

Chapter 51

Zeus, the Father

Two level threes in two and a half years, one of whom was able to stand against a level nine after her first rank-up. He sighed. Freya was either the most blatant cheater he'd ever encountered, or the luckiest little shit he had ever seen. Oh well. It wasn't like it mattered. Alcaeus was still the strongest, and he had more than a few 'cheats' of his own. That, and Freya mostly concerned herself with Hera, since all of her children were female, for now at least.

Really, Hera was getting a bit ahead of herself. A freak comes along who can fight against a level nine after a single rank-up, which was obtained after a bit over a year, and she thought that trying to poach from that familia was a good idea? What a *Hera* way of thinking. Everything he learned from the usual gossip and through Laurent's falna showed that there might be a third great familia in Orario in a few years, almost purely on the back of one mortal's absurd power and Freya's... 'Luck'. And Hera wanted to make an enemy out of them already. Silly old woman.

Zeus sighed again. Oh well, it would just make the lower world experience more interesting.

Calliphone

A week later - Twenty-nine months and a week since joining the Freya familia

The third floor of the avernic labyrinth was quite a bit more hellish in look than the previous two. A great deal more fire, to go with the brimstone. The sulfurous smell was perceptible even through her mask's filters and enchantments, drowning out every other scent with the smell of rotten eggs. At least it wasn't as bad as smelling her own acid-melted flesh in the giant's grove or the acid caverns.

The demonic monsters infesting the labyrinth seemed to substantially grow in strength with every floor that she descended, more so than any prior area. In addition, the humanoid ones were armed with obsidian weapons far more often. As she walked through one of the narrow open-ceiling hallways that connected the large arena-like chambers of the maze, she could hear the sound of tough monster flesh being torn apart messily. It was the same kind of sound that she would hear whenever she got one of the obsidian-armed monsters to do a bit of friendly fire.

How interesting, some monsters were fighting each other. Stepping into the large room, she found that it was a fifteen-foot bipedal monster facing what looked to be four of the twenty-foot four-armed ones, though one of them was already lying on the floor, ripped to pieces. The lone monster wielded two obsidian curved swords that looked to be about ten feet long, and the four-armed ones wielded a variety of weapons, mostly axes and clubs. It was something she had never seen before, not in almost two and a half years of dungeon-diving.

The shorter monster was much faster, she noted, leaning against the entrance with a hand on her new sword. It was also a much more proficient fighter. Where most monsters, even warrior-types, would simply throw themselves at their opponent until one of the parties died, this one fought patiently, going for safe openings with blinding speed, never abandoning its defense. It never dedicated both weapons to an attack, always keeping one scimitar ready to defend with. Its counters were quite nice as well, parrying and riposting in the same beat.

In a handful of seconds, there was a second monster lying in pieces on the ground, then a third, then a fourth, before it turned around, leveling a sword at her, blue eyes gleaming.

“What brings you here, mortal? I haven’t seen any of your kind in eons, not since Siegfried and Kriemhild stopped visiting,” it spoke, rumbling the earth.

Cal struggled not to gape in shock behind her mask and helm. A talking monster? And those names were legendary, the champions of the Odin familia in centuries past. Both Mia and Laurent had spoken about their great feats before. Ais especially loved to hear about the legendary dragonslayer, for whatever reason.

Still, didn’t the guild say that there was no information on the floors below the crystalline abyss? Yet, this thing clearly knew the long-dead Odin familia.

“Well, mortal? What brings you down so deep into the Mother?” it asked again.

Snapping out of her thoughts, she responded, “I’m exploring the unknown floors and trying to gather materials to improve my equipment. How is it that you can speak?”

“I don’t rightly know!” it laughed, “But it doesn’t matter anyway. I have not encountered another speaking person in several ages, and the loneliness was quite miserable. What is your name, mortal?”

“Calliphone. Call me Cal. What exactly are you?”

“Well, Cal, I call myself Satha. I do not know what I am, only that I think more clearly than others of my species, and that I long to one day witness the sun. Now, I must eat, please forgive my rudeness,” it said, before cutting through the carcasses of the other monsters, tearing out the head-sized magic stones and eating them.

When it swallowed the first stone, all of the cuts and scrapes on its thick skin steamed with heat, before sealing. With the second, it was fully healed, all of the scars vanishing. With the third, the crimson hue of its hide seemed to grow slightly darker. After the last one, its four black horns, two pointed straight forwards and two shorter ones curving backwards from the back of its skull, seemed to grow slightly along with the many bony spurs that protruded from its muscular arms, shoulders and back.

“Ah, delicious. Farewell, Calliphone. If we meet again, we should have a little duel. Siegfried always said that was the best way to get to know someone,” it said, before turning around and leaving via one of the dozen passageways that led into the room, massive wings wrapped around its torso.

Cal was left wondering if she had just made a mistake in leaving it alive. The wight that she had forcefully enhanced had only eaten five magic stones, and they had been from a higher floor. This thing had been eating the enormously powerful magic stones of the avernic labyrinth, and it had been doing it for centuries at the very least. Oh well, nobody else could dive this deep. It wasn't like dropping an enhanced monster in the middle of Babel. Besides, the very idea of fighting such a strong opponent had her trembling with excitement.

