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The Death Mage

Densuke
Illustrations by Ban!

ONE PEACE BOOKS

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Summary

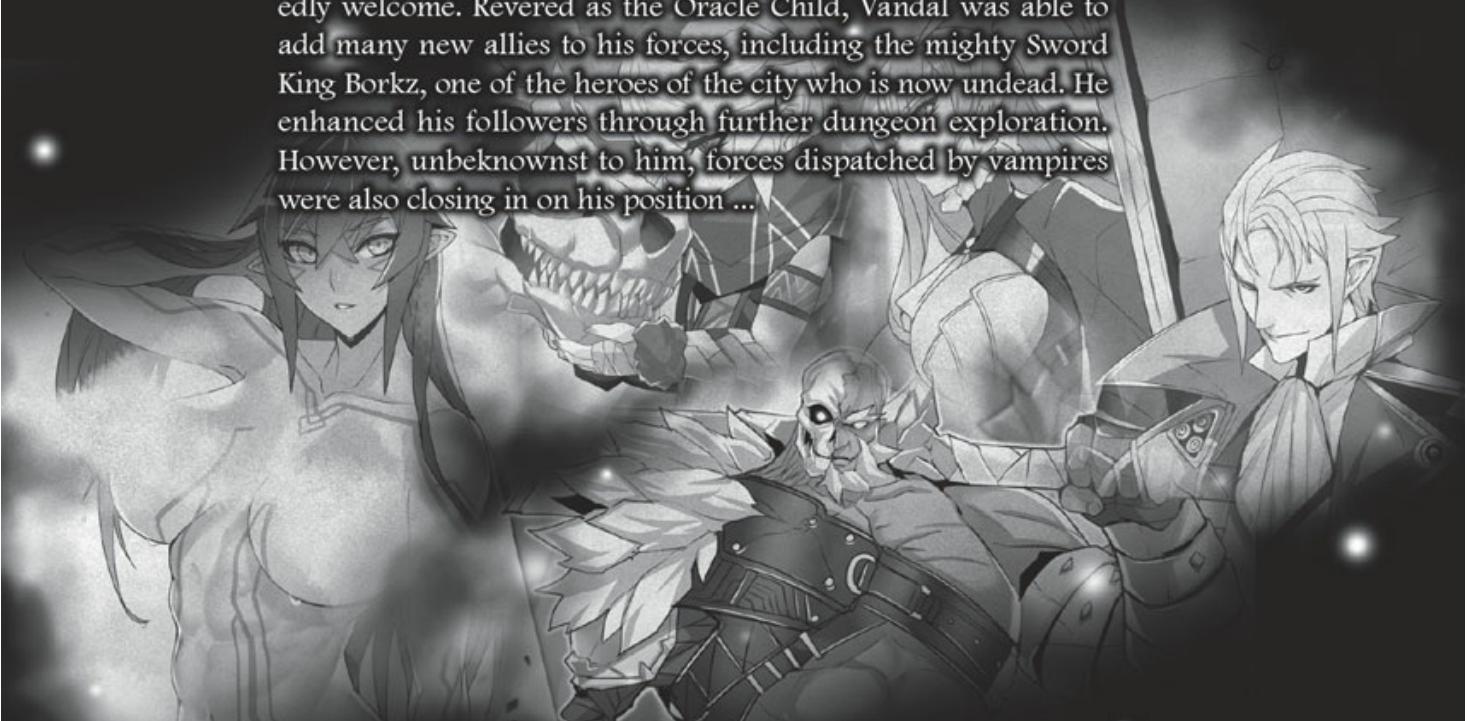


In his second reincarnation, Vandal was born as a dhampir. He found a measure of happiness in his third life, but then his mother Dalshia was killed by humans. Vandal swore vengeance on High Priest Goldan and the others who killed her.

After making new allies, enhancing his undead, and taking his first steps toward revenge on Evbejia, Vandal and his party took to the road. They encountered the ghoul elder Zadilis and saved her from attacking adventurers. After entering a demon barren in order to get Zadilis home, they found themselves unexpectedly welcome in the Ghoul Grotto. Vandal settled down in the grotto for a while to train and then made a big contribution by helping to defeat the Kobolt King Gyahn, who attacked with designs on expanding his own domain.

After the battle, Vandal remained in the grotto to learn non-attribute magic from Zadilis. He became closer to the ghouls as he helped solve Zadilis' issues with old age, as well as general infertility among the ghouls. However, this peaceful interlude was shattered by the Noble Orc Bugogan and his army of orcs, who threatened to destroy the grotto. Once he decided to fight alongside the ghouls, Vandal became Ghoul King on the appeal of Vigaro and the others. With Vandal as their king, the ghouls were blessed with new weapons, magical items, and attribute enhancements, and even with their inferior numbers, they managed to defeat the orcs. But before they could celebrate, Vandal decided to lead his new companions away in search of fresh pastures rather than face an oncoming conflict with their human pursuers.

This led them to the giantling city of Talosheim, known as the City of the Sun. Here, Vandal again found himself unexpectedly welcome. Revered as the Oracle Child, Vandal was able to add many new allies to his forces, including the mighty Sword King Borkz, one of the heroes of the city who is now undead. He enhanced his followers through further dungeon exploration. However, unbeknownst to him, forces dispatched by vampires were also closing in on his position ...



Character

Death attribute Magician



VANDAL

Hiroto Amamiya after his second rebirth. A dhampir born from a vampire father and a dark elf mother, he possesses massive magical power and a command of death attribute magic. After saving the ghouls from disaster to become their Ghoul King, he visited the city of Talosheim, where he is known as the Oracle Child.



DALSHIA

Vandal's mother. She suffered a terrible death, but Vandal used his death attribute magic to bind her to one of her own bones, keeping her in the world as a spirit.



ZADILIS

The elder of the Ghoul Grotto. She appears to be a young woman but is 290 years old. Perhaps held back by her physical appearance, her mental age is not as advanced as her years.



BASDIA

Zadilis's daughter. A female warrior with an athletic, honed frame that also features feminine curves. She has taken a liking to Vandal.



VIGARO

The next chief of the Ghoul Grotto. Trusted implicitly by the young male ghouls and adored by the females, he's a ghoul with everything going for him. He is also Basdia's father.



SAM

A Ghost Carriage. Originally a servant killed by bandits and left to wander as a spirit. After Vandal avenged his death, Sam chose him as his new master and swore loyalty to him.



SARIA & RITA

Sam's daughters, who are also spirits. They received living armor found in a dungeon treasure room to use as their bodies. Since obtaining the Spirit Body skill, they have more of a visible outline.



TALEA

A former human, now a ghoul, who hitched her wagon to Vandal's after his rise as king. Has significant skill with making armor and weapons.



BORKZ

Giantling undead who was one of the heroes of Talosheim, known as the Sword King. He has regained use of both arms, but half of his face remains exposed bone.



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PREPARING DEFENSES

CHAPTER THREE
IF YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH,
MAKE MORE

CHAPTER FOUR
FROM THE DIVINE REALM

SPECIAL CHAPTER
TWISTED HEROES

AFTERWORD
GLOSSARY

The Death Mage

Written by Densuke Illustration by BAN



Chapter One: Bringing You Oblivion

“Waaah, waaah!”

It was the sound of a crying baby. But this was no ordinary babe.

It had hair as blond as pure gold, and skin as white as the stone used for Talosheim castle. Pink, triangular ears rose from the top of its head, and a short tail jutted out of its rump. But as far as anyone else knew, pig beastmen didn’t exist on Ramda.

“I just came in to find the Living Dead turned to ash and this baby crying there,” Basdia explained.

“I see,” Vandal replied. After his return from Doran Moisture Cave, Vandal went to check on the Living Dead and found the ghoul Basdia with the new baby in her arms.

It appeared that the fetus had come to term while they were off exploring the cave, and the magical power of the Living Dead had run out at about the same time.

“No need to feel bad about the Living Dead,” Vandal commented. “I was planning on burying her once this was done.”

He turned the ashes into a golem and had them bury themselves. The Living Dead had been nothing more than a soulless husk with a beating heart, existing only to nurture the baby growing inside it—the reincarnation of that same host.

“The baby has a healthy set of lungs. I can’t get her to stop crying,” Basdia said.

The baby continued to wail.

“Can I take a look?” Vandal asked.

“Of course,” Basdia replied, passing the baby to the toddler. The babe immediately stopped crying and looked intently at Vandal. He accepted that look and observed the baby in return.

“Yup, I see the resemblance.”

The face resembled both the Living Dead and the woman’s spirit, and the nose was human. She was also, well, a “she.” Noble Orcs could only be male, so it had to be a different species.

“I’m going to take a quick look. Sorry about this.”

The baby burbled as Vandal used Spirit Bodification to turn part of himself into a spirit body, which he used to explore the inside of the baby. The number of organs, skeletal structure, and other internal features were different from orcs and much closer to those of a human. He couldn’t tell if they would function like a human’s; it was too soon for that. But she clearly wasn’t an orc or a Noble Orc.

On the flipside, she wasn’t entirely human. She had the same golden hair and blue eyes of a Noble Orc. Then there were the ears and the tail. She was just a baby at the moment, too. As she grew older, she might develop more things that set her apart from humanity. He wondered what her race was. *Half Noble Orc, maybe?*

“Can you see your status?” Vandal asked the baby.

“Ammh.” She was pulling on a handful of Vandal’s hair. She didn’t seem particularly upset at how this had all turned out, at least for the moment.

“Perhaps you’re feeling a little hungry?” he suggested.

“Van, I don’t think a newborn can understand you,” Basdia said, watching

with bemusement.

The babe turned her attention to the ghoul and then suddenly had Basdia in a headlock. One would not expect a newborn to bust out wrestling moves. She was really locked in, too, with strength far beyond that of a typical baby.

“I regained my memories pretty soon after I was born. I thought maybe she’s in the same position,” Vandal explained.

“Interesting, but I’m not sure it applies here. If she could understand then I would hope she would have stopped crying when I asked her to. But she just kept on crying—until you turned up, Vandal.”

“I guess we have no idea when she’ll get her memories back,” Vandal mused. His had returned pretty soon after he was born. But that could be due to Rodocolte, the god who reincarnated him. This baby had been reincarnated by Vandal in his first attempt at the procedure. It might be months, even years, before her memories returned. This was a spirit from a body that had been dead for months. Her memories might be filled with holes or never come back at all.

“I’ve already discussed giving the baby milk with Bildo and the others. Now the baby is here, let’s get her over to them. You aren’t lactating yet, right?”

“. . . Me? Why would I—”

“Because you’re pregnant,” Vandal said. “Make sure to wear a magic item to protect the fetus.”

“Are you sure, Van?!” Basdia exclaimed.

“Yes. Congratulations. Make sure to come by and get checked out regularly.”

And so they had wonderful news to share about two babies that day.



Under winter's clear blue sky and weak sunshine, Vandal and the girl reborn from the Living Dead were drying some seaweed together.

"Let's begin the experiment," Vandal said.

"Kay," the girl replied.

Vandal proceeded to slowly apply Wither and a gentle dose of Old Age to some seaweed that had just been put out to dry. If he didn't time it precisely, the seaweed would dry out and crumble or simply turn to dust. He pushed through the headaches and heat flashes to try and control the technique. Once it worked out, he turned the magic off and collected the nicely dried seaweed.

"Prepare for taste testing," Vandal said.

"Kay."

They placed a pot on the magic stove they had found in the ruins and added water and seaweed. Then they turned it on. It didn't take long for the soup to start bubbling.

Once they had enough broth, they removed the seaweed before the water boiled too much, then scooped out some servings into bowls using the ladle Vandal had gotten the blacksmith Datara to make. After letting the soup cool a little, they gave it a try.

"Okay. That's already pretty good," Vandal commented. Satisfied with the base broth, he started to add vegetables and other ingredients, and then dissolved in some miso to finish the soup off. "And now it's really good."

“Ooh, ooh,” said the baby.

“A bit too soon for miso soup for you, Pauvina,” Vandal said.

“Awww . . .” the baby replied despondently. Vandal gave the reborn Half Noble Orc—named Pauvina—a pat on the head while enjoying his soup success and this new discovery.

Using the Old Age skill, originally intended to age an organism and eventually kill it, Vandal could create the ultimate dried seaweed that was aged for 25 years in just one minute. This was revolutionary. He had picked that number from his memories of Earth, where he recalled that maturing dried seaweed for about that long created a high-grade product. Something to do with the umami.

He had no means to check on the umami content, of course, and he had never drunk broth made from such seaweed himself. He was open to the possibility that this was all in his head.

“Wooo!” cooed Pauvina.

At first, they had thought that maybe Pauvina didn’t have her memories, but she actually regained them pretty quickly after being born. As Vandal had feared, however, they seemed fragmented, and she wasn’t even able to remember her own name. What she did remember was her body being turned into a Living Dead and Vandal saving her. Vandal might have used her more than saved her, but she clearly felt indebted to Vandal and had taken quite a liking to him.

Pauvina burbled again. Even with some memories on board, her mental age was basically that of a child. Unlike Vandal, Pauvina was a baby who remembered a few fragments of her former life. Now she was going to have to grow up all over again.

And “grow up” was putting things lightly. After just three months, she was catching up to where Vandal was after three years. Even overlooking Vandal’s generally diminutive size, that was an impressive rate of growth. Her Noble Orc blood likely played a role here.

As Pauvina lifted him into the air, Vandal couldn’t help wondering if he was going down the mad scientist route, what with all the new races he was going around creating. Nuaza and the others from his previous batch of mutations had been thrilled with this new accomplishment, comparing it to the handiwork of the Goddess Vida herself. He really was going to be stuck as the “Oracle Child” if he kept this up. He was kind of hoping this goddess would speak up—in whatever manner suited her—and correct the situation.

Vandal turned back to the cooking. “Everything is going well.”

“Weee!”

“We could just use some bonito,” he mused.

Vandal wasn’t sure how long it would take for Pauvina to reach adulthood, but it couldn’t be more than a decade at the most. She was healthy, and they were getting along well. Having used her for reincarnation meant Vandal was responsible for her new life, and he fully intended to take good care of her.

Basdia’s pregnancy, discovered on the same day that Pauvina was born, was also proceeding without issue. Vandal was keeping a close eye on the situation, as Basdia was still only three months along, but the magic items were definitely working. She even enjoyed the piercing from a fashion perspective.

With Pauvina and Basdia requiring so much of his attention, he had stopped the dungeon visits for now, but he was still going on day trips into the demon barrens and continuing everyone’s training. That included helping his allies

acquire the Skip Incantation skill, as well as making more reversi and Jenga sets, fish paste, and miso. All was well.

The only thing he wasn't happy about was the bonito. As it turned out, they didn't smoke food here on Ramda. They dried meat, so Vandal had assumed that they would smoke it too, but that wasn't the case. That meant no roast beef, bacon, ham, sausages, or wieners. According to Kachia and the other humans, dried meat here was generally made by salting it first and then drying it in the sun. This all meant that, if Vandal wanted bonito, he was going to have to build some kind of smoking facility out of his own knowledge.

Dalshia had finally given him permission to use fire, but the hurdle was set a little high if the first thing he truly cooked for himself was to make bonito in a smoker cobbled together from half-remembered information.

"I did talk to the spirit of that Westerner who knew a lot about Japanese food on Origin, but he wasn't a bonito expert or anything," Vandal muttered.

Dry it, make some charcoal, and then smoke it: he had attempted the process multiple times, but ended up with just a burnt lump, or raw insides, or some other form of failure. Fermenting foods was completely different. He could simply set up the ingredients and use Ferment.

Making bacon and sausages was not going to be easy. That was a shame because the orc meat would have really been good for that. Though he supposed he didn't have the spices for tasty smoked orc yet.

"Can you please put me down?" Vandal asked Pauvina.

"Oooh!"

No. She evidently couldn't put him down yet. With a three-month-old still repeatedly lifting him into the air, Vandal began the fourth winter of his third

life.

Having finished the taste testing, Vandal headed toward his own sleeping quarters, carrying something he had made out of personal interest, other than the dried seaweed and attempts at bonito.

“Finally, I’ve got the color and luster I’ve been looking for!” He hadn’t been making food, but nail polish.

Unlike dried seaweed and bonito, cosmetics such as nail polish, lipstick, and rouge did exist in this world. Vandal was making nail polish because the gloss on Zandia’s nails had all peeled off.

“Now I can finally paint her nails!”

Zandia—who has also been known as the “Tiny Genuis”—was the second princess of Talosheim. At least, she had been, during her life; now she was nothing more than a left hand. She had evidently painted her nails red.

Red as blood and as the sun. A symbol of life. Those were supposedly the reasons why she had chosen this color.

However, in the almost 200 years since the Milg Shield Kingdom destroyed Talosheim, the nail polish she so loved had been lost. Any remaining supply had aged to dust, and those who knew how to make it were all dead.

That was where Vandal had come in. He had asked giantlings for ways to make nail polish and then collected ingredients and prepared the concoction himself. His Alchemy skill had provided some adjustments during the process, and he had achieved the task a lot more quickly than expected.

“Now for the all-important application.” He entered his room. “I’m back!”

Welcome back, Vandal. As he opened the door, he was greeted at once by Dalshia, who was still awake. I need to talk to you about Zandia's hand, actually.

"What about it? I was just about to give her a manicure," Vandal replied.

That's not going to be easy. When I woke up . . . well, she was gone, Dalshia said.

Vandal blinked. "Gone? The severed hand?"

He looked over at the table next to his bed, which was the spot where he had been keeping Zandia's hand. The drawer that had been firmly closed upon his departure was now open. He moved over and peered inside. The cloth the hand had been sitting on was still inside. The hand itself was gone.

"You're right. She's gone. But who would do such a thing? I'm pretty sure she didn't grow legs and walk off on her own."

It was gone when I woke up, Dalshia said, tilting her head in puzzlement. *I did hear strange sounds at times, but the other spirits told me there wasn't anything odd happening.* Dalshia's spirit was attached to one of her own small bone fragments, meaning she was unable to move from her position above the bag containing that bone. So she had asked spirits in the vicinity to help search but hadn't received any useful information.

"Spirits aren't exactly reliable when answering questions. Even if there wasn't anything odd, there might have been something that wasn't odd," Vandal reasoned. There might have been a mouse, lizard, or snake under the bed, but a spirit wouldn't consider that odd and would pay it no heed. Vandal, therefore, started by looking under the bed. He had the Night Vision skill, meaning he could see clearly between the bed and the floor.

And there was Zandia's hand.

“Oh!”

Maybe a small animal did get into the room, take the hand from the drawer, and carry her under the bed.

As he considered this possibility, Zandia’s hand suddenly twitched in front of him.

“Hmm?”

Then it used its five fingers to crawl across the floor toward him.

“I see. That explains it. Nothing odd here,” Vandal said. Zandia’s hand had already been here in the room. Spirits wouldn’t think anything of it moving out the drawer and under the bed.

Vandal scooped up the hand into his arms.

“Mom, I’ve found Zandia. The answer was simple: the hand turned into an undead and started moving around.”

Oh, my. I’m glad you found her, Dalshia said. *But isn’t this another problem?*

“Could be,” Vandal agreed. “I’ll get Borkz and the others in here.”

The first to arrive upon hearing this news was Borkz, who had known Zandia when she was whole and alive; then came Nuaza, Zadilis, and Basdia.

“Well, boy,” Zadilis said. “The hand spontaneously became an undead. Is such a thing even possible?”

“Yes, theoretically, it should be possible,” Vandal said. “This is the first case I’ve ever encountered, however.” Vandal always had a horde of allured spirits hanging around him. That created an environment in which undead were highly likely to emerge in his vicinity.

“Most of them can do nothing but gather around you, master,” squeaked

Skeleton. "It's rare for them to become undead without a command."

But it's not impossible. It's not like the young master ordered them not to turn into undead, Saria countered.

"Okay. Why are you all so interested in Zandia's hand, anyway?" Basdia asked. "I'm not here because her name is similar to my mother's—I'm here because another possible candidate to marry Van has appeared!"

Of course we're interested, said Rita, nodding along with Saria. *She's one who might be his wife in the future!*

As servants of the young master, this is just another part of our duties, Saria added.

That seemed to explain why the other undead were here. Vigaro stood behind them, looking down at the hand with interest. "I nothing better to do," he said.

"It might not even be her," Zadilis said. "What do you think, Borkz?"

"The hand understands what I'm saying, but it doesn't seem to know anything," Borkz reported, scratching at the bone part of his head.

Borkz had been trying to ask the hand about things Zandia would have known in life, telling it to tap once on the floor for yes and twice for no. As a result, they could tell that the hand understood what was being asked but didn't seem to have Zandia's memories.

"It might just not be able to remember," Borkz reasoned. "Child, can you take another look at the spirit in the hand?" Borkz picked up Zandia's hand and moved it over to Vandal.

Being able to see spirits meant that he should be able to tell what kind of spirit was in the hand. He took a moment to stare at the severed appendage,

which had five wriggling fingers, as if trying to reach for him.

“Hmmm, I’m sorry,” he finally reported. “I’ve tried to work it out multiple times, but I can’t see it. It’s definitely an old spirit.”

Too old for even Vandal’s abilities to make sense of, unfortunately. The more time that had passed since death, the less cohesive a spirit would remain, losing all memories of what they had looked like in life and turning into nothing more than a pale shining ball or flickering flame.

“The fact that it can understand someone besides me means it must be a pretty intelligent spirit. But I don’t know if it’s Zandia.”

“Okay. If it could be her, we should keep an eye on things,” Borkz suggested. “Child, that’s your department.” Then he placed Zandia’s wrist on top of Vandal’s head. The fingers gripped down to get a hold.

“You’re sure you want to leave this with me?” Vandal confirmed, standing with a massive hand clawing down onto his skull.

Borkz gave a shrug. “I’m sure you can handle it. The hand seems more taken with you than me. If you don’t mind, you can continue as you’ve been going.”

“Very well,” Vandal replied.

He wasn’t dissatisfied with that. Before it was a severed hand, now it was an undead severed hand. Not too different.

“We should give it a name, too. If it isn’t actually Zandia in there, then it might get confusing if and when we actually get Zandia’s body back.”

“And what if it’s actually her?” Zadilis asked.

“Once we find that out, we can change her name back to Zandia,” Vandal said.

The hand didn't seem upset at getting a new name either. It was moving its middle finger up and down, as though nodding.

"Since it's Zandia's left hand, how about Lefdia?" Vandal suggested.

The hand curled up on Vandal's head and stuck out its thumb. That looked like it was giving the okay—but then it lost balance and toppled over.

Vandal used his Telekinesis to grab and hold it. "For now, nice to meet you, Lefdia. Let's get those nailed polished."

And so Vandal found himself with a new fiancée (TBC), the undead left hand, Lefdia.



The search was full of hardship, to say the least.

The vampires had managed to find a comparatively safe route through the mountains, but they had still lost a third of their underling subordinate species along the way. Clearing that goal didn't make things any easier.

"I didn't think it would be this big a pain," Eleonora said, sighing as she dragged herself onward. The goal was to kill the baby dhampir, but there weren't exactly spells like Dhampir Radar or Dhampir Detector. They had therefore started by looking for a grotto inhabited by the few hundred ghouls the dhampir was said to lead. They might have lost much of their force crossing the mountains, but Eleonora had to at least presume there were at least 200 of them left.

So if they were going to make a home for 200 ghouls, they needed a large settlement. Ghouls also weren't suited to living at high altitudes or negotiating

cliff faces. They would choose a flat spot, much like their original jungle demon barren—which was now being developed by humans. She had sent out familiars to search based on these parameters—and hadn’t found a single ghoul.

“Where have they gone? They can’t have just vanished like mist.” Eleonora sighed as she dumped some of their supply of holy water onto a crippled subordinate species vampire at her feet. These subs really were awful. Their master wasn’t much of anything either, but the subs were useless. She wondered if there was any helping them at all.

“They might be underground,” Sercent suggested. “We should check caves.” He was looking pretty exhausted as well. He didn’t care about the cost to his minions, but completing this task was about more than advancement for him. If he failed, he was dead.

“Ghouls still need to eat,” Eleanora said. “We would have seen them coming in and out. Maybe he was finished with them after crossing the mountains and just disposed of them?”

Regardless of whether he could pull off such a feat, it would explain why they had found nothing even with all of her familiars. This was the same dhampir who hid himself away as a newborn for half a year from the infamous religious fanatic Goldan. If he was alone, he wouldn’t need nearly as much food, and hiding underground would be much easier.

“Maybe our worthless dead fools have been snitching on us to the dhampir after their deaths?” Eleonora suggested. The dhampir was apparently a Medium, so they had tried to kill and be killed as little as possible. But searching the mountains was too difficult.

Bad luck had also played a role. Bumping into a dragon was one of the main reasons they lost so many minions. They had to use holy water to completely

eradicate the bodies of the fallen, but they couldn't see what was happening to the spirits themselves. The only ones who could see spirits that hadn't turned into undead were Mediums. So the vampires had no idea if the spirits were rushing off to tattle.

"This dhampir might be a Medium but I still can't believe he can summon the spirits of people he's never even seen," Eleonora said. "At least I hope he can't."

"Fair enough." Sercrent paused. "But what next? Where should we search?"

"Well, how about the Talosheim ruins?"

The kingdom of giantlings had been wiped out by the Milg Shield Kingdom under the Amidd Empire 200 years ago. Among the three progenitor species vampires who led their faction, Gubamon had been involved in the action against the giantlings, and Tehneshia too. The place had surely become a demon barren full of undead giantlings.

"It's probably in ruins, but there would still be buildings they could use. Easier than building a settlement from scratch."

The dhampir wouldn't have known this in advance, but there were also dungeons close to Talosheim. They could now be using those to acquire food.

But Sercrent didn't look happy with that idea either. "Talosheim must be overflowing with undead," he replied. "They couldn't have made a settlement there."

Eleonora looked at him, and for a moment was driven by the urge to just kill him on the spot. The reason Sercrent didn't want to go to Talosheim was pathetic to the extreme: he didn't want Eleonora to take control of this operation.

Sercrent needed to absolve himself of his previous failures and restore his

standing by defeating the dhampir, but he also had to be the one responsible for doing so. If Eleonora claimed the prize, he would be out in the cold. Even if he completed the task, if he did so by listening to Eleonora, it would tar him as a worthless fool incapable of dealing with a baby dhampir without oversight. Among the vampires who worshipped the evil gods, sucking up to those on the rise and thoroughly kicking those on the fall were the tenets of their existence. If Eleonora wanted the operation to proceed smoothly, she needed to make Sercrent look good while doing it.

However, even though Eleonora understood all of this, she couldn't play along. She was one of Vilkain's personal guard, meaning she couldn't afford to end up beneath Sercrent on the chain of command. She'd face bitter punishment or have further unhealing wounds inflicted. So she had decided to kick this foolish weakling while he was down and then just keep on kicking.

"If that's how you feel, I'll go check it out alone," Eleonora said crisply. She only remained with Sercrent all this time because she needed his resources. She didn't have permission from Vilkain to make her own subs. Without Sercrent, she would have had nothing but familiars to do her bidding.

With all the losses they have suffered, however, those "resources" were now much thinner.

"Hold on a moment!" Sercrent protested. If Eleonora did kill the dhampir while he wasn't around, that was as good as failing the mission himself. It was also a chance for him to take all the glory, of course, but he wasn't as strong as Eleonora. With his reduced subordinate numbers, there were few advantages to him in going at it alone.

"... Very well. You twisted my arm. Let's go and check out Talosheim," Sercrent agreed.

Eleonora proceeded to fly up into the night sky, uncaring of this prattling fool of a vampire and his pointless pissing contest—even though he had lived countless more lifetimes than her.

However, upon reaching the ruins of Talosheim—which the records of the Milg Shield Kingdom army stated had been eradicated 200 years previously—Eleonora was left gaping, eyes wide, stunned in place. She never looked so dumbstruck, even when she was alive.

“Impossible,” she finally stammered.

“This has to be some kind of illusion,” Sercent managed.

Eleonora didn’t have to worry about the fool or his minions seeing her like this—they were all making the same face.

Massive castle walls sparkled under the light of the moon and stars. To Eleonora and the vampires, it looked as brilliant as the daytime sun. The white-stone walls didn’t have a single vine climbing them. They weren’t broken or crumbling. There wasn’t a single crack, a single stone out of place.

“What’s going on here?” Eleanora stuttered. “The Milg Shield Kingdom army smashed their walls, surely. Mikhail smashed them!”

“That’s right,” Sercent muttered, working through it himself. “The records state that the gates were destroyed and castle walls breached in two places. Even if that was a mistake, there’s been no one here to care for or fix these walls for two centuries.”

But, as he talked, he regained his composure.

“Of course. The undead. The Talosheim undead must have done all this. Undead are tireless. They could do this, given 200 years.”

Eleanor raised her brows. “Undead fixed and maintained the walls?”

Undead weren’t known for their productivity or social organization. They might show more if they were following someone more powerful than themselves, but in most cases, they were just an aimless bunch of reanimated bodies. Even with 200 years to get the job done, she couldn’t believe they would simply clean and polish these walls, let alone perform complex tasks such as large-scale repairs. If this was possible, every haunted house and ghost ship across the world would be spotless and sparkling. She gave Sercent a look that clearly doubted his sanity.

“So? If you’re so clever, what did this?” he accused.

That was a question that Eleonora didn’t have an answer for.

These walls clearly hadn’t been made by monsters, and they had received no reports of the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom seizing the Talosheim ruins and creating a new town there.

But the vampires weren’t here to take back or occupy Talosheim. They were simply here to kill the dhampir.

“. . . Let’s check out inside,” Eleonora suggested.

The walls didn’t seem to have sentries posted. There were some giantling undead at the gates, but that didn’t matter to the noble species vampires with their powers of flight. They could just fly over the walls, while the subordinate species could use their claws to climb.

But the walls marked only the start of their surprises.

The city of Talosheim was dark and silent, looking like the ghost town it should have been. However, something else strange was immediately apparent.

“The buildings aren’t damaged,” Eleonora said.

The structures comprising Talosheim all stood in proud rows. They were larger, solid designs created in stone, but even so, this place should have been sitting unattended for 200 years, after terrible fighting.

“You think this is work of the undead as well?”

“Who else? Ah, I know! The dhampir! He had his ghoul minions do all this!” Sercrent yelped.

“And ghouls repaired giantling-sized buildings at the same specifications?”

That shut Sercrent up, but Eleonora was still unable to provide her own answer as to who had been fixing this place up.

Her quickly cobbled-together working theory was that a couple of hundred giantlings must have survived the attack by the Milg Shield Kingdom forces 200 years ago, probably by escaping to the territory of Duke Heartner. Once the coast was clear, they returned and spent the next 200 years rebuilding the city. But even that was hard to believe. It also didn’t explain why the city was so quiet.

“Master Sercrent, I detect a faint light,” one of his minions reported.

“What?! It’s coming from the castle. Okay, let’s go,” Sercrent commanded.

The mission still came first. But just when they thought the worst surprises were past them, another shock arrived when they reached the open square in front of the castle.

“This is taking them forever.”

“But they can’t very well ask the young master to do it.”

“Squeak, Nuaza said they will be finished by spring. Just have to look forward to it.”

Two strangely shaped living armors and a skeleton were looking at a half-finished stone statue.

“I’ll win this time!”

“Not yet, whelp. I’m not losing to you!”

A group of giantling undead munched on baked confections while clicking pieces over some kind of game board.

“That looks great!”

“Mine with miso!”

“Mine with fish paste!”

A group of black orcs and black goblins were cooking and eating skewers of meat over a big frying pan.

“This fin tastes of nothing.”

“But I hear it’s good for beauty. It makes a great soup.”

A male and female ghoul, walking along arm in arm.

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

“Now look . . . that way!”

A bunch of humanoid monsters with canine heads, also playing some kind of unknown game.

Sercent stared down at his subordinates. “What’s going on here? I expected some ghouls . . . but there are orcs and goblins in strange colors and monsters with canine heads. Then there are undead mixed in among them, carrying on like this is some kind of human city!” Sercent had to know that none of his companions could provide an answer, but he couldn’t help himself. That was

how bizarre, how removed from the reality that Eleonora and the others understood this entire scene was.

For different races to come together like this was unheard of, apart from when under the yoke of slavery. It was especially impossible when undead were involved. With the exception of those miraculously retaining some of their personality from life, undead would normally attack and eat any living creature, man, or monster. But here, they were just hanging out.

Eleonora doubted these could all be such high-level undead. Even if many of them had somehow retained their personalities, they should still be violent and angry.

“What’s going on? What does this mean? Did someone tame them? But that’s impossible too! Undead can’t be tamed!” Sercrent’s voice was low and urgent.

He was also correct. Vampires couldn’t tame undead; humans certainly couldn’t. Skilled holders of the Tamer Job had tried to tame undead numerous times in the past, but they hadn’t even managed to tame the lowest of the low rank 1 undead like Living Bones and Zombies, let alone high-tier undead like Elder Liches. The results of these efforts had cemented the common understanding that undead were like reptilian monsters: completely impossible to tame.

However, Eleonora and the others did know of an exception to this rule.

“It can’t be . . . but could there be someone here blessed by a demon god? No! By the goddess?” Eleonora suggested.

One blessed by the Goddess Vida, who had revived Zakkato as undead, or by one such as Demon God of Living Pleasure Hihiryu-Shukaka, whom Eleonora and her sect worshipped, might be able to create and control undead.

“A vampire from the sect of another demon god . . . no, it has to be Vida. There’s someone here blessed by the Goddess Vida.” Eleonora had spotted the restored temple to Vida. If there was one here blessed by a demon or evil god, then such a temple would surely have still been in ruins.

“Impossible!” Sercent’s eyes were wide in denial. If there was one here under the protection of the Goddess Vida, then it very well might be one of the progenitor species who worshipped that goddess.

“Master Sercent, we should run for it while we can!”

“They haven’t spotted us yet. Let’s retreat!”

The cowering subordinates were quick to suggest they get away with their lives. If there was a Vida progenitor here, then it was clear what would happen if they were discovered: a one-sided massacre, unleashed by overwhelming strength.

Noble species like Sercent and Eleonora wouldn’t make any difference. That was the size of the power gap between the progenitor and noble species. That explained why those with prickly—to put it mildly—personalities like Vilkain and Tehneshia, who made enemies inside and out with just a few words, were still able to rule over hundreds of noble species for tens of thousands of years. Sercent, having been tortured by Vilkain, and Eleonora, having had direct contact with her master, understood this even better than the subordinates. They both wanted to retreat at once, they really did, but at the same time, they also spotted a reason why they couldn’t.

“Hold on,” Eleonora said. “There are ghouls mixed in among the undead and goblins. The dhampir must be here.”

They had searched everywhere other than Talosheim and found no sign of

any ghouls. Yet, there were ghouls here.

These had to be the same ghouls that the dhampir has led across the mountains from the Milg Shield Kingdom. That meant the dhampir was with them.

“You know what will happen if we run away without killing the dhampir,” Eleonora said.

The pale faces of the subordinates who had been so keen on running away now turned—if possible—even more pale.

“We must search for the dhampir. His name was Vandal, correct? Eleonora. Capture a ghoul or two and see what they know,” Sercent ordered.

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do.”

They needed to identify the dhampir and eradicate him before this powerful being protected by Vida discovered their presence. Then they could run for the hills. Pushing down her general disgust with Sercent, Eleonora started to work on pulling off this most difficult of tasks.



Talea was walking back from the public baths, clothed in a fur coat to keep off the winter chill.

“Ooh . . . it’s really getting cold,” she muttered.

The place might be called the City of the Sun, but winter in Talosheim was colder than it had been in their previous home in the jungle demon barrens. She refused to believe it was because she had become more susceptible to cold in

the last few years.

Even so, Talea looked at the ghouls and undead enjoying themselves out on the main street and smiled. Things were good. And only getting better.

There would probably have been many who took exception to such an assessment. Talosheim's residents didn't seem to be living especially rich or fulfilled lives at just a glance. Few of them wore clothing made from proper cloth, with most of the garments coming from hides and furs peeled from monsters. They looked like some wild tribe. That impression was reinforced by the lack of shops, with commerce still relying on a primitive economy of trade. There were no gaudy theaters, no stores selling books packed with knowledge, and no restaurants serving gourmet food.

And yet what Vandal has created for them eclipsed all of that.

He had created the simple but fun game of reversi, something that would normally be the purview of the rich, and given out sets for free. More precious, however, were the variety of different condiments and spices he created. The walnut sauce and acorn cookies he had created in the jungle demon barrens had been unique for the location, but nothing too rare otherwise. But since coming to Talosheim, everything he had created—although invented might be the better word—was simply off the charts. The fish sauce. The miso. The ginger, which had only ever been used in medicine. And the wasabi they had discovered here. He turned them into fantastic dishes and provided a base supply for free. If people wanted more, they could trade for it in the ruins of the adventurers' guild.

Vandal didn't understand what a big difference this all made. Talea wasn't sure she understood the full extent of it herself. What she did know was that such unreserved use of condiments was typically reserved for the richest of the

rich. At best, the poor folk got some salt, which they needed to carefully ration. Sugar was a rare, rare treat. Things might have improved a little recently, but that was how it had been when Talea lived in a city more than 200 years ago. Here, an established exchange rate allowed everyone to get whatever they needed. If the miso or fish paste went on sale in a human city, they would surely fly off the shelves even at a high price.

Vandal had also started to make the seaweed soup and bonito, although that second one wasn't finished yet.

Then there was his aid in resolving the ghouls' fertility issues. For Talea personally, his repairing of all the public baths in Talosheim was one of the biggest contributions. For regular folk, having access to hot water up to the shoulders was as luxurious as dining with all those condiments.

"Glory for ghouls is assured for the next thousand years, so long as we have Lord Van on our side!" Talea exclaimed. The extent of what Vandal had achieved enabled that much confidence. But Talea's understanding of this also created a further issue for her. "How can I hope to get closer to him?"

Talea wasn't a fighter. She was a crafter, capable of making weapons and armor from monster materials. Vandal's focus on tackling dungeons and training in the martial arts reduced the time they got to spend together. Vandal was himself small of stature, wearing only skins and furs. He also used his own claws as his weapon, meaning Talea never got the chance to make any gear for him.

At the moment, he wasn't taking as many trips out, waiting for Pauvina to grow a little more and for Basdia to clear the three-month hurdle for her pregnancy. But once spring rolled around, he would surely return to the dungeons.

"I'm really feeling the distance here. The distance between Lord Van and myself. I wasn't even by his side when Lefdia appeared," she muttered to herself. While Talea was back in the town, Basdia and the others were off enjoying intense moments of life and death action with Vandal. That former adventurer ghoul called Kachia had started to act suspiciously, and Zadilis was apparently going to tag along on the next dungeon trip. But it was the "birth" of Lefdia, the undead hand of Princess Zandia, that had lit a fire under Talea's sense of crisis.

Zandia was a member of the Talosheim royal family, who still had strong support among the giantling undead today. The hand was always crawling around Vandal, clinging to his head and his back. It was stuck to him, quite literally. This was bad. Really bad.

"Maybe if I had some daughters of my own, but I only had sons," Talea lamented. "Ah! I could make one now! I'm 260, but there's still time! But no . . . I could never give birth to another man's child in front of Lord Van!"

Vandal was basically midwife for everyone. If Talea was going to have a child that would mean Vandal would see everything. She couldn't face that kind of embarrassment. She had no idea how Basdia could.

