

Ascension of the Sylvan Cosmos.

#Chapter 51. Exploring the Golden Sap Forest. - Read Ascension of the Sylvan Cosmos. Chapter 51. Exploring the Golden Sap Forest.

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Cinderielle learned that the attack was a planned ambush to rob the caravan by hearing the conversations from afar. They weren't really trying to hide it either way, so Cinderielle gladly listened.

It seemed that they weren't random bandits as well. Instead, they were a group named [Void Witherwood] who had increased their activities in this area lately.

[Void Witherwood] was a group of outcasts who committed several atrocities to become stronger. They were one of the factions that taught that the System's ability to grant experience for killing was a call and a message, so most of their training was related to killing.

There were rumors that they could also teach Energy Gathering Methods related to killing.

Interestingly, Cinderielle learned that lately, they've suddenly increased their activities in this area because something seemed to have gone wrong. This information came from the handsome man who had tried to approach her before leaving.

'How does he have that information? Perhaps... Is he the reason we were actually attacked? Was the attack aimed at him? The moment his bodyguard showed formidable strength, they left at once as if they had confirmed something.'

She chose not to participate in the conversation and listened along the way.

Time went by quickly, and the place where she was going to separate from the caravan was getting close. 'Finally, the Golden Sap Forest! I wonder what will I find inside?'

There have been a few more assaults from beasts during the journey, but nothing difficult or intense. The most danger Cinderielle went through was the bandit fight that almost halved her Aether Mana reserves.

'Hm... I hope that this doesn't affect my exploration too much.'

Ariel, the woman who had been quite actively talking with her, approached with a smile and a wave of her hand. "Cinder, will you leave soon?"

Cinderielle nodded at her. After fighting together, they had come a bit closer, so Cinderielle was willing to explain. "Yes. I need to complete the mission soon since it is quite important. Honestly, I'm a bit worried now that I have a bit more than half my Aether Mana reserves. But I think I can do it. I've researched, and the highest-tiered creature in this Forest besides Trees has an F+ Rank Tier. Level 10s and above are also scarce and have clear territories. As long as I avoid those, I'll be fine."

Ariel agreed with her analysis but added something. "What you say is right. However, what do you think about me and the others accompanying you?"

Cinderielle blinked, confused. "Why would you do that? For your information, I won't share the bounty."

Ariel chuckled. "Don't worry, we aren't aiming for it. To be honest with you, it's a bit low even if we got it somehow." Ariel answered honestly. "We also have some things to search for in the Golden Sap Forest. At first, we were planning on going to the other city and gathering a person good with plants, a Sylvan if possible. Still, since you've appeared, it's an opportunity I'm unwilling to pass on."

Cinderielle finally realized why Ariel had approached her and had been so good-natured. She lifted her elegant eyebrow and asked. "Ho~, so you approached me because of that?"

Ariel shrugged. "Don't get me wrong. I do like you, and now I'm sincerely offering cooperation."

Cinderielle crossed her arms, looking down at the petite woman. "Yes, but your initial intentions weren't that sincere."

Ariel snorted and acted cutely, something the Sylvan thought suited her quite well. With her glasses and bob-cut hair, she looked pretty cute for an average-looking woman. "Don't be like that~. Haven't we fought a life-and-death battle together~. We are friends now!"

Cinderielle answered flatly. "Oh."

Ariel's lips twitched, and she coughed to relieve the awkwardness, returning to normal. "So? Do you accept?"

'Hm... Should I? Both my Sylvan Quest and regular quest are about exploring, so it shouldn't be a problem if I do so with other people. On the contrary, I've seen them fight, and I know a bit about their strength. While they are powerful, if I were to use my innate skill, escaping shouldn't be a problem.'

After pondering for a while, long enough to make Ariel a bit restless while waiting for an answer, Cinderielle finally agreed. "Okay, you can come with me. However, let me make it clear that if there is even the slightest suspicion, I will not hold back from separating."

Ariel's tense expression relaxed as a sincere smile spread on her face. "Perfect! I'll call my partners!"

Cinderielle looked at how the woman skipped away and shook her head. 'I'm quite younger, but it really doesn't feel like that.'

She walked toward the caravan leader and commented. "Mister, I'm separating here."

The man turned around and grinned. "Little Sylvan, thanks for your help back then. Here."

Cinderielle saw the man take out a small leather pouch with something inside and extend it to her. She took it and asked. "What's this?"

"Compensation, haha." The man saw Cinderielle's surprised look and laughed. "You've helped a bunch, so just take it. It's not that much."

Cinderielle looked between the pouch and him a few times and finally nodded. "Thank you. I'll always take into account your caravan for future needs."

The man nodded with a satisfied smile. "That's good, missy. Good luck!"

Ariel arrived at this moment. "Yo! We are leaving with her to do that thing."

The man snorted. "Sure, sure, sure. Go on and leave this old man alone."

A person behind him shouted jokingly. "Leader, did we become invisible now? You are ruthless."

The man snorted. "Shut up and pay attention. What if we are ambushed again?"

The people around laughed merrily.

Cinderielle took her belongings, and when the caravan passed through a forest patch that was not as thick, she jumped down, and another four people followed behind her. There were three men and Ariel.

"Well, let's go."

They all nodded and dove into the deep expanse of forest, not knowing that their findings would be much more than they ever expected.

As they walked deeper into the forest, their nerves tensed. Every sound that appeared around her grabbed their attention, thinking that a beast or something similar would appear from the nearby shrubs.

Cinderielle was much more relaxed than the four humans. Her innate titles and skills as a Sylvan helped her feel at home while walking through the forest.

As she walked, she spotted quite a few plants that were ready to harvest. However, she didn't do so, as her backpack space was very limited and not really suitable for storing harvested plants.

Ariel asked in a hushed tone. "Cinder, where are we going?"

Cinderielle shrugged. "Who knows? Let's find traces of beasts and follow them. I need to find traces of a beast tide or something similar, so I should go where most creatures are gathering."

Ariel was speechless. Cinderielle asked back. "What's your objective?"

