NOVEL
5
THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY
WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Prologue: Starting off to a Glowing Endorsement

Chapter 1: From a Report to an Intrusion

Chapter 2: Move to Explain

Chapter 3: From a Battle to a Talk

Chapter 4: From Vigilance to Interception

Chapter 5: Interception to Transit

Chapter 6: Surmise to Search

Chapter 7: From an Appearance to a Settlement

Epilogue: Bedridden to Rest

Bonus Story: From the Notes of a Certain Priest

Afterword

Newsletter

“I have a job for you. You’ll hear me out, won’t you?”
She declared this with such confidence, in fact, that nearly everyone nodded without thinking.

Stoss
A fellow Elder vampire who stands in the way of Dia's ability to pass her test. On top of commanding some seriously powerful familiars, she seems to have a trump card against Dia specifically...
Dia
A young girl who hired Loren to help her with a test of her abilities—to see if she can stand on her own as an Elder vampire. But why would someone as powerful as Dia need help in the first place?
Loren
A former mercenary who became an adventurer after his mercenary company fell to ruin. He boasts enough physical strength to easily swing around a sword as tall as he is. While he generally looks rough around the edges, he has a surprisingly wide breadth of knowledge. Scena, a Lifeless King, has taken up residence in his soul.
Lapis
A priest who served as the healer of the first party Loren ever worked with. Owing to a certain secret of hers, she decided to stick around with Loren after that.

"Zombie dragon..."
Dragon corpses were rare enough, and even more rarely resurrected, but the appearance of such a monster would have rattled nations and rallied armies.
"Well, it looks like someone is taking this seriously."
"How considerate of them..."

The Strange Adventure of a Broke Mercenary

NOVEL 5

WRITTEN BY

Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by peroshi
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THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

Fantasie Geshichte von
Söldner in großer Armut

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: Starting off to a Glowing Endorsement

CHAPTER 1: From a Report to an Intrusion

CHAPTER 2: Move to Explain

CHAPTER 3: From a Battle to a Talk

CHAPTER 4: From Vigilance to Interception

CHAPTER 5: Interception to Transit

CHAPTER 6: Surmise to Search

CHAPTER 7: From an Appearance to a Settlement

EPILOGUE: Bedridden to Rest

BONUS STORY: From the Notes of a Certain Priest

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Prologue:
Starting off to a Glowing Endorsement

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—of late, quite a few things had fallen to ruin. The Waargenberg Kingdom, in the southwest reaches of the continent, was chin-deep in the chaos.

It stood to reason; several towns and villages had fallen in a remarkably short period of time. Even worse, two entities declaring themselves dark gods had made their triumphant return.

Upon receiving this information from the guild, the kingdom's top brass had put in requests for skilled adventurers to investigate. The army had suddenly begun to get their battalions in order. From military officials to bureaucrats, every government office was in a tizzy from top to bottom.

Apparently.

However, Loren was no more than a bottom-rung adventurer. All the ruckus had little to do with him. He was taking it easy in the bar attached to Kaffa's guild.

Not too long ago, stinging from failure after failure, he had taken a break from guild requests to do some simple monster hunting along the roadside. Lapis had taken it upon herself to report to the guild all the various nonsense they'd suffered along the way.

Loren had left the matter entirely up to her, lifting barely a pinky. Of course, that increased the burden on Lapis, and the priest to the god of knowledge didn't hesitate to complain about it. Loren heartlessly ignored her.

Loren hadn't expected much from their monster hunt. They'd had their spoils evaluated at some podunk town and received a certificate for later payment. However, when they'd gone swimming in the course of the aforementioned nonsense, that precious document had gone swimming with them, and gotten soaked to the point of incoherence.

They'd assumed all hope for payment was lost along with the legibility of their receipt, but the guild branch in Kaffa kindly communicated with the guild responsible for the tally, and they ultimately agreed to pay a portion. A good portion, too, though it was a conservative estimate of a now unknowable amount. The Kaffa guild also claimed a small sum as a necessary "convenience fee" for all of the trouble they'd gone through to contact such out-of-the-way colleagues.