When Talea asked Basdia that very question, the ghoul had replied that it was no big deal, that it wasn't like Vandal actually watched them make the baby. That probably marked the line between pure ghouls and former human ghouls.

"I could put myself out there," Talea pondered. "But if that fails, I won't have anywhere else to turn . . . huh?"

Clatter, clatter, clatter. A small stone rolled out from an alleyway between two buildings. Talea turned to look toward the alleyway and saw a woman.

Her ghoul eyesight, able to see clearly even in just the moonlight, was her undoing. Talea got a complete look at the woman and her red eyes.

“I need you to tell me about this Lord Van character,” the woman said. She had red eyes, red hair, and white skin. Talea knew from her appearance that this was someone who wasn’t a mere Talosheim resident, but Talea wasn’t on guard, or worried, or scared. She felt only familiarity and friendship.

“My pleasure.”

“Thank you. Let’s talk over here,” the woman suggested.

With a relaxed, happy expression on her face, Talea followed the woman—Eleonora—into the alleyway.

From among all the ghouls walking past, Eleonora selected one who was muttering to herself about “Lord Van.” She didn’t look all that strong and seemed to speak about “Van” with familiarity, suggesting she knew the dhampir. Both of these hunches turned out to be true. Eleanora’s alluring gaze skill went into effect without any resistance, and she successfully lured the ghoul away. Then she managed to obtain information on the dhampir.

“Lord Van is in the castle,” the ghoul explained. “He’s sleeping in rooms once used by a minister, or a general, or someone important.”

The fact the dhampir wasn’t using the king’s chambers confirmed that there was someone more powerful whom the undead were serving. “Good,” Eleonora said. “And is there someone in this city who has received the blessings of the Goddess Vida?”

“Blessings of the Goddess?” Talea tilted her head. The allure made her feel like as close to Eleonora as family, but she couldn’t produce answers to

questions she didn't understand.

But this was a question from someone she wanted to please. She wanted to provide an answer.

"I'm sure you mean Lord Van." That felt like the only answer. Talea had quit being human more than 200 years ago; she had no awareness of the fact that undead couldn't be tamed. She just took it for granted that Vandal could do so. He had been going around with them from the moment she met him, so there was no reason to think deeply about it. On top of that, Nuaza and the other giantling undead called Vandal the Oracle Child. Putting all of this together, it seemed natural that her pale inquisitor was asking about Vandal.

"What? The dhampir?!"

This news sent another ripple of surprise through Eleonora and the other vampires. The dhampir they were trying to eradicate had already received the blessings of the Goddess Vida. If that was true, then all the ghouls and other undead in Talosheim were as good as his arms and legs.

"This is bad," Sercent muttered. "Very bad. We can't leave things like this. We need to finish this immediately!"

One of the things the demon god vampires had really feared—the dhampir forming up some kind of organization—was already happening. With all the ghouls and now countless undead, the dhampir probably had an army of more than one thousand. Not to mention this fighting force had taken up residence in a hardy fortress city. Their defenses were currently full of holes, but more undead would quickly plug those up, keeping the vampires from sneaking in here so easily again. Even worse, now that Sercent had afforded the dhampir the time to create this force and entrench themselves in this city, he would face painful reprisals from Vilkain upon reporting this fact, even if they did complete

their mission. Even Gubamon, who cared little for the antics of his minions, would have to lay some blame for such a serious mistake. That was why he couldn't help but speak up, but Leonora waved him down to shut his mouth.

"Finish? Finish what?" Talea asked, responding to Sercent's comment. Leonora's Alluring Doom Gaze technique wasn't strong enough to affect a subject permanently. They had extracted the information they needed, but having this woman raise a stink now would still be bad for them.

"Nothing that you need worry about. Thank you for everything. You really have been a big help," Leonora said soothingly.

"Hehe, that makes me happy to hear," Talea replied.

Fortunately, Leonora managed to get her mark's attention back.

"You must be getting sleepy after all this talking. You can stay here in my room tonight," Leonora suggested. "Lie down, go ahead."

"Now that you mention it . . . my eyelids are feeling a little heavy. If I can have a moment here . . ." Talea proceeded to stretch herself out in a room of the empty stone house and immediately close her eyes.

One of the subordinates drew his sword and swung it down at the sleeping ghoul. In the next instant, a clang resounded off the walls.

"Gwaah! Lady Leonora? Why!?" Before his sword could reach Talea, Leonora's slender hand had snapped the sub's sword arm.

"What's the meaning of this?" Sercent seethed. "We're finished with this ghoul! Killing her shouldn't matter!"

"Of course it would matter, Sercent. Were you listening to anything she just told us?"

"If you mean the spirits stuff, simple! Just dump some holy water on as soon as she's dead!" Sercent retorted haughtily.

Eleonora pressed her hand to her forehead and sighed. Becoming a vampire had pushed her beyond the reach of sickness and physical maladies, but spending time around this guy was always a headache.

"Think. This isn't like the death of one of your minions." It was like talking to a child. "This ghoul is completely besotted with this dhampir. If she dies then she will rush immediately to tattle to her beloved. If we managed to splash some holy water around before that happened, we might be able to purify the ghoul's spirit, preventing her from immediately giving us away. But this dhampir can tame undead. Can you state that this ghoul's corpse won't be possessed by a different spirit, turn undead, and start moving around? There are hundreds . . . maybe thousands of undead here." Using holy water to purify the spirit wouldn't stop the corpse from turning undead. Without a proper burial or thorough destruction of the corpse, there was every possibility of a random spirit inhabiting the body and turning undead. Word also had it that undead spawned more easily around existing undead.

"I'll give you that," Sercent admitted, "but even if she did turn undead, so what? She'll be a moaning zombie, nothing more. Worthless as a source of information."

If it wasn't Talea's own spirit, then it wouldn't be able to tell anyone information about Eleonora and Sercent.

"But what if one of the other ghouls or undead discovers that zombie?" Eleonora continued. "From what we've seen so far, even the goblins here look pretty smart." From what they had learned while talking to Talea, this ghoul was a prominent figure this community. If she was found wandering around as

fresh undead, it would quickly cause a commotion. They might have been able to exploit that to kill the dhampir, but they would face dim prospects of getting out alive afterward.

Of course, they could burn the body to prevent it from turning or use holy water to purify it. But neither Sercent nor Eleonora could think of a technique to burn the body without noise or smoke. If the smoke from burning the body was spotted, then they were back with the commotion conundrum. As for the holy water option, they simply didn't have much of it left.

By the time the ghoul woke up again, the vampires would be far from this place. They might be able to use her when killing the dhampir or when making their escape, and so keeping her under their hat was the better move.

“Bah.” Sercent clicked his tongue, accepting the situation but displeased with it. “You, hurry up and fix that arm,” he spat at the subordinate clutching his broken limb.

Eleonora would have liked some credit for only breaking his arm, an easy fix, rather than causing tendon damage, but she kept her mouth shut. She couldn't ask for too much.

“Let's move,” Eleonora said.

They left the sleeping Talea behind and headed toward the castle, where their real target awaited them. The vampires were still sure that, by the time the ghoul awoke, this would all be settled, and they would be far from this place.

Getting inside the castle proved easy. There were no sentries to speak of. Either this dhampir was overly confident in his own strength, or simply oblivious to potential danger.

“How do we kill him?” Sercent asked.

“Any noise will attract the undead outside,” Eleonora reasoned. “Now that we’ve come this far, we also need to check on the body of Sword King Borkz that Gubamon was asking about. For the dhampir, I’ll allure him with my doom gaze and then you chop off his head.” While using her Alluring Doom Gaze, she had to maintain eye contact with the subject. Anything that interrupted would instantly break the effect. It was safest to not have to perform the kill herself.

Gubamon, the progenitor who created Sercent, had the habit of acquiring the bodies of those known as “heroes” and collecting them as undead. During the fighting in Talosheim 200 years ago, he had also sought to add bodies to his collection. However, the vampire he sent with orders to bring back Sword King Borkz happened to encounter Divine Ice Spear Mikhail and so, predictably, failed in his task. Eleonora didn’t have any specific reasons to help out Gubamon but also no reasons to get on his bad side. It was certainly worth paying heed to what he wanted.

“I assume he is already undead,” Eleonora added.

“Most likely, but we still need to confirm it. Even though Mikhail took him out, we’re still talking about a former hero. If he is undead, he’ll likely be a high rank. I’m sure he wouldn’t serve a baby dhampir, but the baby might know where to find him,” Sercent replied.

“Okay,” Eleonora said. “I’ll ask the dhampir once I have him allured.”

Sercent’s eyes had a dangerous light burning inside them, speaking to how cornered he clearly was. If he could bring back even a piece of Borkz’s bones, he might be able to escape punishment from Gubamon. He was willing to stake everything on that hope. If he crashed and burned, he could easily drag Eleonora down with him. From Eleonora’s perspective, she hated Sercent, but

helping him out was a better idea.

Eleonora slid smoothly into the unguarded room, slipping silently through the doorway. She gasped.

Her eyes met those of the dhampir.

She was staring at him in surprise. Technically, this situation suited her. She had activated her Alluring Doom Gaze prior to entering the room, just in case; that placed the dhampir immediately under her control. The proof of this was right in front of her. There was no light of intent in the eyes of the dhampir. She felt like she was staring into the eyes of a dead fish.

“You’re Vandal?” Eleonora asked.

“Yes. I’m Vandal,” the dhampir replied. He had white hair and the mixed color eyes of mixed blood. He also answered to the name. This child was the target dhampir.

But something also felt off to Eleonora. She wasn’t sure the Alluring Doom Gaze was actually working. A subject under her influence normally had a slack, eager-to-please look on their face and spoke slowly, with some slobbering. But this dhampir’s face was expressionless. His voice was firm. And there was still a flicker of strength in his eyes, which should have been hollow and vacant. Looking into those eyes was like gazing into a chilling, unknowable abyss.

Is he resisting my gaze? Eleonora thought. He would need powerful, high-level mental resistance skills for that. Dhampir Resist Maladies and dark elf Resist Magic wouldn’t be enough. He might have high Spiritual Pollution . . . but then he probably wouldn’t be able to hold a rational conversation. He certainly doesn’t look that far gone, but I need to make sure this is working.

Eleonora had absolute confidence in her gaze, but this dhampir was protected

by Vida. She had to keep her wits about her.

“Say. What do you think about me?” she asked, provocatively.

“Uhm . . . you look very pretty,” the child replied.

“That’s nice to hear. Do you think we could be friends?”

“Sure. If you want to be friends with me.”

“In that case, will you pray to the demon god Hihiryu-Shukaka? The god who me and my friends follow? Just say what a wonderful god he is,” Eleonora said.

“Okay . . .” The dhampir proceeded to do what Eleonora asked, putting his hands together and saying that a wonderful god Hihiryu-Shukaka was. Then he just looked quietly back at Eleonora. She had clearly been overthinking things.

If this dhampir was in his right mind, he’d immediately realize I’m a vampire and be on guard. And if he’s blessed by Vida, then he would never willingly intone the name of a demon god.

The second part in particular was something he would never do without the influence of the Doom Gaze. This dhampir was still a child, but information suggested he was smart, and his minions called him names like “King” and “Oracle Child.” That meant he was surely proud. She had thought he was odd looking at first, but he was starting to seem almost cute.

Now she just needed to extract the required information and bring him over to Sercent and the others.

“You’ve been taming undead, haven’t you?” Eleonora started. “How did you do it? When did the goddess bless you?”

“Yes, I’ve been taming them, but I couldn’t tell you how,” he replied. “In terms of this blessing business . . . you mean the oracle stuff?”

That was another surprise. He wasn't just blessed but also received an oracle from the goddess? This dhampir was under the watch of the goddess, for sure.

She reflexively worried, for a moment, if killing him could be dangerous. That was a futile question, however, because failure to do so would mean disobeying orders from Vilkain, which was just as dangerous a proposal.

"Okay. What about Sword King Borkz—do you know of him? Can you tell me where he is?" Eleonora continued.

"Borkz should be in the audience chamber."

"Should? So he's undead?" she asked.

"Yes," he responded.

As expected. If Borkz was still in the audience chamber—where she had been told to look for his body—that suggested this dhampir had not been able to tame him. A hero undead had obviously proven too much to handle. In that case, it was probably best not to risk trying to recover him. If Sercent wanted to try it then he could have a go on his own, and good luck to him.

"Also . . . how did you repair this castle? The city? This place should be in ruins. Did you have the undead repair everything?"

"No. I made golems and they repaired everything."

Golems. That suggested that, as well as the Medium, he also had an Alchemist Job. She needed to ask more along these lines . . .

"Hey. How long are you planning to take with this?" Sercent entered the room, subordinates following behind him. "You've asked everything we need to know. We're finished with him."

"I was supposed to bring him out to you," Eleonora replied.

“Then do your job. I only came in because you were taking too long.”

“What a short temper.” Eleonora could see Sercent baring his fangs in the corner of her eye, hardly hiding his rage.

She wondered if his behavior was meant to be threatening. She needed to keep her eyes locked with the dhampir in order to maintain the effect of Alluring Doom Gaze, meaning she could do without the distractions.

“This child might be useful to us,” she said. “We should extract details on how he tames the undead and the way he used golems to make the repairs.”

If taming the undead came from his blessing from the goddess, killing this dhampir might purchase the wrath of the goddess and force into action the Vida progenitor vampire species that lurked deep in the demon barrens.

In addition, a way to make repairs using golems would be a massive help. This dhampir hadn’t been in Talosheim for even a year. If he could complete the repairs to this fortress castle in such a short time, he might be able to build an entire small fortress in a month. The tactical value was immeasurable. Even Sercent could surely see that.

“Eleonora, have you gone insane?” Sercent asked. “We have been ordered to kill this dhampir. That is our top priority. Everything else is secondary to that. It doesn’t matter what secrets he knows or what rare skills he holds.” His reply was in keeping with the internal structure of their organization: complete and absolute loyalty to the orders of the progenitor species.

His was the correct move. As Sercent stated, both Vilkain and Gubamon placed the utmost emphasis on the execution of their orders. Anything else was just noise; they would not receive praise for anything they achieved if they failed to execute their orders.

“Why are you questioning my sanity?”

“Because it is in question,” Sercent sniped back. “You haven’t become attached to this runt already, have you? From where I’m standing, it looks like you’re hesitating to kill this dhampir and asking silly questions to stretch things out.”

“You dare to even suggest such a thing?” Eleonora exclaimed. “The very idea is an insult!” Her voice was raised but not in anger. His suggestion shook her. Then she was surprised at finding herself so shaken at a seemingly ridiculous claim.

Impossible! Eleonora thought. I’ve suddenly developed a guilty conscience? I thought I cast such feelings away when I swore my loyalty to Lord Vilkain!

She had been sold by her family to work in the mines. That was where one of the organizations under Vilkain’s spreading umbrella picked her up and groomed her. She had been put through strenuous training, with others who didn’t meet the grade getting their blood drained right in front of her eyes many times. She had even been close with some of those she then had to watch get killed.

She faced fights to the death against those struggling in the same conditions as her, constant pressure to inform on and betray those around her, and bouts of torture for seemingly no reason. But she made it through and finally managed to become a vampire.

Eleonora recalled one of Vilkain’s lectures during one such torture session. “Listen carefully, Eleonora,” he had said. “There are only two types of creatures in this world. Those who stand above others in dominance and the weak who get trampled beneath their feet. If you wish to dominate, then you must trample. You can only dominate if you have someone beneath you. Is there a

king without a single peasant serving him? If you don't wish to be abused and debased, then you must abuse and debase someone else."

His voice and the wounds he had inflicted that day remained chiseled into her body and soul. If you didn't want to lose everything, you had to take what you wanted from others. If you didn't want to be hurt, you had to hurt others. If you didn't want to be killed, you had to kill others. It was the only way to defend yourself. An indelible law of nature.

She should therefore not be hesitating to kill this dhampir. She had killed a lot of people already. Countless times she had been betrayed by friends and allies and betrayed in return. She had almost been killed and killed in return. She couldn't understand where this hesitation was coming from.

"If you're so bothered, you do it. Or have one of the other minions do it. You want me to do all the work while you just stand on the sidelines?" Eleonora asked.

At that taunt, the subordinates all gave a shudder, looking at each other, and then took a synchronized step—backward. None of them moved toward the dhampir. Certainly not. It was almost like something was pushing them away.

"Eleonora, you do it. Otherwise I will report to Lord Vilkain that you showed hesitation when it came to killing the dhampir," Sercrent said.

"You wouldn't dare!" Eleonora exclaimed. She had to exert considerable mental strength to keep herself from looking over at Sercrent. His capacity to ignore his own countless mistakes turned her stomach. She was driven by the urge to rip out his throat with her claws.

The answer to the predicament, however, was simple. She just had to kill this dhampir.

“Can you come here?” she asked him, her eyes still fixed on his. Those hollow, empty, dead eyes.

She was going to kill him. Simple. Once he moved closer, she could thrust her sword through him or slash him with her claws. Just kick him in the soft belly and rip him open. Eleonora had the strength to kill a heavily armored knight with ease. Killing this child would be like squishing a fly.

The dhampir proceeded to move toward her, unassuming in his movements. Her breathing was becoming ragged, slipping out of her control. The child was within kicking range. Her chest started to ache.

No. Maybe not a kick. Her nails. She would use her nails to finish him.

Now he was within nail range. Her hands were shaking. Let him come a little closer. But if he moved any closer, he would move out of her line of sight. Sercent and the others were behind her, so she couldn’t back up.

Without seemingly any other choice, Eleonora moved to pick the dhampir up. She could grab his head, stick her fangs in his cheek, drink his blood, and kill him that way.

Then she peered into Vandal’s eyes at close range. Still without a spark of light. Empty, no reflections within them. And yet, amid that nothingness, she felt the presence of . . . something. Something from which she could never escape, no matter how hard she ran. Something unimaginable.

No! I can’t stand against him! That instinctual impulse froze Eleonora in place. She was breathing hard, shoulders heaving, unable to stick her fangs into the dhampir in the end.

“Underlings!” That was the moment when Sercent shouted. “Kill them both, Eleonora and the dhampir! Just like when you killed that scumbag Varen!”

“What?!” Eleonora gave a shout as swords were swiftly pointed at both her and the dhampir. She felt her body get pulled forward and go flying as the blade coming for her stabbed into her back, and she rolled onto the dhampir’s bed.

“Gah! Avoided it on reflex,” Sercent bemoaned. “I guess you are one of Vilkain’s personal guard. But you won’t be able to defeat us with that injury.”

Eleonora had sustained a deep cut to her back, reaching almost to her heart. It was tough to kill a noble species without destroying their heart or chopping off their head, but this kind of damage would slow her down.

“If I shut you up along with this dhampir, then I won’t have to worry about Vilkain or Gubamon finding out what’s been going on here! Die!”

Sercent might have been running his mouth simply because he was feeling something similar to Eleonora from the dhampir—if not as strongly—and he was trying to shake it off.

But this merely led him down the worst possible path.

“What did you just say?” came cold words from the child’s mouth.

The Doom Gaze hadn’t been working after all. Eleonora forgot her pain, still frozen by the terror of this dhampir, but also flooded with a sense of relief.

Because, in that moment, his eyes were not turned on her.



A little earlier, Vandal awoke unexpectedly.

“. . . Something is riling up the spirits,” he muttered.

Borkz couldn’t have been getting into any trouble with a dungeon rampage at

this hour. He tried asking the spirits directly but didn't get any answers.

It seemed better that he stayed awake for a while. He wasn't feeling anything from Detect Danger, so it didn't seem like any disaster-level monsters were attacking Talosheim or anything like that.

He decided to hang out and see what happened next. It might be nothing more than Pauvina coming in, having woken up in the night.

"I wonder if Mom and Lefdia are sleeping."

The bag containing his mom's bone, placed on the table next to his bed, was quiet. Lefdia, in the drawer below it, was quiet too. As he was wondering how to spend the time as he waited for whatever was going to happen, he felt some kind of presence.

"Detect Life," he said, spreading the detection over a wide area. With that, he discovered a number of lifeforms entering the castle. He wondered who it could be at this time of night. The fact that he could detect them with this technique meant that they weren't undead, but that didn't help him work out who they might be.

Aside from perhaps the baths, there shouldn't be anyone in the castle apart from Vandal, Pauvina, and Borkz. Zadilis was out in a dungeon and Basdia had gone to spend the night with Bildy to hear about child rearing. He had invited Talea to come and live in the castle, but she was so busy that she opted for the convenience of living in her studio. She hadn't seemed especially happy about that choice, however, and Vandal was pretty sure she would move in once her work settled down.

Excluding all of those candidates, then, he was left wondering who it could be. He cast Detect Life again. "Oh, they aren't headed for the audience chamber

but here toward me?"

They obviously had business with him. Vandal sat up. He spent the rest of the time waiting considering whether he should go with the cheesy villain route, opening with a line like "I've been waiting for you" or "You sure took your time."

Then he sensed a fairly strong risk of death from the other side of the door. Whoever was out there, at least one of them really seemed to want Vandal dead.

Who is it? Still unsure of who he would be facing, Vandal dropped back, took out Lefdia from her drawer and gave her Dalshia's remains to hang onto. "Hold this, cling onto my back, and stay still," he told her. She gave him a thumbs-up, hooked the string of the bag over one of her fingers, and then climbed into position on his back as instructed. Based on what he could feel beyond the door, this wasn't too dangerous a situation—not yet—but it was better to be prepared and play it safe.

He also had no idea who might be alive and want to kill him. It was too soon for his resurrected classmates to be coming for him. Anyone else with a motive to kill him would be people from Evbejia, or bandits who might have escaped his purges, but they would have to traveled here from the Milg Shield Kingdom. Crossing the mountains would be almost impossible, and no assassin would take that job either.

Another possible scenario was a bunch of monsters, but he was yet to see anything from the selection of races around Talosheim that were smart enough to creep to his bedchamber at night like this.

Agents from the Milg Shield Kingdom still seems more likely, Vandal mused. They might have some kind of highly trained assassination squad or something.

Then the door opened a crack, and a single woman slipped into his room.

A woman? And she isn't hiding her face. She didn't look like an assassin or a monster. She was wearing loose, easy-to-move-in clothing, seemingly without any armor or weapons. She had red hair, white skin, and was attractive, maybe a year or two over 20. She didn't take out a knife or cast any magic. She just looked up at him—and gasped.

Her eyes opened wide, seemingly in surprise. Suddenly coming face to face with the master of the room she was creeping into was surely unexpected, but she seemed more surprised than that. She was quick to recover, however, and then she looked at him intently.

She's got powerful eyes. That was Vandal's first impression. He kept his own eyes fixed on her. She had just crept unexpectedly into his room, and he was sensing the potential for death from her, so he figured this might be a "blink first and you lose" kind of situation.

She was certainly staring at him like she wanted to bore holes in his face. Then her gaze and mouth loosened a little.

"You're Vandal?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm Vandal," he replied.

She asked his name and so he replied. But now he really had no idea who she was. But was the response to Detect Danger: Death getting weaker now?

"Say. What do you think about me?" she asked.

Vandal wondered where that was coming from. "Uhm . . . you look very pretty," he replied, playing it safe. She was pretty.

"That's nice to hear. Do you think we could be friends?" she asked.

Now he had made her happy and also asked to be his friend. If they were on the street, he would think she was trying to pick him up.

“. . . Sure. If you want to be friends with me,” he responded.

Something felt inappropriate about a beautiful woman creeping into a child’s room in the middle of the night and asking to be friends, but he decided to play along. He didn’t want to make her mad.

“In that case, will you pray to the Demon God Hihiryu-Shukaka?” the woman continued. “The god who me and my friends follow? Just say what a wonderful god he is.”

In this world, everyone believed in the existence of gods. Maybe this was just how things worked here, Vandal figured. When introducing themselves, maybe people also mentioned the god that they worshipped?

Well, whatever. He might have balked at Rodocolte or Alda, but there seemed no harm in this, even though he had no idea who this Hihiryu-Shukaka was.

“Okay . . . the Demon God Hihiryu-Shukaka is a wonderful god,” Vandal intoned, still wondering who this attractive woman might be. *She doesn’t seem to want to hurt Mom and doesn’t seem willing to attack me either. Is she trying to get me to join a cult?*

There was also the possibility of her being some kind of operative from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. When Talosheim fell, the first princess and around 500 of the giantlings escaped to the territory of Duke Heartner in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. They might still have hope of restoring their nation. Having taken the giantlings in, the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom would also desire the recovery of Talosheim. A political marriage with the first princess could officially make Talosheim part of their nation, bringing them considerable wealth and

other benefits. There was no longer any route for the Milg Shield Kingdom to send in military forces, meaning the country could be maintained with just the walls to keep monsters out and some warriors. With the four dungeons nearby, it was sure to attract many adventurers.

In that case, maybe they had sent a party to investigate Talosheim. Once they arrived, they would have discovered the walls, city, and castle restored, and undead and monsters living there, ruled over by some unknown “king.” That could be why she had come to contact Vandal. If there was any room for negotiation, then she probably wanted to negotiate. If that failed, she had backup waiting outside the room to take him out.

Of course, he had no idea why such an agent would be bringing up the demon god.

This was quite the screw-up, Vandal thought. I didn't expect a spy or a human to try and sneak in here. Our security is full of holes.

After all, without Vandal using Golem Creation to make a path, it would be hard for hundreds of enemies to cross the mountains, and the tunnel leading to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom was still plugged up. He hadn't expected anyone to come from the outside under these circumstances. Monsters generally couldn't climb walls, and they could also sense the presence of the giantling undead, which tended to scare them away. As a result, the city and castle could be sneaked into with only a little application of cunning.

Vandal cursed his lack of preparation, although still feeling grateful that he wasn't dealing with adventurers from the Milg Shield Kingdom or fanatics from Alda who would have just attacked without question. He needed to ask her name.

“You've been taming undead, haven't you?” the woman said, beating him to

it. “How did you do it? When did the goddess bless you?”

Vandal wasn’t expecting the conversation to turn in this direction either.

How do I tame undead? I don’t feel like I’m doing anything special. Is that really an important question in this situation? It wasn’t like he was throwing around magic balls to catch weakened undead, or they were looking up at him with begging eyes to join his party after he defeated them. He had made the bone ones himself; the ghouls like Zadilis and the giantling undead from Talosheim like Nuaza had been affected by Death Attribute Allure, and he had negotiated with Borkz. Vandal didn’t feel like he was doing anything special.

This world did have the Job “Tamer,” meaning he assumed it wouldn’t have been all that strange. Maybe the issue was the sheer numbers. From her perspective, he did appear to have tamed more than a thousand undead. She was probably looking for the secret or trick behind that. Such was his interpretation of the question, as Vandal was unaware of the common understanding that undead couldn’t be tamed.

This stuff about being blessed, though. Is that the oracle stuff Nuaza was talking about?

Vandal took a moment and then answered. “Yes, I’ve been taming them, but I couldn’t tell you how,” he replied. “In terms of this blessing business . . . you mean the oracle stuff?”

His response seemed to surprise her, but she accepted it. Even with all the gods knocking about in this world, oracles were clearly something special. He had just answered her question with a question, but Vandal was just relieved that she didn’t seem bothered.

Hold on? I think her intent to kill me just shot up a little.

“Okay. What about Sword King Borkz? Do you know of him? Can you tell me where he is?” the woman continued, once again preventing Vandal from asking her for her name.

He didn’t know where this question was coming from either. Maybe she wanted to get a better idea of the strength of Vandal’s force.

“Borkz should be in the audience chamber,” Vandal replied.

“Should? So he’s undead?”

“Yes,” he responded, seeing no reason to lie about Borkz’s location or the fact he was undead.

The woman took a moment to consider Vandal’s response. She wasn’t asking about the heroes other than Borkz, like Zandia or Geena. Vandal felt Lefdia twitch on his back.

The danger from the beautiful woman was waning again, but he still felt a Detect Danger: Death reaction from outside the room. Vandal decided it was best to get Borkz and the others up here. He activated some of the bug undead and sent them off to the lower chambers . . .

“Also . . . how did you repair this castle? The city?” The questioning continued. “This place should be in ruins. Did you have the undead repair everything?”

Vandal supposed she must have been pretty surprised to arrive and find Talosheim all repaired. “No,” he replied. “I made golems and they repaired everything.”

He understood that using golems like this couldn’t be common practice. It still took him thousands, if not tens of thousands of MP to make a single golem. Theoretically, it was therefore possible, but no regular Alchemist would actually

be able to pull it off. *Golem Creator had been an undiscovered Job. It takes someone like me, with more than one hundred million MP, to make such it work.* Without common knowledge about golems, that was the only way he could analyze her surprise.

That was when the door behind the woman opened and a man came in, looking pretty pissed off, followed by more figures behind him.

Hmmm, the situation is escalating, Vandal thought. I should turn the floor into a golem.

All the men coming into the room had their faces exposed, were armed with swords, and were giving him pretty evil looks. At least their weapons weren't drawn yet. Same as the woman, they all had red eyes.

"Hey. How long are you planning to take with this?" the man asked. He proceeded to suggest that they quickly dispose of Vandal. This one wasn't even trying to hide his intent to kill, and yet his attention was completely on the woman as the two of them started to argue.

So the fight is finally about to begin. Vandal was ready for things to pop off, but the woman kept her eyes on him while arguing with the man.

"This child might be useful to us," she said. "We should extract details on how he tames the undead and the way he used golems to make the repairs."

Vandal was happy that she recognized his worth so quickly, and it was also great that she was trying to stop the man from attacking. But it also hardly seemed like something you would normally say while looking the subject of the discussion right in the eyes.

"Eleonora, have you gone insane?" the man fired back. "We have been ordered to kill this dhampir. That is our top priority. Everything else is

secondary to that. It doesn't matter what secrets his knows or what rare skills he holds."

That gave Vandal the woman's name for one, but also some other interesting information. *Killing me is their top priority? Does that mean they are Alda, then? Not from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom? All that "demon god" stuff was just crap?*

It seemed like Vandal's suppositions prior to this point had been mistaken. It was also odd that the man, just like the woman, was openly discussing this stuff in front of him. These intruders were either very confident in their own skills or completely underestimating Vandal.

Either way, he didn't like it.

"Eleonora, you do it. Otherwise I will report to Lord Vilkain that you showed hesitation when it came to killing the dhampir," the man threatened.

"You wouldn't dare!"

The situation had reached the point where the woman was being pushed into killing Vandal. The name Vilkain had come up as well, and these two both seemed pretty scared of him, whoever he was.

Even as this Elenora woman kept answering, she didn't take her eyes from Vandal. *Aren't her eyes getting dry from that? Mine are.* Even as he considered their relative ocular health, Vandal decided how to handle this issue.

Best to capture them all alive.

He could always question the spirits after they were dead, but if they did turn out to be from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, then having them alive would be more useful later.

That was when Vandal sensed Eleonora's desire to kill him for the third time.

So maybe she was planning to follow her orders from this Vilkain after all.

“Can you come here?” she asked.

So she made her decision and needs me to come closer, Vandal thought. She's not leaving me much choice here. I'll play along, and then if she does try to kill me . . .

Vandal quietly closed in. He came within kicking range, but Eleonora didn't do anything yet. Her intent to kill was rapidly fading.

Now Vandal was within arm's reach of her, yet she still didn't move. He couldn't feel any intent to kill from her at all. He focused his awareness on his Detect Danger: Death, which he always had running in the background. No response at all. Either she had decided she wasn't going to kill him, or she simply couldn't do it. In either case, she was no longer a threat.

By comparison, the intentions of the men behind her were obvious. As the response from Eleonora faded away, their intentions to kill only grew more pronounced. However, Vandal wasn't the sole target of their ire. Eleonora was also in the crosshairs.

Some kind of faction dispute within their organization? There doesn't seem to be much real danger to either of us, but still. Vandal shook his head. *What a pain.* Eleonor had reached close enough to take his head in her hands and lift him up—and then the men made their move.

“Underlings!” Their leader shouted, eyes wild and bloodshot. “Kill them both, Eleonora and the dhampir! Just like when you killed that scumbag Varen!”

His men drew their swords and immediately attempted to kill both Eleonora and Vandal. They were a more dangerous than Detect Danger: Death had led Vandal to believe, so he responded a little too slowly.

He used Telekinesis to send both himself and Eleonora flying backward. Lefdia moved up from his back onto his head, the bed creaked, and blood splattered out from Eleonora's back.

The stab she received looked like it had reached her lungs, but that also didn't seem like enough to kill her. Now Vandal understood: all of his visitors were vampires.

Vandal felt dumb for only just working it out. Still in Eleanor's arms, he looked at the men. The leader was saying something, but Vandal didn't care about that.

"What did you just say?"

Beneath his unchanged demeanor, Vandal was seething.

That scumbag Varen.

This guy had just called Vandal's father and Dalshia's husband, who had been killed before Vandal was even born, a scumbag.

Vandal raised his eyes to the vampires.

"Alluring Doom Gaze is no longer in effect! Kill him before he calls for undead from outside!" Sercent shouted orders at the subordinates, who were reacting a little slowly, and then drew his own sword. He didn't care what Vandal had to say now. The child must die.

If Eleonora healed and returned to fighting strength, he couldn't handle her. If the dhampir called in his undead, then the numbers would overwhelm them. And if these two joined forces, then it was over. *They have to die, both of them, right now!*

His subordinates were preparing their fangs and claws and swords, ready to rip those two apart.

“Drop,” said Vandal.

The floor beneath their feet vanished. Vandal had already turned the floor into a golem, just in case, and now he used Golem Creation to change its shape and create an instant pitfall.

“A hole in the floor?!”

“Impossible!” The vampires yelped as they were dumped into midair along with the bed. The floor under the bedside table remained unchanged, but Eleonora and the vampires trying to kill Vandal didn’t notice.

“What’s going on?” To Eleonora’s shock, she was slowly drifting down atop the bed, in defiance of gravity. So much had happened in such a short time that she could hardly keep up. She blinked in wide-eyed surprise, unconcerned by the injury on her back. Her expression in that moment was so cute and innocent that Vandal actually felt soothed.

It would have been the perfect moment to drop some cool comment, but his attention was held by someone else.

“Just give me a moment,” he told her. Eleonora wasn’t the problem here. She had been planning on killing him when she first appeared, but her desire to cause him harm had quickly evaporated. If it did turn out that she was also responsible for the death of his father, he could deal with her then.

Vandal turned to look at Sercent.

“Gah! Petty tricks!” the vampire spat. As a noble he had the ability of flight. He had dropped a little at first, taken by surprise, but then he recovered and was now hanging suspended in the air. All the subordinates had at least stuck

their own landings. “Hurry up and kill!” Sercent shouted.

“Sounds like a plan,” came a reply from an unexpected source.

“Eek!” Sercent spun toward the speaker and heard a horrible wet crunching. Then he saw his own severed sword arm and his leg from below the knee flying through the air.

“Gah . . . gaaaaaaah?!” he screamed. “What the hell?!”

“So dramatic,” said the giantling, who had just used Slash Vortex. He had craggy features, with a head that was half exposed bone. “Oh, sorry. You wanted him alive?”

“Borkz, change of plans,” Vandal said. “You can kill everyone other than this woman. But I’d appreciate it if you kept that maimed one for me to finish off.”

“No problem. Hah! When did you find the time to pick up another woman?”

“Actually, she was trying to pick me up.”

“Seriously? Lefdia isn’t going to be able to compete with that. We need to find the rest of Zandia as quickly as possible,” Borkz muttered.

Lefdia wagged her index finger up and down, as though arguing against Borkz. Eleonora just now noticed the dismembered hand, but she was more focused on the undead and the waves of pure potential for death rolling off him.

“S-Sword King Borkz?” she breathed. “You have him tamed too?”

Borkz had fallen in the conflict 200 years ago, sure, but he was also a giantling hero capable of chopping off the head of a dragon with a single strike. He had just accounted for two of the four limbs attached to Sercent, a noble species vampire.

The difficulty of taming any given subject depended on the rank of the target

and their comparative intellect. Borkz was stronger than certain dragons and capable of speech. Even with the blessing of the goddess, taming such an undead should be completely impossible.

The others in the room, however, didn't have the leeway to conduct such a detailed analysis.

"Lord Sercent!" one of the subordinates shouted.

"You keep the undead busy! Make time for me to kill the dhampir!" Sercent shouted back.

"Yes, my lord!"

There were still ten or so subordinates, and they all rushed at Borkz. Sercent turned back to Vandal—who had slipped out from Eleonora's arms at some point—and started to incant a spell.

Subordinate species were low ranking as vampires, but they were powerful threats to humans. They didn't have the magical abilities of the nobles, but they had powerful muscles, quick reflexes, claws capable of slashing through steel, and the vitality and regenerative powers to survive any damage, with the exception of their heart getting destroyed.

They also had their abilities as humans, modifiers from their Jobs, and other skill modifiers. Having to fight almost a dozen of them at the same time was not a pleasing prospect.

"Gyaaaaaaah?!"

"The walls! Dragons from the walls?! Gwaah?!"

"L-Lord Sercent! Save us!"

And yet now, these vampires were facing odds completely stacked against them.

“Raaaagh!”

“Rowaaaaaaah!”

It wasn’t Borkz who was taking care of them. Rather, it was the dinosaur undead created from the corpses Vandal had received as gifts on his third birthday.

The space directly below the ministers’ offices was a large, empty hall. Vandal had already turned its walls and floor into golems. That allowed him to freely change the walls into passageways and bring in the dinosaur undead that had been on display in the dining hall.

The subordinates were caught off guard, but quickly rallied. Little did they know that the floor beneath their feet was also one of Vandal’s golems.

Arms extended upward from it, grabbing the legs of the intruders, while holes popped open to hamper their movements. The dinosaur undead didn’t miss these chances to bite or gore the vampires.

The zombie tyrannosaurus bit one of them in half, while a tail attack from the zombie ankylosaurus smashed the head of another like ripe fruit. The bizarre and massive cyclops-reptile-cat zombie shredded a third one to pieces, shaking the remains around as they hung out of its jaws.

The remaining vampires tried to fight back, but fists from the walls and floor continued to interfere, preventing them from stopping the fatal attacks of the undead.

Only three of the subordinates managed to make it through the maelstrom to follow their initial orders and close in on Borkz.

“Fine. Flicker Flash,” Borkz said, swinging his sword somewhat listlessly and unleashing a basic battle tech.

“Undead imbecile! Iron Wall! Iron Body!” The lead subordinate quickly pulled a shield from his back and activated Shield Proficiency Armor Mastery battle techs. These were two advanced techniques, only available after reaching Shield Proficiency lv. 5 and increasing one’s own physical and magical defenses. In the face of such battle techs, Flicker Flash shouldn’t be able to cause a paper cut’s worth of pinky damage.

Kersplat!

But Borkz magical blade sliced through the shields and arms and bodies of the subordinates like a warm knife through butter.

“Come on,” Borkz said. “You can’t do better than that?”

The strength of battle techs depended on the skill level of the user. These lv. 5 Shield Proficiency and Armor Mastery skills couldn’t hope to stop Borkz’s Flicker Flash, considering he had reached Sword Proficiency skill lv. 10 and then gone on to achieve the promoted Sword King skill.

“Eeeeeep!”

“Lord Sercent! We can’t handle this! Help us!”

The remaining two subordinates finally realized they were out of their depth. Borkz shook his head at their stupidity as he swung his sword again.

“Try this,” he said. “Three Tier Slice.”