Ariel paused and commented. "Investigate the reason for increased deaths during this last period of time. The mortality rate has jumped high enough that it has become an emergency, and that's not quite good."

Cinderielle asked. "Human mortality or Sylvan mortality?"

Ariel frowned a bit. "Does it matter?"

Cinderielle nodded. "If it is just human mortality, you can't really avoid considering flora. But if too many Sylvals have died, then it is quite clear that the origin of such events is a beast or something that isn't affected by a Sylvan's natural aura."

Ariel's eyes widened a bit, and then her face gained an embarrassed expression. "Sorry, I..."

Cinderielle waved her hand. "Don't worry. It is true that we Sylvals have a tendency to separate ourselves from others." Then she added. "Not without reason, though."

Ariel and the other three didn't comment. One of the men, a tall and slender one with an athletic body, asked. "Cinder, um, well. Can I call you like that?"

Cinderielle nodded. "Go ahead. I have no problem with being called by my name."

The man smiled a bit. "Well, I was wondering. How are you going to create proof of whatever you find here? Do you have one of those expensive recording devices?"

Cinderielle shook her head. "I'll just report what I see sincerely. If they don't believe it, that's on them. I'll receive my pay when my words are confirmed in either case, so it doesn't matter."

Another man asked. "What if things change by the time you take to return and present the information."

Cinderielle shrugged. "As I said, I'll inform them honestly. If they play games, I'll report them to my teacher."

Ariel lifted her eyebrow. "Ho? Quite interesting."

"What is interesting?"

Ariel smirked. "You have so much confidence in your teacher."

Cinderielle nodded. "Have you heard the name Eila Neoflora?"

Their eyes widened.

"No way! She is your teacher!?"

"She is one of the strongest Sylvans in Fortuna City, right?"

"One of!? I think she might be the strongest."

"Nah. That's a bit of an exaggeration."

"Tsk ts. Are you sure?"

Cinderielle asked with a strange expression. "Weren't you all super tense just a few moments ago? What are you shouting about?"

Ariel and the others became embarrassed and coughed.

Cinderielle asked as she finally found some beast traces. "Is this your group's first mission?"

Ariel snorted. "What do you mean? We are veterans, alright?"

Cinderielle snorted back. "Then, it isn't showing. How about acting a bit more as such?"

Ariel pointed northeast from their position and voiced. "That way, if you want to find a group of beasts."

Cinderielle's eyes widened in pure stupefaction. "You can't expect me to believe you."

Ariel smirked. "Suit yourself."

One of the men coughed. "Cinder, I recommend listening to her. She has good instincts and sight. She has probably spotted traces."

Cinderielle looked at them skeptically but decided to trust them for once. "If you are incorrect, I won't listen to your calls again."

Ariel rolled her eyes. "Are you that confident that you won't make wrong judgments? If we apply your logic, nobody will listen to anyone by the end of the day."

Cinderielle got silent this time, as Ariel's words were reasonably certain. "Well, at least, I'll ask the reasons for your decision in detail."

Ariel easily agreed to her conditions.

They followed in the direction Ariel pointed at, and as she said, they managed to find quite a few traces. Ariel explained. "The vegetation in this area was clearly stomped, so that means quite a few creatures moved through here."

Cinderielle frowned. "Perhaps the beast tide is a real threat?"

One of the men commented. "We'll have to continue investigating."

Their group followed the traces, and soon, they heard a large group of creatures moving through the forest.

With stealthy steps, they discovered hundreds of beasts moving at once in a specific direction. Moreover, there were quite a few different races.

'This can't be a good sign...'

Chapter 52. Cinderielle Arrives at the Grove.

Cinderielle and her group stood a distance away from the beast group and followed with silent steps. They wanted to check if more beasts would join in the way.

Based on her extensive research, Cinderielle was well aware that a beast tide was a phenomenon triggered by the primal instincts of the creatures. Sensing the impending doom of a natural disaster, they would all, without exception, move in a single, unified direction.

While fleeing, beasts usually become much more aggressive toward anything blocking their way, and because of the group's group mentality that was born, the ones in the front were pushed to go forward, making them look like unintelligent beasts that just threw themselves at city walls and other kinds of defensive structures built by creatures.

However, unlike that feeling of unity that beast tides gave, Cinderielle realized that these creatures were marching together, but their steps were not rushed at all.

It was orderly, and their groups were mixed but separated. Ariel whispered. "What do you think, Cinder?"

Cinderielle was about to speak when the group of <River Beavers> stopped and separated, turning right and going in a completely different direction.

This solidified Cinderielle's conjecture that this was not the signals of a tide but a group formed from different beasts for an unknown objective.

A young-looking man with a slim body called Doles, one of the three men accompanying them, asked. "Do we follow them?"

His brother, a very similar-looking man called Maley, asked with a weird expression. "Why would we follow them? Are you stupid?"

Doles snorted. "Hey, aren't we investigating? Knowing why that group separated might bring us unexpected results!"

Ariel looked at the brothers and commented. "Can you two be more silent? What would we do if those hundreds of beasts heard us?"

Cinderielle commented. "Let's follow."

Ariel was surprised. "Are we really going to?"

Cinderielle looked at her and nodded. "Why not? Moreover, from what I've seen, there is only one Level 10 in that group. They are strong, but nothing we can't deal with."

Robert, the third man walking with them, asked with a serious tone. "Are you sure you want to do this, missy?"

Looking at the man who looked well into his fifties but had a strong body, Cinderielle decided to ask. "What do you recommend, sir?"

Ariel complained. "Hey, why are you so respectful to him and not me?"

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, she answered with a sigh. "He is probably double your and triple my age. He is an experienced person who is alive at this job even after so many years. So, listening to his advice is something we must do."

The man smirked and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, missy. I was just going to say that if we do go that way, we need to do so by their traces and not by keeping them in our visual range."

Cinderielle asked. "Why is that?"

The man explained while rubbing his bearded chin. "Well, if we can see them, that means that they can see us as well. While we will be hidden, all it takes is one misstep to create an unavoidable situation where we need to fight."

