing at!?"

The caravan leader laughed one last time before coughing and becoming serious. "Sorry, missy. It won't happen. Also, may I have Missy's name?"

Cinderielle pondered and commented. "Just call me Cinder. What's your name?"

The caravan leader grinned and commented. "I'm called Larte. The ones behind are Aries, Doles, Maley..."

Larte presented the people behind him one by one, a total of 15 people. There were more, but the rest were customers. Caravan work was diverse as it took her time to transport both people and goods. Moreover, if the Caravan was strong enough, cities asking them to exterminate some troublesome creatures was not that uncommon.

Because of culture and the existence of World Trees, almost the entire planet's lithosphere was covered in forests, and tight but protected roads connected different civilizations.

These roads were treaded by caravans that knew the routes, and fees were to be paid. Traveling alone was not against any rules, but coming into contact with certain beasts or lacking strength during the travel could lead to a graveless death.

Speaking of graves, the way people buried others was interesting, as the objective of the current culture was becoming one with nature after death. Hence, most people had the tradition of burying their loved ones below trees, gardens, or other places where nature would slowly decompose and assimilate them.

Hence, a "graveless" death was usually considered one where the corpse couldn't be retrieved. In the most objective sense, being eaten in the wild by monsters was the same as what people did. However, the emotional value and sentiment of a creature's desire to grieve their deceased was prevalent even in this world's culture.

Still, thanks to the "returning to nature" culture, those who approached a natural death didn't fear it as much. The habit of looking at things as part of a more significant cycle was prevalent.

This naturally didn't take away from the fact that people feared non-natural deaths.

I digress.

Larte commented as she saw Cinderielle walk toward the front. "Are you really that eager to participate as a guard?"

Cinderielle scratched her cheek. "More than eager, I still don't understand why the change in attitude. The only reason I'm even coming without suspecting you is because of that."

Cinderielle pointed at a symbol on the carriage's side, an honor badge from the Explorer Association. These were only given to groups that had committed no felonies for one hundred missions and upheld morals. In short, someone with this mark was considered trustworthy.

Larte laughed. "Well, I guess it's expected to be confused. However, I can tell you that the fact that you can transform so young and early is better than you being able to fight Level 15 or higher creatures."

Cinderielle nodded, keeping it in mind, but she didn't continue asking. 'I'll ask teacher Eila when I come back.'

Larte looked around and shouted in a deep tone. "If everyone is gathered, start preparing because we are departing in one hour! Those who are not ready by then won't be missed."

Cinderielle saw someone with a list approaching and whispering something into Larte's ear. The man nodded and then spoke aloud again. "We are departing in two hours! Sorry for the delay. Everyone present will receive a 3 percent discount or pay rise for this travel!"

'Ho? What made his attitude change so abruptly? Well, I'll have to wait to know.'

After one and a half hours passed, Cinderielle could see Larte's feet tapping the ground quickly and impatiently. 'They are not here yet? Quite a way to make people wait.'

She could see that most people in the group were showing dissatisfaction in some way, which made the atmosphere quite tense.

After ten more minutes, a group of people approached with slow steps. Cinderielle looked over, and her face became solemn. 'Strong.'

Larte didn't seem to care much, though. He approached and spoke with a clearly restrained tone. "Lord, can you speed up? We are already half an hour late from our departure."

The man smiled. "What's with this attitude and all this haste? Half an hour late is nothing; stop complaining about such small things." Larte held back from slapping his

face with all his being and turned around without looking while shouting. "We are leaving!"

Cinderielle walked toward the front, only to be interrupted. "Oh, Miss, are you the only Sylvan in this caravan?"

Turning around, Cinderielle saw the man who had arrived late approaching her with a broad and handsome smile. Cinderielle answered with a cold and somewhat sneering tone without registering his handsomeness or anything similar. "It seems that you have eyes."

One of the guards placed his hand on the hilt of the sword, but Larte stopped him. "If you draw that sword, I don't care if the person you are protecting is important or not; he will have to search for another caravan!"

The man looked at him with disdain, but he retreated for now, leaving one sentence behind. "Well, miss. If you want to talk, call me later."

Cinderielle ignored him and walked toward the front.

Feeling another person approaching, Cinderielle had to consciously stop her face from twisting with annoyance. "Hello! Is this your first Caravan?"

The woman who approached had a reassuring and refreshing smile. Like the rest, she was human. However, her height was a bit short for a human woman. Cinderielle was more than a head taller than her, forcing her to look down to talk with her.

The woman, looking up, smiled wider.

'What a stupid face.'

Of course, she didn't say it aloud and commented. "I'm focusing on the guard duty. Can you leave me alone for a few minutes?"

The woman laughed. "Don't worry, nothing happens around these areas. I've traveled with the <Sunflower Caravan> a few times, and these locations are usually safe and worry-free. Look."

Cinderielle moved her gaze in the direction she was pointing at, only to see a man sleeping by the side of the carriage driver seat. Her eyebrow couldn't help but twitch with annoyance. 'Should I have come alone?'

Chapter 50. Bandit Attack.