He proceeded to unleash three rapid slashes. They chopped one of the subordinates into three pieces—head, chest, and legs—and scattered the parts of him in a spray of blood.

“Ah, aaaaah!”

The third one escaped with nothing more than getting his legs cut off at the knees. He wouldn’t last long after that, of course.

“Wait! I surrender!” the subordinate yelped. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, about Lord Sercent, about Lord Gubamon, about Lord Vilkain! Just spare me!”

“Sorry, guy,” Borkz replied. “No prisoners required.”

He told me to kill everyone other than the lady, Borkz thought. Gotta do what the boss needs. See? Even I can follow orders.

“You know what they say. Don’t pity the goblin, kill the goblin.” Borkz swung his sword for a third time, sharing some of the wisdom common among adventurers back in the day.

Blood splattered out again, turning what remained of the subordinates into chunks of delicious-smelling meat.

“Begrudge yourself for becoming the enemy,” Borkz said. Then he picked up a leg and gobbled up a piece. It was good. These subordinate species vampires tasted better than they looked.

“I’ll try the organs and brains next,” Borkz muttered. “Bah, but I should have brought some salt with me.”

Enjoying a snack of fresh meat, Borkz settled in to watch the execution.

“Die! You pathetic dhampir!” Sercent shouted, unleashing a torrent of lightning. The snaking forks of electricity were powerful, likely to stop the heart with a graze and significant charring with a direct hit.

However, they also vanished in the moment they touched the Magic Sucking Barrier covering Vandal's body.

"What?!" Sercent raged. "Very well. I'll shred you to pieces with my claws!" He swung those claws around, quickly closing the distance like some kind of feral beast. He was certainly pretty spry for a guy who had just lost an arm and a leg.

"I'm taking your head off! Rend Iron!"

The vampire's speed really was quite impressive. From Vandal's perspective, it was almost like he just blipped in and appeared in front of him.

However, Vandal already had Anti-Attack Barrier and Magic Sucking Barrier working overtime. He wasn't leaving anything to chance after what happened fighting the Noble Orc Bugogan.

"What? My magical power! My strength!" Sercent yelled. He felt like the air itself had been replaced by a viscous and heavy substance. The moment he touched Vandal's barriers, his arm stopped moving completely.

The resistance was terrifyingly strong, to say that his arm carried enough strength to smash a castle wall and yet he couldn't move it an inch. Sercent decided it had to be some kind of special defensive magic. He also had a good idea how to break through it.

"Hahaha! All I need to do is attack at a strength that overwhelms your defenses!" he crowed. He unleashed the Brawling Proficiency advanced battle tech, Rend Iron, once more.

His arm was now slowly making progress toward Vandal. It closed in on the child, so close to striking distance . . .

Once my claws reach him, I'll shred this weak dhampir to ribbons! Sercent

thought. *His skull will shatter and his organs splatter! A pathetic death awaits him!*

“You’re right about that,” Vandal admitted. “But you can’t do it.”

Sercent had thought the dhampir’s face to be filled with despair and dread, until he spoke. *The balls on this baby!* Sercent wasn’t as strong as Eleonora, but he still had magical power and fighting abilities suited to his class as one of the noble species. It might take him a moment, but even with one arm he could destroy a barrier of this kind without issue—*Hold on. One arm?*

“His arm and leg aren’t regenerating,” Eleonora commented, noticing Sercent’s gaping wounds that continued to leak blood. The regenerative powers of the nobles meant that, unless damage was caused by silver or light attribute weapons, all wounds quickly stopped bleeding and started to heal, just like her own back wound. But there was no sign of that here.

“I’ve used a technique called Zero Heal that turns off all self-healing abilities,” Vandal explained, his tone as flat and even as ever. “It has a very short range and is only effective while I pump magic into it, but it will be more than enough to end you.”

It took both Eleonora and Sercent a moment to even process what they had just been told.

“Ah? Agaaaaah!” As soon as his blood-drained brain caught up, Sercent let out a sound that functioned as both scream of pain and roar of rage. He was now desperately trying to break the barriers around Vandal before he bled to death.

Vampires had incredible regenerative abilities. Noble species could have all their limbs hacked off and still be back to normal in a short period of time.

Eleonora and Sercent had therefore never bothered to learn healing magic. They didn't even have any potions with them.

“Raaaaagh!”

In a final act of desperation, Sercent attempted to use lightning and fire magic to burn and seal the wounds, but that magic was also absorbed by the Magic Sucking Barrier. The more the vampire struggled, the more blood flowed out from his exposed wounds.

“Raag . . . raagh . . .” Sercent was starting to slow down, slipping into the lethargy of death, his already pallid demeanor blanching white. “You . . . scum,” he gasped. “I serve Lord Gubamon . . . progenitor vampire, blessed by . . . by Demon God of Living Pleasure, Hihiryu-Shukaka. Kill me . . . and hundreds, hundreds of vampires, will pour in here! I have connections . . . with the Milg Shield Kingdom! They do . . . what I say . . . and will send their forces! If you don’t want that to happen—”

He was begging for his life. At least some of it was the truth, and that convinced Vandal that his words might carry some weight. But he ignored Sercent and turned to Eleonora.

“Is he telling the truth?” Vandal asked her.

Eleonora watched Sercent’s face twisting in anguish beyond the child. “No,” she promptly replied. “This man, who killed your father, does serve a progenitor, and is connected to the Milg Shield Kingdom. But entire organizations will not be mobilized to avenge him.”

“You bitch! Siding with this dhampir—” Sercent raged.

“Your breath stinks,” Vandal said, cutting him off. He closed in on Sercent, and then rammed both of his arms into the vampire’s chest.

The vampire wailed out as Vandal used his Spirit Bodification arms to rummage around inside him and drag out his spirit, while Sercent's body was still alive.

"I never met my father," Vandal said. "I can't say that I loved him. I don't know if I even respected him. You might mock him, you might be the one who killed him, but that doesn't make me hate you. Not for the sake of my father." Vandal had learned all too well, on both Earth and Origin, that family and relatives weren't necessarily to be trusted.

He started to shred the Spirit Body to pieces.

"Gyaaaaah?! Aaaaaaaaaagh!" Sercent screamed.

"But my mom loved him. With your connections to the Milg Shield Kingdom, I'm presuming you had some hand in her death. You're surely also connected to the force that was dispatched to the jungle demon barren. *Those* are the reasons why I hate you. Why I despise you. Why I will never forgive you, and why I don't want you fawning over me once you die and become a spirit. I won't let you have another life."

Inside the extracted spirit, Vandal's arms located a small glowing orb, like a marble that could be held in two fingers. He grabbed onto it.

"No! Not that! Anything but that!" Sercent begged.

The orb was his soul. The nucleus of his spirit, surrounded by his spirit body—like the part of a cell that held genetic information. Sercent innately understood what was happening and pleaded for mercy, but Vandal wasn't listening. He brought all of his strength to bear and crushed Sercent's soul.

"Gaaaaaaaaah! Gyaaaaaaaaagh?! Gaaah—"

It shattered with a clean cracking sound. The fundamental fragments that had

formed Sercent scattered like particles of light. Sercent's body, which had been screaming terribly until that moment, fell silent. The body was still breathing, its heart was still beating, and the right equipment would likely detect brainwaves. But Sercent would never move again.

"I like that sound," Vandal said. "I've been wanting to try that."

To destroy a soul. Manga and light novels were packed with spells and items that could eradicate souls, and Vandal had been wondering ever since Origin if he could do the same thing. After all, this world—or Earth, or Origin—didn't have a place like hell for punishing the dead. The Reincarnation God Rodocolte wasn't going to waste his time with something like that.



Vandal had realized that everyone who had ever taken from him would simply die and eventually be reborn, that's it. *And that would be getting off far too lightly.*

However, if their souls were crushed, they would be eradicated altogether. Their souls would never even go to Rodocolte. There would be no new beginning for them.

"It takes time to pull off, though. I couldn't do that in the middle of a proper battle," Vandal pondered aloud. "I'll need to immobilize them or straight out kill them first, then do it." He dropped the remains of Sercent and then descended to the floor.

Standing there was Borkz, his jaw hanging open in surprise and a half-eaten vampire leg in his hand, and Elenora, frozen in place with her eyes open wide.

Vandal shook his head, wondering what was so surprising. Lefdia was still attached to the back of his head but seemed frozen in shock too.

"What did he do? What part of Sercent did he destroy?" Eleonora asked.

"I'm undead. I saw it all," Borkz replied. "Unless I'm completely wrong here, it was his soul. The child crushed that vampire's soul. Haha. That's some crazy shit."

"His soul?!"

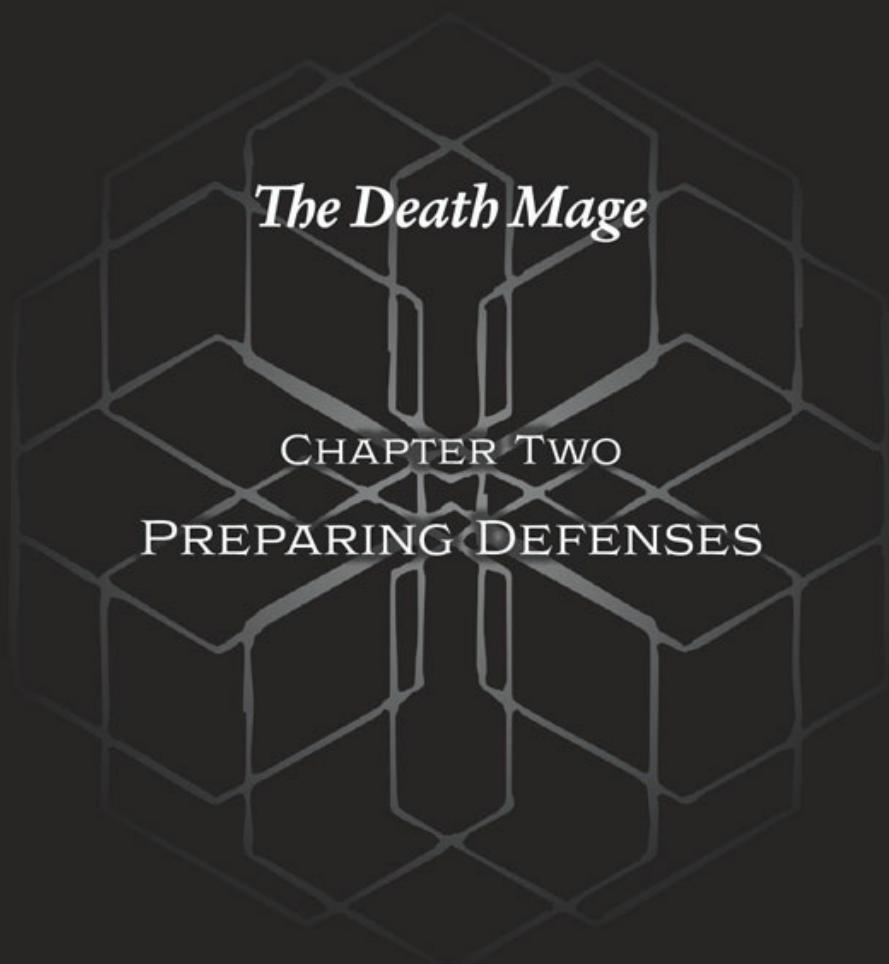
Eleonora looked completely shocked, while Borkz had a cheeky grin on his face.

Vandal took control of his normally neglected cheek muscles and made his face smile. "Okay. This time I'm going to be asking you the questions. Oh, and

no need to praise Vida first."

For some reason, that didn't help to relax the situation.

Acquired the skill Soul Crusher!



Chapter Two: Preparing Defenses

After crushing Sercent's soul and letting the dinosaur zombies eat him for experience, Vandal brought Eleonora with him to the dining hall. His intention was to bring everyone together and listen to what Eleonora had to say.

"I'm so sorry!"

It was Talea, however, who started the proceedings by begging for his forgiveness, practically bashing her head onto the floor.

"She allured me so easily! I spilled all your secrets and then simply fell asleep! I don't know how to apologize!"

"Not at all. Nothing to worry about," Vandal assured her. When Eleonora had first mentioned her interaction with Talea, Vandal had felt a rush of panic, but she looked in pretty good shape to say she'd been napping on a cold stone floor in the middle of winter. Vandal thought nothing more of the incident and didn't need her apologies.

"Do not blame yourself, Talea," Zadilis said. "You have reasonably high resistance skills, like Resist Maladies and Resist Magic, but they could not protect you from Doom Gaze."

"Van doesn't know how to react to all your apologies," Basdia added.

"Oh, thank you . . . thank you so much," Talea said. "But why are we sitting like this?"

She was sitting directly next to Vandal. The chairs were designed for a single giantling but seated the two of them, their bodies pressed up together.

"I heard you've been worried about your distance from me. I decided to

reduce that to zero distance,” Vandal explained.

“Who—who told you that?!”

“Eleonora.”

“Aaaaagh!” Talea shouted. “What are you spilling my secrets for, vampire woman?!”

“Talea, Talea. Calm yourself. You just elbowed the boy,” Zadilis said.

And it was a powerful elbow at that.

“Why is she even here?!” Talea exclaimed, jumping to her feet and glaring at Eleanora—but at her neckline rather than her face, clearly because she was worried about Doom Gaze.

The subject of her ire was sitting in her chair with a meek look. Her arms and legs weren’t bound, and she wasn’t gagged or blindfolded. It looked like, if she desired it, she could simply fly away.

“I’m here, of course,” Eleonora said, “to share everything I know with Lord Vandal.” She had quickly taken to calling him “Lord,” embellishing her loyalty with floor-deep bows.

Getting her to shut up wasn’t easy, Vandal reflected. After he crushed Sercrent’s soul, she had proceeded to offer praise to the Goddess Vida—even though Vandal had said it wasn’t needed—and then kissed his hand and swore her loyalty to him. If he hadn’t stopped her, she would probably have gone onto kissing his feet. It had also been hard to get her to stop being so formal and speak a little more normally. He finally resorted to ordering her to do so, with some finger-pointing for good measure. He hadn’t been able to tell from her expression whether she was scared or happy.

After hearing what Eleonora has to say, Dalshia said, can we talk about what

we're doing next? I think I missed quite a lot while I was sleeping.

Sam—who had recklessly driven his carriage here into the royal dining hall— relayed her words to the rest of those present who couldn't hear her for themselves.

Then Eleonora started to explain the reasons for her intrusion and everything that the vampires who followed the Demon God of Living Pleasure Hihiryu-Shukaka had done to Dalshia and Vandal.

As it turned out, they hadn't been visited by the spirits of anyone Eleonora or Sercent had killed because the vampires had been using holy water to purify themselves throughout the mission. This was an effective means against Mediums, as it prevented any tattle-tale spirits from tagging along with them—at the cost of some painful burns when applying the water. It had definitely helped them get the jump on Vandal—for what that had been worth—but also seemed pretty extreme.

"This is bigger than I was expecting," Vandal murmured as she laid it all out.

He hadn't had any direct contact with the vampires who killed Varen, his father, since he regained his memories, and hadn't come across any other information on them, so they hadn't made much of an impact on his life. Indeed, he hadn't even given them much consideration, but this whole time they were hiding behind puppets like High Priest Goldan and Heinz. He would never have dreamed that they were the ones pulling the strings of the Milg Shield Kingdom. Milg was a member of the Amidd Empire that extolled the religion of the God of Law and Life Alda, which should have been the enemy to the vampires. This was the very religion that advocated the downfall of vampires; it was ridiculous that they had been completely infiltrated by them.

"Well, the Milg Shield Kingdom and Amidd Empire were originally enemies,"

Eleonora said.

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” said Sam, a former resident of the Milg Shield Kingdom who also had no idea of this fact.

The progenitor vampires Vilkain, Tehneshia, and Gubamon. The nobles beneath them and their network of subordinates. Then there was Marshal Thomas Palpapekk. Taking out one enemy had led to an explosion of new ones.

“So they were involved in the war 200 years ago, too! Was that all your doing?” Borkz raged. Even Lefdia was tapping angrily on the floor.

“I wasn’t even born then, so I don’t know the details!” Eleonora jabbered as fast as she could. “I’ve only heard that Gubamon wanted to exploit the war and have his underlings collect the corpses of the Talosheim heroes!”

The teachings of Hihiryu-Shukaka stated that, in this world, you were either the one in control or one of those being controlled. Taking control and toying with the lives of others allowed you to enhance your standing. Obtaining the blessings of this god apparently allowed the blessed to then tame—or create—undead that couldn’t normally be tamed and use them as their minions.

One of the three who had received those blessings, the progenitor Gubamon, also had the hobby of collecting the bodies of those known in life as “heroes” and keeping them as undead. He would therefore send his minions into any large-scale conflicts or monster hunts to collect the bodies of the fallen. Such minions had apparently been on site during the fighting in Talosheim 200 years ago.

“That would explain why we didn’t find the bodies of Geena or Zandia,” Borkz said. “Hey, did you see if Zandia’s body was missing the left hand? And why didn’t they take my body?!”

“Maybe they left your body behind because of all the damage to it,” Nuaza suggested. “You had lost your sword arm and your sword. You might not have made much of an undead.”

“Nuaza! You’re saying I wouldn’t have been able to fight?” Borkz roared.

“Not me, no!” Nuaza said quickly. “I was just suggesting maybe that’s what the vampires thought!”

“I don’t know whether this Zandia person has a left hand or not. I served Vilkain, not Gubamon. I’ve never seen his collection,” Eleonora explained. “I heard that because of the damage you had sustained, Borkz, the other bodies were taken out first. When his men returned for you, they met Divine Ice Spear Mikhail.” That meeting quickly led to combat between Mikhail and the vampires.

In his exhausted state and with his beloved spear gone, the vampires probably thought they had a chance at bagging the body of another dead hero and earning extra goodies from Gubamon. Mikhail was confirmed for promotion to S rank, however, and was plenty strong even without the spear that had become his alias. Rather than falling to the vampires, he managed to drive them off. However, doing so sapped more of his strength while also delaying his treatment, eventually leading to his death.

“I had no idea all this was going on right next to my corpse,” Borkz said. “That ice must have been to keep the vamps out.”

So it hadn’t been the Dragon Golem that took out Mikhail, but rather a bunch of vampires hunting for corpses. That was an odd end to his story.

“It sounds like we aren’t going to find their bodies down there even if we do defeat the Dragon Golem,” Vandal commented.

“Right! Hunting time, child!” Borkz roared. “We need to take back the bodies of Geena and the little lady from this Gubamon vampire fellow! A man isn’t a man until he’s taken a woman or two!”

“Hey, what about Eleonora. I’d say that I took her from Vilkain.”

“Nope. Doesn’t count.”

Vandal wasn’t keen on Borkz’s idea of predatory love—whether he was the predator or the prey. He wasn’t even sure if that definition applied here.

Lefdia, for her part, didn’t seem to have much awareness that she was a part of Zandia’s remains, or that it was her body they were discussing. She was just rhythmically moving her finger. Maybe she hadn’t been angry earlier, either. She could have just been tapping out a ditty.

Vandal sighed. “The vampires are definitely a future target, but perhaps you can give me a decade or so first?” Vandal replied. Regardless of whether this “hunt” went ahead, it did sound like he was going to end up fighting these vampires who worshipped the Demon God of Living Pleasure. In just this short time, they had already become a group whose eradication was even more vital to Vandal’s survival and happiness than existing targets such as High Priest Goldan and Heinz. These were vampires, meaning they weren’t going to die off on their own. If he left them alive, they would keep on plotting and planning Vandal’s demise.

He had no problem with recovering the bodies of Geena and Zandia from them and turning them into undead, if that was a natural result of the fight. And if they were already undead, then rescuing them also felt like a reasonable choice. That said— “Can you please stop trying to make me into your king?” Vandal asked.

Borkz was keen for Vandal to end up with Zandia. She had been second in line to the throne in life, which would make Vandal the new king of Talosheim.

“You’re already a ghoul king,” Borkz reasoned. “Why not our king too?”

“You need to learn to accept the good things that happen,” Zadilis counseled.

“Consider it training for when you become a noble,” Basdia said.

“Young Master! Don’t turn down this opportunity due to a lack of kingly experience,” Sam advised. “We don’t have anyone here who understands how laws and taxes work, and we don’t even pay taxes at the moment anyway.”

Talosheim isn’t even an official nation at the moment, Saria reminded him. *This would be more like playing at king than being one.*

“If you obtain a new title, you might be able to enhance Borkz and the others,” Zadilis added.

It sounded like everyone other than Vandal agreed with the idea, which only made it harder to get away from.

It isn’t that Vandal doesn’t want to, Dalshia finally piped up. At least someone was on his side. *He’s just concerned about the first princess and her descendants.*

Vandal had been considering the possibility that the first princess and her descendants who had fled to Olbaum would put forth a claim on the throne of Talosheim and seek to restore the nation themselves. It had been 200 years since Princess Lebia made her escape. Giantlings had a life expectancy of around 400 years, so there was plenty of potential for her to still be kicking around. If that was the case, it could cause all sorts of trouble even if Vandal was only “playing” at being king of Talosheim.

“I think Princess Lebia and her descendants would be overjoyed at how you

have restored Talosheim, child, and happily let you take the throne,” Nuaza said. “After all, you are the one who completely restored the castle, the city, and the walls.”

He was correct, of course. The giantling undead and ghouls might have helped with clearing the trees and culling the monsters, but it was Vandal’s Golem Creation skill that had made the most significant contribution to the repairs. Even if the first princess and her retinue had returned to Talosheim prior to Vandal’s arrival, it would have taken them decades to restore the city to this extent, incurring significant expenses along the way.

“I still don’t think they’ll just give up the throne,” Vandal said. “Regardless of what the princess thinks, there will be pressure and ideas coming from the Olbaum side too.”

Olbaum might even send in assassins to handle the matter. At worst, they could form a party of high-ranking adventurers. Among those in Talosheim at the moment, the only one even Olbaum would consider a living being with any kind of rights was Vandal, the dhampir. Under Olbaum law, there was nothing stopping them from eradicating the population of undead and monsters and taking back the city.

“All I’m saying is that we can’t make any big moves without knowing what is going on in Olbaum,” Vandal concluded. “But I should have given this some thought sooner. We’re going to have to prepare ourselves better to defend against not only monsters, but also human intruders.”

Vandal had no plans to hand over Talosheim to anyone. He had taken the city and performed many of the repairs himself. Plus there was the magical device beneath the castle that he hoped one day to use to bring back Dalshia. Anyone trying to take it from him would be met with suitable resistance—even Olbaum.

"So I'd like to start discussing our defenses at once," Vandal said.

"Lord Van, before we get into that, we need to deal with this woman first!"

Talea squealed, cutting him off and jabbing a finger at Eleonora. She was clearly still feeling the humiliation of the Alluring Doom Gaze.

But Eleonora stood firm in the face of this threat to her life, turned toward Talea, and bowed her head low.

"I am so sorry for my conduct last night," she said.

"What?! You think you can just apologize now?"

"What else would I do? I was in the wrong. I certainly don't want to become Lord Vandal's enemy. That idea is what scares me the most. I'll cast aside anything, even my pride as a noble, in order to prevent that. That's how strongly I feel."

After destroying Sercent's soul, Vandal had listened to what Eleonora and the spirits of the subordinates had to say for themselves. Then he crushed the souls of all the subordinates. Not because they had come to kill him, but rather because these were the scum who had killed his father, Varen, and had wanted to kill Talea.

The reasons Eleonora was sitting there in one piece, not even trussed up, was because she hadn't been involved in Varen's death, because she had come here to kill him but quickly changed her mind upon meeting him, and because she had stopped the other vampires from killing Talea. As a result, Vandal determined that she was not their enemy.

"Can I ask why you seem to have such a high opinion of me?" Vandal asked. "All this talk about being blessed by the gods is just a big misunderstanding."

"Oh, you have strength even more powerful than a god, from one point of

view,” Eleonora replied. “Being able to destroy souls is something only the legendary Demon King could do. My master is a progenitor vampire, and he could never do that. I daresay even the Demon God of Living Pleasure could never manage such a feat.”

“I heard about such things in fairy tales when I was a kid,” Borkz said. “That’s why I froze in shock when I saw you do it. I thought my rigor mortis came back for a second.” The giantling cackled.

Corny humor aside, it sounded like there wasn’t anyone on Ramda who could destroy souls, perhaps because the function of reincarnation here was handled by Rodocolte, rather than by any of the gods that existed here. Rodocolte was the god who handled the systems of reincarnation for multiple worlds, including Origin, Earth, and Ramda. So an individual god on one world couldn’t obliterate a soul from their position on that world. It didn’t matter the suffering the soul went through in life, the terrible death it faced, or the thousands of years the soul might exist in torment thereafter; eventually the soul would be reborn as a new life.

No one on Ramda knew about Rodocolte. But they all believed in reincarnation. So long as that was assured for them, they could still hold onto hope, even beyond death. They could believe that one day they would be restored and live a new life.

Not only that, but there were gods who appraised good deeds and promoted individual souls, perhaps even letting them join the divine pantheon. The spirits of countless heroes and great people had been welcomed as minor deities, heroic spirits, or divine familiars, continuing their good deeds after death. Even gods themselves could hope to be reincarnated, so long as their souls remained intact.

The destruction of the soul was therefore a direct denial of all such hopes and desires. Only the legendary Demon King had ever possessed that power. The ability to destroy souls was why even the divine had feared him, and why he had commanded so many evil gods.

“The Demon King is long gone, so you possess the most terrifying power in the world,” Eleonora said. “Compared to you, even Vilkain and Hihiryu-Shukaka would be on the back foot. That’s why I never want to fight you.”

Eleonora was a slave, chained by fear. Her parents, controlled by terror themselves, had sold her as a slave. The slavers hadn’t seen much worth in the skinny, dark-skinned kid, treating her roughly and carelessly. When she was eventually purchased, it was by some greedy mine owner, who treated his slaves as consumable goods. That was when Vilkain happened across her, detecting her true potential and purchasing her as a result. In exchange, an even larger fear dominated her life. The only difference was that, so long as she met his expectations, Vilkain actually treated her well.

When she out-performed the others, she didn’t get a beating but rather praise and rewards. When she kept to Vilkain’s teachings and did what she was told, she didn’t get cold chains and a collar around her neck, but soft and beautiful clothing. It didn’t matter how dirty or nasty the things she had to do were. If she went along with them, no more rotten vegetable soup. She got to dine on the finest dishes ever prepared. If she played along and kept him happy, she received beautiful gemstones for her new collection of jewelry, rather than fresh scars for her old collection of pain. Having grown up beautiful and strong, Eleonora was finally welcomed into the ranks of the nobles, acquiring her Alluring Doom Gaze and coming to serve at Vilkain’s side.

At the same time, she also feared losing his favor more than anything else.

While Vilkain rated Eleonora highly for her deeds, he also didn't consider her indispensable. She understood that much, all too well. She was his favorite, at the moment, but a vampire like her would come along once every thousand years, perhaps, if not more frequently.

That's right—a thousand years, at most. For Vilkain, who had lived for tens of thousands of them, it wasn't really a long time. That was why Eleonora continued to pander to all of Vilkain's whims.

But now, Eleonora encountered someone even more terrifying than Vilkain.

Vandal.

When Vilkain learnt that his current favorite pet had jumped ship to shack up with a dhampir, he would likely tremble with humiliation before exploding with rage. If he ever captured her, she could expect terrifying torture. But there was one thing he couldn't do.

Destroy her soul.

"Are you sure about this?" Vandal asked. Both he and Talea still looked puzzled at Eleonora's change of heart. "I bet the salary is a lot better over there. The work is probably more fulfilling. He's stronger than me, too. I promise you. Far stronger."

"That's not true," Eleonora responded. "I watched you destroy Sercent. He didn't stand a chance. Even if I was at full strength, I wouldn't have been able to take him apart so completely, in such a cold, cruel fashion."

Vandal paused. "I'm not quite sure how to take that." Maybe she had found her previous position more fulfilling after all. "That Sercent—that was his name, right? He only got himself killed so badly because he basically threw himself into my trap."

Vandal didn't consider Sercent to have been weak. Certainly not. He had just been reckless, and unlucky, too. He hadn't possessed accurate intel on Vandal, for a start, leading to the rug getting pulled out from under him—pretty much literally. Vandal had quietly called in Borkz, who chopped off Sercent's arm and leg, while Vandal's dinosaur zombies ate most of the vampire minions. The final straw had been that, after assuming magic wouldn't work on Vandal, Sercent chose to attack in close combat before his wounds had even closed. That had got his remaining arm snared in the Anti-Attack Barrier, preventing his escape, and with Zero Heal in effect, his regeneration was now curtailed. Fear of dying from blood loss then sent him into a panic, allowing Vandal to finish him off.

Putting aside the other advantages of having a weapon like Bugogan's gave, Sercent attacked the Anti-Attack Barrier with his own arm. As a result, it drained the kinetic energy from his muscles and froze him in place. Vandal also poured a lot more magical power into the barrier after his experience in the last fight. His skill level had also increased, meaning the barrier itself was more powerful. With all of these factors coming together, the vampire had simply been unlucky.

"From what you've told us, Eleonora, it sounds like he was feeling pretty cornered, for various reasons," Vandal summarized. "He was probably panicked. If he had backed off and used some ranged attacks, he could have escaped."

Certainly, Sercent couldn't have won the battle. Borkz had been standing right there, and Vandal had wrapped him up with his barriers. A powerful foe at his back and his unassailable target in front.

"Even if he did get away, the only thing waiting for him was execution," Eleonora said.

“Not easy being a vampire, huh,” Vandal commented. “In any case. I’m still not that strong. Just very . . . focused on defense, you might say.” He didn’t have the strength like Borkz to just chop an enemy in half with a single swing. Well, okay, he did have something like that, but MP Shot was hard to aim accurately, travelled slower than an arrow, and had a short effective range.

“But you plan to wipe out Vilkain and others one day?” Eleonora asked.

“Yep. Sure do.” Even a progenitor who had lived for tens of thousands of years had to be an easier target than the resurrected, who would one day be born with cheat abilities. The vampires might have the protection of a demon god, but that didn’t make them divine themselves. “But what if this Vilkain comes here himself before I’m strong enough to handle him?” Vandal asked.

“That won’t happen,” Eleonora said. “There’s no way that any of those three would actually cross those mountains and come here in person.” The three progenitors were strong, that much was true, but they also didn’t get along. If Vilkain made a personal trip, Tehneshia and Gubamon would be all smiles on the surface, lending him minions and wishing him well. Behind his back, however, they would plan to push him out during his absence. “The thing with king of the hill is that you only get to be king while you stay on the hill. Climb down for anything, and it’s very hard to climb back up.”

Vandal should have expected as much from a community that worshipped a demon god. They didn’t believe in helping each other out and did whatever they could to drag down others.

“That’s why you think it’s safe to take up with me?”

“Yes. You are the scariest individual I’ve ever encountered in this world.”

“And you’re going to do your best to get along with Talea and the others?”

“Of course. Their enemy is your enemy, right? So I don’t want to be that. I’ll lick Talea’s feet to beg for her forgiveness.”

If she had killed Talea, then Vandal would have definitely killed Eleonora, which meant treating Talea and the others well would surely have the opposite effect.

From Vandal’s perspective, it did seem like a swift change of heart, but . . .

“If Talea has forgiven you, that’s good enough for me. Nice to have you with us,” Vandal said. He could do things swiftly too.

Vandal, are you sure we should trust her so easily? Dalshia asked.

“Boy, listen to what she’s saying!” Zadilis added. “If someone scarier than you comes along, she’s saying that she’ll betray you!”

Vandal gestured for them to calm down. “I think we can trust her, but I’m also going to set up some insurance. You’re not wrong, Zadilis, but that’s just how the world works.” People always gathered beneath those who could do the most for them. The news back on Earth had often talked about employees moving to companies that offered a better salary or working conditions. That was all Eleonora was doing. “Eleonora bases her decisions on the level of fear her boss provides. She won’t betray us as long as no one else who can destroy souls comes along—like maybe the Demon King getting revived.” Some of the resurrected may hold that power, but Vandal didn’t have to worry about them showing up too soon. It also seemed unlikely that Rodocolte would give them powers that might impinge on his own duties.

“I suppose using fear to control has been around for a long time,” Zadilis admitted.

“I’ve got my reasons for wanting her on our side,” Vandal continued. “She

wasn't involved in the death of my dad, so she's not my enemy on that account. She can provide information on this sect of vampires that we'll have to deal with. She'll bolster our fighting strength. And, most importantly—"

"She's another woman," Borkz interjected. "What a body."

"That's right," Vandal said with a nod.

The tension in the room suddenly seemed to change. Vandal wondered why.

"Lord Van. I think you meant to correct Borkz there, not agree with him?" Talea suggested.

"I don't lie unless I really have to," Vandal stated.

"What! You prefer this vampiric trollop to me?!" Talea squawked.

"Not at all. You have an even nicer body," Vandal told her. Talea had much better muscles than Eleonora. Her arms, and her abs, too, he had noticed after getting close to her.

"Oh, well, in that case!" Talea laughed, covering her cheeks with her hands like a shy maiden.

"You *do* know the boy is talking about muscle mass," Zadilis said.

"Can't be anything else," Basdia agreed. And they were correct.

"What did you mean when you mentioned insurance, Young Master?" Sam asked, getting the conversation back on track.

"I'll make a golem into a piercing and put it on her. That will let me know where she is at all times and allow me to attack her from inside her body using the golem if required," Vandal explained. It almost sounded like too much, but it was surely exactly what Eleonora wanted. He had also picked something extreme to help everyone else accept Eleonora joining the group. He had

already planned the composition of the piercing: it would contain mercury inside and have Maintain Freshness cast over it to keep it in working order.

“That sound like solid plan, but where you putting the piercing? The navel?”

The young master does seem to have a thing for those, Rita said, somewhat forlornly. *Not that I have anything he likes . . . muscles . . . a left hand . . .*

Lefdia’s arrival was continuing to make waves in the group.

“You are correct about the muscles, Rita, but wrong about everything else,” Vandal. “You have plenty to offer.”

Like cuteness! she replied.

“I’m going to put it in her tongue,” Vandal eventually stated, pushing aside all the banter.

“Her tongue?”

That seems a little much, Vandal . . . Dalshia suggested.

Everyone seemed to think he was going too far. Apart from—“I’ll take one or two or however many you want to put in me!” Eleonora was down on her knees, sticking out her tongue as if she wanted it pierced right away.

“We also need to discuss the defenses of Talosheim,” Vandal said. “I think that’s enough on this topic.”

The real work began now. He was going to have to wait until later to check out the specifics of his new Soul Crusher skill.

Name: Eleonora

Rank: 8

Race: Vampire Baron (Noble Species Vampire Baron) Level: 47

Job: Doom Gazer

Job Level: 70

Job History: Slave, Servant, Apprentice Magician, Apprentice Warrior,
Magician Age: 6 (20 at time of becoming vampire)

—Passive Skills

[Self Enhancement/Subordination: Level 3] [Brute Strength: Level 5] [Rapid Regeneration: Level 2] [Resist Maladies: Level 5] [Instincts: Level 3] [Spiritual Pollution: Level 3] [MP Auto Recovery: Level 3] [Detect Presence: Level 3]

—Active Skills

[Excavation: Level 1] [Time Attribute Magic: Level 5] [Life Attribute Magic: Level 5]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 2] [Magic Control: Level 3] [Sword Proficiency: Level 1]

[Brawling Proficiency: Level 1] [Sneaking Steps: Level 3] [Steal: Level 1] [Housework: Level 2]

—Unique Skills

[Alluring Doom Gaze: Level 7]



"We need to get the defenses of Talosheim into order," Vandal said.

The discussions—and preparations—began the very day that Eleonora joined them. The principal reason was her reveal that the demon god vampires had agents among the top brass of the Milg Shield Kingdom, including the Marshal, as well as in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom.

They didn't know how aggressively the progenitors were going to try to kill Vandal, but the worst-case scenario was a massive force from Milg with a smattering of vampires mixed in. Currently, the defenses of Talosheim were defenses in name only. They couldn't withstand an assault by thousands, if not tens of thousands of elite troops, and the vampires could take action to cut off routes of escape.

Vandal could always make a run of it on his own, but if the enemy had agents in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, then there might not be anywhere safe for him across the entire continent, although his departure could help to keep the giantling undead and ghouls safe at least.

"You won't find any cowards here willing to throw you to the wolves for their own safety," Borkz said.

"That's right, child," Nuaza agreed. "We will fight until our meat and organs rot away and our bones shatter!"

"Me agree," said Vigaro. "We need Vandal in lives."

"Indeed we do. For the magic items to help us have children, as much as anything else," Zadilis agreed. "Even without that, we can't kick out our king for the sake of our own safety."

Vandal also wanted to protect his place in Talosheim. He was still planning on going to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom eventually but wanted to come back

here at least once a year. He dreamed of the big city, but still wanted a home in the countryside to come back to. He wanted Talosheim to be something like that for himself.

“Thank you all,” Vandal said. “Then I’ll create defenses capable of stopping a force of over ten thousand that includes vampires. From spring to early summer. We should be finished by mid-summer at the latest.”

“Are you serious?” Borkz asked.

“Certainly not. I’m as serious as they come.”

Vilkain would get suspicious when Eleonora and the others from the first party didn’t get in touch. Once he decided the mission must have failed, then the vampires would surely take further steps. It was unlikely they would manipulate Milg into sending a massive force right away, but they would definitely try to collect further information on what was happening. Once they had a report on the state of Talosheim, they would likely decide that sending only a few more vampires wouldn’t resolve anything.

“Abouth your Golem Creation,” Eleanor interjected, slurring her words a little because of the fresh piercing in her tongue. “No one other than you can use that either, Lord Vandal. Putting aside your volume of magical power, even an Alchemist can’t make golemth inthtantly or freely change their shape like that. Just like taming undead.” If the progenitors found that out, they would do whatever it took to kill Vandal.

“Don’t overreact,” Vandal said. “Those three progenitors can tame undead, surely?”

Eleonora shook her head. “No. They can’t. Tehneshia and Gubamon make more use of undead than Vilkain, but they do so by turning corpses into

undead. That allows them to command them. They can't command any undead that they didn't create." So even a progenitor wouldn't be able to tame a rank 1 Zombie if it was undead before they got to it. "That's why finding out that you can tame undead would make them so mad. Especially Gubamon."

"I see."

Sword King Borkz was one of the heroes that Gubamon had been after, but the giantling was already undead. Vandal had gathered up the fragments of his arm bones and put them back together and used Fix Corpse, so even collecting some of those was off the table. Vandal didn't know anything about this Gubamon guy, but considering his background, he was likely to get pretty mad that a mere dhampir was not only pilfering from his desired collectables but could use undead in a way that he never could. Vandal didn't care if he threw a tantrum, but an attempt on his own life was a different matter.

One answer to deal with such a serious situation was to strike first, but that wouldn't be easy. Vandal faced the same issue as the vampires: crossing the mountains. The vampires also had numerous bases scattered around, and even Eleonora didn't know where all of them were located.

After determining that leaving the city to attack was unrealistic, Vandal first set his mind to solving their workforce issues.

Talosheim had once been a fortress city of five thousand giantlings. The city could easily house around that number, and the castle walls were big enough to encircle them all. However, there were only about one thousand giantling undead at the moment. Even with the ghouls and new species, their numbers didn't reach two thousand. That meant achieving some kind of replete security system was simply impossible. The undead didn't get exhausted or need sleep, so Vandal could put them on watch 24/7, but he didn't want to ask that of

them. The undead needed some fun and enjoyment in their lives.