That was far better than receiving nothing at all, so Loren and Lapis declined to fuss and finally got a bit of cash in hand. Consequently, Loren's wallet was a bit heavier than usual. Of course, he still owed a considerable amount of money to Lapis, so it was up for debate whether his coins belonged to him at all, but there was no pressing need to pay her back. He was now the richest he had ever been, at least since becoming an adventurer.

"Just enough for a breather, though," Loren muttered with a self-deprecating chuckle as he set his mug of ale down on the bar.

He'd been granted a sizable reduction of his debt as well. During that last outing, they'd found something Lapis was searching for—and Loren chose to take it instead of a reward that would have paid him handsomely. In return, Lapis had rebalanced their scales.

In fact, once they were back in Kaffa, Lapis agreed to lower the debt all the way down to ten gold coins, which was less than half of what it had been. Whether this put him in a favorable position or not was subject to personal opinion.

As far as Loren was concerned, it honestly didn't matter. There was no interest or collateral. Lapis never pressed him to return anything; she told him to pay her whenever he wanted. The conditions were almost a joke.

Loren might be a former brutish mercenary, and maybe he could be accused of lacking common sense, but he knew it was absurd for money to be lent out like that. Lately, he had got to thinking that the debt was simply Lapis's way of keeping him around.

If she was of charitable character, there was no way to explain why she'd looted the pillaged town or the devastated bandit camp. If it was money she

was after, she'd be expected to work Loren like a pack mule, affording him only the bare essentials and taking the rest for herself. Her current behavior led him to believe their relationship was not in fact about the money.

She was certainly out to increase his debt to exorbitant amounts, but perhaps she was running the numbers to ensure he could never pay it back, no matter what treasure he came across.

Of course, he had no evidence to say she wasn't simply fattening him up like a pig for the slaughter. He couldn't say for certain.

"Mr. Loren? Umm, Mr. Loren?"

Loren spaced out, incoherent thoughts drifting around his head, until his own name snapped him back to reality. He turned in the direction of the voice to find out that the person sitting across the counter, leaning in, was not his usual priest. It was the guild clerk.

He often hit up the guild at the same time every day, visiting the same receptionist at the same window out of habit. By now, he knew her face well.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Loren? Are you all right?"

Even his drink had run dry without him realizing it.

"Sorry 'bout that. Just thinking about life. So, you need something?" Loren asked, topping up his mug.

Casually placing a cheese platter on the table, the receptionist held an empty cup toward Loren. The unexpected request made him pause and examine her more closely. She was likely around the same age as Lapis, with chestnut hair tied back so it didn't get in the way of work—it would probably be decently long if she unbound it.

She was no great beauty, better described as *cute*, but she served as a receptionist who often dealt with ruffians, so her personality was likely made of sterner stuff than her button nose. And given how she so nonchalantly demanded a share of the ale Loren was drinking, snack already offered in barter, she was likely shrewd enough.

"I want to talk with you about something, and I thought it might be better

done over a drink.”

It was still midday. That meant the guild was still open for operation; even if she was talking to an adventurer, this was no time for her to be drinking.

“You sure? Aren’t you on the job?”

“Adventurer guild receptionists are granted a considerable degree of freedom to more smoothly negotiate with the members of our guild.”

“I’m not treating anyone whose name I don’t even know.”