As Cinderielle was traveling, their caravan approached the wilderness. It was a dirt path with clear wheel traces and footprints, created by people with innate affinities for manipulating dirt, earth, rocks, and similar materials in general.

The state of the road was a stark contrast to the untamed wilderness that surrounded it. It was solid-looking and firm, meticulously tended, with clear lines that separated the road from the natural, wild expanse.

As the caravan trod the path at a gentle pace, Cinderielle talked with the woman who approached her. "So, Cinder, if that's even your real name, hahaha. How does it feel to be a Sylvan?"

Cinderielle looked at her as if she were stupid. "What kind of question is that? Miss Ariel, I recommend that you don't speak nonsense."

Ariel smirked. "So scary. So? You can't give an answer?"

Cinderielle rolled her eyes and looked forward. "Who could? It's not like I know how a human feels about things. The only things that I know are different between us for certain is our System, innate affinities, lifespan, and our look on the World's beings."

Ariel lifted her eyebrow. "What do you mean with that last one?"

Cinderielle spoke flatly. "You don't perceive the flora's beauty past its superficial appearance."

Ariel paused and asked. "Are you speaking about tree-loving?"

Cinderielle gave her a side-eye. "That's a disrespectful way of putting it."

Ariel laughed again and asked with a smirk. "What's the 'respectful' way of putting it then, miss?"

"Don't act stupid. You could say 'love for trees,' 'appreciation of flora,' 'interest in nature,' and many more." Cinderielle sighed. "Well, it's not like you can understand."

Ariel nodded. "That's true. I just can't seem to understand what you see in trees or other plants. What is it that attracts you, Sylvans, to such creatures who, most of the time, can't even properly communicate?"

Cinderielle shook her head. "It's not about appearance, Ariel. Do you think Sylvans would get together with humans at all if we were speaking about appearances? Human males are not exactly attractive except for a small minority. Even intercourse is not as pleasant from the accounts of most Sylvans."

Cinderielle concluded. "We, Sylvans, look further into their beings and feel the connection with our partner-to-be. We focus on the feeling and understanding of the target's nature."

Ariel wanted to ask more, but Cinderielle lifted her hand. "No need to discuss further. Do you want anything else?"

Ariel shook her head and sighed. "I actually do."

"Hm?"

"Well, the leader asked me to communicate with you because he felt that talking with a woman would be easier for you. Can I ask for your objective in going out of the city this time?"

Cinderielle had nothing to hide since the mission she took to investigate was very common. With just that information, the existence of her <Sylvan Quest> wouldn't be discovered.

"Yes." Cinderielle nodded and continued. "There were a few missions regarding the investigation of the Golden Sap Forest. It seems that creatures have been moving strangely recently, so the higher-ups are fearful of a beast tide happening. My current objective is to see if I can find any indications of the tide happening."

Ariel realized and sighed with a troubled look.

"What's wrong?"

Hearing Cinderielle's question, Ariel commented. "Well, if a beast tide is really about to happen, our business will take quite a hit. Caravan traveling is usually the most prosperous and safe during peaceful times. It is true that during war times or dangerous moments, the profits increase. However, so does the risks."

Cinderielle could understand. There was a high chance of being asked to carry out dangerous jobs if there were emergencies. Being emergencies, they would be paid generously. However, it was during these perilous times that risks increased. If, for example, someone didn't want you to deliver something, they could send people to get you.

While Cinderielle thought of these matters, the caravan advanced quite deeply through the path. Ariel spoke with her. "We are about four hours away from reaching the Golden Sap Forest."

Cinderielle nodded as she sat in one of the carriages, holding her staff between her arms and leaning on the side of the open door. 'Hm... This is quite peaceful.'

The sound of the beasts' feet touching the ground and reaching her ears was accompanied by the clatter of the items around her making sound, creating a peculiar atmosphere.

There was sudden movement at the roadside, alerting the guards. Soon, without much of a warning, a group of people wearing dark robes appeared on the roadside. Cinderielle frowned and quickly looked around, trying to check their systems.

However, as she checked, Cinderielle saw a flash of light and quickly dodged to the right. Right after she moved, an arrow with a white aura shot right where her forehead was. 'This precision... They are not normal bandits.'

With the first attack shot, the entire place got heated up as everyone lunged at each other. Cinderielle lifted her staff, and her Aether Mana surged crazily as plumes of fire surrounded her.

Then, she waved it, and several fireballs streaked across the air, landing on distant enemies between the bushes. Ariel saw that and asked, worried. "Do you want to light the entire forest in flames?!"

Cinderielle spun her staff and lifted it, creating one bigger ball of pure fire and shooting it again.

BOOM!

An enormous fire explosion swallowed a large area as numbers of damage flooded her vision.

Ariel looked on with a speechless look, not understanding what motivations Cinderielle had. 'Aren't Sylvans allies of nature, this can-huh?'

Ariel stopped herself from speaking after the flames subsided, revealing an intact patch of forest that had been damaged by just the explosion's burst and not the flames.

Cinderielle spoke flatly. "My flames naturally don't burn plants if I don't want to."

Ariel's lips twitched as she took back two steps to dodge an incoming sword strike. "Naturally, of course, naturally fire doesn't burn plants. How silly of me!"