He therefore started by making more golems.

“Rise,” Vandal commanded. “Advance.” He had come to Garan Valley and was turning the boulders of the cliffs here into golems, one after the other. He then had them walk back to Talosheim on their own. It was pretty easy work, apart from the cost in magical power.

“Amazing, child,” said one of the giantling stonemasons.

“You aren’t going to put us out of a job?” asked another.

“Time is a luxury we don’t have,” Vandal replied. “After today, this place won’t be called Garan Valley. More like Garan Quarry.”

“Sounds like we really will be out of work.”

“Actually, there will be even more for you to do,” Vandal corrected him.

“You’re serious?”

Vandal proceeded to give the giantlings drastically more work than they could have hoped for. Vandal needed their skills for some of the more delicate adjustments to all the golems.

“I’m going to be attaching these golems to the castle walls and the stone buildings. I want you to decorate them so that they look like stone embellishments,” Vandal explained.

“Sounds fancy. We can make it happen, but why? Will it make the golems stronger?”

“No, it won’t enhance them. It will just make them appear as decoration.”

The stonemasons still didn’t seem to get it, but once some of the decorated golems were finished, their effects became more apparent.

Placing the golems close to the walls and buildings would have provided a deterrent to would-be attackers and enhanced the city's overall security. But by embedding the golems into the thick walls and detailing them to look like nothing more than stone embellishments, from the outside, it merely looked like Vandal had spruced the place up a little. That would lure invaders into a false sense of security. They would approach the golems without any sense of danger, then get their faces punched right off.

If Talosheim was facing an entire army, they could let their enemies approach the "undefended" walls and then have actual defenders step out and attack, catching them off guard.

"I can even have them stay hidden until the enemies have already started to climb the walls."

"That's pretty nasty."

"But child, won't our defenses be weakened once the golems move from their positions?" a stonemason asked.

"I'm only using the golems to add more defenses on top of the stone walls that are already there. Anything placed in the city from the second floor or higher will just be a face or eyes for keeping watch," Vandal explained.

"Then we can keep our city intact," the stonemason said in agreement.

Vandal got this idea from the way security guards and cameras were used inconspicuously on Earth. *Even better, these golems don't need any further attention once they have been placed, which is mentally much easier on me,* Vandal thought.

It even made the city look cooler. There were no downsides to this plan.

Vandal also learned that the stone walls of Garan Valley would eventually

stop giving up stone after a certain point. It was like some kind of transparent barrier cut them off from quarrying further, or maybe any further stone was simply an illusion.

But after a few days, the stone walls returned to normal. They were never going to run out of stone.

Of course, while Vandal and the stonemasons were busy with the golems, everyone else wasn't just sitting around.

"I'm going to ask you to do something a little bit dangerous," Vandal told them. "I need you to go and place sentry golems in the following locations."

Bolstering the city's defenses was important, but Vandal also needed a better idea of when the enemy were coming. Vandal therefore asked the others to help place his sentry golems farther out from the city. He had narrowed down three possible routes that the enemy might use.

"You can leave this with me, Lord Vandal," Eleonora said, as he gave her the mountain route. There wasn't much risk of an attack from this route. A number of Sercent's subordinates had perished trying to cross it. Eleonora assured him that it would take at least a noble or higher to traverse it safely. No normal human could perform such a crossing intact. That only make it clear how extraordinary Vandal was, having made that same crossing with more than six hundred ghouls without losing a single one of them.

The second route was the tunnel connected to the domain of Duke Heartner in Olbaum.

"We need to watch this too?" asked Zulan.

"There are demon god vampires in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom,"

Eleonora replied.

While the tunnel was currently collapsed, it could certainly be reopened from the Heartner side, allowing vampires to come through. The first princess might still be alive over there, but the vampires could try and exploit her feelings for her homeland.

Then there was the third route, and the most difficult to deal with.

“You need us to look for the tunnel connected to the Milg Shield Kingdom,” Zulan said. “Is there even such a thing?”

“It’s possible,” Vandal replied. There was no information stating there was a tunnel that ran through the mountains on the Milg side. However, there was a tunnel on the opposite side, leading to Olbaum, and so the counterpart tunnel may simply have not been discovered yet.

After all, this was potentially a tunnel from tens of thousands of years ago. There would have been no Amidd Empire or Olbaum Electorate Kingdom back then. The tunnel might even have been created before the goddess Vida created the vampires. This made it highly likely that tunnels would have been made running both east and west, although Vandal had no idea who would have done the digging.

In any case, looking for a tunnel would involve searching with few clues across demon barrens packed with monsters. Vandal planned to send a full convoy, including Borkz, Vigaro, Zadilis, and his own skeleton beasts.

“I don’t mind the trip, but I want plenty of miso, fish paste, and especially bonito to take along,” Borkz said. “If you’re putting adventurers to work, then you need to reward them.”

“You like the bonito?” Vandal asked.

"Yeah. It's great when stewed and can be eaten almost without anything else," Borkz replied. "Always nice to save some time."

Vandal hadn't finished the bonito yet: it had been dried but not smoked and was still very soft. But as Borkz stated, it made a pretty good soup all on its own.

"I hope to finish it within the year," Vandal said.

"It's not even finished yet? I can't wait to try the real deal!" Borkz exclaimed.

"Something to look forward to," Vandal said. "What I need you to place out there are goblin skeletons made from goblin skulls, these rock golems made out of rocks, and wood golems made out of withered branches."

All of them could be carried in a giantling's hand. They were also the kind of objects you might find anywhere. Just another piece of the scenery. The golems might be detected if someone used non-attribute magic such as Appraisal, but it seemed unlikely that anyone would go around casting Appraisal on rocks and branches and skulls littered across the ground. This was a region where monsters were constantly fighting for dominance. No intruders would have the time to confirm each rock was actually a rock.

Of course, those same wild monsters might end up destroying the golems or undead, but Vandal planned to place three surveillance items in each location. Even if one of them did get destroyed, he would still have backups to work with.

Regarding the route that the Milg Shield Kingdom army had used two hundred years ago, Vandal decided to leave it unwatched. Eleonora informed him that a pair of Hurricane Dragons had taken up residence there. Defeating two dragons of at least rank 10 on dangerous cliffside footing would take a party with numerous hero-class rank S adventurers. That wasn't something the current Amidd Empire could pull together easily.

The same went for the vampires. Eleonora stated that higher-ranking nobles or the progenitors like Vilkain could probably fight them off, but the scale of the battle would immediately give away their position to Talosheim. There would be crazy Sunblind flashes, the sound of explosions, and probably entire sections of the mountains crumbling away.

There was one other possible route: to circle around the southern mountains of the Vangaia Continent and then come north. But apparently that route would be suicide even for a progenitor.

“Legends suggest there are even more powerful dragons, giants, and even demon temples out there,” Eleonora explained. The legends also spoke of an empire of Noble Orcs and completely unknown demon barrens with vast hordes of countless monsters. None of the legends were confirmed, of course, but there was a strong possibility of the existence of the Noble Orc empire, at least. The spirit of Bugogan, after his defeat in the jungle demon barren, had talked about having come from such an empire.

None of these things were Vandal’s allies, but they served as excellent defenses. Of course, they also stopped Vandal from going to look for the Vida-worshipping vampires, who should be out there somewhere.

“Thanks everyone. Let’s get to it,” Vandal said in closing.

Except for finding a tunnel connecting to Milg, none of the work took longer than a month. Once Eleonora, Zulan, and the others finished their own tasks, Vandal had them join up to look for the ancient tunnel.

At that time, Vandal readjusted his own priorities. “I’ll get to work on repairing the second and third walls and then move on to weapon development,” he announced.

"Young Master, are you still planning on working yourself to death?" Sam asked.

"I'll be fine. I'll rest on my days off, as promised," Vandal assured him.

In the last two hundred years, the only ones to visit Talosheim were Vandal and his group, and then the vampires—from among whom only Eleonora was still alive. No one was going to notice something like extra castle walls on the city.

He created the second wall as sturdy as the first one was, placing golems and arrow slots along it. He made the third wall tall enough to cover the first and second walls, but with an appearance so shabby it looked ready to crumble at a glance.

"Cover it with some mud, put some withered undead vines around it, and perfect," Vandal said. Even if Milg Shield Kingdom forces did come, the walls would still look battered enough to lull them into a false sense of security—meaning they might not notice that the damage to the walls was different from what might have been taken down in their records of the past fighting. Of course, the walls were created entirely from stone golems, so they weren't shabby in the slightest.

"The castle walls can even turn into extra warriors for us," Sam observed.

But noble and higher vampires can fly, Rita chimed in. *Like Eleonora.*

"So I'm going to make some anti-air weapons," Vandal replied. "It takes too much time to make undead that can fly."

A small number of such undead was one thing, but to make hundreds of undead capable of flight, like Skeleton Bird, would take far too long. Vandal could use monsters already capable of flight, like wyverns, and turn their fresh

corpses into zombies, but it would still be difficult to get anything close to the required numbers, and he would have trouble replacing any that fell.

He also considered making a few hundred smaller undead, like bugs or small birds, but simply turning something into undead didn't necessarily make it stronger. Even if he turned bugs and insects into undead, they still wouldn't be able to pierce the skin of their target. And noble vampires were skilled with magic. Any wide-range attack would vaporize small undead in seconds. Not to mention that attempting to collect hundreds of such small creatures was one of the fastest ways Vandal could work himself to death.

"I could use the corpses of insect monsters, but it would take too long to collect them," Vandal said. "Once I fix up the defenses, I can make some time for that."

"What new weapons do you need our help with, Lord Van?" Talea asked.

"Anything to do with metal, I can handle it," Datara, the giantling blacksmith, offered.

"I want you both to make crossbows," Vandal said.

The two of them glanced at one another and then at Vandal.

"Crossbows?" Talea asked. "Ah. Right, those things."

"What do you want to make those for?" Datara asked.

Crossbows existed here in Ramda, but they weren't popular or even especially useful. Crossbows offered excellent accuracy, and while they didn't exactly fire rapidly, they could be wound up by pretty much anyone, meaning the frail or elderly could make use of them.

However, skills and battle techs existed in this world. Increasing the level of the Bow Proficiency skill raised both the accuracy and power of bows. Doing so

would also increase the user's level, boosting their stats and allowing even a delicate-armed lady to pull the string of a mighty bow. Battle techs, meanwhile, could be used to perform all sorts of seemingly superhuman feats, such as firing multiple arrows in quick succession or threading a shot through the eye of a needle.

A crossbow would also receive modifiers to accuracy from the Bow Proficiency skill, but the weapon's composition meant that it couldn't use battle techs. As the user also didn't directly touch the string, higher stats would not change the strength of the shot either.

As a result, neither adventurers nor the military had much demand for crossbows. Some regular folk might have purchased one, since they were so easy to use, but in most cases they stuck to a bow and arrow as well, since a bow was much cheaper. Therefore, the crossbow was very much in the purview of the weirdo in Ramda, and many armories even in large cities didn't bother to stock them.

"Rather than waste time with crossbows," Datara said, "we should focus on making better bows for everyone."

"We're not arming people with the crossbows," Vandal said. "I'm going to turn the crossbows themselves into undead." His plan was to possess the created crossbows with spirits and turn them into Cursed Weapons.

Cursed Weapons were weapon-based monsters possessed by spirits and could move on their own. They were weak monsters, only rank 2, meaning normally they would have trouble dealing with an average soldier, let alone a vampire.

However, all a crossbow needed to do in order to fire a shaft capable of piecing plate mail was pull its own trigger. It was also highly accurate. Cursed

Weapons couldn't use battle techs to begin with, so that wasn't a disadvantage either. Reloading could become an issue, but Vandal planned to cover that with a golem fashioned as a pair of arms created exclusively for reloading. Put one of those with every crossbow on the walls, buildings, and castle, and no problems.

Using Detect Presence wouldn't pick up on such installations. The crossbows would be able to see day and night without getting tired and continue to fill the enemy with bolts until they ran out of ammo. Vandal also planned to use silver-plated arrows for the anti-vampire crossbows, placed high on the walls or on top of buildings.

Metal plating normally required considerable skill, but Vandal could do it easily by shaping the silver using Golem Creation and then affixing a thin layer to existing arrows.

"We should also make some ballistae and catapults," Vandal suggested.

"You're really spoiling for an all-out war! Sounds like fun!"

"I might manage the ballistae, but I don't have a clue how to make catapults," Datara said.

"Don't worry. I'll handle those," Vandal replied. Of course, he didn't have any actual experience making them. But he had watched a documentary on Earth about catapults. The documentary discussed recreating ancient weapons using modern technology and investigating their effectiveness.

The only kind of programs I got to watch, what with uncle's luxury sensitivity. I remember it all too well, Vandal grimaced. Even that hadn't completely outlined how to create a catapult from scratch, but he had the basic pieces and their general structure in his head. He just needed to use Golem Creation to recreate it all.

During his downtime, he played with Pauvina, Lefdia, and the others, checked up on Basdia, and started working on Talea's much-delayed Rejuvenation. Before he knew it, summer arrived once more.

Rapid Healing, Resist Maladies, Death Attribute Magic, Skip Incantation, Magical Power Auto Recovery, Limit Break, Golem Creation, Non-Attribute Magic, Magic Control, Carpentry, Construction, Alchemy skill levels increased!

Simultaneous Activation skill acquired!

Zadilis, Nuaza, Skeleton, Skeleton Wolf, Skeleton Monkey, Skeleton Bear, Skeleton Bird, Braga, Zamed, Memedigga, Rita, and Saria ranked up!

Name: Vandal

Race: Dhampir (Dark Elf)

Age: 4 years old

Alias: Ghoul King

Job: Death Mage

Level: 39

Job History: None

—Status

Vitality: 69

Magical Power: 144596652

Strength: 52

Agility: 31

Muscle: 56

Intellect: 157

—Passive Skills

[Brute Strength: Level 1] [Rapid Healing: Level 3 (UP!)] [Death Attribute Magic: Level 5 (UP!)]

[Resist Maladies: Level 5 (UP!)] [Resist Magic: Level 1] [Night Vision]

[Spirit Pollution: Level 10] [Death Attribute Allure: Level 4] [Skip Incantation: Level 3 (UP!)]

[Enhance Brethren: Level 5] [Magical Power Auto Recovery: Level 3 (UP!)]

—Active Skills

[Suck Blood: Level 3] [Limit Break: Level 4 (UP!)] [Golem Creation: Level 4 (UP!)]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 3 (UP!)] [Magic Control: Level 3 (UP!)] [Spirit Body: Level 2]

[Carpentry: Level 4 (UP!)] [Construction: Level 3 (UP!)] [Cooking: Level 2]

[Alchemy: Level 3 (UP!)] [Brawling Proficiency: Level 1 (NEW!)]

[Soul Crusher: Level 1 (NEW!)] [Simultaneous Activation: Level 1 (NEW!)]

—Curses

[Unable to carry over experience from previous lives] [Unable to enter existing jobs] [Unable to personally acquire experience]



The only lively rooms in Talosheim Castle were the baths. The nation still wasn't functioning as anything resembling an actual country, so no one needed anything else from the grandiose structure.

"That was a great bath."

"I love those massage golems that King made for us."

"You do? I like the bubbling jacuzzi."

Despite having no bathing culture previously, the ghouls had quickly taken to sinking into hot water up to their necks. Vandal had created all sorts of additional golem products to enhance the experience, but simply getting into the water seemed to keep them happy.

"Hey, have you heard about Elder Talea? They say she's been called to King's bedchamber every night recently."

"I heard that too, but I think he just wants someone around. He's four years old, and I heard he doesn't like being alone. She's not an elder now, either. She's Chief Crafter."

"I know what she calls herself, but I can't stop calling her elder—"

Two female ghouls were idly chatting, walking along, when Talea herself suddenly dashed out and cut in front of them.

"Huh? There she—" the first ghoul paused, seeing Talea being followed almost immediately by Vandal, who was, for some reason, up on the ceiling, galloping along on all fours.

Neither of the gossips could find anything to say about seeing their king like

this.

A moment later, Talea was back, captured by Vandal.

“No, please! That’s enough for tonight!” Talea begged, tears in her eyes as Vandal carried her the other way using Telekinesis.

“Not at all,” Vandal replied. “I have the catapult tests tomorrow. I want to go another ten at least tonight.”

The two gossipy ghouls looked each other and swallowed hard.

“There’s lonely,” one of them said nervously, “and then there’s that.”

Talea was lying spread-eagled, breathing hard, unable to move.

“Your Rejuvenation will be finished in a few days,” Vandal said from beside her. Let’s keep this momentum going.”

“Hawooh . . .” Her legs wobbly and unable to stand, Talea made a strange noise. She experienced a lot during her lifetime, but this Rejuvenation process was like nothing else her body had felt before. There was the alien sensation of something crawling around inside her, combined with something akin to the pleasure and relaxation of getting a massage. It both filled her body with renewed strength but made her feel as exhausted as having sprinted a mile. She couldn’t even begin to describe it.

Of course, she felt happy to get in on a secret that only Vandal and Zadilis had known until that point and happy to grow young again. There weren’t any rational downsides to it, and yet . . .

“I was feeling tired all the time, had trouble breathing, could barely see, and then there was the pain in my back. And yet . . .” She had been suffering more

severely from old age than she even realized. That was what 260 years did to a ghoul.

“Want to go another ten years?” Vandal asked.

“No! Not tonight, thank you!” Talea squawked.



There were a number of gathering places for the vampires who worshipped the Demon God of Living Pleasure Hihiryu-Shukaka. In one of these, the three progenitors gathered—a rare occurrence of maybe once every thousand years. And they were doing something now that they hadn’t done for tens of thousands of years.

There was a warped seven-pointed star on the floor, depicted in fresh blood. The three progenitors extended their arms toward it and made a fist.

“I, Tehneshia, offer my precious blood.” A drop of blood dripped out from between Tehneshia’s fingers. Her eyes sparkled like those of a child opening a present.

“I, Gubamon, offer my precious blood.” Another drop of blood, this time from the fingers of a crusty, withered old man with huge goggling eyes and a luxurious beard that seemed to suck up all of his nutrition. His eyes overflowed with incomprehensible greed.

“I, Vilkain, offer my precious blood.” Then a final drop of red, from Vilkain’s white hand. His eyes were completely, utterly dead inside. His lips, which usually hinted at a gentlemanly smile, tugged strangely taunt.

The three of them gathering in the same place and working together to

achieve something had been unheard of for tens of thousands of years. A single one of these progenitors had the strength to wipe out a party comprised of superhuman rank A adventurers. They were the leaders of this vampire community but had also been blessed by Hihiryu-Shukaka, making them close to divine themselves. For such beings to gather together and attempt a ritual must mean . . .

“Hah. Looks like it failed. Sercent betrayed us, eh?” Gubamon looked down at the unresponsive star on the ground, his lips rising in a smile that revealed his fangs.

“Eleonora next. Get on it with,” Tehneshia said.

“Very well.”

Vilkain had the one of the waiting nobles bring up the next child, and then he chopped off the head. A fountain of blood spilled onto the floor, glowing with sinister light and writhing around as though alive before settling into the same shape as the previous star.

The three vampires then each added another drop of their blood. The results were the same. No response.

“It looks like Eleonora has also betrayed us,” Tehneshia said.

Gubamon snickered. “Indeed! For if she was dead, she would have appeared here as undead.”

This ritual allowed the souls of deceased noble vampires to be summoned and revived as undead. It required the sacrifice of a babe from a woman who had only known one man, and then blood from all three of the progenitors to be added to the star drawn in that blood. Even after all that, the restored vampire would be far weaker as undead than they had been in life, meaning the

ritual generally wasn't worth the effort. The reason they conducted it now was because of a serious event that had occurred a month previously.

Kill the dhampir offspring of the subordinate Varen and dark elf Dalshia. The progenitors had received this oracle from the Demon God of Living Pleasure Hihiryu-Shukaka.

The progenitors had previously left the eradication of the dhampir in question to Sercent and Eleonora. It had been around a year since they were dispatched to handle the issue, but vampires had a loose sense of time. Maybe the pair had encountered some unexpected resistance, but none of the three had thought to check in. Unless the Vida-worshipping progenitors got involved, the progenitors saw no need to panic.

But an oracle from the demon god himself changed everything. Even the progenitors, those blessed by the god, rarely received word from him directly. And here he was, ordering the destruction of this dhampir. The fact that Gubamon, who never normally showed up for these things, had made the time to stop playing with his collection and show his whiskery face spoke volumes about the importance of this occurrence.

The progenitors had started by trying to contact Eleonora and the party sent to take out the dhampir, but it was already too late. So they turned to the rite. If the vampires had been wiped out, they would be able to revive them as undead and hear their report. If they didn't revive, then it clearly meant betrayal.

"It seems we underestimated the dhampir," Tehneshia said. "He either swayed our assassins to join him or captured them alive to have some fun. In either case, they failed."

"That Sercent wasn't an outstanding specimen, but he also wasn't

completely incompetent. Getting him to go turncoat means this dhampir must have considerable strength,” Gubamon agreed with a nod. He seemed awfully pleased with the idea of one of his men turning on him because that implied this dhampir had to be something really special—have some unique ability or simply be incredibly powerful—for Sercent to be willing to turn on his own creator and all of the other nobles and subordinates in order to serve him.

Gubamon cackled. “I want to get the corpse of that dhampir, yes, I want it very much! I’m already planning the undead I will turn him into! Oh, such pleasure! Hahahaha!”

Gubamon’s primary hobby was to collect the corpses of heroes and turn them into undead. The oracle from the Demon God of Living Pleasure had basically pointed him toward the next corpse for his collection.

A dhampir so dangerous that the demon god wished for his destruction. That could be more valuable than a grade A adventurer. He didn’t know what made the child so dangerous, or what he had done to purchase such divine wrath, but Hihiryu-Shukaka had his eye on him now.

“Then do your best,” Tehneshia said. “I’m really not that interested—well, maybe a little. That dhampir has hundreds of ghouls with him, correct? It might be fun to make some undead from ghouls.” She also enjoyed creating undead, but for her it was more like making a work of art. She didn’t care about the strength or renown of the materials like Gubamon. The theme of her work for the last few hundred years had been “family,” so she had no interest in the dhampir, whose father had been exterminated before the baby was even born and his mother burnt at the stake soon after. But the gray skin of those ghouls might make for some fetching undead. That was what her own twisted inspiration told her.

Vilkain, meanwhile . . .

“Shit,” he muttered. It was a word that he would never normally be foul the air with. The noble still holding the empty basket opened eyes wide in surprise.

“Lord Vilkain?” he ventured—and then gasped. Vilkain grabbed the noble by the neck and then hoisted him into the air. “Lord Vilkain! What are you doing—gwaah?!”

Vilkain proceeded to whip “it” wildly around in circles by the neck.

“Damn it all!” Vilkain roared. “My Eleonora! My plaything! Selected by me from among dozens of candidates! You dare steal from me?! You shit! You shitty dhampir!” He swung his arm around, up, down, left, right, smashing “it” into the walls and floor over and over, thrashing at everything around him. “I was looking forward to another hundred years of playing with her! Making her think she was special, building her up, and then slowly but surely slicing her to pieces! I wanted to destroy her! How dare you steal that from me! Shit, shit, shit, shitbag dhampir!”

“What? What’s this?! Eek! Lord Vilkain!”

“Please, Lord, Vilkain, control yourself! What happened—mmrrrfgh?!”

“Aaaaagh! Lord Vilkain is on a rampage! Run, run away!”

“Waaaagh!”

His minions knew the best thing to do was to get the hell away from him. Vilkain’s hair was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot, foam frothing from his mouth as he rampaged. His noble persona had completely vanished. He didn’t even look so much of a rampaging beast as a broken madman. He swung his arms wide to the side, toppling a broken pillar, and then gasped for air as his shoulders heaved up and down.

“Haah . . . haah . . . phew.”

He looked up into the sky and saw a beautiful moon sparkling a pale blue. The stars twinkled around the moon, as if to emphasize its beauty.

Vilkain still had “it” in his hands—a head smushed so badly he could no longer tell whether it had belonged to a man or woman. He tossed the remains of the noble away and then addressed Tehneshia and Gubamon like nothing had just happened.

“What shall we do next? Tehneshia, your turn. Any ideas?” Vilkain asked. He took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth, then smoothed out his moustache.

“Back with us already?” Tehneshia said. “That didn’t take long this time.”

“Your little outbursts can last for days,” Gubamon added. “I thought maybe we were going to have to step in.”

“My apologies, of course,” Vilkain said dryly. He was completely back to normal, but the scene around him looked like something from a slaughterhouse. Or more like an abandoned slaughterhouse slated for demolition. The meeting place could have been the house of a rich noble before, but now rubble covered in blood and dotted with body parts littered the place. He had wiped out half the nobles and most of the subordinates in attendance.

“No matter,” Tehneshia said. “I thought something like this might happen, so I didn’t bring any of my minions along. Just some subs to make up the numbers.”

“Hahaha, nice move!” Gubamon chuckled. “I, unfortunately, brought a full complement of nobles!”

“I apologize again. Did I get many of them?” Vilkain asked.

“Nothing to worry about!” Gubamon said, still jovial. “I was planning on trimming the fat to help prevent another dogpile like this Sercent business. Any of them who can make it through your outburst are worth keeping around!”

“Very well,” Vilkain replied. “You wound me, though, taking advantage of me like that.”

“Why is it my turn, anyway?” Tehneshia asked. “I know I showed some interest, but all I want to do is skin a ghoul or two after the dhampir is dead.”

“Simple,” Vilkain said. “We’ve already sent one of Gubamon’s servants and one of mine. That logically means that you come next.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Tehneshia admitted. “And I can’t show you two up if I never do anything.” She cackled. “Very well. Time for some military action. I have someone in the Amidd Empire army, doing a pretty dance to earn eternal life. The promise of turning people into vampires is so convenient for getting what you want.” An ally in the Amidd army made a good starting point, and she could work on swinging other nobles and high-ranking officers. She could have the military marching in two years or so, easily.

The vampire party had included a regular noble, a young one who was strong for her age, and then maybe a few dozen subs. Tehneshia didn’t know how the dhampir fought them off, but it had to be something out of the ordinary for the demon god to deliver an oracle. She saw the solution to be a show a force: a few thousand troops, knights, and adventurers and throw in the high priest who put the dhampir’s mother to the flame—why not? She could also have some of her own vampires infiltrate the army. One hundred seemed like overkill; a few dozen nobles should do it.

“But is it okay to give away that information we discussed?” Tehneshia asked.

"I'll just deal with them myself once we finish the job, that way the Vida sect won't be able to make use of anything."

Both Gubamon and Vilkain gave their agreement.

"It wouldn't be surprising if the Vida sect knew already," Vilkain said.

"If you get involved personally, it should all work out," Gubamon agreed. "Getting an army to move is a lot of work, though. You don't even like using humans."

"I don't? Speak for yourself, old man," Tehneshia replied.

"Hahaha, good point!" Gubamon cackled. "I'm not especially good at it either!"

"Then we are in agreement," Vilkain said. "Inform us once the plan is in motion. Our god has delivered an oracle to us, meaning we have to work together on this."

"Indeed we do," Gubamon said. "Punishment from divine Hihiryu-Shukaka is something I would very much like to avoid."

All three chuckled in agreement. By the time the surviving vampires had staggered out from the rubble, their masters were already preparing to leave.

All three were thinking the same thing about the oracle from Hihiryu-Shukaka. Why would the demon god himself—a being far more powerful than any of them—order the death of this specific dhampir? The only answer was that the dhampir, a dhampir who wasn't even one of his followers, had attracted Hihiryu-Shukaka's attention. In essence, this dhampir had something that was a threat to Hihiryu-Shukaka. It might be information, it might be some power, but he had something, something that scared a god.

The next logical step was, of course, that if they could get their hands on that,

then maybe they could bring even the demon god under their control.

Hihiryu-Shukaka understood that the progenitors would think this way. After all, they were only enacting the teachings that the god himself instilled into them. But that was also why Hihiryu-Shukaka did not share any further information about Vandal with them.



With a groan and a whoosh, the catapult launched a human-sized rock into the air. The missile proceeded to strike the desired target, a wooden dummy placed a distance away.

“Wow.” Basdia sat like a princess, stroking her swollen belly while sitting under a parasol made from monster hide. “These catapults are really going to help out.”

“We’re still just testing them,” Vandal replied, as Pauvina lifted him up and down at Basdia’s side.

Vandal was generally expressionless and had eyes like a dead fish, but after spending enough time with him it was possible to extract his emotions. His tone right then, a little slower than normal, meant he was in a good mood.

“The normal ammo seems to work. Let’s give the golem ammo a try next.”

“Yesh, shir!” little Pauvina exclaimed. “Okay to go!”

Lefdia raised a small flag. At the signal, the catapult started to move and prepare on its own.

Vandal built the catapult using Golem Creation. A catapult golem. Unlike

regular catapults, this one had arms and stone wheels. It could use them to load itself with rocks and other ammo to throw, then position itself for targeting and fire—a fully automated system. The main body was made from ent wood, giving it the toughness of steel and excellent fire resistance.

“Fire!” Pauvina shouted.

The loyal golem catapult launched the next rock. It arced through the air, much like the first, and came down on a different target. This one was surrounded by additional wooden dummies.

“Raaaaagh!” The rock rose up with a roar and started moving around.

“Did you just launch a golem?” Basdia asked, shaking her head. The missile-now-golem was in the midst of trashing the dummies. It seemed to have taken some damage from the impact, but as it didn’t feel any pain, its ability to fight was unimpeded. It would just smash everything it could find until it got smashed up itself.

Deploying this weapon in combat would be a sight to behold. The primary weakness of the golems was that they were slow. A catapult delivery method not only overcame that problem but turned their delivery into an additional attack. The enemy would be staring down at their front lines crumbing and golems causing destruction. That was not going to end well for them.

“Yes. Considering that they might have to fight subordinate vampires, I’ve also given them silver fists and claws,” Vandal said.

“Very thorough. I like it.”

“Thank you. But I think the golem missiles still have a little room for improvement.”

“They do?” Basdia asked.

Based on the demonstration she had just seen, the golem destroyed the wooden enemies in seconds. It seemed perfect. But Vandal had been watching using bug undead positioned near the target, and he shook his head.

“Some of the dummies had shattered legs but their abdomens were intact. I ordered them to kill the targets completely—to cause life-ending damage,” Vandal explained.

If humans had their legs shattered, they weren’t getting back into the fight without some serious healing. But vampires could very likely continue the fighting even without their legs. The golems needed to crush heads in order to earn a passing grade.

“You have high standards for killing,” Basdia said.

“High! High!” Pauvina tossed Vandal up into the air. “High” was apparently a trigger word for her. She did the same thing inside once, smashing Vandal nose-first into the ceiling. The incident led to a ban on tossing him inside, which was likely why she was making the most of it now that they were outside. She snatched him out of the air just before he hit the ground.



“You need to work on the landings. Can you be gentler?” Vandal asked.

“Okay!”

“I really need you to try. Please,” Vandal said, his head still spinning. “Let’s move onto the test of the next special ammo.”

Lefdia proceeded to wave her flag. This time the catapult grabbed a large barrel and then launched it into the air. It arched through the sky . . . and then split into two.

“What? It failed?” Basdia said.

Clear liquid spilled into the air and rained down onto the plains in front of the target.

“No. That’s a pretty good result,” Vandal said. “That’s a barrel golem created to deliver poison and disease. It splits apart a certain amount of time after firing and sprays it over the ground.”

“P-poison?”

“Yes. Poison,” Vandal stated. “Although there’s only water in there this time.” Vandal could make poison and diseases easily with his magic. He could unleash his own brand of bioterrorism any time he liked.

He did have to be careful not to get hit by his own weapons. If he got hit by virulent poison or a disease that surpassed the strength of his Resist Maladies skill, he could be incapacitated before he even had the chance to use magic.

“Poison? Diseases? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“The question is more about what to spread than how to spread it,” Vandal said. “The undead and golems don’t care, but poison and disease will affect you

and the other ghouls.”

It was a difficult question. He could spread a highly virulent disease, but that would be meaningless if it put Basdia and the others at risk, not to mention the vulnerable children. Maybe he could protect them with a quick Death to Bacteria or Detox, but that wasn’t a practical solution during a fight.

Poison, then. But that still wouldn’t work if Vigaro and the other ghouls were out in the field.

“Maybe I could use the same kind of toxin as you ghouls?” Vandal proposed. “I wonder if there’s some kind of virulent, untreatable airborne disease that only infects humans.”

“Hold on,” Basdia interjected. “That’s not what I’m asking here. What I’m saying is—should you even use such tactics at all? You’re talking about using this on humans?”

“Yeah. So?” Vandal replied, still being thrown up and down by Pauvina—but at least a little more gently now.

“I’m not saying killing is wrong, or anything like that,” Basdia said. “But there might be issues if you kill too many people.”

“Sure. I don’t want to kill more than I have to.”

He was nodding his head up and down—or at least, he might have been. It was hard to tell with him still being tossed around.

“Just because I’m making these weapons it doesn’t mean I’ll definitely use them. My mom wouldn’t like it either.”

Dalshia wasn’t exactly a pacifist, but she also didn’t like indiscriminate killing. She wouldn’t want him to kill without reason, would try to stop Vandal from doing so, and would be sad afterward if he did.

Basdia, meanwhile, had grown up in a ghoul grotto that had always sought to avoid conflict with adventurers. She might feel uneasy about killing humans because of that background. Vandal, for his part, hadn't become a mass murderer and still considered himself human too.

Humans were social animals, meaning their happiness lay within their society. As Vandal's final goal was to achieve happiness for himself, killing a whole bunch of people needlessly in this society would only push him away from that goal.

"I won't kill anyone who isn't asking for it," Vandal concluded.

"Yeah, won't kill," Pauvina said. Even Lefdia was managing some kind of nodding action.

But Vandal wasn't finished.

"But if I need to kill every last creature standing before me in order to keep everywhere safe, that's what I'm going to do. So don't get mad if that happens."

"Don't get mad!" Pauvina chirped.

Unnecessary killing was wrong. But this was a world with gods, religions, and empires that believed wiping out all races other than their own was some form of justice. If surviving meant killing a whole bunch of folks, Vandal didn't have a choice. Basdia seemed to be of the same frame of mind.

"Of course. If that's what is required to protect my baby, and you Van, and everyone else, then I won't stop you," Basdia said. "I'll happily swing that axe myself."

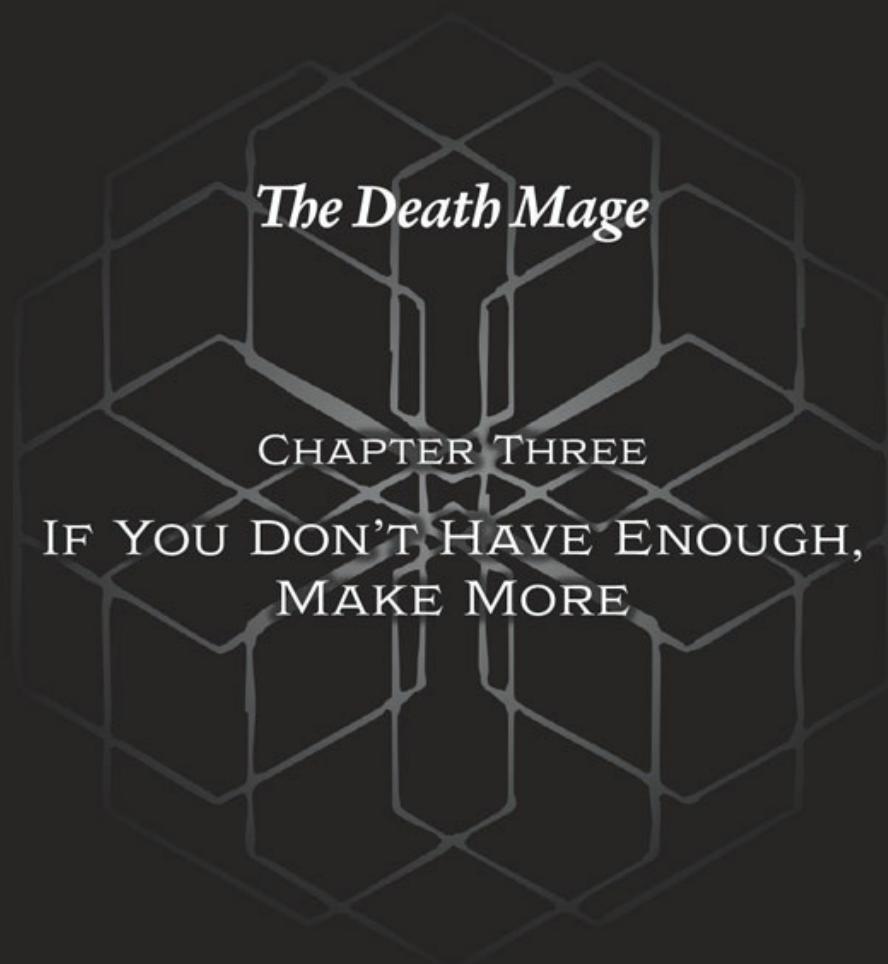
"You're going to make a great mom," Vandal told her.

"You bet I will. Any time you want to help make another one, just say the word."

"It's going to be at least a decade or so before that happens.

As he made this reply, Pauvina proceeded to really toss him up there. The landing would be rough from this height, so he used Flight to float in place for a moment.

Then he thought back over everything that had happened the last few months.



Chapter Three: If You Don't Have Enough, Make More

Vandal and his allies had repaired the castle walls, secured their defenses, and gathered their weapons. They had also successfully placed surveillance undead and golems along the route across the mountains that the vampires and humans would likely use. After they placed the golems along the route that Eleonora used and the ruins of the tunnel through the mountains on the Duke Heartner and Olbaum side, Vandal took a trip to scout the locations out for himself, albeit only the entrances.

Eleanora's route looked fine. What was peculiar, however, was the tunnel route.

The entrance had looked simply caved in, but when Vandal started using Golem Creation to clear the rubble and Spirit Bodification to go inside the golems, he had discovered the true extent of the destruction.

Nuaza and the giantlings had described how First Princess Lebia and the other escapees used secret devices to destroy and block the tunnel two hundred years ago, but now Vandal saw that the interior had been turned into some kind of crazy puzzle. Soft, smooth soil and sand had been poured over the broken rubble in vast quantities, and when he tried to remove some of that rubble to make an opening, more sand just flowed down.

He was only able to make it a half-mile or so down the tunnel, but it was like that the whole way. Even though just above it soared a mountain range that touched the clouds.

It was like, in an attempt to stop the tunnel from ever being opened again, someone had used high-level earth attribute magic to turn the stone and bedrock into fine sand. The Milg forces would have been helpless against this

approach. Even Vandal, with his Golem Creation skill, wasn't sure what to do about it. No one knew how Lebia had closed the tunnel up. Maybe it was that these "secret devices" of the Talosheim royal line were amazing at what they did.

But Vandal wasn't sure. He suspected that maybe vampires were involved in this too.