The other four found his reasoning logical, so they all chose to follow his words.

Without much trouble, they are able to follow the River Beaver's group's footprints.

It took around two or three hours before they suddenly heard battle sounds in the distance. Maley frowned. "Battle? The sounds don't feel human-like."

Cinderielle looked around with a strange expression. 'Why am I getting restless? I feel like I want to charge forward and rush to the center of this grove.' She focused on her surroundings, and a strangely enticing aura made her body restless.

Robert and Ariel found out about Cinderielle's strangeness, and Ariel quickly asked. "What's wrong, Cinder? Remember that we came here with you because of your Sylvan senses. Are you feeling danger?"

"No." She shook her head, saying with a thoughtful expression. "On the contrary, I feel... eager. It's bizarre. As if there is something calling me right ahead."

The four humans looked at the Sylvan with a strange expression, not knowing how to react to such words. Doles asked. "Is your head well-ough!"

Maley's slap on the back of his head choked his voice, forcing a strange sound out. "What are you saying so directly? You need to ask politely, even if she is going crazy-ough!"

With a very similar motion, Ariel slapped the other brother on the back of his head. She spoke with her lips twitching, "Do you two share the same neuron or something? Is that why you are incapable of simple thought?"

Robert sighed. "Don't mind these two, missy. What's in your mind?"

The sounds of battle continued, and when Cinderielle was about to answer, the sound of a solid item slamming on a fleshy body with brutal strength spread from the covered middle of the grove.

Ariel's face grimaced. "That sound..."

Cinderielle commented. "Let's wait until the battle ends and then walk in."

Doles answered with a very unwilling tone. "Nonono. Are you not hearing all the harsh sounds of the things battling inside? I think those <River Beaver> have met disaster while walking in that direction. You want to follow their same fate?"

Cinderielle answered flatly, not even bothering to play with him. "I'm going. If you want to follow, good. If not, you can turn around and leave."

The others blinked at her decisiveness. Ariel muttered with a sigh. "Where has the 'taking advice from others more experienced' gone to?"

As they approached, their group finally entered Liu Shu's <Charm Of The Seedling> skill range. As if Cinderielle had crossed some sort of membrane, her feelings went entirely out of control.

The feeling from <Charm Of The Seedling> was like an all-encompassing hug that warmed up her body. It was as if she had been freezing until now, and finally, after being exposed to heat, she realized it.

Her heartbeat increased, thumping against her chest as blood flowed through her veins, spreading this strange heat throughout her entire body. That was not all; as her body heated up because of the heartbeat, a rush of excitement ran through her veins and blood.

The four humans felt the strange aura change, but it wasn't much of a difference from them.

When they heard Cinderielle's confident steps abruptly stopping, they looked sideways at her in confusion. Ariel got scared and asked with urgency, "C-Cinder! Why are you breathing so roughly? I can feel your heartbeat from here and..." Her nose twitched a few times, making her feel strangely embarrassed. "You are spreading some kind of floral scent. Control yourself!"

Cinderielle, however, was not hearing her. Her mind was in absolute shock. 'Impossible. Here? How could it be here?' Cinderielle spoke to herself with completely jumbled thoughts, not knowing how to react. 'Am I wrong? Am I being deceived by some tricky creature? No, but it feels as if this aura is impossible to misinterpret.'

Cinderielle's mind continued running in circles. 'But, it's just too big of a coincidence! What am I supposed to do now!? This aura is certainly similar to that one I felt when I was young!'

Cinderielle had always thought that even if she managed to find this aura, it wouldn't be the correct one. After so many years, how could she, a child back then, remember something like an aura so clearly?

To be honest, Cinderielle was prepared to give up many decades of her life just to find something that felt right, and if she found nothing, she would give up and try to search for happiness somewhere else.

Of course, this thought was just that, a thought. She had never been sure if she would be able to let go of such a profound and deep-rooted feeling. It had been just a glance, and it carried over years without any difficulty, making romance of any kind a lost cause even before it had the chance to start.

Cinderielle felt a hand landing on her shoulder, snapping her out of her thoughts, and she looked sideways with her orange eyes glowing with a strange light and a gentle blush on her face due to the accelerated heartbeat. "What's wrong, Ariel?"

Ariel took a step back involuntarily. The sensation Cinderielle's current eyes gave was utterly different from usual. It was deep and covered by a mysterious veil. What was strange was that they had a visible glow, making it feel like the colors inside her iris were swirling.

The three men also got alert, looking at Cinderielle with serious expressions. Ariel gulped and asked. "You, are you okay? You look... different."

Cinderielle smiled, her red cheeks looking extremely attractive, as if her body used everything to become alluring and appealing. "Don't worry. Let's go quickly."

And with that, they all saw Cinderielle rushing out of the grove.

Meanwhile, by Liu Shu's side, Clavel was flying and looking at the several corpses created by Liu Shu's attack. "Hm... some of them are in quite a bad state to skin them for their coat."

Zinia looked at her and asked, confused. "Why do you want their skin?"

Clavel shrugged. "Queen Flor told us that we can sell it to Sylvans and other creatures, and selling them will usually avoid an attack."

Zinia tilted her head. "Why?"

Clavel pondered and commented. "Perhaps because the <River Beaver> has a natural ability to repel water, so it is a nice cloth?"

Zinia was about to answer when the shrubs by the side moved, and a tall woman appeared.

Her stature, coupled with her neat red colored hair and orange eyes, accentuated her fiery aura and glamorous body.

The fairies that saw a Sylvan appear weren't that nervous. While Sylvans and Rose Fairies weren't considered even in the same category, they were good for cooperating.

This time, though, they weren't leisure. Clavel knew that Liu Shu had just gone through a tough battle, and her ability to defend had taken a hit.

Clavel pondered. 'Is this that ambush they were expecting? Or another group altogether.'

Clavel moved forward and summoned a pair of wind blades. "Stop!"