Cinderielle sent a fireball behind Ariel, hitting a bandit who was trying to sneak attack her. "Focus!"

While Cinderielle fought, she saw that two of the 30 bandits were rushing straight at her. She looked at them quickly and managed to see their level and ternary essences.

Level: 8

Aether Mana Shards: 1345/1605

Phoer Body Shards: 1520/1800

Anima Energy Shards: 1498/1584

Level 9

Aether Mana Shards: 892/1054

Phoer Body Shards: 2901/3358

Anima Energy Shards: 945/990

Then, with a quick glance, she checked hers.

Aether Mana Shards: 4921/5363

Phoer Body Shards: 2847/2847

Anima Energy Shards: 2650/2847

With practiced motions, Cinderielle unsheathed her sword on her waist while spinning her staff and placing it on her back.

The Level 8 approached first, using a complex footwork that made his body blurry. Cinderielle snorted and stomped the ground.

While lifting her leg, fire energy gathered around her leg, and after her foot powerfully landed, it created a loud explosive sound.

BOOM!

The Level 8 thought that it was just an intimidation tactic, so he didn't react much. However, what surprised him was seeing Cinderielle's body using the counter force from the explosion to launch herself forward while thrusting her sword.

His face changed to one of horror as he realized that he couldn't dodge. Thankfully for him, his partner was much sharper and managed to react, swinging his own short sword toward the path Cinderielle's body was taking.

With inhuman reactions, Cinderielle stomped the ground with her other foot, sending herself sideways and dodging the incoming sword strike.

Her ability to react was primarily due to her <Blazeleaf Robe>, which gave her a passive skill that decreased her reaction time by ten percent, making her motion vision ridiculously detailed.

However, Cinderielle didn't stop there, as after spinning her body in a very precise way, she quickly created another burst, lunging at the Level 8 from a tricky angle at an incredible speed.

'What!?'

The Level 8 certainly didn't expect such a movement that almost defied the laws of inertia. However, he had no time to mourn as Cinderielle's blazing orange eyes were locked on his neck.

Cinderielle shouted. "DIE!"

The bandit screamed back as he used his all to move the sword. "YOU WISH!"

BOOM!

The collision of swords was followed up by a massive fiery explosion created by Cinderielle.

[-312]

Cinderielle clicked her tongue. 'Too shallow!' Her back felt chilly as her senses warned her, but it was too late.

"The one to die is you."

Reacting as fast as she could, she summoned a ball of fire on her back and exploded it.

BANG!

The blast threw her body forward, allowing her to dodge the sword. However, she did around 200 damage to herself with that attack.

The Level 9 that almost got her frowned and quickly followed. 'Even if she has thrown herself forward, she is destabilized. I can still finish her off.'

Cinderielle's mind quickly analyzed her situation, and she gritted her teeth. 'Should I use it now? But if I do, I won't have it for the exploration!'

Still, she didn't have to worry as Ariel appeared and blocked the strike coming at her with a loud metallic sound.

Ariel smirked. "Hey, oh mighty Sylvan, need help?"

Cinderielle didn't lose a single second as she spun her sword three times and created a spiral of flames that rushed forward. "About time that you came."

Ariel wanted to roll her eyes, but she was exchanging blows with Level 9 and couldn't get distracted. Feeling the heat coming from her back, she sidestepped right as a flame spiral brushed past the place where she stood before. 'Huh? That will miss-'

BOOM!

The attack exploded mid-air, hitting the similarly confident Level 9 at the side.

[-406]

Ariel grinned. 'Not bad.'

Then, both women started battling by each other's side, quickly shaving off the Phoebe Body Shards of the Level 8 and Level 9.

After a few exchanges back and forth, Cinderielle managed to spot an opportunity and rushed forward.

After Ariel dodged the attack from the Level 8, she lowered her body while spinning in place to release a powerful swipe kick that hit true.

The acceleration of her leg lifted the Level 8's feet off the ground, and Cinderielle took the chance. "Die!"

Her sword descended, piercing his chest, and then, Cinderielle ruthlessly exploded flames inside his chest.

[-1054]

The man's insides expanded as his eyeballs almost popped out comically. Of course, the result was not comical at all.

[Congratulations on defeating <Shadow Feet Human Level 8>. You've gained 10 Experience Points.]

With the Level 8 dead, the Level 9 hesitated for a second before looking around. 'We are losing? Huh? What is that?'

The place he looked over to was where the handsome man stood. His bodyguard at the side took out a giant mace and swung it in a descending arc toward an approaching Level 7.

BANG!

The loud sound echoed on the battlefield, forcing many to look over at the absolutely raw results of the attack that turned the attacker into a pulp.

The handsome man who was being protected smirked. "Quite an interesting thing. This is my first time receiving a bandit attack."

Cinderielle and Ariel saw the Level 9 pausing and then turning around to flee, confusing them. Looking over to the place the bandit was looking, their lips twitched as their food almost climbed up from their stomach to say hello.

Ariel said after gagging once. "Ugh! No wonder he fled."

Cinderielle's lips were twisted as she nodded. "Yeah..."