The Vida worshipping progenitors, said to live beyond the mountains in the south of the Vangaia Continent, were hated by the demon god followers. Interaction between Talosheim and the Heartner domain could mean nothing but trouble for the demon god vampires. If trade boomed and Talosheim eventually became a base of operations for Olbaum to investigate the south, it might stir the Vida vampires into action. So before that could happen, the demon god vampires may have used the Amidd Empire and Milg Shield Kingdom to try to wipe Talosheim out. The vampires had probably also been looking for a way to weaken the religious Amidd Empire and its composite nations. If the vampires had already infiltrated the empire, it would be easy to prompt a conflict.

Eleonora hadn't known anything about any of this. While she had been promised a glorious future, she hadn't held an important position within the organization, and it hadn't even been ten years since she became a vampire. Even those within the sect weren't that friendly with each other. It made sense that she didn't know anything.

Vandal decided to stop going down that rabbit hole. There wasn't much research anyone could do in this tunnel. He needed to speak with someone who was there, or the spirit of such a person. For now, he just let it all fuel his general urge to kill the demon god vampires.

They had also succeeded in finding a second tunnel, leading to the Milg Shield Kingdom.

A large rock blocked it, preventing them from identifying it as a tunnel at first glance. Borkz and his team uncovered the tunnel while fighting off Earth Dragons, Rock Dragons, and a settlement led by a Goblin King. Talea's skilled hands were currently working the dragon materials brought back.

With that, their surveillance network was complete.

In terms of fighting power, everyone was getting stronger as well—if maybe not strong enough to tackle a progenitor. Borkz, Eleonora, Vigaro, and Vandal's other elite party members had all leveled up plenty in the months that had passed, although none of them had ranked up.

Still, Vigaro had performed a Job Change to an Axe Warrior, which specialized in Axe Proficiency. He also learned the Deforestation skill for whatever reason. He had apparently chopped down a lot of tree monsters while searching for the tunnel.

Nuaza had ranked up to a rank 5 Lich. His bone and skin skull had been smiling happily when he finally got the “lessor” removed from his rank, mainly in the hope that Borkz would cut him some slack.

In a similar vein, Braga had become a rank 4 Black Goblin Assassin, and the other Black Goblins had ranked up to Black Goblin Scouts. They had become a pretty useful scouting unit. Braga, in particular, seemed keen to pursue the path of the ninja after hearing about them from Vandal.

Zamed and Memedigga had both also ranked up, becoming an Anubis Rider and Anubis Monk, respectively. Zamed had tamed some monsters that he captured in the dungeons and started to fight while riding them around.

Meanwhile, Memedigga was learning both magic and martial arts and had ranked up after a few dates with Belg in the Vida Temple. The blessings of the goddess for all.

The Orcas Gobba was yet to rank up, but he stood ten feet tall, putting him on par with Borkz in terms of stature. He had also caught some geega birds in the forest, which brought fresh eggs to Talosheim.

Others had also ranked up, leveled up, honed their skills, and gotten stronger. When the vampires came, it wasn't going to be like when they had been forced to leave the jungle demon barrens. Even if the Milg forces did attack, Vandal would be able to fight back.

If he was going to get greedy, he would have preferred to add a few more anti-vampire weapons to their arsenal, but they hadn't had the time, skills, or techniques. On that score, however, they were lucky that the progenitors and longer-lived nobles had a very long-term perspective on the passage of time. They normally planned things in units of years; it would at least be months before anything happened. Vampires were free from the constraints of limited lifespans and lived only with their own kind, cutting them off from the passage of mortal time. "The other day" could mean something that happened more than a decade ago. They were unlikely to leave Vandal alone for ten years, but Eleonora estimated that—without some additional special circumstance of which she wasn't aware—the vampires probably wouldn't make a move for two to five years.

Vandal therefore decided to start working on his own goals once again. The primary one being to obtain the revival device left by the Goddess Vida, located beneath the castle in Talosheim, and bring Dalshia back to life.

"In order to achieve that, I need to become stronger," Vandal said to himself.

He would need to finish off the half-destroyed Dragon Golem that continued to protect the divine legacy.

If that was the only issue, there was no need for Vandal to personally get stronger. He could stand behind Borkz, Eleonora, Vigaro, and Zadilis, and back them up while they did the destroying. Dalshia getting a new body was on the line, but that didn't mean Vandal had to stand on that front line himself.

However, the cursed ice that blocked the chamber defended by the Dragon Golem could only be melted by Vandal. When he made the attempt to do so, it set off a strong response from his constantly active Detect Danger: Death. The Dragon Golem must have known what Vandal was doing and was intent on killing him the moment he entered that chamber. If he attempted to leave the fighting to Borkz and the others and simply open a path for them, the moment they entered, Dragon Golem would likely launch some kind of attack at Vandal and instantly kill him.

Of course, Vandal was now much stronger than when he had first seen the Dragon Golem through the ice. He had changed his Job and leveled up. His stats and his skills increased. Soul Crusher, the skill he had obtained when he destroyed Sercent's soul, was particularly powerful. Careful investigation revealed that it reduced the enemy's MP in exact proportion to the vitality damage Vandal dealt. If he could hit a vampire with it, they might recover their vitality quickly, but their magical power would remain diminished. That was a powerful weapon when fighting a vampire.

It might even be a way to reduce the magical power that allowed the Dragon Golem to move around—although that would also require doing some actual damage to it.

Even with all of this, he still got a powerful warning from Detect Danger:

Death. So he wanted to become even stronger. And in order to achieve that goal, he restarted the dungeon expeditions that had been put off for so long.

“We are about to enter a grade C dungeon, child,” Borkz told him. “You will find it very different from the grade D that you have run so far. Keep your wits about you.” The undead giantling was doing his best to make an authoritative face with the flesh he had left.

Vandal decided not to comment on the results.

“I’m ready for anything,” Vandal replied. “Please lead the way.”

They were about to tackle the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains. One of Borkz’s ancestors discovered this dungeon countless generations ago. Unlike the grade D Garan Valley and Doran Moisture Cave, this was a dungeon that in principle only adventurers ever went inside. Even for sturdy giantlings, this place was too dangerous for those who hadn’t dedicated their lives to adventuring.

“Really hard,” Vigaro said. “Many floors, strong monsters. Not many malady monsters or traps, but strong. Strong monsters.”

“You repeat yourself,” Zadilis chided. “Are you drunk?”

“They really are strong, though, these monsters,” Rita stated. “We might have ranked up, but from the third floor in here we would have been in trouble without Vigaro.”

“Squeak! From the eleventh floor down, every fight was a struggle,” Skeleton chimed in.

The party consisted of rank 6 Vigaro and Zadilis, and then the fresh rank 5s of Rita, Saria, Skelton, and Skeleton Bird. Putting aside their guide, the mighty Borkz, it was a group well-suited to tackling a grade C dungeon.

After completing their preparations, they headed inside the Borkz Demi-

Dragon Plains. The interior was very much what the name suggested: a wide, grassy plain. Some floors had woodlands, rivers, or lakes, but in general, it consisted of plains. And it really looked—“Like something from a movie,” Vandal muttered to himself as he fired off an MP Shot. The spreading verdant greenery, like a carpet of grass, was populated by herds of roaming dinosaurs.

It really was like taking a trip back to the Jurassic era. A deeply moving scene.

Vandal continued to be moved even after the nearest flock of dinosaurs started to charge his way.

“Hey, you need to take that raptor out quickly . . . Nope, okay, you got it,” Borkz said, regarding a raptor that had been lurking to attack their front lines, which then quickly got minced by Vandal’s MP Shot.

A regular MP Shot didn’t have that much power, was slower than an arrow or other attribute magic attacks, and was difficult to aim, making it easy to avoid. On paper it seemed to have nothing but flaws. Vandal, however, made something that might be better labeled an “MP Super Cannon,” with tens of thousands of MP infused into every shot and the ball itself larger than he was. The size made them harder to avoid, and Vandal had recently also learned how to curve the trajectory. That allowed him to finish off even the nippy raptors.

“You’ve all been here a few times now. I guess the first floor isn’t going to offer much challenge,” Borkz said.

Vigaro, Zadilis, and the skeletons still had a lot to learn, from Borkz’s perspective, but they were making short work of these raptors. The boss of the flock was a rank 4 Huge Raptor, larger than the normal ones and clever to boot, but they were handling it with aplomb. If there hadn’t been quite so many of them, then Vandal would probably not have been needed.

“But we’re just getting started.”

All of the monsters in the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains were either close to dinosaurs that Vandal recognized, or large reptile-types like crocodiles and turtles. In ancient Talosheim, these dragonesque, scaly monsters that weren’t actual dragons had been known as “demi-dragons.” The category also included wyverns, which could easily be considered to be related to winged dinosaurs like Pteranodons.

From the first floor to the third floor, the monsters were gradually becoming more powerful. Starting on the fifth floor, the rank 3 monsters dried up completely, replaced by the occasional rank 5 mixed in among the monsters.

“Roooooaaah!” came a terrible dinosaur sound.

“Hey, a Tyrannosaurus,” Vandal said.

It had the triangular silhouette, a mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth, powerful back legs, and tiny front paws. The most famous of all carnivorous dinosaurs back on Earth, the Tyrannosaurs . . . or, in this case, the ranked-up Armored Tyranno. In spite of the hard scales and carapace-like armor covering its body, here on Ramda, it only weighed in at around rank 5.

Vandal couldn’t overcome his disappointment at this mighty carnivorous dino being weaker than Bugogan and the same rank as a scrawny wyvern, but it wasn’t out of the realm of expectations.

“Squeek! You are mine now, beast! Flowing Water! Slicing Moon!” Skeleton avoided the oncoming chomp of the Armored Tyranno by spinning smoothly to the side, then drew an arc with his sword, chopping off the dyno’s head.

After Vandal powered up Skeleton with the additional spirit bodies, causing

him to rank up, he had further honed his skills to become a rank 5 Skeleton Baron. He had achieved Sword Proficiency level 5, as well as Bow Proficiency and Shield Proficiency level 4. In terms of rank, he was equal to the Armored Tyranno, but while the dino could only pull off simple, animalistic attacks, Skeleton could perform complex movements that ignored the conventional structure of physical joints. That was the difference between them.

“Master, what shall we do with the body?”

“I’ve already got a Tyrannosaurus zombie, so let’s use it for materials and food. What are the best bits of this type of monster?” Vandal asked.

“The thighs are pretty good.”

They removed the magic stones, scraped off the scales and armor, and then took a break with some nice dinosaur thigh.

The boss on the tenth floor was an herbivore.

Vandal had been hoping for one of the big slow ones with a long neck, like a Brontosaurus, but instead it was a horned dinosaur that liked to charge around.

“Moooo!” It looked a bit like a Triceratops and sounded a bit like a bull, preparing to charge . . . while crackling lightning flickered between the long horn on its nose and the two pointing from its forehead.

“What else to expect from a fantasy world?” Vandal muttered. Even the dinosaurs were magically enhanced fantasy freaks.

“This is a Trihorn that ranked up to obtain wind magic,” Saria explained. “We can handle it.”

“We’ve beaten this type before,” Rita added.

The living armor sisters then stepped forward. They looked a lot different from before. They had ranked up to Magic High-Cut Leg Armor and Magic Bikini Armor, respectively, finally achieving the Spirit Body skill.

This meant they didn't just look like armor anymore and had obtained a visible human form. It was just a white, blurry human shape, like a mist barely contained within the armor, but it was something. Sure, it looked like a strong wind might blow them away. But all their other skills had increased as well. They were still rank 5 but could handle rank 6 enemies together.

The sisters faced down the Trihorn as it came charging right at them. And then— “Yaaaah!” They both screamed as the monster crashed right through them, sending gauntlets clutching weapons and the other scant pieces of their armor scattering everywhere.

Vandal gasped.

“No! Dead? They dead?” Vigaro exclaimed.

Skeleton Bird let out a dreadful squawk.

“That looks pretty bad!” Borkz commented.

Zadilis was the only one to retain her calm. “Another bad joke,” she said, shaking her head with a sigh.

As she spoke, the gauntlet and limb pieces of Rita and Saria shuddered in the air, turned around, and grabbed their halberds and glaives once again.

The Trihorn’s bellowing victory cry was interrupted by the weapons stabbing into its neck and belly and back, as the two it had thought defeated made short work of it in return.

Once the monster was dead, the scattered armor pieces gathered together and formed back into Saria and Rita.

“That takes care of that,” Saria said. “This is a great way to deal with Trihorns.”

“They’re so dumb. When we scatter they always think they won,” Rita said. “They drop their guard and that makes them easy to pick off!”

“Ah, you must be getting thirsty,” Saria said. “Here you go, Young Master. Fresh off the vine, as it were.”

Vandal accepted the wooden cup of Trihorn blood. The girls didn’t seem especially repentant about the little show they had put on.

“It’s a good strategy, but surely you didn’t need the scream,” Vandal said, pressing the point.

“Ah, well. The horn was more tingly than I expected.”

“You do have a weakness for tingly stuff.”

“Rita, you screamed just as much,” Zadilis said.

“That was just . . . a bit of fun.”

“We are not here to have fun!” Zadilis snapped back. “Pull that Spirit Body together as well, will you? You look like a lump of wood!”

“I don’t know what to look like! I didn’t get to spend that long in a human body when I was alive! I’m still inexperienced!” Rita protested.

“If you’re inexperienced then don’t mess around in battle!” Zadilis shot back. “No more joking around!”

“You could tighten things up a little,” Saria said.

The older members of the party seemed to have it under control, so Vandal hadn’t needed to say anything.

However, seeing his allies take risks, when he had been told off for the exact same thing, did rub him the wrong way.

“Take care, Saria. You need to do better than that, or I’ll start letting enemies get hits on me again as well,” Vandal commented. That seemed like an acceptable level of critique. He was only asking for equality.

“No, please! Don’t do that! Anything but that! I’ll do better, I promise!” Saria immediately said, in a bit of a panic. She might have turned pale . . . if she had a face. Vandal figured he wouldn’t need to worry about her anymore “Changing the subject,” Vandal said. “How did you pull off that attack when you split up like that?”

Saria and Rita might look like a bunch of separate pieces, but in principle they were invisible people wearing armor, with all the parts moving together accordingly. Vandal would have expected the misty bodies they had obtained from Spirit Body level 1 to bring greater cohesion and restriction to control of the parts, not less.

“We obtained the skill Remote Control,” Saria explained.

“Remote Control?”

“That’s right,” Saria continued. “It means we can detach parts of our bodies—in our cases, like gauntlets or boots—and move them around.” They had apparently earned the skill while training together.

“That sounds like a useful squeaking skill,” Skeleton said. “I’d like to learn it too.”

“Geeeeeeeh!” Skeleton Bird agreed.

The two of them were nothing but bone, outside of the flesh and cartilage and feathers sculpted out of Spirit Body, so with a little practice they probably

could also obtain the skill. There would be almost no risk to moving their bones around if they controlled them with Spirit Body. This Remote Control skill was probably exclusive to undead, like Living Armor, Skeletons, and Zombies. Vandal hadn't seen it here yet, but on Earth, horror movies always featured skeletons or zombies that kept moving even when chopped into pieces. Vandal also knew about examples like lizard tails, but lizards weren't in control of the separated pieces, so that was something else.

"I'd like to learn it too," Vandal said.

"Huh?"

Vandal didn't see why the skill being exclusive to undead should stop him from learning it, but the others didn't share his optimism.

"I'm not so sure you should be splitting yourself up, Young Master," Saria said.

"If you can't go back together you'll end up as undead yourself," Zadilis warned him.

"Please," Vandal said. "I'm not talking about chopping off limbs and sending them flying around."

It would definitely be a problem if he ended up in pieces. If he used Spirit Bodification first, he might be able to make it work, but if something went wrong he could literally kill himself. He had survived Bugogan giving him a good chopping, but he also hadn't been cut completely in half, and he had quickly pressed the halves back together. He had no idea if that would work on a part of him that had been flying around.

"I'm going to try it with my hair," Vandal proposed. He had grown his hair to shoulder length because Zadilis and Basdia had told him it was more masculine.

They seemed to want to give him a mane like a male ghoul. Dalshia had said it was cute too, and so he hadn't seen any need to change it. It would reach his waist before long. If it got to his knees, he'd think about cutting it.

"I guess hair might work," Saria conceded.

"If it doesn't work with your hair, don't change to fingers, okay?" Zadilis cautioned him.

His party was worried, but Vandal saw all sorts of applications for Remote Control and wasn't about to give up on it. Even if he did acquire it, he wasn't planning on firing off his severed arms like a rocket punch or anything silly like that.

From the eleventh floor onward, the fighting got harder. All the monsters were rank 5, with individual rank 6 monsters sometimes appearing.

"This place really takes off after the eleventh," Borkz said. "Lots of useful non-monster materials too."

There were leaves that could be used as medicines when crushed or brewed into a bitter but healthy tea. There was an amber quarry and cliffs with stones for sharpening weapons, preventing rusting. Many adventurers had apparently come down here seeking such riches.

The floors also provided outstanding experience.

"This dinosaur is almost done for. Can you finish the job?" Vandal called out.

"Of course!"

"Sis, the octopus thing is going your way!"

"Young Master! What exactly is this flying-shell-octopus?"

“An ammonite, maybe?” Vandal guessed. “But the ones I know about don’t exactly fly around.”

“An Ammo Knight! Then I shall fight it!” Skeleton shouted.

“It’s not that kind of knight, but okay . . .” Vandal replied, deciding it wasn’t worth the effort.

His own boney knight leapt into action against the flying ammonite, which had a shell bigger than a bear. All the monsters that appeared, including the ammonites, were individually of equal or even greater rank than each member of his party. That meant plenty of experience.

“Raaagh! Slice Steel!” Vigaro faced off an oncoming, hard-headed-looking herbivore using one of his new Axe Proficiency battle techs.

The egg-shaped head consisting mostly of bone split in two, and the herbivore collapsed to the ground. Vigaro had ranked up to Ghoul Berserker all the way back when they in the jungle demon barren and later obtained a Job in Talosheim, almost making him equal in strength to a grade B adventurer. Then he changed to the Axe Warrior Job, which offered skill modifiers on Axe Proficiency and Deforestation, suggesting the ghoul wasn’t finished with his meteoric rise yet.

“Oh no! I chopped magic stones too!” Vigaro wailed as he hacked at another monster.

“Whatever are you playing at?” Zadilis chided as she finished off a different dinosaur with her own magic.

Zadilis had reached level 100, but previously lacked the skills to rank up from Ghoul Mage. Since arriving in Talosheim, her further training had allowed her to finally make the leap to a rank 6 Ghoul High Mage. Her overall appearance

hadn't changed much, but she now had a red jewel on her forehead that looked a bit like a third eye. Apparently it was an additional organ that facilitated her use of magic.

The light attribute magic unleashed by the newly powered-up Zadilis was something to behold. It cut through another armored dino, a bit like an Ankylosaurus, like a hot knife slicing through butter.

"I'm enjoying this Skip Incantation skill, too," Zadilis commented. "Ah, boy, can you share a little magical power?"

"Fine, fine."

Zadilis had seen an increase in her MP, but it went without saying that she was still far from Vandal's vast sum. If she got too carried away dishing it out, she still ran the risk of running dry.

Of all the materials that could be found in Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains, the most valuable—putting aside materials from the dungeon boss—were the honey and wax from the Cemetery Bees.

These were rank 5 bee monsters, about a foot in length. While alone, each bee was not much of a threat, a horde of them attacking a single target was a different story. Their mandibles could chew through sheet metal like paper, and your run-of-the-mill shield couldn't block their stinger needles. The most dangerous thing about them, however, was their Virulent Poison.

This was a powerful neurotoxin, capable of causing death from shock in just a few minutes to those without sufficient resistances. Supposedly their hives were surrounded by piles of adventurer corpses, the remains of those eager to get the delectable honey and high-quality wax that could be made into

remarkable soaps and candles. Just like a cemetery.

"I heard all that about them, and was ready for the worst . . . but they might actually be super friendly?" Vandal suggested.

"I don't think so. Child, are those bees undead, perhaps?"

"They look full of life to me," Vandal said. He was getting a good close look at them, as he was wearing a covering of the bees like some bee-man.

"Just wanted something sweet! Now look! Cemetery Bees rarest monsters in here!" the ghoul exclaimed.

". . . I seem to have found a lot of them," Vandal said.

The bees were buzzing, but neither biting nor stinging him. They were just licking him with their tongues. There was no indication of them performing that trick of honeybees of covering their foes to raise their temperature and overheat them. They just seemed to like Vandal.

"You are something else, Young Master," Saria said. "Even bees love you."

"Squeak, are you sure you're okay under there, Master?"

". . . I think so?" Vandal replied.

This was the kind of situation that would make anyone with a phobia of bees pass out, but Vandal didn't have anything against insects. He had loved stag and rhinoceros beetles when he was a kid on Earth.

Then, a number of the bees flew over, carrying a larger Cemetery Bee. They clattered their mandibles as they landed on Vandal's forehead.

"Boy, could that be their queen?" Zadilis asked.

"I think it probably is."

“What do you think they are doing?”

“I think . . .” Vandal trailed off. “I just tamed them?”

“. . . Boy. Could it be that you don’t just appeal to undead, to any monster with ‘death’ or ‘cemetery’ in their name?”

“Wow. I’ve heard bug monsters are too primal for anyone to tame.”

“Wow. Amazing, Vandal. You might be the first in the world!”

“I’m sure you’re all saying nice things, but I can’t hear over the sound of wings,” Vandal replied.

It seemed that Death Attribute Allure even worked on bugs. Or maybe he had just been using bug undead for so long that even living ones started to like him.

Insect monsters couldn’t think for themselves and always acted on instinct. That might suggest that they were easy to tame. But in fact, their instincts were so strong that humans had never been able to control them.

Some had managed to use certain sounds or the smells from certain plants to get insects to follow limited commands, but that wasn’t the same as taming them completely. Such methods also carried the risk of getting swarmed and killed if things went wrong. That had led people to believe that insect monsters, like undead, simply couldn’t be tamed.

“That’s what people always thought,” Borkz said, finishing his explanation over all the buzzing. “I guess they thought wrong.”

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing, with Vandal still covered by countless bees. They genuinely liked Vandal.

The Cemetery Bees had been in the middle of moving their hive and

happened to see Vandal passing when his Death Attribute Allure captivated them. Vandal had found favor with undead inside dungeons before, but he hadn't been able to tame them or bring them out with him. Here, the bees continued to tag along when they moved to the next floor. Maybe it was due to him leveling up Death Attribute Allure. Or maybe Vandal and the Cemetery Bees were just highly compatible.

"Ghouls, vampires, and now Cemetery Bees," Borkz commented. "Death Attribute Allure seems to have even wider applications than we imagined."

The Cemetery Bees were monsters, created by the Demon King to fight people and help him take this world for his own. But their affinity with Vandal suggested that maybe it was actually an evil death god who had created them.

In any case, if his Death Attribute Allure level was going to increase any further, it might make sense to keep out of dungeons and demon barrens where undead-type monsters frequently appeared. He could end up leading around a parade of horrors every time. Although it could be a good way to bolster his forces.

"What we do about this?" Vigaro dragged Vandal from his thoughts by pointing at the mid-boss for the twentieth floor of the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains.

"Gyaaaaaaagh!" It was a rank 6 Venom Wyvern, roaring as it spread its wings wide. This long-lived wyvern had achieved a rank up, growing bigger as a result, and was capable of unleashing Virulent Poison from its claws and the tip of its tail.

It was only clever relative to other beasts and didn't have any breath attacks. However, its speed and mobility were far greater than a normal wyvern. It was clearly impossible for grade C adventurers to defeat this flying shockwave of a

monster, no doubt about that.

“Let’s stick to the original plan. I’ll fight it alone,” Vandal said.

All the mid-bosses appearing in the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains, prior to the final boss, had been assigned to Vandal to test his skills against. It didn’t matter if he leveled up and increased the numbers on his stats if he couldn’t actually use them in battle. He didn’t yet have the strength to handle the Dragon Golem; he wasn’t even sure it wouldn’t just kill him on the spot.

Therefore, to test his readiness for the Dragon Golem, Vandal planned to fight this Venom Wyvern one on one and see if he could win. It also went without saying that he wasn’t going to just suck the magic from its wings with Magic Sucking Barrier and ground it for easier pickings. Even if he managed to defeat the Venom Wyvern like that, it wouldn’t prevent the broken-down Dragon Golem from defeating him with a single attack. The winged lower-tier dragon in front of his eyes was nothing compared to that overwhelming Dragon Golem, after all.

This was just one measuring stick. Defeating a mid-boss wouldn’t award him any particular special powers. If he did win, he’d go down and test the waters with the Dragon Golem again, and if it still needed more time, then that was that. Back to training.

“Just make sure you don’t die,” Borkz warned him.

“Do your best, boy. We’ll be watching over you,” Zadilis replied.

Knowing that his friends had his back, Vandal set out to fight the Venom Wyvern alone.



“It didn’t work out this time either,” Vandal summarized.

“It can’t be helped,” Bildo said. “I’ve heard that only those with innate talent or a ton of experience can make it to rank C adventurer.”

“You’re doing very well for your age, Vandal,” Basdia assured him. “But one on one is something else. If you’re going to be a Tamer, maybe you don’t need to worry about it too much?”

After his fifth defeat, Vandal had returned to Talosheim. He got some rest, and then worked on weapon development, made some more bonito, and did other useful things.

Currently, Bildo and the other new mothers were gathered to chat about child raising while Vandal practiced some death attribute magic. The menu for the event was a vegetable soup with bonito, acorn noodles, and honey agar for dessert. It was almost a year since he started with the bonito, using fire to make something for the first time in more than twenty years (as counted from his days on Earth), and after a string of less-than-successful attempts, he was finally getting the process nailed down.

I should have studied more about bonito and smoking and all this stuff when I had the chance, Vandal lamented. Not that I expected to end up reborn in another world. Stitching together information collected passively from TV and other sources resulted in all of his failures. He seemed to recall one program smoking the bonito closer to the charcoal, but that must’ve been either a mistake with his memory or some kind of special production method.

For udon noodles, acorn flour was smoother than wheat flour, so he used eggs from the geega birds to bind it together. He had wanted to make them

more like ramen, but that required more ingredients he didn't have—most notably, sodium carbonate or potassium carbonate. In other words, baking soda. Something else he hadn't worked out yet. Even the spirit of the Japanese food researcher he had talked to on Origin hadn't shared those kinds of details. He was still working on it, but he was sure he'd get it within a few years.

Vandal was no longer surprised by such things, but it turned out that noodles didn't exist on Ramda. They didn't have udon, soba, ramen, or even pasta. When he started rolling out the udon, those watching him had thought he was making some kind of long bread.

He did look forward to spreading the Japanese culture of slurping noodles while eating them. He would have expected udon, or definitely pasta, but this arena was just like the smoking process: cooking in this world relied on methods as simple as possible. Probably because they didn't have much time to better study cooking and because there was always delicious monster meat and other produce coming out of the demon barrens.

For dessert, he had made agar from some agar weed he found, while the honey—of course—came from the Cemetery Bees. The bees he tamed, although putting it that way didn't exactly seem like the correct order of events, had started to create a massive nest in Talosheim castle. They were sending worker bees out into the demon barrens to make honey, even in the middle of winter. As it turned out, the Cemetery Bees subsisted mainly on meat. So to get honey, Vandal just provided an equivalent amount of meat that wasn't suited for consumption by the others, like goblin meat.

The honey from the Cemetery Bees was fragrant and had a strong flavor. The agar covered with it was turning into another popular dessert. Between agar and seaweed, sea produce was starting to take off in Ramda. The only

annoyance was that it couldn't be produced instantly like the miso and bonito using magic.

"Van, can the children eat honey?" Basdia asked.

"I've used magic to remove anything potentially harmful from it, so it should be fine," Vandal assured her. He had used Death to Bacteria and Detox to remove germs while maintaining the quality of the honey. Eating it wasn't going to do any harm, although it could still make you fat.

"Then it won't matter if she gets some in her mouth?" Basdia said.

"Oooh!" The baby reached for some of the honey-covered agar on the table.

"But it's too soon for solid food for you, Jadal," Basdia cooed, shifting the baby away from the plate. Jadal was Basdia's daughter, born just at the end of summer. After all the trouble she had getting pregnant, the birth turned out stunningly easy, and the baby was growing up fast and strong. She also had exceedingly cute, gray-colored cheeks.

"Jadal is getting big," one of the other mothers said. "Are you keeping her nails trimmed?"

"They aren't growing yet. When did Vabi start to grow?" Basdia asked.

"Not until Vabi was one. But some babies start as early as three months old. Make sure to keep an eye on them."

"Babies can hurt themselves with their nails," Basdia agreed. "Was King the same?"

Vandal could extend his nails when he was three months, but he was already very smart by then, Dalshia explained.

"Really?" Basdia exclaimed. "He was smart at three months?"

“He was one year old when he showed up at our grotto. I guess nothing should surprise us now.”

Dalshia was smiling, joining in with the chatting ghoul mommies. Only Vandal and the undead had been able to see Dalshia before, but Vandal had developed a new Visualization magic that allowed her to faintly materialize in front of the others. That let Basdia, Bildy, and the others all converse with her. Vandal had developed the technique believing that smoother communication would help reduce the stress on Dalshia.

It also allowed the whip marks and burns across her spirit body to be seen. That wasn’t such an issue in Talosheim, where everyone knew what had happened, but it wouldn’t be so useful in human society. Vandal wanted to revive her and make his new magic worthless before they got there.

While Dalshia and the girls chatted, Vandal was playing with the ghoul kids nearby.

“Gooo!”

Male ghouls had lion-like heads from the moment they were born, almost making them look like kittens. They didn’t have paws, but they were really cute.

Skeleton didn’t seem to like them much. Vandal was pleased he had warned him not to dish out any revenge on cats.

“Daddy!” one of them said.

“I’m not your daddy,” Vandal replied. They all really liked him, which was fine, but he had to be clear that he wasn’t their father.

“Bro bro!”

“That’s better. Think of me like your brother,” Vandal said. He was three years older. Big brother worked.

“Sis sis!” said another.

“No. Bro bro I can accept. Not sis sis.”

“King does look kinda feminine,” said Bildy. “Like the shape of his head.”

“Right,” Basdia agreed. “If his eyes were the same color he really would just look like a little girl.”

All the ghoul males had lion heads, meaning the ghoul women all thought Vandal looked like a girl. Borkz, Zulan, and the other giantlings who prized muscular bodies also considered him feminine for other reasons.

“Hang in there,” he muttered to himself. “Once my voice changes and I make it through puberty, I’ll show them.”

When Vandal was an adult, he planned to have a chiseled cleft in his chin, arms like tree trunks, chest like a plank of wood, abs like a tank’s caterpillar tracks, and thighs thicker than a woman’s waist. He’d put Hollywood machomen to shame, he swore it. He had the Brute Strength skill, which already added modifiers to his muscular strength. It could only increase from here. Probably. Definitely.

Vandal pondered his vision for the future while Pauvina clopped happily past him, playing at horsey. She was only one year old but already looked five or six, and she loved to carry the other kids around on her back. She certainly wasn’t showing off her natural prowess to Vandal, even as he dreamed of becoming a beefcake in the future.

Nor was Lefdia attempting to encourage him by tapping gently on his shoulder. She was soothing him.

“How are plans for further mid-boss battles?” Basdia asked.

“Once I’m all rested up, I’ll be going back for another try,” Vandal replied.

Vandal had been on a losing streak against the mid-boss on the twentieth floor of the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains. Of course, that didn't mean he was repeatedly being killed. In terms of life and death, he was always the victor. It was just that he was losing based on the rules he had put in place.

He had to fight the mid-boss one on one. That included not using any golems via Golem Creation. He also wasn't allowed to use Magic Sucking Barrier to restrict its movement. The time limit was five minutes, as determined by a sand hourglass.

Under these rules, Vandal had fought the Venom Wyvern a total of five times. It always went the same way: any attacks he even managed to land proved completely ineffective and the five minutes ran out. Rinse and repeat.

The Venom Wyvern's poison could be countered by using Detox, meaning he could discount those attacks almost as soon as they were used. His Anti-Attack Barrier was also more than sufficient to block any direct attacks. But Vandal himself didn't have anything that could hurt the Venom Wyvern.

He started out trying to use Flight non-attribute magic, in an attempt to meet his foe in the air, but he couldn't keep up. He could just throw in more magical power if all he needed was more speed, but that didn't allow him to make the kind of sharp turns that the Venom Wyvern excelled at. After all, Flight was really nothing more than lifting his body with Telekinesis and moving it around. The Venom Wyvern had actual wings and complemented them with wind attribute magic. Vandal couldn't match that kind of skilled flight technique.

Next, he had tried to take it down using long-range attacks. He targeted it using non-attribute MP Shots, but his attacks' lack of range and speed quickly hampered such attempts. MP Shot was all about trying to bind magical power together and hold it in place long enough to hit something—but without any

object to bind to, it was prone to rapid dispersal. A normal magician might manage a hundred feet; Vandal was capable of imbuing more than 10,000 MP, an insane amount, but even then the shot might make it a football field's length before dissipating. He got the same result even if he used the Simultaneous Activation skill to fire multiple shots at once.

Then there was the fact that these shots were not only slower than bullets, but also arrows, and their generally straight trajectory was easy to avoid. Especially for a Venom Wyvern that could fly around at high speed.

Vandal tried warping the very shape of the shot in order to bend its trajectory, but that didn't work either. If he could just land one, he knew it had the destructive power to shatter not only scales but also muscles and organs.

With close combat and MP Shot off the table, his remaining choices were to lean on poison or sickness of some kind, use Soul Crusher to siphon off the wyvern's magical power, or create an opening using his Lemures.

He actually managed to get some Virulent Poison to hit it in the eyes and mouth, but the wyvern had "Venom" in its name, and Poison Resistance in its skill list. The poison did nothing.

He later managed to infect it with disease in a similar way, but five minutes passed before the sickness took hold.

Soul Crusher still needed to hit its target with a physical or magical attack and could only cause MP damage equal to the physical damage it caused, meaning Vandal couldn't hope to drain all of the wyvern's MP.

Using Lemures had been effective on lower-ranking wyverns, but this one showed no surprise and gave no effective openings at the sudden intent to kill generated by his familiars.

Vandal had finally created an opening by recreating his battle with Sercent. He expanded the Anti-Attack Barrier to meet the Venom Wyvern's attacks, catching its claws and tail in the barrier. But before Vandal could actually attack, the Wyvern snaked its long neck around and chewed off the enmeshed parts of its body to escape.

If Sercent had been so decisive, he might still have been alive. It wasn't an instinctive thing to do, even for a wild animal. It was likely rooted in the further expansion of its basic instincts because of its status as a dungeon mid-boss and an intuitive understanding that taking one of Vandal's MP Shots in the belly would mean death.

If Vandal used the mighty claw attack backed by the Physical Strength Enhancement that he employed when fighting the boss of Doran Moisture Cave, the Island Turtle, he might be able to cause critical damage prior to the Wyvern escaping. That attack had shattered the hardened shell of the Island Turtle, so it would likely make mincemeat of the speed-focused Venom Wyvern. However, it has also had the undesirable secondary effects of shattering the bones in his arm and tearing his muscles apart, so he had no desire to use it again unless his life was on the line.

The Venom Wyvern escaped him again for another five minutes.

Once the matchup was over, Borkz proceeded to quickly finish the job. The party continued down to the thirtieth floor, defeated the dungeon boss there, and collected the treasures from the vault. That all provided more experience and more levels. That was something to be pleased about, at least.

"I think I can win next time," Vandal said.

There's no need to be in such a hurry, Vandal, Dalshia stated. I'm happy to wait five, even ten more years before I come back to life. A hundred, even, if that's what it takes.

"No need to worry. I know I say this every time, but this time, I'm really onto something."

Dalshia looked apprehensive, but Vandal had a good plan this time.

He was going to modify MP Shot and create a new type of death attribute magic. He had always found his innate attribute to be lacking when it came to directly damaging his enemies, so in that case then, he simply had to come up with something to remedy it. Defeating enemies himself didn't earn him any experience, so he had put off the development of such a technique. But he needed it now. It was time to go to work.

The result was the creation of a new death magic technique with a long effective range, fast speed, and difficult-to-read trajectory.

"I'll win next time. There will be no seventh match."

Upon finally achieving this new technique, Vandal was confident in his declaration.



The mid-bosses and final bosses that appeared in each dungeon were different from other monsters in that they were created directly by the core of the dungeon. So regardless of the number of times they were defeated, after a little while, another monster of the same strength would pop up in the same location.

“Hisss!”

“Hisss!”

A snake with seven heads, each large enough to swallow not only a human but a cow, was wound around a massive skull. However, it only had one tail.

It was a multi-headed reptile, another type of dragon monster. When hatched from its egg, it was a reasonably sized snake with just two heads, but as it grew in size, it also grew more heads, as well as tougher scales, regenerative capabilities, and powerful poison. Once fully grown, it became a massive snake with seven heads, known as a Hydra. It was rank 6 and above the wyverns in the pantheon of demi-dragons.

It was no smarter than a regular snake and lacked the mobility and speed of the wyvern. But its massive frame boasted power that could crush a man with ease, and its scales took incredible force to damage. The Virulent Poison from its fangs was so powerful that only special potions could cure it. Killing the beast was further complicated by the requirement to chop off all of its heads and then destroy the heart in its body. Leaving anything alive would allow it to regenerate in a matter of days.

Further growth could eventually lead to a Hydra gaining eight or more heads, at which point it became known as an Orochi. Supposedly one of the heroes gave it that name. Vandal, now faced with this Hydra as the mid-boss on the twentieth floor of the Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains, had this to say about it.

“Can I get a do over?”

“Nope, no way,” Borkz replied immediately.

“But I just created a new technique specifically to deal with the mobility of the Venom Wyvern,” Vandal complained. The Hydra didn’t have the intellect or

speed of a regular wyvern, which in turn was no match for the ranked-up Venom Wyvern.

“Makes sense. I was amazed you got the same monster five times in a row for the mid-boss already,” Borkz replied.

The boss and mid-bosses that appeared in a dungeon weren’t generally a single fixed race. There were tendencies in place for what was likely to appear, but then the dungeon would randomly select one. Here, that choice was made from among rank 6 dragon or dinosaur monsters. From one perspective, Vandal could almost be considered unlucky that one of the stronger monsters, a Venom Wyvern, had been selected five consecutive times.

“This Hydra isn’t going anywhere now. Give it a try. Your new technique.”

“Okay,” Vandal said with a sigh. “Death Shot.” He proceeded to thrust his hand toward the writhing mass of heads and formed a ball that looked like a miniature black sun. The Hydra sensed something coming and attempted to flee, and then the Death Shot hit it.

The basis of the technique was much like MP Shot. Vandal gathered the power to steal vitality and bunched it up. He was still getting a handle on the technique, so he couldn’t fire off as many as the MP Shot, but the range and speed were completely without comparison. It also boasted reasonable tracking power.

That wasn’t required in order to hit the Hydra, however. The Death Shot landed with ease, and a wailing hiss rang out as the Hydra started to writhe and spit. Its heads dropping to the ground one after the other as its vitality was sucked away. Vandal ripped off some more Death Shots, and once all the heads were on the ground, he finished off the heart with another one. All that remained was the main body the Hydra, uninjured but dead.

“Wow. Amazing,” Borkz said.

“I mean, I am using the power of one hundred normal Magicians,” Vandal replied.

“Sure, and that’s less than one percent of your power,” Borkz retorted. “You should definitely be happy. You just killed a mid-boss, and it didn’t take five minutes. It took one.”