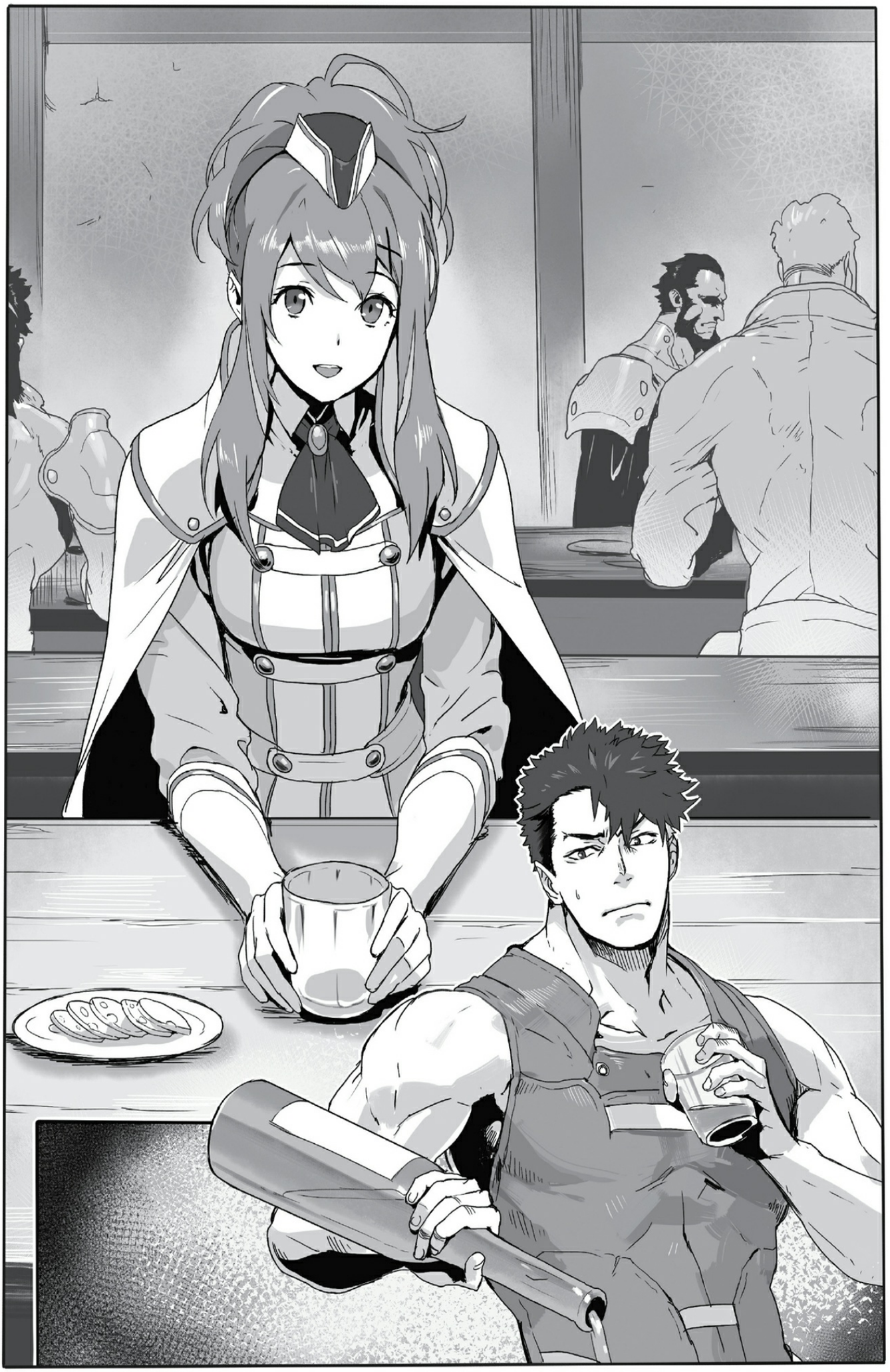
“Ivy Bridgeguard,” she replied almost immediately. A hint of surprise crossed his face, but with the cup still held out to him, he topped it off from his bottle.

“So, what do you need?” Loren asked.

If you need some ale to talk, then take the ale and talk already, he thought. However, after a sip of ale and a mouthful of cheese, Ivy’s expression loosened into one of bliss and she seemed no closer to conversation than before.

Loren was about to urge her to get on with it, but she seemed to finally remember why she was there. She corrected her posture ever so slightly and got down to business.

“Truth be told, I was thinking that it’s about time for your promotion exam.”



Now here was something that hadn't even crossed Loren's mind. He didn't mean to brag, but he had a stunningly low quest-clear rate, even for a newly minted adventurer. Loren didn't think he'd done anything to distinguish himself from his copper ranking.