Focusing on her face, not only Clavel but the rest of the Rose Fairies couldn't help but frown. The red-haired and orange-eyed Sylvan was looking at Liu Shu as if nothing else mattered in this world.

Her face, full of adoration and fascination, couldn't probably be faked even by the best of actors. The raw emotion in her eyes was enough to make a few Rose Fairies feel strangely intimidated.

Clavel didn't really know how to react to a Sylvan that rushed at them without any protection whatsoever. Zinia realized that Cinderielle was really not that high level, making it much more strange.

'How did a Level 6 enter here alone?'

Chapter 53. A Sylvan's True Strength.

Liu Shu had been dazed, looking at the notifications from the almost 35 River Beavers she had killed.

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 5>. You've gained 1 Experience Point.] x15

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 6>. You've gained 2 Experience Points.] x9

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 7>. You've gained 3 Experience Points.] x5

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 8>. You've gained 4 Experience Points.] x4

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 9>. You've gained 6 Experience Points.] x1

[Congratulations on defeating <River Beaver Level 10>. You've gained 35 Experience Points.] x1

'Really nice~, so much experience. Hehe.'

Then, she looked at her accumulated experience and saw that it had jumped to 346 points. She was far from leveling up, but that didn't mean much to her. Liu Shu was happy with any progress.

While thinking of this, Liu Shu looked at how the Rose Fairies began moving the corpses around. 'Will they also transform them into fertilizer?'

Without proper soil and proper resources, her energy-gathering method wouldn't work; after all, it didn't give her experience daily out of nowhere. She needed to feed.

Other than that, Liu Shu grew like a normal creature as well. It was much slower than the bursts her Level Up gave her, but she did increase in size constantly as time went by.

Her roots slowly expanded around her, piercing through the moist earth at a very gentle pace. 'Hehe, it feels nice~. The earth is cool and refreshing. Hm?'

Liu Shu suddenly felt one of her roots hit something piercing straight down. 'Rock?'

Her senses expanded in that direction, sending pulses of energy in the direction of the root that found an obstacle. The energy pulse she sent expanded on the root, giving her a clear vision of that area. 'This root is around 40 meters deep, hmmm. Is this... a wall of rocks? Can I dig through?'

While Liu Shu was focusing on that, a notification appeared in her mind that surprised her.

[<Charm of the Seedling> has attracted a <Ceperet Human Level 9>. Proficiency increased by 9.] x4

[<Charm of the Seedling> has attracted a <Pyroaether Emberites Sylvan Level 6>. Proficiency increased by 6.]

'Humans? Sylvans? What kind of little friends are those?' Liu Shu looked at her Aether Mana and Anima energy and became a bit worried. 'I hope they are not bad little friends.'

She retracted her gaze from the wall of rocks, for now, looking toward the place where she had sensed their approach. Once she looked in that direction with the <World Tree Eye>, she spotted one woman with fiery red hair and orange eyes looking her way with a very strange expression.

Far behind that woman, there were four humans that were "hiding" behind some trees. However, they were out in the open for Liu Shu as her roots had already extended that far, making their current appearances quite comical.

'Do they like crouching?'

Still, there was one thing that took Liu Shu's attention, and that was... 'They are so tall!'

While the Rose fairies were humanoid, their stature was just too small compared to others. So, with them as a reference, everything else appeared to be enormous to Liu Shu, even when she knew that humans and sylvals were the standard size; knowledge gained while reading, or rather, absorbing, the Woodcrafting books.

She saw Clavel and Zinia flying forward while raising their hands, ready to strike, so Liu Shu similarly focused on them. 'Are they dangerous? Why are Clavel and Zinia reacting so strongly?'

She refocused on them, looking at the Sylvan for a longer time. She was very beautiful compared to anyone she had seen until now, and her aura was also welcoming.

Once her <World Tree Eye> covered the red-haired woman, she strangely saw the woman shudder as she looked at her, making Liu Shu feel a strange sense of danger. However, it was a complicated danger that didn't cause her to react like when someone attacked her. 'What's this feeling? Also...' Liu Shu focused on the trembling woman and asked herself. 'Why is her face getting redder? Is that because she can control flames!? So cool~.'

Clavel shouted. "Sylvan, we are Rose Fairies, one of the few races that protect nature. Retreat! We are not a threat!"

There was one reason Clavel shouted and didn't attack right away. When her eyes landed on the woman, even though she could see that she was a Level 6, her ternary essences were absurdly high. Not only that.

Clavel felt a drop of sweat falling from her temple. 'It feels as if I'm facing Queen Flor. Why is this Sylvan so strong!?''

Thankfully for her, the Sylvan seemed to have been mesmerized by Liu Shu, but that was not that good either. Clavel saw the Sylvan snapping out of her daze and looking her way, making Clavel tense up. She heard her say with a stutter. "A-Ah, um... T-That tree, no. That beauty-" The Sylvan covered her face. "Kya! Who am I calling a beauty!? Stupid, we just got to know each other!"

The Rose fairies, the humans, and even Liu Shu looked at her with extremely weird gazes.

'Huh?'

Cinderielle patted her face and coughed, trying to regain her usual cool. However, the Rose Fairies could clearly see that, even though her posture was straight and her face was serious, the reddish tint on her cheek and the twitch of her lips trying to bend upward were more than apparent.

"AHem! Rose Fairies, I'm called Cinderielle. Can you let me get closer to, um, to..." Cinderielle looked at Liu Shu shyly and tried to say seriously. "T-That pretty World Tree!"

Ariel and the other humans walked out of the forest, and Ariel shouted. "C-Cinder! What in the branches above are you doing!? T-They are monsters. What if they attack you!" Ariel looked at the noticeable female figure on the three's trunk and said with a grave face. "Moreover, that's a World Tree! What if she attacks us? We'll need to attack back, and attacking a World Tree is never a good idea!"

Cinderielle looked at Ariel with a piercing gaze and spat. "She won't attack us, and if you dare put a hand on her..." Cinderielle didn't finish her sentence, but her glowing orange eyes were more than enough.