“Hey, I’m happy,” Vandal said.

“No need to get so hung up on defeating the Venom Wyvern,” Borkz reminded him. “What you need is the strength to not get insta-killed by that Dragon Golem, right?”

That was correct, but Vandal still didn’t quite agree with Borkz. On the other hand, he couldn’t keep repeating this dungeon until the Venom Wyvern popped up again. He was going to have to accept this result.

Now it was time to try the Dragon Golem.

Death Attribute Allure, Enhance Brethren, Non-Attribute Magic, Magic Control, Cooking, and Brawling Proficiency levels increased!

Remote Control skill acquired!

Name: Vandal

Race: Dhampir (Dark Elf)

Age: 4 years old

Alias: Ghoul King

Job: Death Mage

Level: 100

Job History: None

—Status

Vitality: 90

Magical Power: 204506933

Strength: 67

Agility: 46

Muscle: 71

Intellect: 233

—Passive Skills

[Brute Strength: Level 1] [Rapid Healing: Level 3] [Death Attribute Magic: Level 5]

[Resist Maladies: Level 5] [Resist Magic: Level 1] [Night Vision]

[Spiritual Pollution: Level 10] [Death Attribute Allure: Level 5 (UP!)] [Skip Incantation: Level 3]

[Enhance Brethren: Level 6 (UP!)] [Magical Power Auto Recovery: Level 3]

—Active Skills

[Suck Blood: Level 3] [Limit Break: Level 4] [Golem Creation: Level 4]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 4 (UP!)] [Magic Control: Level 4 (UP!)] [Spirit Body: Level 2]

[Carpentry: Level 4] [Construction: Level 3] [Cooking: Level 2 (UP!)] [Alchemy: Level 3]

[Brawling Proficiency: Level 2 (UP!)] [Soul Crusher: Level 1] [Simultaneous Activation: Level 1]

[Remote Control: Level 1 (NEW!)]

—Curses

[Unable to carry over experience from previous lives] [Unable to enter existing jobs] [Unable to personally acquire experience]



The sixth run through Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains pushed his Death Mage Job to Level 100, and so Vandal headed for the first time in over a year to the Job Change Chamber in the Adventurers' Guild.

“Give me fish paste for this. And miso.”

“I wasn’t bonito and seaweed.”

“Do you have honey? I want wasabi too.”

“Give me some acorn flour!”

“No more geega eggs? Give me some shrimp, then. Even ammonite!”

The remains of the adventurers’ guild had also become the center for receiving and trading the condiments and kelp that Vandal created. Everyone could collect their rations here, and then trade with materials from the demon

barrens if they wanted something extra. Requests for resupply when stocks were running low got posted up on the board, almost making it look like the adventurers' guild was back in action.

"Although a real adventurers' guild wouldn't be packed with ghouls and undead like this," Vandal commented. "It would make it easier for me if it was!"

The condiments were one thing, but the residents of Talosheim could probably make things like the acorn flour for themselves at this point, rather than having to rely on bartering. He asked a few of them why they were still doing so.

"Hey, why do you think?" one giantling replied. "We can get miso, fish paste, seaweed, and agar for free, and then get even more if we just cough up some monster parts and magic stones or collect up some ingredients. Why would I waste my time making it myself?"

"Acorn flour? Find acorns, smash acorns, put in water three days, dry acorns, make powder? Killing monsters easier," added a male ghoul.

These races seemed to possess a rather different work ethic from that of humans on Earth.

"I guess it is easier to head into the demon barrens and kill an orc than to raise a pig and make some bacon," Vandal mused. He had become quite influenced by the hunter-gatherer lifestyle himself.

With the increased number of products he turned out, he had established specific production facilities for things like the acorn flour and walnut sauce. He had used Alchemy to make magic items imbued with spells like Wither for drying things and Decay for aging meat and then a production line of golems that could smash up, grind, and do whatever else was required. Watching them

all at work reminded him of footage from automated factories back on Earth. They ran entirely on magical power, making them economical and friendly to the environment. He could even turn them into warriors if required. They were wonderful, ecological factories and completely maintenance free.

“Maybe I could build a factory for the seaweed and agar,” Vandal pondered. “I’d probably need some actual people for the processes, but that could lead to employment in the future. Although everyone is happy with hunting, so I guess it doesn’t matter. But eventually we’re going to have Black Goblins and Anubis that are too old to hunt any more . . .” It was certainly a concern, but he could worry about establishing a social security system later. “For now, Job Change. I think I’m going for Golem Creator this time.”

Vandal still had the curse “unable to enter existing jobs,” meaning he could only enter into Jobs no one had ever held before. The first time he came here, he had been offered Death Mage and Golem Creator. That suggested there would be at least one Job on offer for him this time.

Keeping his cool, he calmly touched the crystal in the Job Change Chamber.

<Selectable Jobs: Golem Creator, Undead Tamer, Crusher of Souls, Poison Wielder, Insect Wielder>

“I’ve got a few more choices,” Vandal muttered, overcoming his surprise and shaking his head. Of the three curses that Rodocolte had doled out, the job change one seemed the most pointless. Although perhaps it could cause more issues in the distant future.

Undead Tamer probably showed up because Eleonora had made him aware

that taming undead was usually impossible. It probably offered modifiers to skills related to undead, but Tamer Jobs apparently did little to the stats of the actual Tamer.

Crusher of Souls was clearly a Job that had appeared because he destroyed Sercent's soul and obtained the Soul Crusher skill. Vandal could combine the other effects of his skills into Soul Crusher, so perhaps the Job offered modifiers to both magical and physical skills. For stat modifiers, he wasn't sure. Maybe strength and intellect?

He had less of an idea where Poison Wielder came from, or why no one else had ever achieved such a Job. Maybe it required users of death attribute magic to achieve a certain level in Brawling Proficiency and poison a certain number of their enemies. Vandal figured there would be modifiers to Brawling Proficiency and stats like strength and agility.

No one was going to want to shake hands with a Poison Wielder. Vandal didn't want to imagine people simply ignoring his offered hand or wiping their hands with handkerchiefs immediately after shaking.

Insect Wielder must have been triggered by him taming the Cemetery Bees. The skills and status modifiers were likely similar to Undead Tamer, just focused on insects. It might be a good Job if he wanted to make more honey. It also might be fun to tame some beetles and become the Bug King he never could be back on Earth.

"But Golem Creator is the play this time," Vandal asserted.

He was going to be fighting the Dragon Golem, after all. He still didn't know what it was made from and couldn't use Appraisal through the ice, so he was going to need all-out Golem Creation skills in order to defeat it. He couldn't expect to control the Dragon Golem himself. Still, they would be fighting in a

vast but ultimately enclosed underground space. There was a floor, walls, and a ceiling down there. The golem's wings were also damaged. It wasn't going to be flying around. If Vandal could turn the floor and walls into golems, he should at least be able to slow the Dragon Golem down, if not hold it in place completely.

Golem Creation had also been useful when he killed Sercent and the vampires. He used golems to create his production lines for flour and sauce and repaired the Talosheim walls and castle using golems. These skills would surely aid and enrich his life well beyond the Dragon Golem battle.

Selected Golem Creator!

Enhance Brethren and Golem Creation level increased!

—Name: Vandal

—Race: Dhampir (Dark Elf)

—Age: 4 years old

—Alias: Ghoul King

—Job: Golem Creator

—Level: 0

—Job History: Death Mage

—Status

Vitality: 90

Magical Power: 204506933

Strength: 67

Agility: 46

Muscle: 71

Intellect: 238

—Passive Skills

[Brute Strength: Level 1] [Rapid Healing: Level 3] [Death Attribute Magic: Level 5]

[Resist Maladies: Level 5] [Resist Magic: Level 1] [Night Vision]

[Spiritual Pollution: Level 10] [Death Attribute Allure: Level 5] [Skip Incantation: Level 3]

[Enhance Brethren: Level 7 (UP!)] [Magical Power Auto Recovery: Level 3]

—Active Skills

[Suck Blood: Level 3] [Limit Break: Level 4] [Golem Creation: Level 5 (UP!)]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 4] [Magic Control: Level 4] [Spirit Body: Level 2]
[Carpentry: Level 4]

[Construction: Level 3] [Cooking: Level 2] [Alchemy: Level 3] [Brawling Proficiency: Level 2]

[Soul Crusher: Level 1] [Simultaneous Activation: Level 1] [Remote Control: Level 1]

—Curses

[Unable to carry over experience from previous lives] [Unable to enter existing jobs] [Unable to personally acquire experience]

He checked his stats to see that they hadn't changed as much as his first Job Change to Death Mage. That was probably just the difference between taking a Job for the first time, as opposed to moving to a second one.

"I'd love to just head down to the basement right away . . . but I need to check out my new Golem Creation skill level and also see how everyone else is doing with the increase to Enhance Brethren."

Testing revealed that he could make golems at a reduced cost to his MP. If they needed to cross the mountains again, he would be able to create paths for them at twice the speed. In the future, rather than simply make a path or dig a tunnel, he imagined he might even be able to make the mountains move out the way . . . but that might cause a volcanic eruption, so probably better not to go too lightly into that. He had no idea what was behind the topography of this world.

His golems also got stronger. It seemed that Enhance Brethren had started to work on them. They still wouldn't be able to match the Dragon Golem, but the buffs would be useful moving forward.

Just don't take any risks, okay? If it gets too dangerous, run for it, Dalshia told him.

"That's the plan, Mom," he replied.

"Good luck, Young Master," Sam said. "But part of being brave is knowing when to run away."

"I'll make a hole in the wall to escape if I have to," Vandal assured him.

Dalshia and the others were only there to see Vandal off. He was heading

beneath the castle with a small, elite, and carefully selected party.

The Hero Mikhail, confirmed for promotion to grade S, had killed the living Borkz with a single attack—and even he had been unable to take down the Dragon Golem. Its head, right side, arm, wings, and tail were smashed up, it had cracks all over its body, and there was a spear stuck into its chest, but it was still a powerful foe for Vandal and his allies. Vandal had therefore selected either those who were either rank 6 or above or who could be easily transferred to a new body if they were destroyed, with a sprinkling of those who could be used as decoys.

This meant rank 9 Borkz and rank 8 Eleonora were definitely coming along, and then rank 6 Zadilis and Vigaro. He also selected Skeleton, Skeleton Wolf, Skelton Monkey, Skeleton Bear, Skeleton Bird, Saria, and Rita. They were all still rank 5, but they were made from bones and armor. Even if they got ground to powder or turned to scrap, Vandal could revive them in new bodies relatively easily.

He also created ten stone golems, to act less as meat shields and more as stone ones. He wanted these in case the materials he had access to down there turned out to be too weak to use, or some kind of magic effect on them prevented him from using them. The golems would grab the Dragon Golem's legs and act as shields for his more vulnerable allies. He had made them from the spirits of orcs and goblins from Bugogan's settlement, so he had no problem in letting them get broken to pieces.

The only surprising selection was Lefdia, who rode on his back along with a selection of wooden rods.

“Be careful, though,” Vandal warned. “Depending on what the Dragon Golem is made from, it might be able to harm spirit bodies.”

He had only seen their enemy through a wall of cursed ice, meaning he had no idea what it was made from, although he was pretty sure it wasn't just steel.

"If it's mithril, that will give it high magical defense, meaning Zadilis and I won't be able to do much magic damage. It will be able to damage spirit bodies, too. We'll have to rely on physical attacks from Borkz and the others."

Vandal could probably land some damage if he used Physical Strength Enhancement, but he had Borkz and Vigaro along. There was no need to risk damage to his arms again.

"If it's made from adamantite, we won't have to worry about it hurting spirit bodies—but I also won't be able to damage it with my sword. Then we'll be relying on your magic, child," Borkz said, tapping on the haft of the magical sword that he had received from Bugogan by way of Vandal. The sword's magic enhanced its cutting edge and hardness, substantially increasing its power in the right hands—and those hands belonged to Borkz. He could have used it to slice through the scales of an Earth Dragon with ease. Hearing that it wouldn't damage an adamantite Dragon Golem, Vigaro made a noise of surprise.

"That hard?"

"You bet," Borkz answered. "A magical metal far harder than the scales and bones of lower-ranking dragons. When compared to adamantite, steel might as well be slime."

"But then Vandal's magic might work," Rita suggested. "Someone could pull out that spear and use it too."

"The other option is to aim for the cracks in its body. In fact, if it can't move around quickly, you can turn the floor into golems and bury it, boy," Zadilis said.

"There are plenty of options," Vandal said. "Like using the fragments of the

Dragon Golem that are lying around. Using the same material that it's made of should at least provide a shield."

The party continued to discuss as they headed downward. Chunks of ice were scattered about, and the atmosphere was the most unsettling out of anywhere in Talosheim. That was ironic, to say that this was the one place in Talosheim currently *not* teeming with undead.

Vandal melted sufficient ice to allow their passage, and so there was nothing in their way.

It wasn't much longer before they reached the chamber with the Dragon Golem. Beyond the thick wall of ice, they could see the shape of a black dragon.

Vandal paused to assess. "It's not as dangerous as before," he said. "But there's still plenty of danger."

"What shall we do? Try again another time?" Borkz asked.

"No, we're going ahead. This is a golem that drove off an adventurer with practically grade S strength. Even with all the damage, we can't defeat it without risk."

The golem had been created by the goddess. The only way to defeat it safely would be to obtain grade S strength for himself or to raise Borkz and the others to grade S. It had taken him four and a half years to reach this point, starting out as a powerless baby with nothing but bags of magical power. He had no idea how many years, or even decades, it would take to reach that point. Dalshia had told him not to take too many risks, but he also wasn't willing to wait that long.

I want to celebrate my birthday this year with my mom in a real body, Vandal thought.

He then cast buffs on the party members besides the golems. Zadilis and Eleonora did the same. Vandal applied Energy Steal to everyone, increasing their physical and magical defenses. Zadilis applied Bestow Wind Blade to their weapons, increasing their attack strength, and Wind Blessing to increase agility. She also applied Arrow Evader, just in case, which would make it easier to avoid missile weapons and spells. With all the undead in the party, there was no effective way to use light attribute magic, which was a shame. After that, Eleonora used time attribute magic, Accelerate, to allow everyone to move more quickly. Vandal capped things off by restoring Zadilis and Eleonora to full MP, and then they were ready to go.

Apart from Borkz's magical sword and Vigaro's axe, the materials and items they had collected from defeating monsters and clearing dungeons bolstered the party's strength. They had a number of Earth Dragon and Rock Dragon materials and plenty made out of Black Steel—a magical metal, if a less valuable one.

“Grrrrrh!”

Vandal used most of these materials in the boney bodies of Skeleton Wolf and the other skeletons. He had replaced their primary bones with identically shaped dragon materials. Even an ogre wouldn't be able to break their bones now.

“Here we go.”

Vandal held out his hands and drained off the magic in the wall of ice. It was thicker than the other walls that he had already removed, but that was the only difference, and the ice started to melt away.

The Dragon Golem noticed the change at once. It started to move—sideways.

One, two, three steps. It wasn't backing away or coming forward, but moved directly to the side, stopping . . . right where its head was left lying on the floor.

It's not planning on picking that up?! Vandal thought. Crap!

"Split to the left and right—ah!" Unable to ignore the sudden warning of deadly danger, Vandal gave up on casting his magic and got the hell out of there. Everyone else split up and scurried to the sides. A moment later, the darkly glistening head of the dragon crashed into the spot where they had just been standing.

Unbelievable—the dragon had kicked its own head at them, turning it into a potentially deadly missile.

"This one seems pretty bold!" Borkz spat. "And it can really use its head!" They watched as the head continued to fly, shattering the magic ice like it was plate glass and smashing all of their stone "shield" golems.

"That's the steel of the gods, orichalcum!" Eleonora shouted, her voice trembling. "The fact it shattered that cursed ice that only Master Van could melt is proof!"

Orichalcum. The highest tier of magical metal, above mithril, adamantite, damascus, and black steel: the most precious metal in the world, and supposedly, only the gods could use it. The one-hundred-foot Dragon Golem was made of it.

"I understand using it for weapons and armor, but a golem bigger than a dragon?" Borkz exclaimed. "This goddess doesn't hold back!"

Wow. If we carry all of this home, we could purchase a small country, Rita said.

"Then make sure we carry it home," Vandal replied.

Huh?

“Rita, Saria, skeletons, start collecting up the golem pieces,” Vandal ordered. Then he headed after Borkz and Eleonora into the chamber.

Krrrriiiiik! It was hard to tell if the noise was the golem screaming or if it was just the squealing of metal. The dragon seethed with power as it slowly started to move around.

“Raaagh! Dragon Killer!” Borkz unleashed his most powerful battle tech. It clanged off the cracked Dragon Golem’s arm with a loud ringing sound, but that was it. It didn’t even leave a mark. “Damn! This thing is hard—gaah!” An arm smashed into Borkz, sending him flying away, shattering through the protective magic with ease.

“This is orichalcum. Harder than adamantite. That isn’t going to work,” Eleonora said, shaking her head. She was flying through the air, looking for her own opening to strike at the Dragon Golem. Her target was, of course, the magical spear, still wedged in the chest of the golem. She could either pull it out and use it as a weapon or ram it in harder and try to do more damage to the golem that way.

Golems other than those created by Vandal had vitals. They had a core embedded in their heads or bodies that provided the MP powering them. There were no exceptions, even for a golem created by the goddess. This one was already missing its head, meaning the core had to be in the body. If they could destroy the core, then the golem was finished. That was their target.

Vandal had managed to stop Borkz with Anti-Attack Barrier before he smashed into the wall. Vigaro had given up on attacking once he saw the result of Borkz’s attempt and was acting purely as a distraction. Zadilis was attacking with wind and light magic, but orichalcum had superior magical defense even

compared to mithril, and she wasn't doing much good.

At that moment, the skeletons were probably having the most effect.

"Woooh!" Skeleton Wolf howled. They had been unable to rank beyond Rotten Beast on their own, but Vandal bathed them in his magical power, allowing them to reach rank 5 Hell Beast (and one Hell Bird), turning all of the bones in their bodies a bloody crimson. Now they were using those crimson bodies to collect up the shattered parts of the Dragon Golem, by whatever means they had at their disposal. They wanted to ensure that the Dragon Golem didn't have any more missiles, like its own head, and provided Vandal with materials that he could use.

Young master, will you be able to make your own golem? Saria asked.

"... The MP just bounces off. I can't," Vandal replied. Making direct use of orichalcum would be difficult.

"Master Vandal, stop the golem's movements!" Eleonora shouted.

It was her turn. Vandal responded by using Golem Creation to turn the floor into golems.

Whirrrr. Countless arms reached from the stone floor and grabbed onto the legs of the Dragon Golem.

But the arms just snapped like twigs as the golem screeched and kept moving. They were slowing it down, a little, but the golem was incredibly strong. However, either the lack of a head had compromised its intellect, or the arms were really pissing it off, because it took a moment to focus on smashing them.

"Now!" Eleonora used Super Accelerate to speed herself up and then swooped in toward the Dragon Golem. She grabbed the spear at an incredible speed. She pushed it forward—*thunk!*

Eleanor wailed as a shaft of cursed ice poked out from the spear, ramming into her chest. Artifacts like this one were known for having protections to prevent anyone other than the owner from laying hands on them.

"Impossible! It's been longer than 200 years!" Eleonora knew about the possible protections but didn't expect them to still be working after all this time.

The ice had pierced straight through the heart. She couldn't be saved. But she was sure that Vandal would turn her into undead and continue to make good use of her. While she still lived, then, she would do whatever she could to aid her most terrifying master. She would try to push the spear deeper into the golem.

To achieve that end, she created an MP Shot behind herself and then launched it at her own body and the spear. It didn't matter if the spear itself was made of orichalcum, or if it was surrounded by impervious cursed ice; this should be enough to push it in deeper. But then her final MP Shot, the product of the last of her strength, faded to nothing.

She gasped and whipped around to see the Dragon Golem shuddering with a terrible roar. Eleonora looked down in surprise to see a black fragment—a piece of the Dragon Golem stabbed into its own thigh.

"Telekinesis Fragment Cannon! Reload!" Vandal shouted, tossing away a scrap of wood.

Skeleton Monkey grunted and tossed up more golem fragments while Lefdia passed him a fresh wooden wand. Vandal took the implement and then unleashed his technique by channeling his magical power through it.

"Telekinesis!" The fragment immediately lifted up into the air and accelerated

toward the Dragon Golem at a blistering speed, while the wand, unable to withstand all the magical power, shattered to pieces on the spot.

A horrific roar let loose. The fragment stabbed into the other leg of the golem. Unable to withstand the damage, the golem wobbled unsteadily.

“Naaaaaaagh! Dragon Killer!” Borkz roared.

“Slice Steel! Circle Whip Axe!” Vigaro joined in.

The two of them, equipped with awkward chunks of metal that barely passed as swords and axes, charged in to bash their “weapons” into the golem.

The golem gave another screech. Its body twisting, spreading further cracks across its frame.

Eleonora, shocked by these developments, started to lose consciousness . . . then the ice shattered, and the next thing she knew she was on the ground, with Vandal looking down at her.

“I’m sorry. I sensed the danger but couldn’t stop it in time,” Vandal said. “No more sacrificing your life to accomplish things, either.”

Eleonora spluttered up blood, trying to apologize for her failure, but Vandal calmed her down. “Just take it easy. You’ll feel better.” Then Vandal’s nails extended toward her. “I’m only small, so there’s only so much I can give you.”

Vandal’s blood splashed down onto her face. The smell of magical power was overwhelming, and Eleonora reflexively opened her mouth and lapped up the blood. Her heart immediately started to regenerate. Her heart—which, after this much damage, shouldn’t have been able to recover at all.

“I’ve pushed death away from you,” Vandal explained. “So long as you have my MP via my blood, a mortal wound doesn’t have to be mortal. I’m sure it will hurt for a while but do your best to recover.”

“I’m actually . . . all better. Thanks to your blood,” Eleonora said. She had never expected to feel so good so soon after getting stabbed in the heart. Licking the remaining blood from her lips filled her with another surge of power. If he hadn’t already ordered her not to take things too far, Eleonora would have been singing his praises, kissing his feet, and swearing her eternal fealty in this moment.

But she needed to show her fealty with her actions.

“Give me a sword too,” she said.

“Okay. Hold on a moment. Lefdia, another wand,” Vandal said. He wasn’t in a position to give her a sword right away. He already had three forms of magic activated.

Two were accounted for by the rough orichalcum weapons held by Vigaro and Borkz. He made them with scraps that the skeletons collected, fitted them with rough hilts, and shaped them to allow Axe Proficiency and Sword Proficiency to work. However, like memory foam metal, they kept trying to return to their original shape, so he needed to use Golem Creation on them continuously. The third magic was turning the floor into golems and maintaining a distraction.

If he made a weapon for Eleonora, that would be casting four forms of magic at once. That was a difficult feat, even for Vandal. But that was also why he had brought the wands with him.

A wand was a medium that Magicians could use when casting magic. They helped to activate and heighten the effects of magic. The short wands that Vandal brought with him were indeed short, but they had that same effect. He used one of them now to cast a fourth type of magic, in a fire-and-forget fashion.

He took a third wand from Lefdia and attempted to turn the collected orichalcum fragments into a sword. But the wand shattered before the blade was complete.

“Hmmm. These wands can’t handle it. We got anything better around here?” Vandal asked.

The neckless Lefdia shook her fingers to the left and right. Vandal still had a number of wands on his back, but none of them were better than the one that just shattered.

The wands were mid-range magic items that they had found in the dungeons, so there was quite a variance in their stats. Faced with Vandal’s insane volume of MP, however, such variance was so small as to be meaningless.

“Boy, your hand is burning hot,” Zadilis said.

Vandal realized he had no choice but to use multiple wands at once, but Zadilis—who was providing constant healing magic to his head—was worried about the volume of heat coming off his hands.

“Just let me go a little longer,” Vandal said.

“You need to worry about yourself!”

“It’s okay. Limit Break can last a bit longer.”

“Boy, I hope you don’t think Limit Break is infinite!”

“It’s fine! Forget about the sword!” shouted Eleanor.

An angry look from Zadilis and hard taps on the shoulder from Lefdia caused Eleonora to quickly take back her request.

“I’ll just watch from here.”

Vandal looked ready to obey them as well, settling down a little. It seemed

like watching was enough now anyway.

Each time Borkz and Vigaro swung their makeshift weapons, clanging and banging their way through combat, the cracks in the Dragon Golem got bigger and deeper. Vandal had repaired the stone golems and they were taking the brunt of the Dragon Golem's counterattacks, while Skeleton Monkey and the other undead were collecting the scattered pieces of orichalcum to prevent them being used as missiles. Mikhail had already half destroyed the golem, leaving it with few ways to attack, and it was slow and heavy. Now that they had a way to cause damage, it wasn't putting up much of a fight.

They needed to look out for self-defense functions, such as the magic spear that had pierced Eleonora's heart. But the cat was out the bag on that one; they simply had to avoid touching the spear.

The Dragon Golem's right leg shattered with a massive cracking sound. Half of its remaining arm had already fallen. Then its entire body collapsed, as though following the other pieces to the ground.

They won.

That's what everyone in the party was thinking. The only casualties had been the stone golems and the wands, which Vandal had been planning to sacrifice from the start. Borkz, Vigaro, and the other undead gave a shout of victory.

Vandal was right there with them. He looked toward the doorway on the far wall, beyond the remains of the Dragon Golem. He hadn't been able to search for it before, but the revival device was surely behind that door. Now he could bring Dalshia back to life.

Then their confidence turned to terror.

"Ru—!" Vandal started to scream, but he was cut short by countless pillars of

ice erupting out from the Dragon Golem.



Ice pillars, exploding out from the cracks in the Dragon Golem's body. Vandal and Eleonora had some distance to react, but Vigaro and the closer fighters had no chance to escape before the ice caught them.

“Grrraah!”

“Geeeeeh!”

The undead roared as the ice pierced them, with bones and armor parts flying as far back as Vandal. He met the eyes of a skull that landed right next to him.

“Skeleton! Where's the rest of you?” Vandal asked.

“Squeak! My bottom half is on the other side! My right arm is in the ice! The rest of me should be around here!” he replied, his jaws and teeth clattering. He had escaped the worst of the ice by splitting himself up.

“That's undead for you,” Zadilis said.

“My own immortality feels pretty half-baked compared to this,” Eleonora joked.

Vandal looked over at them and saw Rita and Saria pulling themselves together, a few pieces missing. Vigaro was uninjured, while Borkz had lost the bone side of his face but was otherwise undamaged.

“Those ice pillars . . .” Vandal looked closer. “The cursed ice is wearing the pieces of the Dragon Golem like armor and moving them around. There are fragments of orichalcum on the surface of the ice, so my Energy Steal and

Zadilis's Arrow Evader won't work."

To top it off, the cursed ice itself could only be destroyed by orichalcum or Vandal's death attribute magic. Skeleton had split up to avoid damage, but Skeleton Monkey and Skeleton Bear had reflexively attempted to grab the ice—and definitely lost that battle.

"Geeeh!" Skeleton Bird gave a mournful cry, reduced to one leg.

Vandal watched the red fade from Skeleton Monkey's crimson femur, the bone returning to its original white color.

"Master!" Skeleton exclaimed.

"I got them," Vandal said. He used Spirit Bodification on his right hand and touched the spirits of Skeleton Monkey, Skeleton Bear, and Skeleton Wolf, giving them some magical power and maintaining their damaged spirit bodies.

The orichalcum had caused some damage. Vandal could repair it, but they wouldn't be in fighting shape any time soon.

"You alive?" Vigaro shouted.

"Gah! My handsome face!" Borkz exclaimed.

The two of them were still clinging to their orichalcum weapons, which were barely holding a weapon shape. They had used those to fend off the orichalcum-enriched ice that had come for them. There was also an explanation for why only the skull portion of Borkz's face had been shattered: he had been covering his face with Rita's bikini armor bra.

"Here you go, Rita," the giantling said.

"Thank you," Rita replied, as Borkz tossed her the bra back. "I was thinking how embarrassing it would be to have to fight in front of you all with my chest

bare.”

“Chest? I don’t see anything!” Borkz said, sounding a little disappointed.

Rita was still little more than mist inside some armor pieces.

“When I level up my Spirit Body like my dad, I should be able to give you an eyeful,” Rita replied. “Well, Young Master? What shall we do?”

“Good question,” Vandal pondered. “Can anyone explain exactly what’s going on?”

“I can make a good guess,” Eleonora offered.

After the initial explosion of ice, there was now a strange ball of ice and metal rolling around the room, toward which Eleonora pointed. Her finger came to point precisely at the magic spear that was still stuck in the chest of the Dragon Golem.

“I think that the magic spear, Ice Age, has gone out of control. Once the Dragon Golem shut down, the spear started drawing MP from its core, making the ice appear. I didn’t even expect the self-defense capabilities to still be working, let alone this.”

In other words, this was all Mikhail’s fault for leaving that spear here.

“Any idea what’s going to happen next?” Vandal asked.

“I don’t know why the magic spear is rampaging, or why it is able to draw power from the golem core, but if this really is a blind rampage, it will continue until it runs out of MP, trashing whatever it can all over the place.”

“I see,” Vandal said. “Trashing everything.” The walls, the floor—and maybe the revival device behind the door.

The headless Dragon Golem was turning into what looked like an octopus or

squid with orichalcum-enriched legs all thrashing around. Whatever trouble Vandal had been expecting from Ice Age, this clearly surpassed it. It started to move immediately away from him, toward the revival device.

“Stop that rotten spear,” Vandal commanded. That was the only choice. They could use this opening to find their feet, but if the revival device got destroyed, it would all be for nothing.

“Okay! On it!” Borkz and Vigaro headed back into the fray, makeshift orichalcum weapons in hand. The cursed ice still had the same properties, meaning only the two of them or Vandal could effectively fight against it.

The two fighters were enjoying themselves. The ice legs didn’t make any attempts to avoid attacks and shattered into pieces when struck. But shattering them also wasn’t reducing the volume of ice.

“Gaaah! No end to cold!” Vigaro wailed.

“It’s all this magical power! While the golem core still has MP, that spear will continue to produce ice!” Borkz shouted.

The ice from the Ice Age wasn’t the body of the spear, meaning no matter how much of it they shattered, they weren’t doing any damage to the weapon itself. It was using the ice to move around, meaning shattering it did slow the monster down, but that was nothing more than buying some time.

Vandal tried to turn the floor to golems to slow it down, but the ice just rolled right over it, continuing its creeping progress.

“I’ll have to break the actual spear!” Borkz shouted. “Swift Response!” The giantling raced up one of the icy legs at a speed unimaginable from his massive frame, closing in with the actual Ice Age itself. But once he got within swinging distance the spear produced countless shafts of ice and launched them

outward.

“Damn! The ice is damn fast!” Borkz shouted.

Each shot of ice was powerful, and the spear could fire them off like a machine gun, a tactic that was giving even the mighty Borkz some trouble. However, as it was firing the ice off instantaneously, it also didn’t contain any orichalcum. Getting hit by some ice wasn’t a huge problem for the zombie Borkz.

However, all the ice launched by the spear remained under the control of the Ice Age, and Borkz immediately noticed how the ice he battered away with his sword continued to writhe around. When the ice hit him, he got frozen in place, locking him down until Vandal could melt it.

“Damn this! I couldn’t beat the spear owner, and now I can’t even beat the spear alone!” Borkz howled, still looking for an opening.

“Vandal! We need help!” Vigaro leapt back from the spear and returned to smashing the legs to buy time. They were both trying to drain off whatever MP was left in the core, but there was no sign of Ice Age slowing down.

“I need to get back in there,” Eleonora said, flying back into combat with a large chunk of orichalcum.

“Rita!” Saria shouted. “With me!”

The two of them had collected their own chunks of orichalcum, shaped reasonably like weapons, and headed back into battle. They started to use the chunks to attack the legs of the Ice Age. They couldn’t perform battle techs with them, but luckily the two of them were strong. Simply swinging the orichalcum with all their might was enough to shatter the ice.

Eleonora used a large chunk as a shield, moving to defend Borkz. She

deflected the bursts of ice with her shield, trying to make openings.

“Geeeeh!” Even Skeleton Bird, hopping on one leg, was firing off Spirit Body feathers. It couldn’t shatter the ice but was just trying to buy them even one more second of time.

They were all fighting as hard as they could to help Vandal get his hands on the revival device. But Vandal couldn’t do anything else. He was already casting six forms of magic at once.

He had stopped turning the floor into golems beneath the Ice Age because it simply wasn’t doing any good. But he was maintaining the two makeshift orichalcum weapons, keeping his right hand in Spirit Bodification, and maintaining the spirits of the three skeleton animals. That made six.

Even with the Simultaneous Activation skill, he was hitting his limits. Limit Break and Rapid Healing were both already active. Zadilis was also applying light attribute healing magic, but even then, it felt like his brain was going to cook. Lefdia pressed her cold palm into his forehead, but it was like water onto a hot stone.

Even when faced with the largest lake, you can only scoop out as much as your hand can hold. This was the same principle: it didn’t matter how much MP he had, there was still a limit on how much magic he could use at once.

What can I do? Vandal wondered. This wasn’t a fight to the death. No one was going to die. The revival device was just going to be destroyed.

The spear was definitely moving with some kind of intent. If this was a mindless rampage, it shouldn’t be heading directly for the device. This was a magic weapon that had been forged by a god in service to Pelia, goddess of water and knowledge, for use by heroes. It was a Legend-if not Divine-grade

artifact. It wouldn't be a surprise if it did have some kind of intent. And if it did, it would likely adhere to the same principles as Mikhail—meaning those of the Hero Bellwood and the God of Law and Life Alda: Bellwood, the destroyer hero who had refuted all knowledge from other worlds, denying Ramda prosperity for the sake of the unique future culture of this world that he had believed would eventually develop; Alda, the god who had allowed none to turn against her teachings, instructing her followers to hate the races of Vida for tens of thousands of years; and Mikhail, influenced by that justice, who had in turn finished off the nation of the giantlings. Now that hero's magic spear was on a rampage to destroy the revival device that Vandal so wanted.

There was something in what they believed in. Vandal had to admit that. There was an argument to be made about the natural order. *But does that mean we're in the wrong? Does wanting to bring my mom back to life make me evil?* Vandal wondered.

The answer was easy. Of course not. Healing the wounded, curing the sick, keeping creatures alive long beyond their lifespans, these things were considered good. *So why is bringing the dead back to life a problem? And yet they won't accept it. Which means we have to win. But how? I have magical power. I have magical power, but that isn't enough. I don't have the brains for this. I don't have the braincells! What should I do?*

"Boy! You really can't take any more of this!" Zadilis shouted, giving a cry of pain.

So he reached his limit. They were finished. It was over. Did he just have to watch his hope of getting Mom back be taken away?

There was one method he could think of. If he gave up on the spirits of Skeleton Monkey and the other undead, it would reduce the load on his brain.

But he couldn't do that. The revival device was the hope of getting something back. He couldn't lose something else in order to obtain it. His skeletons had started out as just a way to get around, as pawns. But in the time since then, they became very important to him. He might be able to swap out their bones, but he couldn't replace their spirits.

Spirits can't be replaced—ah, of course, Vandal realized, splitting himself apart. *I do have a brain after all.*

“Boy?!” Zadilis gasped—but she worked it out immediately. “Spirit Body!?”

Just so. Vandal left his body. An out-of-body experience.

A body without a soul would normally stop moving like a lump of wood, but Vandal’s physical body continued to cast magic. Vandal was using his new Remote Control skill to operate his real body from his Spirit Body.

Now I've got two brains. Zadilis, please take care of my body, Vandal said.

“O-o-kay,” Zadilis said, looking around as Vandal’s voice came out of both his spirit and physical bodies. “Leave it to me,” she said, focusing on her healing magic.

The trick allowed him to divide up the six types of magic into three per body. But if he was going to stop the horrible stick of ice, he needed something more. Now he just needed to work out what.

My brain . . . huh? Now I'm using Spirit Body—I don't need to be bound by physical form! Vandal looked at his body to see that the right arm, which he had used Spirit Bodification on already, was split into three branches, each supplying MP to the spirits of the skeletons. Using Spirit Bodification on himself allowed him to freely change the shape of his arm, just like that. There was no stopping him from going all out.

In a snap, his visual range increased.

He used the Spirit Body skill to manipulate his spirit body, giving himself a second extra head. Now he had three brains. But that still wasn't enough. He made some more. Now he had five.

Lefdia, he said. *Give me all the remaining wands.* Lefdia proceeded to throw the wands one after another at Vandal's spirit body topped with its four heads. Vandal caught them and then unleashed death magic with curse-removing properties toward the Dragon Golem. On top of that, he created a bunch of stone golems loaded with orichalcum fragments.

"Raaaaaaaagh!" The stone golems roared as they charged toward the ice legs of the Dragon Golem, bits of black metal sticking out of their fists and knees.

"Young master!" Rita exclaimed. "What's happened to you? You've got multiple heads and two bodies!"

"I can't seeee!" Vigaro shouted.

"Ah! How masculine! How wonderful!" Eleonora enthused.

"Everyone, try to ignore what the master looks like and fight!" Skeleton said.

"We could use your hands out here, not just your mouths!" Borkz bellowed.

As more golems poured out of the walls and floor at a pace threatening to destroy the room, everyone turned to look at Vandal in surprise—although in the case of Eleonora, almost a kind of joy. But the skull rolling at Vandal's feet and Borkz's angry comment got everyone back to the labor of smashing ice.

That's what it was now: labor.

The magic spear was indeed an artifact of at least Legend grade. But it also wasn't equipped to fight on its own. It was just taking a vast volume of MP from

the Dragon Golem core and using that to create ice, and then writhing about desperately.

The movement of the cursed ice was already slow and stiff. If this had been normal ice that didn't need orichalcum to shatter it, Borkz alone could have taken care of this whole thing in moments.

Now even the cursed ice was being beaten back by countless stone golems containing orichalcum, broken apart by Vigaro, Rita, and the others, and directly melted by Vandal's death attribute magic. Driving off Borkz and its other attackers was no longer a possibility; it even stopped producing the bursts of ice, unable to produce ice faster than the rate that Vandal's party shattered it.



“Enough of you! Shitty spear!” Borkz shouted.

The weapon’s resistance finally proved futile as the giantling smashed it out from the remains of the golem’s chest, sending the weapon spinning away across the floor. The ice immediately stopped.

Seeing the battle end, Vandal smoothly returned to his physical body. Losing all the extra heads made his eyes swim for a moment, but Zadilis kept him from sinking to one knee.

“Phew, thanks,” he told her. “But why are you hugging my head so tightly?”

“I thought all those extra brains might have taken a toll on you,” Zadilis replied. She had his head held firmly between her arms. Lefdia was also up on the top of his head, fingers digging into his scalp.

These two had probably been the most surprised by Vandal using Spirit Body to make extra heads. His arm was still in Spirit Bodification, with tendrils reaching out to the skeleton spirits, but that was something he had done many times in the past. Using it on his actual head clearly caused a bigger stir.

“I need to get bodies for the skeleton animals,” Vandal said. He really wanted to run and check out the revival device, but that could wait for last. First he needed to get his minions back on their boney paws. They could lick their spirit body wounds once they had new physical bodies to inhabit. It wouldn’t be much work or take too long.

“Grrrh!”

“Grrrrh!”