According to other adventurers, it took two to three decent quests for anyone to prove their worth and rise to the next stage of iron rank. Of course, that was only if those quests were completed successfully, and Loren was only remarkable in failing nearly every quest he set out on.

"Admittedly, I wouldn't call you the cream of the crop, as far as success rate is concerned…" Ivy mused.

It was a little demoralizing to have her spell it out so clearly. *Maybe I really am a failure as an adventurer. Am I better off just giving up and returning to the battlefield?* Loren began weighing some terrible options, and his dark thoughts must have reached his face.

Ivy rushed to console him. "However, considering the scale of all the incidents you've gotten wrapped up in—well, none of them were the sort of thing a copper rank should have been able to handle. In fact, they were so rough that I'm impressed you're still alive."

"Is that how it is?"

"Yes, without a doubt."

Loren wondered if that was all true, but he couldn't think of any reason why a receptionist would go out of her way to lie to some copper-ranked guild member. Ivy watched over a good number of Kaffa's adventurers, so surely she knew better than he did what dangers each rank should be flung at. However, even if he accepted her wisdom, that didn't explain why she was here now, going so far as to drink with him to push him toward the test. He suspected she was plotting something.

"I'm sure you've noticed, Mr. Loren," she said lightly, as if exchanging a morsel of gossip. "The country is not in the best situation."

It wasn't, and while Loren hadn't done anything on purpose, he'd definitely played a part in it all. The reminder made him uncomfortable, and his eyes

shifted to a vacant spot.

“It’s sad to hear it when a little village disintegrates. However, once an important relay point and a whole town fall apart, the country is forced to take action.”

“Am I the only one who thinks they should do so for a ‘little village’ as well?”

“No, I agree with you. But there’s a limit to what the country can accomplish, and I’m hoping you can understand that.”

Putting aside whether that made him feel better, Loren understood there were things that simply could or couldn’t be done. That was how the world worked. Maybe it would be different if there was some fantastical organization that could solve any problem at any time, but Loren hadn’t heard of such a thing, now or in all of history.

“That being said, the adventurers’ guild is partially responsible for public order. With everything that’s happening, we’ve been told to strongly recommend the promotion exam. We need to raise the standards of our adventurers.”

“I see.” Loren could understand that much. However, it was a pretty weak reason for Ivy to single out him specifically.

“And one more thing,” said Ivy, as if she could read his mind. “How do you think we feel, taking these wild reports from a low copper rank?”

“The accuracy of the info should have nothing to do with rank,” he answered honestly.

Ivy cleared her throat, a conflicted look on her face. “It would certainly make my job easier if everyone thought that way.”

“You have it hard, I guess. Well, drink.”

“Oh, I most definitely will.”

Something in her words compelled Loren to take the bottle and top off her cup. Ivy accepted gratefully, taking another long draught before continuing in a palpably tired tone.

“The higher-ups, see. They don’t think so. They’re all like, ‘why the hell should

we trust the word of a copper?’”

“I understand where they’re coming from.”

Even with mercenaries, if you got two sides of a story, one from a fresh recruit and the other from a veteran, more trust would be given to the veteran’s words. Of course, the recruit’s info couldn’t be disregarded, but there were more likely to be misunderstandings or mistakes mixed in with it.

“If we don’t want to deal with that anymore, we need to get you promoted. That’s my orders, at least.”

“So that’s why you went out of your way to talk to me. Someone’s working hard.”

“On top of that, I timed it so Ms. Lapis would be away. I think she might be oversensitive to this topic.”

“And you’re saying I’m easy to deal with?”

“You strike me as the sort of person who will be sincere as long as I speak with sincerity myself.”

It didn’t sound too bad when she put it like that. Loren concealed his disgruntled face with a sip of ale.

“It’s not a bad deal, you know. The exam itself will be entirely typical. Just between you and me, I have clearance to void the exam fee, so would you consider taking it? Just for the heck of it?”

If Lapis were there, she definitely would have suspected Ivy of a dozen ulterior motives, and neither would she be so open to taking the exam. A receptionist seeking Loren out during peak hours just to give him this spiel? Even Loren suspected something was up.