Ariel felt her heart constrict in fear for a second, as if a powerful predator had locked on her. "C-Cinder, I-I didn't mean that we will, but you know." Ariel gulped. "To defend ourselves and such."

Cinderielle looked at Liu Shu and told Ariel. "There is no need to worry." Then, she ignored her and started walking forward with her hands spread out in a gesture of surrender.

"I-I'm really not trying to do anything. I just want to... um... speak with her."

Clavel quickly and nervously said. "Stop right there! Don't take another step, or we'll attack!"

[illegible]

Her mind was constantly spinning with those thoughts as her eyes traced every branch, leaf, and trace of the relatively young tree. 'Such a perfect bark, Kya! Look at her branches, dropping so cutely~. Oh, her leaves are so pretty; I want to trim them gently~. H-How about taking care of her trunk...' Cinderielle's eyes landed on the protrusions similar to breasts and blushed. 'Big...' Her eyes then started lowering toward the waist

area, but she quickly stopped herself. 'DON'T! Ahhhhhh! I'm a pervert! I shouldn't look at a lady when she is naked and vulnerable!'

However, if one were to look where her eyes were looking, they would be able to notice them roaming everywhere. She said no in her head, but physically, she was unable to stop her brain from snapping photos with each of her blinks.

Liu Shu looked strangely at the creature that was making funny faces with a hint of cautiousness. 'Why do I feel like I'm being eaten? A predator? Are Sylvan's a World Tree's natural predator!?''

Well, she was not too far off. Sylvans did "prey" on World Trees, after all.

"What is happening here!?"

Cinderielle's and the human's relaxed mood completely disappeared as a powerful aura washed all over them together with the sound of many buzzing wings.

Cinderielle and the others turned to see a much larger Rose Fairy arriving with a terrifyingly cold face and Wind Aether Mana swirling around her figure in massive torrents.

Ariel shouted with urgency. "CINDER! RUN! THAT'S A LEVEL 12!"

However, Cinderielle refused to leave. "Rose Fairy Chief, I'm not here with ill intentions!"

However, Flor was not buying it and snarled. "You know that there is a World Tree here now; how could I leave you to return and be sure that Fortuna's World Tree won't send an army to kill the sapling!" Flor's energy became increasingly turbulent when she considered the dangers that leaving these people could cause to the young Liu Shu.

"You are unlucky, but I can only kill you to silence you!"

Liu Shu looked at the situation and couldn't help but feel uncomfortable when she imagined the red-haired Sylvan dying. However, she didn't know how to interfere.

Her usual energy pulses worked by sending energy right onto a creature. When Flor was actively using Aether Mana, she created a shield to protect her weak body. This shield blocked all kinds of attacks, including Liu Shu's pulses.

Cinderielle saw that Flor wasn't prepared to talk and couldn't help but bite her lips, shouting. "I don't want to hurt you, but you are leaving me with no chance! Rose Fairy Chief, I sincerely have no ill intent toward that World Tree; on the contrary, I'm willing to help you protect her!"

Flor extended her hand forward and scowled. "Lies! How could a resident from Fortuna City be so willing to help nurture a World Tree so close!"

After all, World Trees didn't like each other's presence, and more often than not, when two World Trees met, it would end in a brutal fight where only one of them remained alive.

Cinderielle saw that Flor was truly going to attack, so she bit her lips and chanted. "Don't blame me, Rose Fairy Chief. <Pyroaether Sylvan Body Liberation>!"

With her chant, a tornado of fire surrounded Cinderielle, and Flor quickly shot several powerful wind blades.

The tornado of fire destroyed the wind crescents and dispelled quickly, revealing an entirely changed Cinderielle.

Unlike her human form, which had just different-colored hair, she looked like a completely new being this time.

Her skin was reddish and bark-like, while her body was covered in clothes made of flaming leaves. Her stature had doubled, and her legs had grown root-like protrusions that quickly latched on the ground. Her hair was made out of pure Fire Aether Mana, and her orange eyes glowed while leaving trails of light as she moved.

The reason for Sylvan's race domination throughout the world was this natural ability to transform into a tree-like being that was mobile as well. While she could latch onto the ground, she could move as quickly, if not more rapidly than before.

It was a complete transformation whose only weakness was its short duration and inability to use as they pleased.

Flor's face became serious when Cinder's aura seemed to have made a qualitative leap and caught up with hers. With a heavy heart, she quickly analyzed her. 'Her previous stats were around 5,000 Aether Mana, while her other two didn't reach 3,000 but were close. Now...'

Level: 6

Aether Mana Shards: 11896/11896

Phoer Body Shards: 9413/9413

Anima Energy Shards: 8892/8892

Flor's face changed to one of horror as the Sylvan's stats had almost completely overcome hers. 'What!?'

Chapter 54. Ruthless Rose Fairy Queen.

However, while Flor was startled, she didn't back down. On the contrary, she became even more aggressive and rushed at Cinderielle. Her speed was ridiculously fast, making the transformed Cinderielle have trouble following her.

However, the transformed Sylvan was a force of nature and didn't need to see exactly where she was going. With no words spoken, Cinderielle lifted her staff, which now looked like a wand, and waved it.

WHOOSH!

A torrent of flames rushed forward, creating a wall of fire in front of Flor. Flor's eyes sharpened as she quickly maneuvered upward, dodging the attack, only to be met by a large fireball shooting straight at her.

Without missing a single beat, Flor shot a wind sphere.

Both attacks collided in a large, fiery explosion. The hot air shockwave hit everyone like a wall of heat, making them frown as they observed the quick-paced battlefield.

Flor moved around quickly, sending several wind blades Cinderielle's way.

Meanwhile, Cinderielle didn't move from her standing place as she sent one attack after another. The number of attacks Cinderielle was throwing was far above Flor's, which made Flor sneer. 'Using abilities so recklessly will be your bane.'

To make sure, she decided to check on Cinderielle's Aether Mana consumption, only for her sneer to disappear. 'What's this regeneration?'