However, when he tried to restore them to normal, Skeleton Monkey and the

others didn't seem to want to play along. They were upset about the burden they had placed on Vandal through their own weakness. They didn't want to return to simply being weak. They wanted to get stronger.

"Geeeh!" Skeleton Bird felt the same way: the four animals wanted to all combine together.

"... I think that would be possible, but are you sure? Once we go ahead, I'm not sure I could bring you back," Vandal warned them.

The bone-shaped spirits of the currently disembodied mammals and Skeleton Bird all growled and cawed in agreement. They had started out as multiple wandering spirits of animals and bugs. They didn't remember what form they had taken in life and had almost no memories prior to becoming undead. The most important thing to them was their loyalty to Vandal. They didn't have lifespans, or the need to eat or reproduce. They were simply undead, freed from all primal desires.

"Very well, then."

The spirit left the boney body of Skeleton Bird as the spirits of the other animals lost their shapes, mixing together.

The scattered bone pieces that had comprised their former bodies then clattered together in a single spot. They mixed and merged, forming a single new body, and all the spirits poured into it "Roooooaaaah!"

With an incredible roar, a new beast of bones was created. It was like someone had haphazardly crammed pieces from four different puzzles together, with bones from a bear, monkey, wolf, and bird all poking out. The politest way to describe it was a bone chimera. A Japanese person might consider it a bone Nue.

“A bone chimera,” Zadilis commented. “Created when multiple animals and monsters are bound by the same powerful intent. This is my first time seeing one for myself. Skeleton Bird, Skeleton Monkey, Skeleton Wolf, Skeleton Bear, and Skeleton. Your loyalty is most impressive.”

“Apologies . . . but I’m not included in whatever that is,” Skeleton commented.

“Ah, of course,” Zadilis replied.

Skeleton’s skull was still sitting on the floor. With the magic spear’s rampage coming to an end, he finally started to put himself back together.

“Skeleton, let me know if you’re missing any bones,” Vandal said.

“Of course, master.”

Then, with Bone Chimera in tow, Vandal headed toward the magic spear that was still lying on the floor.

“Master Vandal, please!” Eleanor called. “It’s too dangerous to approach that spear!”

Vandal waved her off. The spear didn’t have a single mark on it. It was a powerful artifact, after all. Vandal enveloped the weapon in death attribute magic and touched it.

“Hands off me!” He immediately heard a voice ringing in his head. The spear appeared to have more of an awareness than Vandal had expected.

Intelligent weapons existed in this world, with awareness and intellect of their own, and it seemed that Ice Age was one of them.

“You filthy dhampir! I don’t know what you are planning, but your plans and your dirty life will be crushed by whomever wields me after Mikhail! Enjoy your

fleeting victory!"

"I can do without the bluster, thanks," Vandal said. "Can you just explain what's going on? I thought you were made by an ice god in service to Pelia, not Alda?"

At that question, Ice Age started to stammer and stutter, providing a broken and confused answer. Piecing it together, it sounded like the Ice God Yupeon was of a different mind to the Sea God Tristan, who had consorted with Vida and created the merpeople. Yupeon's thinking was more in line with that of Alda and the Hero Bellwood. Then, 200 years ago, it had finally accepted someone other than Bellwood to wield it—Divine Ice Spear Mikhail. He had been a devout follower of Alda, believing in the justice of the Amidd Empire and Milg Shield Kingdom from the bottom of his heart. But the goddess's Dragon Golem had managed to drive him off, perhaps mere moments before his victory, leaving Ice Age stabbed into the chest of that same golem.

When Mikhail didn't return, the spear created ice to seal away the revival device. It was still a blight on the order of this world, with the ability to bring the dead back to life. An artifact could not normally activate without its owner around, but the tip of the spear was touching the core of the Dragon Golem, allowing it to siphon off the magical power it required. It had proceeded to make a bunch of ice walls that only Mikhail should have been able to pass through.

That meant the ice that had captured Zandia's hand was created by Ice Age, not Mikhail.

"But it isn't Mikhail who shows up, or even his successor, but you!" the spear raged. "With your two dirty undead in tow, playing around with life itself! The arrogance! Ah, I was so close! So close to completely crushing your vile undead

ambitions!"

"That's such a—hold on?" Vandal had been about to say, "such a shame," but then something caught his attention.

Two undead? Even if he didn't include Rita and Saria, with Borkz, Skeleton, and the others, he had six with him. Surely it isn't counting the humanoid and animal ones differently. So why two? When I first came here, I only had Borkz and Nuaza with me. Maybe that's what it means. Vandal didn't know what was going on with the senses of this spear, but they seemed to have been active even while stuck in the chest of the Dragon Golem.

That made sense. Two hundred years ago, Ice Age had made walls of ice in this room, in the corridor leading to it, and even at the entrance to the underground, all while stuck in the golem's core. Of course it would have noticed when Vandal arrived here almost two years prior.

What has it been doing, then? It's had more than a year since someone other than Mikhail's successor appeared, a dhampir who could melt the cursed ice. So what has it been doing since then? Vandal wondered.

"Vandal! What doing now? Talking with spear? Hey!" Vigaro shouted.

"Young Master, are you okay?" Rita asked.

Vandal didn't even hear them—he just started running. Running toward the door the Dragon Golem had been protecting.

The door was made from the same materials as the wall, making it a little hard to spot, but as Vandal approached, it opened up like an automatic door. Defeating the golem was likely the trigger for it to open.

Vandal gasped. Beyond the doorway, he saw large cylinders made from some kind of strange glass, a magic circle, monoliths carved with lettering that Vandal

couldn't read, and something that looked like a flat-screen TV from Earth. But all of them had been speared by countless shafts of ice, scraped up, and destroyed.

"Hah . . . hahaha! It worked!" crowed the spear. "I received magical power from the golem core, but I couldn't move around myself, so I wasn't sure if creating ice in a distinct location was working as planned, but it did! Hah, dhampir! Your evil plans are finished!"

The spear was already really getting on Vandal's nerves, its voice ringing painfully in his head. The Bone Chimera let out a mournful sound and Vigaro and the others all stood still in defeat.

Vandal turned his gaze back to Ice Age.

If it's broken, we just have to fix it, Vandal thought. If we can't fix it, then we have to find another way. I'm not giving up on bringing Mom back to life. But there's something I need to do first.

"You wish to destroy me, dhampir?" the spear asked, without a trace of fear. "With your unholy manipulation of orichalcum, perhaps you can achieve that vile wish. But it would be meaningless. As an artifact created by Ice God Yupeon, I am a living part of him. Even if this spear is destroyed, my awareness will return to the god from whence it came. And then another great hero, like Mikhail but even greater, will appear before you! And this time, he will end your evil life, along with all your impure undead!"

Vandal almost felt sick hearing this ugly voice, so sure in its own righteousness.

"I have to ask, but . . . are you serious?" he replied.

He really did have to ask. Just to make sure.

“Of course! If you have regrets now, then regret the dirty circumstances of your birth—”

“Then I’ll have to eradicate you.”

Vandal used Spirit Bodification on his fingers and stuck them into the magic spear. He felt the resistance of the orichalcum and a sharp pain when he pushed past it, like his skin was being peeled back and the exposed flesh and bone rubbed down by a file.

“Gwaaaaaaaaah?!” Ice Age’s voice devolved into crackling white noise. It felt so good to hear that Vandal almost forgot about the pain.

“You might be part of some up-himself god,” Vandal said, “but if you’re going to proclaim yourself our enemy and that you’ll chase us with all your strength for the rest of your existence, then you aren’t really leaving me with much choice.”

Maybe Ice Age didn’t know why Vandal wanted the revival device. Either way, it didn’t matter. The spear had already called his plans “evil.” For the intelligent weapon, dhampirs were pure evil, worse than a plague of pestilent insects, so whatever they might be planning was always going to be evil. There was no need to investigate any further.

The spear was trying to do the same things as Mikhail, the hero who had crossed the mountains at the behest of a controlling religion to put an end to a quietly flourishing nation of giantlings. And then it dared to call those murdered by that so-called hero—those who had been turned into undead because of his deeds—“dirty.”

It didn’t matter what Vandal and his allies actually wanted or actually tried to do. So long as Ice Age existed, it would consider them evil and continue to seek

an opportunity to lodge its spear tip into their guts. That was its entire existence.

“If I leave you out here in the world, I won’t be able to relax in my search for bringing my mom back to life or find true happiness in the future,” Vandal said, gritting his teeth. “Aha, there we go. Found it. When you spouted off about being part of a god, I wondered if this was the case and here we go. Even I couldn’t destroy something if you didn’t have it.”

“Guwaah! You would—make an enemy of a god—?!” the spear screeched.

“Whatever we do, we’re the enemies of your god, no?” Vandal reasoned. “In that case, it doesn’t matter what we do.”

There had been plenty of chances to negotiate, come to terms, reach a settlement, or join forces. Their side was having none of it. *Do they really think, after everything they’ve done, everything they’ve said, they’re just going to get out of this, without any repercussions?* If so, Vandal was almost jealous of how brazen they were. He could never be that shameless.

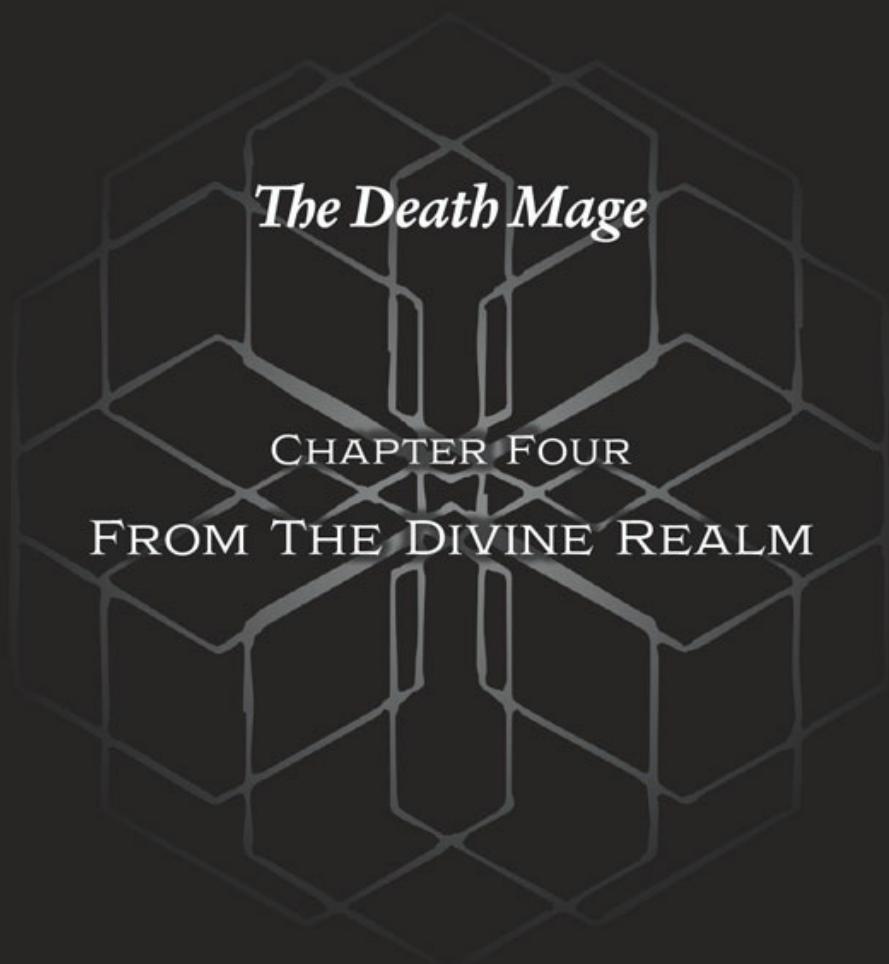
“I don’t think you’ll be able to,” Vandal said, “but let Yupeon know, if you can, that he’s our enemy.”

“Gaah, giih, Mi-Mik—” the weapon spluttered.

A clean shattering sound rang out. Vandal cut short the spear’s song of glory, as the soul formed from a piece of a god was finally crushed.

Golem Creation, Spirit Body, Simultaneous Activation, Soul Crusher, and Remote Control skill levels increased!

Unique skill God Smiter acquired!



Chapter Four: From the Divine Realm

The space between worlds. What might have been called a Divine Realm. It had been created by the god Rodocolte, the divine being responsible for reincarnation across multiple worlds including Earth, Origin, and Ramda, and now he was sitting in it.

This was also the place where he had gathered the souls of the approximately 100 people who had died on Earth.

In this moment, Rodocolte was looking at Origin. He was hardly omnipotent, but as a god, he could see many things even from outside their world. Not everything, but most of what was happening.

“There’s unavoidable chaos on Origin, all rooted in the existence and destruction of Hiroto Amamiya,” Rodocolte mused.

Origin was a world that developed much like Earth, apart from its fusion of magic and science. Vandal had lived his second life in this world, and Hiroto Amemiya and the other resurrected currently lived there. It was also experiencing some serious turmoil.

The cause was the death attribute magic of Vandal—Hiroto Amamiya. The military state that had been experimenting on him had extracted ample death attribute magical power from him prior to his death and used it to create all sorts of magic items with revolutionary powers.

Some were simply convenient, such as cooking devices that fermented ingredients instantly or matured them as desired. There were storage devices that kept their contents eternally fresh and medical devices that removed all poison and sickness from a human body. Pills that restored the function of

organs compromised by age, sickness, or injury. Shampoo that restored hair growth.

Feats that had been impossible with the other magic attributes or science, or theoretically possible but practically impossible to build. And now they were being built easily and at such a low cost.

The scientists had created impossible items, impossible creatures, viruses and pathogens without cures, and cures for genetic diseases. They had even devised cryogenic freezing. Research into the death attribute was now reaching the realm of true immortality.

That too was a possibility. Death attribute magic could achieve it.

At first glance, the death attribute appeared to simply be the opposite of the life attribute. It could do similar things, and if utterly pushed to its limits, then life attribute magic could perform many similar feats.

Similar, but not the same. Because life was energy. It didn't matter how much more energy you added, or how much you tried to save. Energy would eventually run out—which meant death.

But death attribute magic controlled death. That meant it had the power to remove the phenomenon of death from a living creature. All you had to do was stop the progress of decay or remove poison and disease. Returning function to compromised organs and returning health to cells wasn't difficult either.

However, the military state that discovered the death attribute had also killed Hiroto Amamiya with their excessive experiments. After he turned undead, the other resurrected completely eradicated him, including all of his magical power.

That meant no one could make any more death attribute magic items. No more research. The existing items and livestock remained, but they weren't

enough to satisfy the desires of mankind.

The illegal research facility had been internationally condemned, with its many abuses of human rights. The president and those running the operation had all been dismissed. All of the crazy devices that the military state had been producing and selling suddenly couldn't be produced or sold any longer.

So, the first thing the advanced international society that had so condemned the inhumane research did was begin research into death attribute for themselves. Almost all of the staff at the original lab had been killed by Hiroto Amamiya, and their spirits weren't in great shape either. Those that still remained had memory and personality issues, preventing magic like Summon Spirit from being of any use. Each nation therefore desperately sought out those few survivors, their surviving research, gathered all the death attribute magic items they could find, and started to try to recreate them. Industry and medicine were one thing—the word “immortality” had an inescapable appeal for everyone in power.

The problematic military state had been severely weakened, but the leaders of the union, federation, republic, and emerging states weren't going to back down with immortality on the table. Their previously secret feuds would now come to the forefront.

“The struggle will continue for a while,” Rodocolte muttered.

Then there were the other victims of the research that the undead Hiroto Amamiya had saved. After Amamiya was defeated, Hiroto Amemiya and the other resurrected took them in and handed them off to an international organization for protection. However, the resurrected had been left in the dark about what really happened next: the victims had simply been routed to the labs of the other advanced nations to undergo further human experimentation.

Those victims managed to use the limited death attribute magic left to them by Hiroto Amamiya to escape. So now every nation was fighting to get their hands on what little death attribute magic remained in their world. If these desperate squabbles expanded into open warfare, it might cost millions of lives.

“Not that I care about that,” Rodocolte said. He wasn’t interested in such calculations. Indeed, he didn’t care if people died. He even welcomed it. He was the god of reincarnation, after all. Dead people could be reborn. Simple. Rodocolte’s reincarnation system could handle millions of dead at the same time. Theoretically, it could handle billions. A trillion souls, max. He had no problems there.

Origin had a population of ten billion. Even if they lost a couple of percentage points, they’d make that back quickly. It wouldn’t even take 100 years.

In fact, with both science and magic working their wonders on Origin, the average lifespan was much longer than it was on Earth. A bit of a cleanout wouldn’t be a bad thing. Rodocolte wanted his worlds to develop, of course, but he was perfectly happy with a society that could support a few billion people without destroying itself.

If a population of seven billion fell to five billion, his only thought would be “that was a bit of a drop.” He had more a problem with humanity achieving some kind of spiritual evolution or proceeding to the next stage of existence. That was beyond his means. He didn’t mind them going into space, of course. Rodocolte had no intention of meddling directly in these worlds, and his ability to do so was limited.

Still, if he wanted to stop the conflict on Origin, all he needed to do was send an Oracle to the resurrected or get some information to them. But he didn’t want to do that either. He had sent the resurrected to Origin rather than

directly to Ramda in order for them to earn some experience. They had their cheat powers, blessings, and luck on their side. He was happy to leave them to their own devices. If fighting broke out, some of them might die. More than ten of them, maybe. But that was experience, too. That was why he gathered 100. A few failures were within his plans.

For Rodocolte, a god who didn't have any direct believers of his own, people were nothing but bits. Just data flowing within the system. Good, bad, happiness, tragedy—none of that meant anything. He was happy so long as the system was running.

"The problem is this immortality business," he muttered. Creatures that didn't die spat in the face of the god responsible for reincarnating souls. Immortals were a glitch in the system. They were a far bigger problem than undead walking around dead or even the dead coming back to life.

Undead were souls that continued to wander the world they lived in rather than getting reincarnated, but they would eventually return to the system. Dead coming back to life was also an issue, but if their souls moved on to the next world, then the bodies returned to life empty, which was a minor malfunction.

But immortal beings would never come back to him.

Undead were minor errors that could be left alone and still eventually work themselves out. But if people returning to life were a bug that was harder to iron out, an immortal required a complete shutdown and some serious maintenance to put right. A real big problem.

"From that perspective, it's fortunate that Hiroto Amamiya was killed," Rodocolte said. If he had survived and the research continued, eventually achieving immortality, the situation would be far harder to put right. Even if he

did send word via an Oracle to the resurrected, he couldn't guarantee that they would go along with what he wanted. He couldn't even contact anyone other than the resurrected, either.

That was because the residents of each world didn't know of the existence of Rodocolte. He wasn't an object for their worship, in order to prevent a serious issue on one of the worlds having an effect on reincarnation in other worlds. But at this point, he was wishing he had set himself up with some dependent or ally gods, like others often used. Gods were not all-powerful. They could only use their authority within the prescribed range and only directly have an effect on those who believed in them.

Origin would be fine, anyway. The death attribute magic of the girl and the others saved by Hiroto Amamiya had already been heavily processed. It didn't have half the capabilities of the magic of the original carrier. Those in power could bleed all the magic from those wretched bodies, and they still wouldn't reach the gates of immortality.

So long as immortality wasn't going to happen, the situation could take care of itself. It wasn't going to lead to the eradication of humanity, or even the loss of too many lives. With that thought, Rodocolte gave a relaxed sigh.

"It's been five years since Hiroto Amamiya was reborn on Ramda. Maybe he has his memory back by now," Rodocolte pondered.

It was a big mental burden for someone to go through infancy, unable to even move, with memories of a former life. Rodocolte had therefore rigged the resurrected so that they wouldn't get their memories back until they were five or six years old. Unless there was some trouble or unexpected circumstances, they wouldn't get their memories back while they were still small children.

"Hiroto Amamiya's soul hasn't come back yet, meaning he at least made it

these five years. I'd better check in and see if he's remembered anything."

If he did have his memory, Rodocolte would need to prompt the unfortunate kid to off himself before he used death attribute to achieve immortality. Rodocolte had placed three nasty curses on Hiroto Amamiya, but he hadn't been able to erase the death attribute magic that had bonded so closely with his soul. If he was thrown into a struggle for his life, then he might learn death attribute magic on Ramda. That had to be prevented.

Rodocolte therefore went into the system to look up where Hiroto Amamiya had been reborn. He could use the system to check on the pasts and presents of the souls he had reincarnated.

But there was no information on Hiroto Amamiya.

"... Hold on?" He ran the search again but found nothing. There was a record of his reincarnation from Earth to Origin, but no records after that. "He wasn't reincarnated? But that can't be. I know he was. But if there's no record in this system—damn it! He must have fallen into a cycle of reincarnation that I don't control!"

From Rodocolte's perspective, there were three irregularities on Ramda. One was the undead, which sometimes caused him trouble on Origin too. The second was the monsters that the Demon King had created long ago. And the third was the races that the Goddess Vida had created. These last two existed outside of Rodocolte's system of reincarnation.

When the Demon King and his minions first created monsters, Rodocolte could have made a few adjustments to stop the monsters from being reborn again if they had used Rodocolte's reincarnation system. The Demon King had therefore managed to circumvent Rodocolte's system and set up his own unique reincarnation system. That was why there were still so many monsters

rampaging across Ramda and also why dungeon bosses and mid-bosses popped up again so easily.

Humans who worshipped the evil gods and demon gods, as well as the other races, were a part of the system created by the long-dead Demon King, removed from Rodocolte's system. This had already caused a number of errors in Rodocolte's system in the past.

The races Vida had created had to do with a feud between Vida . . . well, all the gods of Ramda, and Rodocolte. When the Demon King first appeared, Vida, Alda, and the other gods of Ramda all asked Rodocolte for help. But he turned them down and remained an observer. He didn't want the Demon King to crush his soul, which would have had a ripple effect on the reincarnation of many other worlds that Rodocolte managed.

For Rodocolte, Ramda was one of many worlds. If it was wiped out, it would be like getting a few bones broken. Painful, for sure, but hardly a mortal wound. He wasn't going to risk getting eradicated just to prevent a fracture or two.

Rodocolte had also taken exception to the gods choosing to turn the tide by bringing in heroes from other worlds. Summoning heroes from outside the worlds Rodocolte was responsible for caused additional errors in his system. He demanded that they be sent back immediately or used up and killed as quickly as possible. Rodocolte figured Ramda was finished, and didn't want to make any bigger a mess than was necessary.

A serious rift between Rodocolte and the gods of Ramda developed as a result. There wasn't much ire from Rodocolte's side, but Vida in particular had been especially distrustful of him. For that reason, Vida took the system the Demon King created and added her own adjustments to devise the Vida reincarnation system, through which she created her own new races such as

the vampires. As the goddess of life attribute magic, she had powers somewhat similar to those of Rodocolte. She couldn't handle the reincarnation for multiple worlds, of course, but she was willing to give it a try for a single world.

She had been planning not just to control the reincarnation of her own new races, but that of everyone on Ramda. But then, the God of Law and Life Alda had stepped up to defeat Vida and her followers. Alda had no love lost for Rodocolte either, but he put maintaining order and law above even that. As a result, Vida's system still only managed the reincarnation of her new races.

All this suggested that Hiroto Amamiya's soul had been sucked into either the system of the Demon King or of Vida. That meant he had been reborn as either a monster or one of Vida's races, such as a vampire.

"... I don't see him." Rodocolte went through all the data for everyone born around the time of Hiroto Amamiya's second resurrection but couldn't find any information. "But how did this even happen? Probability-wise, this has to be trillions to one. Unless I really got unlucky... ah. Of course."

Rodocolte recalled that he hadn't given Hiroto Amamiya any cheat abilities, or fortune, or even a fate. That meant his luck was bad and he had no fate to follow, putting him onto dangerous paths that even Rodocolte couldn't predict. Rodocolte had also put three curses on him. His intent had been to force the unfortunate boy to choose to kill himself, but thinking about it now, they might have screwed up the system.

"Very well. It will take a while, but I'll have to look for anyone who has had contact with the reborn Hiroto Amamiya's soul. That should at least tell me how he is doing... hmm, looks like he's a dhampir?"

The records of a certain merchant revealed a dhampir. It seemed his target had indeed been reborn as one of the Vida races.

But that wasn't Rodocolte's problem.

"What? Why does he already have his memories? And he's using death attribute magic! And got undead following him around!" Rodocolte exclaimed.

A dhampir using death attribute magic and talking very much not like a child had appeared before he was even a year old. Amamiya clearly had his memories back.

"This is because I didn't give him any luck. Gah, I'll need to rethink my whole approach next time."

Rodocolte still regretted his screw-up with the resurrected, including Hiroto Amamiya. He had prepared just over 100 cheat abilities, good fortune, and fates. He had wanted to have plenty on deck, so he'd prepared more than enough of each. Just as his preparations were complete, a ferry had happened to sink on Earth, giving him about 100 souls minus the murderers who caused their deaths. From among them, everyone apart from one had chosen to be resurrected in a different world.

Rodocolte didn't want to have anything left over, and so he gave out everything he'd prepared to those who agreed to resurrection. But he had missed one person. By the time he realized it, he didn't have anything left to give. That one slip had led to all of this.

"What to do about Hiroto Amamiya . . . about this "Vandal" character, I suppose?" Rodocolte pondered. "Should I warn Alda? Or maybe get the demon gods worked up over him?"

Alda was currently the only active major god on Ramda and was certainly the strongest of the gods. But Rodocolte didn't have a great relationship with him. He played along just to maintain the order of reincarnation, and he certainly

didn't like Rodocolte.

Rodocolte had also proceeded with his current plan without discussing it first with Alda. When the god found out about Vandal and the other resurrected, he was first and foremost going to be mad with Rodocolte. From Alda's perspective, Rodocolte had ignored them when they needed his help, but now he was begging in his own time of need. Not to mention the 100 resurrected he would be sending his way, all with insane cheat powers. There was every possibility that Alda wouldn't just attack Vandal, but also have his dependent gods and believers attack the other resurrected too.

That said, leaking word of this to the demon gods and getting them to kill Vandal wasn't a great move either. The evil and demon gods had strange sets of values that Rodocolte didn't understand. Rather than kill Vandal, they might try and turn him into their ally.

Rodocolte thought, and then thought about it some more, and eventually decided to just watch and wait for a while longer.

"A few more years and some of the resurrected on Origin should start to die. I can ask them to kill him," Rodocolte decided.

Undead had always occurred on Ramda, so a few more of them wasn't going to adversely affect the system. Furthermore, the curses should prevent Vandal from turning his experiences in his previous lives into skills, and unlike Origin, Ramda had no scientific support to offer him, making achieving immortality almost impossible for Vandal there. It didn't matter if he had a couple of years, a few decades, or even a few centuries. Give him a thousand years and he probably wouldn't make it.

Rodocolte just had to wait a little longer, and once one of the resurrected died, he could feed them the info and get them to kill Vandal. The resurrected

had cheat power crafted by Rodocolte himself, while Vandal only had his death attribute magic and a vast sum of magical power that filled the otherwise empty space inside him. An analysis of the merchant's memories showed that he had somehow started to level up, but the other two curses were definitely working. He wasn't going to become that powerful. Nothing to worry about. Having reached that conclusion, Rodocolte turned his gaze away from Ramda.

If he had found the records of the adventurer Luchiriano, whom Vandal had come into contact with through the living dead, Rodocolte might have been a little more worried. If he had contacted the demon gods, he would have learned that Vandal had crushed the soul of the noble species vampire Sercent. That would surely have spurred him into action before a soul within his system got crushed. He didn't do that either.

But Rodocolte was yet to recognize his biggest mistake yet.



On this day, every statue of the Ice God Yupeon, subordinate to Goddess of Water and Knowledge Pelia, wept tears of blood. Not just the statues on the Vangaia Continent, but everywhere around the world. Those who had received the blessing of Yupeon heard the screams of their god and passed out on the spot.

The cause was Vandal crushing the soul in the magical spear Ice Age, destroying it completely. As the awareness from the weapon didn't make it back to its original host, Yupeon himself, there was no way for anyone, even the god, to know exactly what happened. The people took it to be a terrible omen of evil afoot, such as the revival of the Demon King or the resurrection of the

fallen Hero Zakkato, and sought out the council of their holy people in every region.

Although serviceable now, the audience chamber could use a thorough cleaning. And the mood inside it was grim.

Most of those who had taken on the Dragon Golem were present, with the exception of the stone golems.

“Wooaaah!” Bone Chimera was making a strange sound, combining the cries of numerous animals.

Only missing was Vandal himself, who had put the chamber back together, Lefdia, still riding on his back, and Skeleton, whose crushed spine and pelvis meant he couldn’t move around on his own. They were still down below the castle—looking for a way to fix the destroyed revival device.

By the time Vandal crushed the soul of Ice Age, he had earned a vast sum experience. More than even Borkz ever earned from a single encounter. The Dragon Golem had been made from orichalcum by a goddess, and the essentially rank S Divine Ice Spear Mikhail and his allies had failed to kill it. Finishing the golem off earned Vandal and his party a massive chunk of experience.

As a result, Vigaro reached rank 7, ranking up to Ghoul Tyrant. This was the highest, strongest form ever confirmed for a ghoul. He was now the ultimate warrior, standing almost as tall as a giantling, boasting two new, additional arms to fight with.

Rita and Saria hadn’t changed so much in appearance, still wearing the same

armor, but they had ranked up to rank 6 High Magic Armor. The increase in their Spirit Body skill also allowed them to look a lot less like mist and a lot more human. Vandal might have considered them to be female mannequins modeling sexy clothing. Their spirit bodies were still unstable, however, and moving quickly or a gust of wind would disrupt their shape, making them billow out from the armor like smoke. They certainly weren't corporal yet.

The other members of the party also saw significant gains. Skeleton had probably ranked up, although he wasn't present to confirm it. Vandal's own Job level had likely risen significantly too. But no one was in the mood to celebrate.

"He's taking a long time," Zadilis said. It had already been a few hours, but there was no sign of Vandal coming back.

He hadn't suffered any wounds himself, outside of the blood he shared with Eleonora, but he had burned a lot of MP and his Limit Break had been running hot. He had to be exhausted.

Yet, none of them could bring themselves to go and check up on him because they all envisioned the shock that Vandal was currently facing at the loss of the revival device.

From those present, Eleonora had known Vandal for the shortest time. She had been sold by her parents when she was small, meaning family didn't mean much to her. But she still understood how badly Vandal wanted to bring his mother back.

Losing a mother at a young age was nothing rare or special. It was a sorry story, but one that could be heard on any street corner. The children left behind just had to take the licks and keep on kicking if they wanted to survive. Put the pain in the past and move on, eventually. That's what Eleonora had done in order to survive, back when her parents sold her for a purse of coin. She might

be adept with time attribute magic, but she couldn't erase the past.

But Master Vandal is strong, Eleonora thought. Strong enough, perhaps, to do what even the gods cannot. To bring the dead truly back to life.

It might be possible. All he had to do was reach out, and he might make it. If he tried hard, it might happen. That was why he couldn't let his mother's death slip into the past.

Indeed, he had almost done it. Almost revived Dalshia.

But that hope had been crushed, for reasons he surely couldn't accept. Crushed and trampled. Eleanor shuddered with terror, imagining the anger and shock he must be feeling and the frustration it would foster in him.

Master Vandal hates those who try to take happiness from him, Eleonora thought. He rages at them, hates them, curses them, fears them. He revels in their destruction and does whatever he can to achieve it. She had felt that most strongly when he crushed the souls of Sercent and the subs who had tried to kill Talea. And then today when he crushed the soul of Ice Age.

Unlike with Sercent, however, this time, simply crushing Ice Age's soul probably wasn't going to relieve him.

I wish I could soothe him, somehow, she thought, and then stopped herself. I'm not scared. Why would I think such a thing? She took a moment, putting a hand on her chest—in the spot where the ice had pierced her and Vandal had used magic and his blood to heal her. There wasn't even a mark there.

In the past, she would have been terrified. She had been useless and caused great trouble for her master. She would have been sure that he would cast her aside and terrified of such a thing happening.

But the feeling in her chest right now was not fear. She felt sick, almost. Like

she couldn't breathe.

Is this mysterious feeling why I want to soothe his pain? she wondered. I've never felt the need to try to curry favor with him before. After all, he showed her a lot of kindness even without her doing anything. *So what's going on?*

Just as Eleanor started to probe deeper into her feelings, Nuaza entered the chamber. "Is the child still below ground?" he asked.

"Yes," Zadilis replied. "He isn't back yet."

"I see. Well, there is something that I wish to apologize for."

"Are you talking about going underground with him two years ago?" Borkz asked, finally breaking the grimace on what was left of his face to speak. "I'm the one who should be apologizing for that, not you. I asked him to search for Zandia and Geena. If I had brought up the revival device first, or realized that Mikhail's spear was likely to be self-aware . . . in fact, if I hadn't lost to Mikhail 200 years ago and just snapped that ice pick, then none of this would have happened."

When they first met, Borkz had resisted Vandal's Death Attribute Allure. He could probably still do that now if he wanted to. But he had chosen to stop resisting of his own accord because he had realized that it was pointless.

A kid with a blank expression. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, or what he was looking at.

But that kid had taken the empty husk of Talosheim and brought energy and everyday life back to it. For free, asking for nothing in return. Vandal would say he was getting plenty, of course, but from the perspective of Borkz and the others, those were all necessary costs.

Vandal had fixed the castle walls, allowing them to live in safety. His magic

allowed for condiments that made wonderful things to eat. He had repaired the massive chambers in the castle. The respect and affection everyone held for him was real—he had exceeded all expectations of the “child” that Nuaza always went on about.

They hadn’t recovered Zandia’s and Geena’s bodies yet, but Vandal promised that he would help with that too, even if it took a decade or more to achieve. That still didn’t seem like so long, to say that he planned to take on the progenitor vampires, which all the heroes of Talosheim together wouldn’t have been able to defeat, within the same amount of time.

And yet, given this chance to repay him, Borkz had utterly failed. It was pathetic. He was a former grade A adventurer. It was like taking payment in advance and then doing no work at all.

“No. That’s not what I’m talking about,” Nuaza said, concerning why he wanted to apologize.

“Huh? Then what?” Borkz asked.

“I have destroyed part of the temple that the child so kindly restored for me, under my own willful volition,” Nuaza explained. “I have already apologized to Vida and Pelia, of course . . .”

“Destroyed?” Borkz asked. “Are you talking about—”

“The statue of Ice God Yupeon,” Nuaza explained. “It was attached to a pedestal, so I chopped the whole thing off and buried it.”

Many of the temples in the world included statues for other gods, as well as the primary deity to which it was dedicated. There weren’t statues for every single one of them, of course, but even a dependent god like Yupeon had existed for tens of thousands of years. It was hardly unusual for there to be a

statue of him in the Talosheim Vida temple.

At least, until Nuaza buried it.

"Are you—are you sure that was a good idea?" Saria didn't have to breathe, but the former human contingent was definitely holding her breath.

Zadilis and those who didn't build temples didn't get it, but the statues of the gods in this world had special properties.

The fact was, of course, that gods actually existed here. Messing with their statues was messing with a god who could actually mess you up in return. The armies of the Amidd Empire, followers of the God of Law and Life Alda, and their member nations often destroyed statues of Vida and her dependent gods, but that was because their god told them to do so.

However, Nuaza's mummified face was at peace. "It's fine," he confirmed. "Yupeon made a declaration, through Ice Age, a fragment of his very being. He considers us his enemies. Yet, we have done nothing to be ashamed of and deserve no punishment. That means, if we are foes to him, then—god or otherwise—he shall be foe to us."

The gods considered them enemies. There was no reason to hold back, even if they were talking about a dependent god of Pelia, who was in the same vein as the Sea God Tristan who had created the merpeople with Vida.

"But it is also true that I buried a statue that the child fixed for us," Nuaza continued. "That's why I need to apologize. Might I mention, however, that the sun has been down for a while now. Shouldn't someone go to check on him?"

"Huh? Has it been that long?" Borkz asked.

"There's no windows to see the sun or stars in here, after all."

"Undead have such a warped sense of time," Zadilis commented. "But it has

definitely been too long.”

“Let’s see how doing,” Vigaro said.

Now that they finally had a reason to go and check things out, the whole group shuffled off toward the basement again. All of them was a bit much, but no one wanted to stay behind.

“Squeak? What’s happening, everyone?”

They were greeted in front of the chamber by Skeleton and Lefdia. Skeleton had all of his bones back. Lefdia looked like she had ranked up, perhaps, because rather than crawling on the floor she was now running around using two of her fingers like legs.

“Wow, look how fast Lefdia is!” Saria exclaimed. “I think she’s even more creepy like that!”

“Strange how speeding up has that effect,” Nuaza mused. “Skeleton. How is the child doing?”

“Squeak, I have a message for you,” the undead replied.

“You do?” Eleonora asked. “What did Lord Vandal say?”

“That he intends to investigate the device for a little longer and so will remain down here. He is also hungry and desires some food, if you would be so kind.”

“I thought maybe he’d be too upset to eat,” Borkz commented. “Sounds like he’s doing better than expected.”

“Okay! Time for someone other than me to whip up a feast for the young master!” Rita exclaimed.

“Rita, how about acting like a maid and learning some simple dishes?” Saria chided her.

“The boy is the only one among all of us here who can really cook.”

“I can roast some meat,” Eleonora said defensively.

“Even I can do that!” Borkz said.

“Raaagh!” added Bone Chimera. The best thing that could be said about the cooking skills of the women in the group, if they had been on Earth, was that they weren’t conforming to gender stereotypes.



He slept well, ate three meals a day, and made sure to bathe. After a month of this lifestyle, examining every facet of the revival device, Vandal determined that yes, it could probably be repaired, but no, he couldn’t do it right away.

The revival device had been created by the Goddess Vida. Vandal had acquired the Alchemy skill, but he was only a beginner with it, meaning he couldn’t work with such a divine object. It was like a primitive who could only make stone implements trying to use semiconductors to rebuild a supercomputer by hand.

However, Vandal also had the skill Golem Creation. Being able to turn inorganic matter into golems and shape them however he willed meant he could, in theory, restore the broken device. The ice from Ice Age had ripped it open and severed its connections. But, luckily enough, it also hadn’t sent any parts flying away or destroyed them entirely. Everything could be returned to normal.

At least, they could have been, if the parts of the revival device accepted the influence of Golem Creation.

Even when he used Appraisal, the parts of the revival device only returned “unknown alloy” and “unknown gemstone.” They repelled Vandal’s magic even more robustly than orichalcum, so he couldn’t turn them into golems.

They likely contained a lot of orichalcum or some other divine metal. This was a world of sword and sorcery, after all. If orichalcum existed, then there was likely also other even more legendary metals to be found.

The fight with the Dragon Golem had leveled up his own Golem Creation skill, allowing him to now shape orichalcum without it reverting back. That meant that if he continued to increase his Golem Creation skill level, he might eventually be able to restore this device.

Of course, he also might not be able to even at the maximum level, and even if he did so, there were no assurances that the machine would work. That was why Vandal was also looking for ways to repair the device outside of increasing his Golem Creation skill level and other methods altogether to revive Dalshia.

In addition, Eleonora had told him that using her time attribute magic to fix the broken machine wasn’t an option.