Not to mention, copper-rank adventurers were so lowly that hardly anything would be lost if one were caught up in some scheme.

“How about it?” Ivy asked.

“I’ll have to ask my partner’s opinion… But I’ll try to convince her. That good enough?”

He couldn’t say for certain, but that seemed to be enough for her. Ivy’s smile was relieved, like a load had been lifted from her shoulders.

Chapter 1:
From a Report to an Intrusion

"SO DID YOU TELL that receptionist you're going to take the exam?" asked the girl in the priest robes.

The day had passed, and it was now evening. As they ate dinner in the guild bar, Loren reported on his conversation with Ivy. Lapis sat across from him, a plate of sausages and a cup of ale in front of her, but she refrained from touching either as she patiently awaited his reply.

Loren placed his own cup on the table and slowly shook his head. "I said I'd ask my partner first."

"That *is* important. I think you handled it well, Mr. Loren."

That seemed like a compliment, but Loren couldn't tell what exactly she was commending. As far as he was concerned, he had completely put off making a decision and pushed the responsibility onto her.

Lapis skewered a sausage on her fork as she went on. "In a situation where you don't have enough information to come to a proper decision, you should avoid giving an immediate answer.

And should someone demand a response that instant, you should give a reply that can be taken either way, taking care to say nothing committal. It's best to stall for time until you can seek an outside opinion."

"You sure you're not just complicating things?"

If Loren went through that process for every little issue, he'd waste a lot of time to get a lot of nowhere. With that in mind, he stared at Lapis, who casually averted her eyes as she brought the sausage to her mouth. Seeing her bite clean through it with a firm snapping sound, Loren began to feel a bit of regret. *Maybe I should have answered immediately,* he thought as he refilled his cup. He would have pressed her on the issue, but he was, again, not interested in getting nowhere.

Aiming for the moment Loren's attention shifted to his drink, Lapis said, "Putting that aside, it seems like the adventurers' guild is highly invested in you taking their promotion exam."

Loren nodded.

With Loren hauled safely onboard, Lapis confidently presented an extraordinary proposal. "Then how about you tell them you'll take it if they give you the silver-rank exam?"

"Skipping over iron? Is there a point in that?"

"Not really. But if the guild's *so* insistent, you might as well leverage your position to demand something they'd usually never think of giving."

I see, so this is why Ivy approached me when Lapis wasn't around. Loren nodded and asked, "You think they'll agree to those terms?"

"I highly doubt it." Lapis caved rather easily considering she'd made the proposal herself.

What exactly are you trying to accomplish? Loren thought. Across the table, Lapis lifted her fork and waved it like a conductor's baton.

"Once they refuse," she explained, "you'll give them a sympathetic look, then ask if they can at least exempt you from the iron-rank exam."

"Oh, c'mon…"

"And if that doesn't work, ask to be exempt from a part of it. They're the ones who want you to take the exam; it would be smart to take whatever you can get."

Evidently, she intended to come in high and work her way through increasingly reasonable requests, knowing the guild would have to fold at some point. She wasn't satisfied with a simple exemption from the examination fee. Loren, however, wondered if she was being a bit too greedy.

"And what if they don't agree to any of your terms?"

"Then simply don't take the exam," Lapis answered matter-of-factly.

"No, but in that case…"

Sure, it made sense to step down if they couldn't come to a resolution. That was how negotiations were supposed to go—there was nothing strange about it. However, that would leave them stranded at copper rank, and it felt like a waste to let this opportunity slip by, especially when the fee was being waived for this special request.

Lapis had a different take. "Getting to the crux of the matter, Mr. Loren, at the moment, I see hardly any merit in us rising to iron rank."

"What do you mean by that?"

Iron rank would see an increase in the rewards paid out for quests, which was more than enough merit for Loren. Apart from that, they would gain access to more information, other adventurers would see them differently, and they would no longer be considered the very bottom of the barrel.

The only downsides came in the increased difficulty of their quests and the responsibilities that came with an iron tag. Those seemed trivial in comparison to the benefits.