She could actually see the numbers go up when Cinderielle didn't shoot. Cinderielle recovered around six shards for each of her ternary essences each second that passed.

If transformed into shards per hour, that kind of regeneration would become 21,600 shards per hour. To put it into perspective, Liu Shu had yet to reach 200 in any of her ternary essences.

'Ridiculous! How long can she even maintain this form!? We've been fighting for 2 minutes already!'

Flor looked at her own Aether Mana and bit her lips. 'What's worse is that the few attacks I managed to land chipped all around 600 Phoer Body Shards. That's nothing!'

Flor's face became murderous as her hidden, bloodthirsty nature started resurfacing. The current Flor couldn't even be compared with the usual easygoing and lazy Rose Fairy Queen. It was to the point that Liu Shu's <World Tree Eye> focused on Flor instead of the creature that had caught her attention so much since she arrived.

'If I can't chip your Phoer away, I'll steal it with one strike.'

Phoer Body Shards were a representation of a creature's vitality. If someone managed to behead another person, even if they had all their Phoer Body Shards, they would die without a chance to retaliate.

Meanwhile, Cinderielle had been fighting with everything she had. While it looked like she had it easy because she wasn't moving, her heart was beating extremely fast as surprise and fear slowly overtook them. 'I can't weaken her!? Is a Level 12 that strong!? No... It's not because she is a Level 12.'

Cinderielle looked at the change in the atmosphere around Flor and became seriously nervous. 'I only have 2 minutes and 10 seconds left of this transformation. I'll be done if I can't weaken her enough before that!'

Flor's attacks had been ruthless and all aimed at lethal spots. This forced Cinderielle to protect those places, and because of the onslaught, she had become so cautious that attacks that didn't aim for lethal spots were not stopped anymore.

After all, her defenses were ridiculously high with her currently transformed body.

Of course, she had no way of knowing that that had been Flor's initial aim at first. With creatures that had enormous pools of vitality, you needed to slowly chip their life away by using feints and other methods or land one lethal strike.

So, Flor initially tried to use several lethal strikes as feints while gradually reducing her Phoer Body Shards with normal attacks.

But that had changed.

With no indications that the transformation was going to end soon, Flor couldn't afford enough luxury to take her time. Moreover, they were fighting extremely close to Liu Shu, and Flor didn't like it.

No words were exchanged as the battle became more frantic. The number of lethal attacks suddenly diminished by a lot, giving Cinderielle breathing room to move toward the quickly flying Flor.

She was surprisingly agile for her size, almost closing the gap between them. 'I need to weaken her even if I get injured!'

However, she didn't realize the cold glint reflected in Flor's eyes. Cinderielle used her staff again, and two walls of fire spread in a line, blocking the Rose Fairy Queen's lateral escapes. 'Now, she should fly backward or upwards; if I bombard her with enough projectiles, some will land, and Flor will get weakened.'

But Cinderielle miscalculated. 'Huh?'

Flor didn't go up or back; she rushed forward at incredible speed. Cinderielle panicked and quickly reacted, sending another wall of fire forward.

BAM!

[-1487]

The large strike that sliced almost half of Flor's Phoeer Body Shards was heavy enough that the spectators thought that Flor had gone crazy.

Yet, when they saw Cinderielle trying to take a step back with her face changed to one filled with panic and fear, they knew that the attack didn't go as planned.

Flor rushed through the wall of flames head first, receiving heavy injuries and burning a large part of her face. However, taking advantage of the surprise, she managed to close the distance between them to less than two meters.

Her body's Aether Mana and Anima Energy surged with incomparable might as she used <Wind Slash> toward Cinderielle's neck with ruthless accuracy.

With a venomous and cold tone, Flor spat. "Die."

SLASH!

The wind crescent ruthlessly landed on Cinderielle's neck, creating a massive gash.

[-4596]!

Flor clicked her tongue. 'Not enough.'

A massive damage number appeared in Flor's eyes, but her face did not make a pleased face. Flor managed to close the distance while Cinderielle clutched her neck in pain and landed on her shoulder, lifting her hand and creating a torrent of winds.

Cinderielle's heart was filled with terror as the bloodthirsty eyes of the burnt Rose Fairy Queen looked at her with incomparable coldness. "Get away!" Then, using a large part of her Aether Mana, her body burst into an explosion of flames that hit Flor again.

The Rose Fairy Queen had to switch from offensive to defensive, or else the wounds would be too great. Her gathered Wind Aether Mana enveloped her body, and right after, she was hit by a powerful explosion of flames.

BAM!

The explosion sent the Rose Fairy Queen flying backward, burning 489 more of her Phoe Body Shards. However, the Rose Fairy Queen flipped mid-air and used her legs to land against a tree trunk, ready to rush into battle again.

Yet, the second she was about to launch herself forward, several branches from the tree she landed on latched onto her. Flor lost in her bloodthirst, almost retaliated against the creature that interrupted her. However, a burst of aura with the meaning of "STOP!" hit her brain strong enough to make her eyesight blur.

This snapped her out of her murderous state, but even then, her gaze went straight onto the Sylvan that was slowly transforming back. She patted the branch coiled around her waist gently and spoke firmly. "Liu Shu, I know you are worried, but now that she has transformed back, I can kill her easily. Let me go."

However, the branch around her waist tightened instead of loosening as a big "NO!" smacked her brain one more time. Flor thought that her brain would explode or something, so she coughed and answered. "C-Can you answer more lightly? You are making my head ring! Also, what do you mean by no!?"

A softer but equally persistent "No!" reached Flor, making her speechless. Flor sighed and gave up, moving her gaze to look at the Sylvan, who was retreating slowly and fearfully while looking between the tree and herself.

Flor spoke with an authoritative tone while seeing the blood rush between the Sylvan's fingers. "Leave. You are lucky that your transformation has healed enough of the wound to make it non-lethal, but if you stay here, I'm going to kill you the second Liu Shu lets go of me."

Another big "NO!" hit her head, and Flor finally understood between seeing the world blur. 'Can she not do it so strongly... wait. She stopped me because she doesn't want me to kill the sylvan?'