She would have to find it on her next trip to the labyrinth. For now, she would simply explore deeper, and put her new sword through further testing.

Calliphone

The still-unnamed blade continued to perform well above expectations. Admittedly, when the first test swing had cleaved straight through a two-inch thick plate of orichalcum, the expectations had been set quite high. Still, it cut through everything that Cal swung it at, and pierced everything that she aimed to thrust into.

Despite its deceptively absurd weight, it moved nicely in her hand, and the eight foot long blade didn't take too much getting used to. The many monsters that she encountered all died to her first swing of the long blade, making it almost too easy. It didn't even slow down while it cut through their flesh, merely moving as smoothly as ever. The avernite bar that made up the core of the blade also meant that it amplified any of her spell's energies tremendously when she channeled them into the sword. It had an even stronger effect than her orichalcum armor, which turned the destabilizing and explosive energies into a disintegration field.

When she pushed energy into her sword, it didn't become shrouded in a cloud of crackling red like her other weapons. Instead, the red core seemed to glow from within, and anything that touched the edge of the blade simply ceased to exist. It was also completely unnecessary to use, as she had yet to encounter anything that could provide any level of resistance to the sword's sharpness.

Oh well. Better overkill than the opposite. It was just a shame that it didn't amplify the explosive effects of her spell, like her hammer did. She would simply have to make another maul, then. Her hemosteel weapons were almost completely ineffective against the monsters of the avernic labyrinth. Her old saber and hammer didn't do much damage, and they shattered whenever she hit something with anything approaching her full strength, even without using draugr. Only her

swordspears did much of anything, and that was likely because of the nuckelavee antlers infused into them.

Ugh. She would have to use more avernite and titanite that could have been dedicated to her armor to make replacements for her older weapons. At least her chain was still durable enough to be useful, but she couldn't count on that lasting too much longer. The mere idea of how much time it would take to make a replacement out of orichalcum, let alone titanite or avernite sent shivers down her spine.

It was painstaking work, forging each link, welding it shut, sharpening each and every corner, each step repeated thousands of times. As useful as her chain was, she almost didn't want to do it again. Three weeks of work, and that had been with a material as relatively easy to manipulate as hemosteel. Orichalcum alone was dozens of times more tricky, and both avernite and titanite were significantly tougher than that.

Oh well. That was a decision for her to make when she got back to the surface. If she ended up making another chain, she had more than enough orichalcum left to make a few hundred meters of length. The question was if it would be worth investing the time to infuse the whole length... It probably was, but it would take ages for her to do it all herself. Calliphone would have to get another blacksmith to do it for her, probably several others in order for it to be done in a reasonable amount of time.

How annoying. A large part of the reason why she had taken the 'blacksmith' developmental ability was to avoid relying on others to infuse her materials. Still, she didn't want to spend weeks infusing the several hundred pounds of orichalcum necessary to forge her desired length of chain. It wasn't like she didn't have the money for it, she simply didn't like paying others to do things that she could do better herself.

Even while distracted, thinking about replacing equipment, she continued tearing through hundreds of monsters on her way through the third floor of the avernic labyrinth, extracting whatever deposits of avernite she found along the way. By the time she found the passage down to the fourth floor of the area and added it to her mental map of the area, she had killed over a thousand of the demonic-looking things. They came at her by the dozens, and fell to pieces almost as quickly.

She ran out of space in her pack for magic stones before she even reached the way down, so she had to begin absorbing them, which led to her killing the monsters faster and faster as she advanced. At first, she was taking out two or three monsters with each swing, if they were clustered together tightly enough, but by the time she began her walk back to the surface, she could cut through a half-dozen with a single blow.

She continued absorbing magic stones all the way up until she reached moytura, the forty-ninth floor, at which point she started a mad dash to the surface. Her armor was fully enveloped by

her spell, and every monster in her path was annihilated by either contact with her, or by a swipe from her long sword.

Before exiting the dungeon, her warskin's plating and her helmet were absorbed, before her dress seemed to grow out of her black not-skin, and then that seemed to melt into her skin, leaving her wearing only the dress and an enormous, overstuffed backpack even taller than her.

Judging by the stares she attracted, as well as the hidden giggling, the contrast made for quite the sight. Honestly, the doorways in Orario were just too tiny. It was already an ordeal to go indoors just about anywhere, but with her backpack it was almost impossible to fit through any doors. It was why she didn't like filling her pack completely.

Still, she made her way back to the guild, though they had stopped paying her in cash a while ago. Instead, they paid her a portion in high-denomination coins, and the rest in credit. Apparently, she had been cleaning them out a bit too much. It turned out that turning in the equivalent in value to most highly successful expeditions to the infernal reach was a bit much for the guild to pay out, especially when it was happening twice a week.

Still, it wasn't all bad. She didn't especially mind not having all of the money on hand, not when it was an incredibly excessive quantity, too much to store on her own. She had been storing most of her funds in the familia vault anyway.

Perhaps on her next trips she would absorb every magic stone, and only bring back drop items and materials? There was an idea. Materials from the unknown floors were quite a bit more valuable than magic stones from the same areas, simply because of how rare and limited they were, so it would be more efficient and would cause her less problems when going through doorways.

Yes, she would do that for a few weeks and see how it went.

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