“Vilkain took a liking to me due to my aptitude for time magic, but it takes a long time to control. Unless you become a master of time itself, you can’t really do much,” Eleonora explained. The time attribute, purview of Rekrent, demon god of time and magic, that hadn’t existed on Origin. Just like space attribute, not many humans or monsters had an affinity for it, and it didn’t have the same kind of easy-to-understand effects as other attributes.

If a user could somehow reach level 10, they could start to do crazy inhuman stuff, like stopping time, winding it backward, and seeing events from the past or the future. But at Eleonora’s level, the most useful thing she could do was accelerate her own movements. She could look back a few hours into the past

or a few seconds into the future—with a few hours' preparation.

“Even if I had access to all of your magical power, Lord Vandal, I’m not sure I could turn back time for longer than a second.”

Vandal had taken a moment to soothe her, ensuring she understood that he didn’t consider this a failing in her, and then started to think of other means to accomplish his goal.

The most surefire method would be to ask the Goddess Vida or her direct underlings to fix it. Those who had created this device could surely do so. She had conducted research into bringing the dead back to life, meaning there might be similar devices in other locations. The issue with that was he had no idea where such locations might be.

After Alda defeated her, Vida was said to have gone to sleep in the southern part of the Vangaia Continent. That area accounted for a third of the landmass and was packed with demon barrens filled with monsters of unknown strength. It wouldn’t just take a long time to search for her—it was too dangerous to even try.

In terms of other methods besides the revival device, the only options he could think of were visiting the magicians’ guilds and royal libraries that existed in human society or trying to extract information from the spirits of ancient Magicians and Liches.

“In the end, I’ve settled on simply continuing to try and gather more information. I’m not giving up, but I’m sorry that I haven’t figured it out yet.” Vandal was now in his fifth summer of his third life as he reported his findings to Dalshia.

No need to worry. This isn’t your fault, she replied gently. You could always

just turn me into undead?

“I’m not doing that,” Vandal said at once. “I don’t have anything for you to possess.”

He had considered that possibility, but only if they still had Dalshia’s body. They lost that option when High Priest Goldan and his cronies burned his mom at the stake to set an example. The only part of her left was the small bone she currently possessed. Reconstituting her body was just that far beyond even Vandal’s powers.

Hmmm. Then how about using some armor and going the Living Armor route, like with Saria and Rita?

“Armor like that isn’t so easily found.”

Ah, it doesn’t need to look . . . exactly like that, of course, Dalshia quickly explained. I’d like some attractive armor, of course, but I’m not sure it needs to go quite so far.

Vandal wasn’t about to suggest his mom became a metal bikini either, so he was quite happy she wasn’t interested. Although thinking back to when she had been alive, his mom hadn’t exactly been one for covering up. Vandal had spent the last couple of years surrounded by female ghouls, however, who also seemingly had an aversion to anything but the skimpiest of coverings whatsoever, meaning he was pretty desensitized to it all by now. In fact, he sometimes found himself thinking that Eleonora was prudish, covering herself up that much. Of course, he hadn’t mentioned it. He didn’t need time powers to see a future in which she’d practically strip naked if she thought that’s what he preferred.

But I’m making so much work for you, Vandal, Dalshia continued. I guess I

shouldn't quibble about the type of armor—

"Put it out of your mind, please!" Vandal had left her to her own devices for a moment and she had almost changed her mind on the subject.



He finally managed to get her off the idea of becoming Living Armor by suggesting that if they really couldn't find a way to restore her original body, he would use monster corpses to cobble together an approximation and put her into that. He hadn't expected to play Dr. Frankenstein in a fantasy world, but here it would probably only take a little stitching to get the job done. Making something that looked just like Dalshia had while she was alive, though, would be much harder.

Maybe there was the spirit of a twisted serial killer out there who could help him with such techniques. Or perhaps one of the progenitor vampires could give him some pointers—before he crushed their soul, of course.

"I also need to check out this God Smiter skill I picked up," Vandal mused. He'd obtained another skill that was difficult to investigate, probably even more so than Soul Crusher. As a unique skill, only Vandal possessed it, and so it was unlikely that anyone else knew anything about it.

It sounds like a skill that kills gods?

That was Dalshia's take on it. He had asked around, but no one had a better idea than that. From a gaming perspective, it was probably something like doing extra damage against a god. But now that Ice Age had turned into a pure orichalcum spear, he didn't have anything with divine affiliation to try it on.

All of the experience from defeating the Dragon Golem had already pushed his Golem Creator level to the maximum. He needed to go tomorrow and change Jobs again.

The stat increases from Golem Creator were focused on intellect, with a drop in agility and almost no gains for strength or muscle. It also hadn't buffed his

MP as much as he would have liked, but at least the skill modifiers had been useful. Those were his impressions of the job.

Name: Vandal

Race: Dhampir (Dark Elf)

Age: 5 years old

Alias: Ghoul King

Job: Golem Creator

Level: 100

Job History: Death Mage

—Status

Vitality: 115

Magical Power: 224506933

Strength: 79

Agility: 80

Muscle: 83

Intellect: 392

—Passive Skills

[Brute Strength: Level 1] [Rapid Healing: Level 3] [Death Attribute Magic: Level 5]

[Resist Maladies: Level 5] [Resist Magic: Level 1] [Night Vision]

[Spiritual Pollution: Level 10] [Death Attribute Allure: Level 5] [Skip Incantation: Level 3]

[Enhance Brethren: Level 7] [Magical Power Auto Recovery: Level 3]

—Active Skills

[Suck Blood: Level 3] [Limit Break: Level 4] [Golem Creation: Level 6 (UP!)]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 4] [Magic Control: Level 4] [Spirit Body: Level 3 (UP!)]

[Carpentry: Level 4] [Construction: Level 3] [Cooking: Level 2] [Alchemy: Level 3]

[Brawling Proficiency: Level 2] [Soul Crusher: Level 2 (UP!)] [Simultaneous Activation: Level 2 (UP!)]

[Remote Control: Level 2 (UP!)]

—Unique Skills

[God Smiter: Level 1 (NEW!)]

—Curses

[Unable to carry over experience from previous lives] [Unable to enter existing jobs] [Unable to personally acquire experience]



Alda, God of Law and Life. He was the only remaining creator god on Ramda and the most powerful of all gods—even including the demon and evil gods.

The source of his strength was not only the dependent gods and familiars who worshipped him but also the large number of the faithful.

In his struggle against the Demon King, and then again when fighting his former ally, the Goddess Vida, he had suffered terrible wounds. But despite all of that, Alda was still mighty.

He appeared as a stern old man with white hair carrying a thick book, as a youth with a hard look in his eye, the Scythe of Judgement in his right hand and a torch in his left, and as a shining moon. All of these were Alda. All were symbols of his power.

There had been a lot on Alda's mind for many thousands of years: none other than the future of his beloved Ramda.

He had always been a worrier. He couldn't stop thinking: Would the people listen to him? Would they approach order, the true light of this world? Would they try to maintain that state? How would he expand his ideals, advance understanding of them?

Things had not been going well these last tens of thousands of years.

"Maybe I need to adjust my approach," Alda mused, muttering to what he presumed was himself. "I hate to admit it, but perhaps I must turn an ear to the worlds of that Reincarnation God . . ."

"Wait a moment, my lord." This came from Records God Curatos, one of his dependent gods and a close aide. He was not one of the Messengers (what on Earth would have been called an angel) who Alda had made himself after the creation of the world and who had then become divine beings. Curatos existed as Alda's aide, appearing as books and other personal artifacts of the god. "There is no need to listen to Rodocolte. His talk of further development is

mere posturing on his part.”

“Calm yourself, Curatos,” Alda replied. “I’m certainly not admitting the requirement for this development that Rodocolte speaks of.”

The Reincarnation God Rodocolte had appealed to Alda and the others numerous times, suggesting the need to further develop Ramda. From Rodocolte’s perspective, this world was inferior to the others that he managed. But his suggestions had fallen on deaf ears. Alda saw no reason to undertake such difficulties. It was a wonderful thing, no doubt: the development of culture and art and the stable continuation of a single civilization. But that wasn’t the priority of Alda and the others in his pantheon.

Alda, and the dependent gods like Yupeon who supported him, were currently still at war. They had defeated the Demon King and Vida, but there were still the demon and evil gods out there, and the world was brimming with monsters and the new races created by Vida. Their divine priority was therefore to deal with the demon and evil gods, the monsters, and the new races created by Vida. There was no need to put “development” or other esoteric concerns over victory in that battle.

Alda also realized the true intentions behind the “development” that Rodocolte wanted. The only thing Rodocolte was concerned with was increasing the population. The more souls that were included in his cycle of resurrection, the stronger he became as a god. But, if anything, Alda didn’t want the population of Ramda to increase. Too many people meant too great a demand for resources, too many splintered factions, and too many nations. That all made it harder to maintain order. It was already getting bad, and they hadn’t even crossed one hundred million. Rodocolte wanted billions of people living on Ramda. Simply trying to imagine the chaos that would bring terrified Alda.

“Such development isn’t even required for the maintenance of this world,” Alda said. “The very suggestion we should learn from other worlds is preposterous.”

He was impressed by science, but was that what Ramda needed? Electricity, automobiles, gunpowder, dynamite, airplanes, computers, and concepts such as economics? They might all provide benefits and enrich the lives of those using them, but did that outweigh the issues they brought? The worlds using them ended up destroying their natural environment for the sake of energy, and such advancements led to terrible wars and conflicts.

Automobiles caused countless deaths every year, while gunpowder, dynamite, and airplanes were used for bloody conflicts. Computers gave rise to new forms of crime, and economics became twisted and abused by greed.

The greatest absurdity was that these objects and ideas had still failed to bring complete order to the worlds using them. Still failed to protect them.

Ramda already had magic. The existence of magic bred its own inequalities, leading to conflicts and bloodshed. Bringing in the seeds of conflict from other worlds seemed to be asking for trouble.

That was why Alda paid no heed to Rodocolte’s words. His response was simple: each world has its own unique situation. And the gods who supported Alda were in agreement.

“Then you ask, what do I seek to change?” Alda posed. “That would be the Demon King’s reincarnation system and the Vida reincarnation system. There will be no peace in this world while these remain.”

Alda wished to eradicate the demon and evil gods, the monsters, and Vida’s new races in order to dismantle the reincarnation systems on Ramda other than

the one operated by Rodocolte. He didn't care much for Rodocolte, but the system of reincarnation he had created was perfect. The other two systems were awful in comparison.

The Demon King's reincarnation system continued to send new monsters out into the world. Even worse, sometimes, the demon and evil gods used it to be born into bodies of their own. Sure, it benefited humans in one significant way—the existence of the dungeons—but that was a single bright spot on a terrible blight. If they wanted to supply dungeons filled with monsters, those monsters didn't need to have souls. It wouldn't be impossible to create dungeons populated with soulless creations. Although he would have to wait for the revival of Rekrent, demon god of time and magic, for that.

Meanwhile, the system created by the Goddess Vida was an unstable mess. The Demon King had created his system as a facsimile of the original, and so it stood to reason that the copy of the copy would be even worse. Vida desired all reincarnation in the world to go through her system, but that was an arrogant and dangerous idea. In order to stabilize the system, Vida created new races in between monsters and humans, and created vampires to assist the process, but it remained incredibly unstable. The souls of the humans of this world could not be left at the mercy of such unpredictability.

"Many brave heroes have fought to maintain your ideals," Curatos said. "We cannot change course now, for their sakes as much as anyone else."

Curatos had recorded all of known history. When making a judgement about something, he tended to look to the past. Alda gave a wry smile at this comment.

"I'm not giving up on stopping Vida's foolishness," Alda said. "I just think we need to change our approach."

That seemed to appease Curatos. Then he started to record Alda's thoughts.

"What do you want to change?" he asked. Alda's approach up until this point was to indicate a general way to proceed while leaving the exact methods up to the humans. The gods provided guidance, not dominance. That was one thing from other worlds that Alda did agree with.

The guidance that Alda had provided, outside of doctrinal matters, was to defeat the evil and demon gods, defeat Vida's new races, and prohibit the use of the technology from other worlds such as that left behind by Zakkato. He spread such wisdom via oracles, sent to those with the highest strength among his faithful.

But upon receiving these words from the god, attempts to spread them often warped their intent, leading the implementation astray. A recent example was the main Alda temple in the Amidd Empire. The organization was placing too much emphasis on the new races and the destruction of otherworldly knowledge. The empire itself was also over-politicizing these issues. As a result, they were allowing the followers of the Demon God of Living Pleasure Hihiryu-Shukaka to infiltrate the ranks of authority.

"I will start telling them exactly what I want," Alda said. "I have spent too long hoping that humans will do the right thing. I have clearly been asking too much of them."

"It can't be helped, my lord. Neither I nor even you are all-seeing," Curatos said.

"Indeed. Even from this divine sanctuary there is much that cannot be seen. That is why I hoped for humanity to obey my oracles and form their laws around them."

“Then what should we have them prioritize?” Curatos asked. “The eradication of the new races? Or start with the filthy monster mixed-bloods?”

The last ten thousand years had seen Vida’s new races severely weakened. Few of the races possessed their own independent nations, and those that did numbered only in the thousands. There were some exceptions, such as the progenitor species vampires, but overall they had limited cohesion and could be wiped out comparatively easily with a methodical approach. Perhaps that was why Curatos thought they should be the priority.

“No, Curatos. I intended to tell them to prioritize the fight with the demon and evil gods.”

“My lord!” Curatos exclaimed. “Those who follow the Demon God of Living Pleasure have become a powerful faction. The Hero Bellwood still slumbers from his struggle in defeating the Evil God of Sinful Chains. Are you sure this is the right direction to point them in?”

As Curatos pointed out, the forces of the demon and evil gods were comparatively stronger than the forces of Vida’s new races. Some had rooted themselves deep into human society, such as the followers of the Demon God of Living Pleasure, while some resided in the demon barrens with the monsters that worshipped them, and others had even left for islands away from the continent to create their own nations.

“The fight with them will be intense and violent,” Alda said. “But if we have them prioritize Vida’s new races, the evil ones will exploit the openings that provides. You have the records of Divine Ice Spear Mikhail?”

The Divine Ice Spear Mikhail was a more recent hero who Alda had been keeping an eye on. He had been devout to the Alda faith, as well as to the teachings of the Hero Bellwood. He should have gone on to at least become a

Messenger, if not a Hero Spirit, or even a Hero God like Bellwood himself.

"I do indeed," Curatos replied. "We lost a good one to the darkness that day."

But someone had stolen Mikhail's soul. Probably a minion of the Demon God of Living Pleasure, but it could have been someone at the behest of any of the evil or demon gods who lurked in the Boundary Mountains.

"In any case, these evil gods are exploiting the conflict between Vida and myself, and profiting from it while we squabble. Rather than the already-weakened new races, we must handle this divine evil first. We also have to consider that some among the new races have managed to achieve a certain status in human society."

Some of the Vida races, such as the giantlings, beastmen, and dark elves, had established a place for themselves among humans. They could be peasants, slaves, farmers, miners, whores, adventurers, crafters. While most were low ranking, there were nobles and even royalty among them. They weren't inherently evil by nature, so many nations accepted them as part of their society.

"Just telling people to kill them all will not fulfill our true intentions. We cannot discuss the reincarnation systems with humans, after all," Alda continued. If he ordered the deaths of all the new races, including law-abiding citizens, it would create unrest and rebellion against him. Alda had hoped that his followers would be able to make such people understand, but that was far from easy. "That is why we start by turning our attention to the forces of the demon and evil gods. We can provide support for the humans in that endeavor, while planning on how to deal with the new races in the future."

"I understand. But will the humans understand your intent in time?"

“That is an issue,” Alda said. Using oracles to transmit his will was one thing, but he wasn’t able to appear and have a conversation. He could only provide sufficient information for the humans to understand his will and then hope they interpreted it correctly. If the brain of a god was a supercomputer, the brain of an average person was no better than an old handheld game console. When imparting an oracle, he therefore needed a powerful member of his flock, someone on the same wavelength as him.

If he chose incorrectly, the target would fail to understand the meaning of the oracle, interpret it incorrectly, or not even be able to realize they had just been contacted by their god. That was why oracles were normally sent to holy maidens or great saints, with short and simple content. The only exceptions were Alda appearing in person, such as he had done during the age of the gods, or inviting the spirits of fallen heroes to the holy sanctuary after they died, as Alda had intended to do with Mikhail.

“Even if it does reach them, do you think they will accept it? All our dependents and Messengers have been saying forever that the new races are evil,” Curatos said.

“As we could not tell humans about the reincarnation system, we needed to create a just reason to wipe out the new races,” Alda reminded him. “But it has had some undesirable side effects, that much is true.” Alda was convinced that the new races, created through the union with monsters, were evil. Even if certain individuals showed some good tendencies, creatures such vampires were going to cause trouble in the future. They were already greatly disturbing the order of the world.

Furthermore, while vampires looked pretty human, races like the lamia and scylla were far more removed from humanity, leading many to believe Alda’s

word and seek to kill them.

However, as he had already stated, some among the new races were integrated into human society. That was why Alda, Curatos, and Ice God Yupeon had declared that all such races were evil, in order to wipe them all out. Destroying the reincarnation system either required eliminating all the bodies for the souls to be reborn into, or an ability like that of the Demon King, who could physically destroy souls. It didn't matter if they were "good" or a "part of society." They all had to go.

"I need to give this some more thought," Alda mused, performing his duties as a god at blinding speed all the while. He was using the power of his own light attribute magic and the life attribute magic he took from Vida to zip around all over the world.

The eight attribute gods and the three pillars—the dragon, titan, and beast gods—made up the original, true form of Ramda. However, after the fight with the Demon King and then with Vida, only Alda remained. Attributes like fire and wind were being operated by their respective dependent gods, Zantark and Shizarion, who had survived the fighting. Regarding the life attribute, however, Alda had stripped the divine grace from Vida and her dependents, to ensure they would not recover, and then taken the attribute for himself.

Alda now had to manage the life attribute, not originally a part of his duties. His dependent gods were doing their best, but it had never been part of their duties either, and so they weren't a great deal of help. It was like a professional soccer team being asked to maintain their game on the pitch while also becoming master sumo wrestlers.

One solution in the past would have been to simply increase the number of dependents skilled with life magic, but those with the capacity to become a god

didn't come along every day, and Alda couldn't hog all the good ones for himself. Every attribute was in dire straits at the moment.

"One surefire way to remedy the situation would be to have Rodocolte manipulate the system and introduce us to a soul from another world suited to becoming such a dependent . . ." Alda mused. Having someone from another world help them out, even for only a few centuries, would reduce the burden on Alda and his struggling team, allowing them to focus all of their strength on the battle with the evil and demon gods.

But Curatos was shaking his head. "I can tell you his reply. No willful misuse of the system is to be allowed."

"I'm sure you are correct," Alda agreed. Rodocolte hadn't been sticking his nose in recently, but he also certainly hadn't become sympathetic to their cause. Asking him for help would yield nothing.

"My lord, why don't you search for a suitable candidate from among the faithful?" Curatos suggested. "There are currently three possibilities of Hero Spirit or higher."

He opened a thick tome and showed the records there to Alda. Of course, these were only candidates. There was no way to tell if they could manage divine duties until they died. It didn't matter how great a person was. They couldn't become a god if they couldn't lead others. They couldn't become a Hero Spirit if people didn't look up to them. Lesser heroes might be mourned, but they also didn't get to become gods.

Considering that, three candidates was actually a large number. But then . . . one of the names vanished.

"My apologies, my lord. That one appears to have switched over to Vida,"

Curatos reported.

"I see." Alda shook his head. "Either succumbed to the lure of a vampire or fell to a majin." Those two were the real blight on this world, with their ability to turn humans into Vida's races.

"That leaves us with Bohmak Goldan and Heinz," Curatos said.

Alda knew of these two, of course. Goldan was a passionate believer—perhaps a little too passionate—but nonetheless one of the true and proper faithful who fought on the front lines against vampires. His raw strength was low compared to the heroes of the past, but his ability to allure and attract others was first-rate. However, it also seemed that this upcoming expedition across the mountains was going to be his final time in the field, and then he was going to take a step back and give orders from the sidelines. He prayed that he could take care of this dhampir that had escaped him the first time, and then step back from active duty with a clear conscience and unblemished record.

At this time, Alda was unaware that Vandal had actually been resurrected from another world. Alda didn't have information from Rodocolte's or Vida's reincarnation systems, meaning the only information he possessed was from the prayers of High Priest Goldan. Even if this Vandal seemed a little suspicious, Alda only considered a dhampir to be an artifact of the Vida reincarnation system and paid it no more mind. Alda would never have considered that Rodocolte—the one who had previously told them to use up and get rid of the summoned heroes as quickly as possible—was now sending in reincarnated people from other worlds, without warning, and knowing full well that Alda didn't want it to happen again.

Alda proceeded to look over the materials on Heinz.

He was another one of the Alda faithful and had reached grade A adventurer

in less than a decade. He had the strength, then, but lacked enough good deeds to take up the mantle of hero. Alda was considering giving Heinz his blessing, which would provide a considerable boost, but the adventurer was currently at something of a crossroads.

That was fine. Such moments focused the mind, for gods and for humans. Confusion and concern led to deeper thinking. A divine blessing provided solace and aid and functioned as a reward for good deeds. It shouldn't tie down or control the faithful.

Alda decided to watch over Heinz for a while longer. Hopefully his current quandary would lead him to a desirable answer. Still, there was no harm in making certain preparations.

"Send a message to Rodocolte regarding those two," Alda said. Although not required for creating a Messenger with divine power, turning a human hero into one of their divine brethren after death required giving prior notice to Rodocolte. They might be Alda's faithful, but Rodocolte was still responsible for their reincarnation. Pushing their luck with how they used it would cause more errors in the system.

"As you command, my lord," Curatos replied.

"Ask those who can spare a moment to gather here as well, including the other attribute gods. I wish to discuss the future with them."

"Very well." Curatos gave a bow and departed. It wouldn't take him long to finish Alda's requests and pop back up again.

"It would be nice if we could get a second Bellwood from among the humans," Alda mused. He looked up into the sky over the divine realm and thought back to the distant past.

When Zurwan, god of space and creation, suggested that they summon otherworldly heroes in order to defeat the Demon King, Alda advised caution. The Demon King had come from outside their world; there was nothing to say that these heroes wouldn't side with the only other outsider. Vida thought the opposite, seeing the need for a bold move to overcome the crisis, and agreed with Zurwan.

Unable to expect aid from the Reincarnation God, the majority had sided with Zurwan and Vida. But that wasn't to say that Alda's opinions had been completely ignored.

After Zurwan opened the door to the other world, the seven remaining gods, including Alda, each selected one person worthy of being a hero and summoned them to Ramda. Alda had selected Shohei Suzuki, who became the Hero Bellwood. Vida selected Keisuke Sakato, who became the fallen Hero Zakkato. They were joined by five other heroes.

They were excellent saviors. Sometimes they experienced differences of opinion, but they discussed the matter and always worked toward the best solution. Bellwood, in particular, had been the epitome of a "hero" for Alda. Not only capable in battle but courageous, he always fought on the front lines against the monsters and demonstrated a complete understanding of Alda's ideals. He showed remorse for the history, culture, and civilization of Ramda lost as a result of the fighting with the Demon King. The introduction of some elements of the other world's culture had been required to help the world heal, such as language, but Bellwood regretted even those concessions.

"Lord Alda, I love this world," Bellwood had told him. "This wonderful world, completely different from the one I come from. Once we defeat the Demon King and bring peace, this world will become even better than my own."

It had perhaps been inevitable that one who thought in such a way would end up at odds with Zakkato and Vida, who desired to bring in as much knowledge from the other world as possible.

“That was where things went wrong.”

Alda recalled the survivors. Himself, Bellwood, two heroes who agreed with him, and then Vida. But Vida had already stopped trusting Alda and his allies. During the fighting—and even though it had been necessary to defeat the Demon King—Bellwood allowed Zakkato and the others to be sacrificed. Vida even suspected that Alda and the other gods set things up to sacrifice Zakkato and the rest.

This rift only deepened. The Demon King was defeated, split into thousands of pieces, and sealed away, but then the two surviving pillars ended up fighting each other.

“We should have considered Vida’s words more carefully, found what common ground we could agree upon, and explained in more detail our reasons for not accepting the rest.” This world was meant to function with multiple gods, and even the gods agreed, especially Alda and Vida, who had opposing viewpoints. Previously, there had been Shizarion, Rekrent, Marduke, and Ganpapelio to step in between the two of them. Zurwan would diffuse tension with a wry comment, Botin would soothe frayed tempers, and Pelia would summarize both sides. But those gods were all asleep or completely destroyed. “If we had only been able to maintain her trust, Vida may never have gone so far as to create her own reincarnation system or her new races,” Alda concluded.

He had his regrets, but at the same time, he couldn’t make any massive changes, such as allowing things that had previously been forbidden. The best

he could do was change priorities. Anything more than that—to admit that his teachings had been wrong—would be to tell his faithful that they themselves had been wrong, for all these years, along with all of those who had fallen in the name of his ideals. Above all else, it was for the sake of everyone who had been fighting evil for so long.

“My lord! Terrible news!” Curatos returned, but in something of a panic.

Indeed, Alda hadn’t seen him so shaken since the fighting with Vida.

“The fragment of the soul of Ice God Yupeon, which he imbedded in a certain artifact, was destroyed by an unknown party!”

“What? What did you say?!”

Alda found himself just as shaken by this news. The only one who could do such a thing was one with the same power as the Demon King: the power to crush souls.

“Whether the Demon King has revived or a new demon king has arisen, we must discover at once who is responsible for this heinous deed,” Alda declared.

It didn’t matter who the culprit was. Anyone with the power to crush souls had to be eliminated. That terrible conflict could never repeat again.

The End



Special Chapter: Twisted Heroes

Home. Central Station. The Hero Hold. The place had various names, but those working out of it just called it the base. Having finished their latest mission, some of the resurrected were returning to it now.

“All these pain-in-the-ass procedures!” one of them resurrected cursed. “Having to hand in our guns and magic casters every time is just such a pain. Can’t we do something about that?”

“No, we can’t, Kaito,” Koya Endo told him. He was another resurrected, known as the Oracle, and he greeted his complaining companion with a sigh. “Even the military and official organizations have guns and magic casters under strict lockdown. They don’t want these military materials being used for personal purposes.”

The world Reincarnation God Rodocolte called “Origin” had both science and magic. But that didn’t reduce the risks posed by guns to society. Guns could kill simply by pulling the trigger, which made them better weapons than magic, was which difficult to learn. Not that magic wasn’t considered dangerous. With the latest magical casters, which acted as the equivalent to a Magician’s staff, even a beginner could cast powerful magic. That was why every nation had laws, with a varying degree of severity, concerning the ownership and carrying of guns and magic casters. Kaito already knew all of this, of course, but he still didn’t accept Endo’s words.

“I’m sure we can work something out. That antiterrorist unit we teamed up with seemed pretty fun to work with.”

“Every nation and organization has a different environment and circumstances. If you understand all of that, maybe you can propose a solution?”

Any ideas?"

Those words wiped the smirk from the face of the infamous "Gungnir" Kaito.

"In that case, do me a favor. Take me off search and rescue and all that charity shit. I want to handle antiterrorism and conflict resolution only," Kaito shot back.

His unrestrained irritation snapped Endo's eyes wide open.

"I'm sick of it. Playing at being heroes. Trying to keep our powers in check, not going over the top, bowing and scraping to these petty fools. I've had enough."

"Your missions are almost all military ones," another one of the resurrected said, joining the conversation. "I'm jealous."

"I bet you're just tired of getting roasted online," said one of the girls. "The flame wielder Ifrita has a much *hotter* rep than you."

"Cuz you post stuff no one even asks about. You're just a moron," said another.

Kaito looked at the black youth and two girls who were ragging on him and clicked his tongue.

"Atorasu, Turtle Girl, Gloomy Guts—shut it!" Kaito spat.

"What'd you say? I'll kill anyone who uses my old name!" The black youth, named Doug Atlas after the fact that he was resurrected from Atorasu Shirai, closed in with Kaito with anger on his face. The two girls' reactions were calmer.

"If we get to choose our assignments, Endo, I'm the opposite of Kaito." Melissa had the protective barrier power of Aegis and had just been in a war zone. "I'd prefer to be search and rescue only. That seems a lot safer than this military stuff."

“Oh, put me there too,” said Kanako Tsuchiya, former pop singer. “I don’t mind visiting disaster zones and providing relief, but I’ve had it with torturing criminals.” With her powerful mental abilities, she had been dispatched to a special organization that handled the interrogation of high-profile suspects.

“I’ve had enough too.” This from Hitomi Minuma, who had the powerful clairvoyance ability “Gazer.” She had been sent to a facility researching precognition. “I don’t want to see anything for a while. I need a break.”

“Just take me off the disaster ops,” Doug said. “They treat me like a human bulldozer.” His anger had subsided, for now. He had telekinesis that allowed him to clear out rubble from the tightest spots. He wasn’t as enamored with that application of his abilities as those asking him to do it, however.

“We understand your dissatisfaction,” said Asagi Minami, one of the top members of the Bravers. “We understand, but we ask you to hold it back. For now. We need your continued support, until we can make it through the current situation.”

“Of course I—” Kaito started.

“Then stop taking it out on Endo, you little punk,” Asagi retorted.

Behind him stood the leader of the Bravers himself. “I know it isn’t easy,” Hiroto Amemiya said. “But this isn’t something we can resolve quickly.” He quietly bowed his head, asking for their understanding. “To this world, we’re outsiders. We need a little longer before they accept us. Please, try to put up with everything until then.”

This sincere request from their leader cleared the prickly atmosphere in the room. However, instead of understanding and acceptance, the room just filled with more resignation.

“I’m not expecting much,” Hitomi Minuma said. “I already saw that you were going to bow your head like that.” She passed Amemiya, his head still down, and walked out of the room.

“I know this isn’t an easy time for us,” Doug grumbled. “But it’s also not easy to hear all this ‘suck it up’ stuff from the one who put us in this situation.” He followed Hitomi out.

These difficult times had started with an incident more than five years ago. The Bravers had received a request for help with some rampaging undead and headed out to a lab in a military state. Amemiya and his team proceeded to dispose of the “dangerous undead” they had encountered there, but also completely eradicated the terrible power that had been surrounding it—even though the United Nations had asked them to bring back a sample.

They later learned that the lab was a facility for death attribute magic discovered by the military state, and the undead had been the remains of the only test subject capable of producing death attribute magical power.

This had led the Bravers to be attacked by certain factions, who considered them the reason why death attribute magic had been lost and, with it, the treatment for incurable diseases. The United Nations was looking upon them harshly as well for disobeying their orders. The entire organization, created to protect the resurrected, was now in danger of being disbanded. They had to recover some goodwill. In order to achieve that, Amemiya had decided to expand the scope of the Bravers’s activities.

“Hey, ingrates!” Minami shouted angrily after Hitomi and Doug. “Amemiya has all of our best interests in mind here!”

“We understand that,” Kanako replied. “He only eradicated the corpse of that undead because he didn’t want any more people to suffer. The military state

was still keeping death attribute a secret when that happened, so of course we didn't know about it." Despite her words, there was no understanding or acceptance in her eyes. "But starting to fight terrorists and criminals and making us do all these dirty jobs doesn't seem like the way to win back any trust."

"We understand that those with power also hold responsibilities. That does make sense," Melissa said. "But that doesn't mean those with power are capable of wielding it."

With that, the two girls also left the room, leaving Kaito with Hiroto, Minami, and Endo.

"I didn't agree with forming an organization just because we're all resurrected in the first place!" Kaito snarled. "You're doing alright for yourself, hah! Keep that family safe if you can!" Then he simply vanished, making use of his own special abilities.

"... I don't have a response to that anyway," Hiroto said. "I hate how pathetic I've become."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Minami said. "You're doing well. Almost everyone sees it. They're just a small part of the group."

"That's right," Endo assured him. "If it wasn't for you, we'd all be lab rats by now, just like the undead."

The resurrected had been reborn into a new world, with their memories of their past lives and abilities superior to other people, including cheat-level skills that even the magic in this world couldn't replicate. But there were only 100 of them in total.

If the people living here had declared them undesirable outsiders, there was

no telling how they would have been treated. There were limits to trying to live while hiding their powers. That was why Hiroto Amemiya had decided to take a stand and form the Bravers, to create an environment in which the resurrected wouldn't have to hide and would be able to find acceptance from the world.

"Even Shimada and Rikudo can't bring those guys into line. Murakami is worthless, too, and just makes more problems, much less bringing everyone together," Minami told him, bringing up the names of two of the best students in their previous lives and their former teacher. "No one can fault you for that."

"I don't think we can expect people to play the same roles they did in our previous lives," Hiroto said. "Especially Murakami. He was a teacher before, but now he's the same age as his students."

"No, because we still have our memories," Minami reminded him.

"Even so, I'm not sure a high school teacher and top students are the people we should be looking to in this situation," Hiroto replied with a sigh. "I understand why they're upset. They aren't the only ones I've been asking to just hang in there, I can tell you. I just hope we can work this out."

"Sorry," Endo said. "I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. The test subjects that undead saved from the lab, who we helped out of there but then couldn't protect . . . they're making their move. And they call themselves the Eighth Guidance."

The military state lab had numerous other test subjects, all being used for research into death attribute magic. Amemiya and his team rescued them and handed them over to the United Nations, from where they had apparently been secured by a research organization. However, they went on to be subjected to further human experiments as the nations tried to obtain death attribute for themselves. Amemiya and the Bravers only learned of this when the test

subjects revealed it to them after their escape.

“Really? Fine then. This isn’t going to make it easy on everyone . . . but we’re going to protect them this time!” The leader of the Bravers, with the codename “Hero,” turned toward this new goal, prepared to move forward.

[Special Chapter: Twisted Heroes – End]

Afterword

To those of you for whom this is the first time, nice to meet you. And to everyone else, welcome back. I'm Densuke, the author of this work. With all of your support, I have made it to four volumes. Thank you all so much.

While Vandal might certainly not want to be put through a fourth life, I'm overjoyed to be publishing the fourth volume. I'm as thrilled to reach my fourth (volume) as Vandal would be distraught to reach his fourth (life).

Turning to the events of this volume, we saw the arrival of a new heroine—a character who didn't appear in the web series. She was there in the web series, of course, so it's hard to call her a completely original creation, but this time she is "handled" very differently!

She's active, moving around free and unencumbered. She's bold, touching our hero all over his body without a hint of shame. And she even has him performing skincare and painting her nails. A really pretty lady, from the tips of her fingers to the . . . severed stump of her wrist? That's right! It's the undead left hand of Zandia, the second princess of Talosheim! I hope you enjoyed all five fingers of her in action.

Of course, the existing characters all got to shine too. We have some newly born, some going off on adventures, and some ranking up. Vandal is also moving farther away from what might be considered "human" starting this volume.

He's working hard on making his third life a success so he doesn't have to go through all of this again a fourth time. Now he has a new home, filled with increasingly monstrous and inhuman hordes. His fighting force has numbers and strength far beyond that of when he was just born. However, the enemies

he is facing are also revealing the extent of their power. You can look forward to seeing him stand up to even greater foes in the coming volumes!

In a further piece of good news, this series has also been turned into a comic! As I'm writing this afterword, the first chapter is out in print. Even my parents seem to like it! I only dreamed that something I wrote would become a comic. Of course, it's something that I wanted, very much. When I applied for the Fourth Internet Novel Awards, I was hoping that this series would win the award, become a book series, and then become a comic. But I also thought that was all a pipe dream.

Now that dream has come true, thanks to all of you. Please allow me to thank you again. I hope you will follow the books, the web series, and now the comic too.

I'm running out of space here so let me offer my gratitude. To everyone at Hifumishobo, including my proofreader and editor. To Ban!, my illustrator, who meets my every demand and does gorgeous work even with characters who are disembodied hands. To everyone who works hard to make this book happen and everyone who supports *The Death Mage*, thank you.

I sincerely hope to see you again in the next volume.

-Densuke

Glossary

Monsters

Vampires

A race created by the union of the Goddess Vida and the undead Hero Zakkato. They are not monsters, strictly speaking, but as many nations treat them as such, they will be discussed here under the classification of monsters.

There are three types of vampires: the progenitor, noble, and subordinate species. Their community operates as a strictly vertical, hierarchical society. Adventurers almost exclusively encounter and report on subordinates, as encounters with nobles are extremely rare.

As monsters who also have the blood of a goddess, vampires are able to take Jobs. That gives them a wider variety of skills than other monsters. Even subordinates are powerful foes, with nobles presenting a threat equal to or even greater than a dragon. The guild advises reporting the discovery of one rather than attempting to fight it alone.

There is a large individual variance between vampires, but the adventurers' guild appraises subordinates at no less than rank 3 and nobles at no less than rank 6. As vampires can take Jobs like humans can, their rank is not the only indicator of their strength, and so, caution is required.

Out of vampires' various powers, subordinates only exhibit the typical physical strength of their race. However, they can obtain skills like Anthropomorph and Clone by ranking up and remain incredibly dangerous. Confirmed names after ranking up include Vampire Slave, Vampire Lycan, and

Vampire Rebel.

Nobles boast not only physical abilities but magical ones, and some individuals may acquire special gaze skills. Many of them tend to focus on honing their magical abilities, but that doesn't make them physically inferior to subordinates. Higher-ranking nobles can show mastery of both magic and martial arts. Given their highly elevated basic stats, this mastery can turn them into an absolute nightmare.

While the general perception is that all noble vampires have a gaze that can allure, paralyze, and read minds, such abilities are in fact unique skills possessed by a few individuals. This mistaken perception likely spread from sightings of nobles without such abilities using magic that has similar effects.

Their titles after ranking up are similar to the system of nobility in human society. They start out as rank 6 Vampires but then proceed to Ritter at 7 and Baron at 8.

All vampires share a weakness to sunlight, silver, and light magic attacks, the domain of Alda, god of law and life. Depending on the vampire's affiliation and god they follow, some of them may be unable to enter certain buildings without being invited in and have additional weaknesses like garlic and running water.

There is almost no information on progenitor vampires. What is known, however, is that even a noble who climbed all the way to Emperor would kneel before a progenitor and swear fealty.

Sercrent was a rank 7 Vampire Ritter. He was clearly inferior to Eleonora, who reached Vampire Baron after only a few years.

Jobs

Golem Creator

A Job that provides modifiers to the Golem Creation skill and other skills acquired by using it. It provides a wide range of modifiers but only a few increases. Taking this Job requires nothing more than possessing the Golem Creation skill at Level 1 or higher, but currently, Vandal is the only person among humans and monsters on Ramda to possess it.

Skills

Remote Control

A skill that allows any part of the body to still be controlled even when it is detached, such as after having been chopped off. It is mainly learned by undead such as high-ranking skeletons, zombies, living armor, and headless knights. In a few rare cases, monsters with exceptional vitality can also learn it.

Higher levels allow for control over greater distances and also increase the number of parts that can be controlled simultaneously. Of course, no human has ever acquired this ability, and there is no known method of training to acquire it.

Densuke

Resides in Saitama Prefecture. Has loved light novels since his childhood and has been writing them himself for close to twenty years. He was aiming to become an author of orthodox fantasy but kept getting distracted along the way. After many twists and turns, he won an award during the Fourth Internet Novel Awards, and achieved his debut as an author. He likes pizza and chicken skin *senbei* and works out every day. He likes undead heroines the best.

The Death Mage Volume 4

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