Flor observed the red-haired Sylvan, who was stubbornly looking at them even when her eyes were filled with fear. While the gaze had clear fear in it, Flor realized that there was something else. 'The way she is looking at me... Somewhere else... I've seen that somewhere else...'

Flor frowned, and suddenly, the image of Verdantia looking at her when she showed the World Tree branch flashed in her mind. Her lips twitched, making her hiss in pain because of the burns while she lamented in her head. 'Is it another crazy woman? What's wrong with Liu Shu? Do all Sylvans react the same way to her?'

Of course, she knew that it was not true since before finding Verdantia, Flor roamed the forest a bit and spoke with a few other Sylvans, even showing them the branch while avoiding telling its origins.

'For now... Only Verdantia and this Sylvan called Cinderielle reacted that way...'

Flor felt a headache coming. 'I hope that the reason Liu Shu is stopping me is because the contrary is also true...'

With a tentative face and not bothering the Rose Fairies attending her, she asked. "Say, Liu Shu... Do you not want me to kill her because you like her?"

This time, a "no" with hesitation came her way.

'Hesitating? Hm...'

Flor put into practice her interpreter skills and asked. "Do you feel that she is interesting?"

This time, a hesitant "yes" arrived.

'Hm. Still unsure.'

The Rose Fairy Queen leaned back and asked with a doubtful look. "Do you feel that she doesn't mean harm?"

A clear "yes" arrived this time. Flor rolled her eyes and looked upward toward the tree's canopy. "Are you freaking kidding me? Why did I have to work so hard for then!?"

Liu Shu looked at the Rose Fairy Queen between her branches with an awkward feel. 'I wanted to stop you since the beginning, but you started fighting without asking anything! I-It's not my fault, hmp!'

Thankfully, Flor couldn't understand her words at all, or else she might have a stroke and lose her remaining Phoer Body Shards and die.

Cinderielle shouted, her voice trembling as she coughed. "I-I told you. I-I don't want to fight! I really d-don't have bad intentions."

Flor looked at her for a few seconds and then sighed. "Whatever, let's talk."

Inside her head, she was complaining. 'It's not that I can kill you either way with Liu Shu holding onto me like this... speaking of which, does she not trust me!? Why is she still holding onto me!?'

The Rose Fairy Queen was about to become depressed when another branch with red fruits appeared in front of her. The Rose Fairy Queen blinked and opened her mouth, taking one into her body.

[You've consumed <Enchanted Basic Phoer Berry> and regained 100 Phoer Body Shards. There are four consumptions remaining.]

'Enchanted?'

She quickly analyzed Liu Shu, and her heart softened when she saw 400 extra Phoer Body Shards missing from Liu Shu's pool. 'She used her own vitality to enhance these fruits?'

Flor sighed with a smile and munched on another delicious berry. 'It seems that she just wants to take care of me. Hehe, cute child~.'

Chapter 55. Conversation between Humans, Sylvan, and Rose Fairies.

With Flor's words, the tension all around dropped a few notches. During the entire fight, the Rose Fairies and humans had both been tense, ready to interfere if the other side made a move.

While the Rose Fairies weren't as strong, they were much more numerous. After all, the Rose Fairies that went out with Flor had already returned. In terms of numbers, they were more than ten times theirs.

Thankfully, the fight didn't escalate, and Flor was stopped by Liu Shu. While Flor did indeed gravel injured Cinderielle, the same was true for the opposite. In short, it was a real fight where blows were exchanged, but not, it had passed, so both parties could take their time to relax their taut nerves.

Cinderielle took in a deep breath, calming her restless body after experiencing a near-death call. She had never expected Flor to be so decisive and powerful.

When she transformed, almost all her stats but Aether were clearly above Flor's, and yet, making use of very risky tactics, Flor managed to very nearly bring her down. If she failed to react at that time when Flor landed on her shoulder, her head would've probably been detached from her body before she knew what happened.

Her explosive flame attack released to blow Flor away was not controlled in any way, and its strength, with her stats while transformed, was enough to probably kill all creatures below Level 10 in a large radius.

No one knew how the rest of the battle would go after Cinderielle blasted Flor away. After all, Flor had lost a good chunk of her Phoer Body Shards and Aether Mana Shards. Flor was exhausted, while Cinderielle still had around 50 seconds more of her five-minute-long transformation at that time.

On the other side, Flor's mental strength and decisiveness were leagues above Cinderielle's, so it was normal to think that as long as she managed to give a decisive blow, Flor would be able to win eventually.

Regardless, it was a close battle that could go either way.

Liu Shu looked at both sides and seeing that they were calm, she finally decided to let go of Flor. She was a bit confused as to why she stopped Flor.

Until now, Flor has been her guardian, caretaker, and even teacher in many matters. She provided her with knowledge, sustenance, and a safe environment without asking much in return.

Liu Shu didn't take her fruits into account, even though they were incredibly influential for the development of young Rose Fairies, because it was an almost effortless action on her part.

Now that she had mastered the process, it was something that she did with her subconsciousness. 'And yet, I wanted to protect that Sylvan from Flor when that Sylvan injured Flor so much...'

She was honestly confused. 'Why?'

Her <World Tree Eye> was firmly locked on the red-haired sylvan, not knowing why she kept protecting her after Flor was injured to the point that she used her own Phoer Body Shards to enhance fruits and feed them to her.

After a while, she understood. 'Her aura.'

Liu Shu finally realized how welcoming and gentle Cinderielle's aura was. It was attractive and warm, making Liu Shu unconsciously want to get closer to her. Like gentle heat during a cold day or the feeling of her roots being nestled in warm and nutritious earth.

While Liu Shu thought of all of that, Flor used her damaged wings to fly up while resisting the pain and land on one of Liu Shu's thicker branches. She plopped her little butt there and sighed in tiredness and pain. "Tsk, tsk. It has been a long while since I got injuries like these..." While Liu Shu was a willow-like tree, not all her branches were the thin kind that dropped. A few sturdy ones in her canopy held the softer and longer branches.

While she recovered 500 Phoer Body Shards thanks to Liu Shu's small sacrifice, Flor was still weak. The burns created by Cinderielle were that dangerous.

Moreover, the action of using her own Phoer was something Liu Shu certainly couldn't do daily or even weekly, as consuming her own Phoer Body Shards was quite damaging on a fundamental level,

Flor looked at Cinderielle, who was still holding her neck and asked. "Well, speak, Sylvan. You say that you want to... no... you said that you would not reveal the secret of a World Tree residing here. How could I trust that?"

Cinderielle chewed her lips. The wound on her neck still hurt, and for some reason, seeing Flor resting in the branches of the World Tree made her heart twist with envy. 'I also want to sit there...'

Even if she was given permission, the branches were too thick for her to sit comfortably, but the feeling of wanting to do the same was there.

After observing for a few moments, she answered loud and clear, with no shame in her voice. "Because I've come to adore her!"

Everyone paused, humans and rose fairies alike, looking at the Sylvan with bewildered expressions. Liu Shu looked at her strangely as well. 'Adore me? That word means to like someone very much, right?' Liu Shu asked herself with a puzzled mind. 'Why does she adore me? Is it a normal thing for Sylvans?'

Looking around, Liu Shu saw similar socked, bewildered, and frowning expressions everywhere, which showed that this was not normal behavior. Refocusing on the Sylvan looking between her trunk and Flor, the World Tree felt strangely flustered. It was more of a feeling of discomfort than anything else since Liu Shu didn't understand complex emotions much.

Meanwhile, be it the humans and rose fairies that saw her arrival remembered her actions and mannerisms, and all came to the same conclusion. 'Wait, she really does!?'

Since the start of their encounter, Cinderielle had been acting strangely, which threw many people in a loop, and they couldn't understand why she acted that way.

However, if her words were the truth, then her actions all made sense.

Flor looked at her and pondered for a while. 'This woman and Verdantia do resemble each other when it comes to how they've treated Liu Shu.' Flor thought with a wry smile. 'At least this one saw the entire tree before saying something like that. Verdantia became obsessed with just a branch...'

Flor would come to know more about Cinderielle in the future, and she would remember her thoughts at this time, making her regret thinking they were different in any sense.

Flor commented. "Well, that reasoning is not enough. I want more tangible proof to confirm your words."

In truth, those words were enough to make Flor believe in her because of the simple fact that Sylvans were extremely serious about their romantic interests. While it was not definitive that a Sylvan would never use that as an excuse, it was rare.

Moreover, unless Cinderielle was a perfect actress, Flor was confident in her vision. She also had the same feeling when she spoke with Verdantia, and the sense of trust that both of them gave her was pretty similar.

Touching one of her itchy burns, Flor added. "Moreover, even if you add proof for yourself, what about those four humans behind you."

Cinderielle, who was about to recount her childhood memory, paused, her words getting choked in her throat by Flor's sharp question. 'Right. What about them?'

Looking at Ariel and the other three stiffened people, Cinderielle frowned. 'We have known each other for a few hours, and it is true that we can't trust them to keep the secret.' Her eyes flashed with the image of Liu Shu being attacked and rooted out from the ground, and her heart became extremely cold and murderous while her eyes became gloomy.

She asked her tone as usual. "What are your thoughts?"

Ariel wanted to curse in all the languages she knew. 'Do I even have an option!? That crazy Level 12 is staring at us like hunting prey, and you are clearly on their side. While I don't think Cinderielle would attack us for that World Tree, I can't ignore the option.'

Ariel wanted to pull her hair out of frustration, but she made a perfect and business-like smile. "Of course! We don't mind keeping this a secret. As long as we are returned alive and in one piece, I'm happy, hahaha."

Flor sighed. 'Right. That's the feeling when someone doesn't really speak the truth. Too stiff, too professional... Who uses those words with a monster who is perceived as stupid?'

Of course, Flor didn't take into account her change in charisma after becoming a Rose Fairy Queen, thanks to being the first to discover Liu Shu's World Tree nature.

In truth, while she still had that definite monster aura around her, Flor was much more dignified, and even these people had trouble keeping their chins up.

"Human woman, are you the leader of the group?"

Her question was met with a nod and a formal knee bending while holding the sides of her clothes. "It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ariel. I am part of the <Sunflower Caravan> merchant group, and these people are indeed my subordinates. We've come to this forest in search of a few items and to check out, together with Cinderielle, if a [Beast Tide] was starting to gather in the Golden Sap Forest."

Ariel thought being completely honest with certain facts would gain their confidence, but Flor didn't easily lower her guard. She learned in the past that humans are a cunning and intelligent race. Many can become really good actors in overcoming difficulties.

A influential and mighty human who specialized in those ways could even influence others enough to change opinions about small habits. This ability didn't seem all that powerful for a common person, but when used in the correct hands, it could become a tool to reshape society.

Flor got thoughtful and thought about it for a few minutes straight without losing eye contact with the five intruders.

'The Thornstride army is marching toward here, so I need to ask quickly and make decisions before it is too late... How can I convince these humans to work for Liu Shu...'
Flor paused. "Wait, a caravan? Those transporting lines that I've seen a few times."

Ariel nodded. "Yes, we specialize in opening routes and transporting goods. We are a neutral party that doesn't usually get involved in wars, as we always go to the place that wins to rebuild ourselves a new business with new opportunities.

Flor pondered for a few seconds and asked. "Do you want to become our caravan?"

Ariel and the rest paused, not expecting such a question. The three friends frowned at the offer. 'What could they even gather here? There are no commodities that would increase our caravan's value. Stopping here is a waste.'

Flor scoffed. "Give it one year, and you might be begging to enter again? Just know that if you don't take my current offer, you will regret it when the prices of every single building and trade go far and above." Flor lifted an eyebrow. "Remember who I am sitting on and answer carefully, human."

The four humans paused, looking at the World Tree with a thoughtful expression.