"The way I see it, we're supposed to be copper ranks taking copper-rank quests…but for some reason, the jobs we take are already clearly beyond the level of what a copper rank should be handling."

"I…guess so?"

Not that this was intentional by any means. But as it turned out, the vast majority of Loren's supposedly copper-ranked quests were the sort of trials no ordinary copper adventurer would have survived.

"Then what do you think will happen if we climb to iron rank now?"

"I'm not following."

"I have this vague inkling that next, we'd be dragged into the sort of trouble that no *iron* rank should ever have to deal with."

Few people wanted to walk into trouble. Naturally, Loren preferred to stay well away from it himself. It wasn't as if he was fond of sticking his head in other people's problems. However, considering his experience thus far, it seemed likely that he was doomed to walk straight into the mouth of madness

more often than not.

“You might have a point.”

“Don’t I? It’s been nothing but quest after quest that make me surprised we’re still alive. As a result, Mr. Loren, your completion rate is probably the absolute lowest in Kaffa’s guild.”

“Wait a second.” Loren couldn’t just let that statement slip by. “Shouldn’t you be just as low as me?” As a party, Loren and Lapis had taken on the exact same quests; it was strange to think he was alone at rock bottom.

After a moment’s hesitation, Lapis confessed the coldhearted truth. “I’ve taken a few simple requests on my own. Truth be told, my success rate is higher than yours.”

They were in the same party, but it wasn’t as if they worked together around the clock. Naturally, they each had their own private time and personal business. Lapis had apparently used hers to complete simple herb-and material-gathering quests.

“Since when…”

“I’m doing it for your sake, Mr. Loren. Don’t look at me like that,” Lapis said without meeting Loren’s glare. He hadn’t the slightest idea how her taking and completing solo jobs was for *his* sake.

“Hear me out,” she said. “Do you know how terrible it would sound if both of us were languishing at the bottom of the ranks?”

“Hmm.”

If they were both marked as failures, their party would be shunted to the lowest of all low categories. Lapis had accepted those light requests to increase their overall success rate and soften the blow to their collective reputation. *If that’s your game, then bring me along*, Loren thought. However, perhaps the requests would no longer be simple as soon as he was added to the mix.

“Am I the jinx…?” he thought aloud. Apparently those easy jobs remained easy when Lapis was on her own. His presence was the only complicating factor he could think of.

“It might be a jinx that takes effect when we’re together. Don’t worry about it,” Lapis kindly suggested before Loren could really start to brood. After all, her original intention had been to ensure that the party’s low success rate didn’t prevent them from taking jobs in the future. She wasn’t trying to bring Loren down, so she was quick to back him up.

“Whatever. Getting back on track, what do we do about the exam?”

“Personally, I would love to play with the conditions and enjoy some negotiations with the guild, but if that’s not quite your cup of tea, Mr. Loren, why not give an honest answer?”

This is why the guild receptionists are keeping an eye on you, Loren thought, but he knew better than to say it. He shifted to another issue. “Are you taking it?”

“I’ll take it if you do.”

The decision was entirely up to him. Loren thought a bit before saying, “If we’re exempt from the fee, I think we should give it a shot.”

They would essentially receive a free promotion to iron rank. Failing wouldn’t cost them anything nor cause any other issues. In that case, Loren didn’t see a need to think too hard.

“Then let’s go with that.”

Lapis offered no objections once Loren came to his decision. The party had reached a consensus.

“Man, you’re really helping me out here. I was worried you’d complain about all sorts of things and ultimately refuse,” Ivy said with a beaming smile.

Loren had informed her of his decision the day after his discussion with Lapis. Before they could change their minds, Loren and Lapis were led to the training hall near the guildhall to complete the exam.

“I’m also thankful for your quick response,” Ivy continued. “Honestly, I thought it’d take longer.”

All her imagined worries would have been reality had Loren left it up to Lapis.

In that regard, Ivy was quite a good judge of character.

As expected of someone who deals with so many adventurers on a daily basis, thought Loren. Though he doubted Ivy would have been happy to hear it. It would, after all, mean admitting to her face that all her fears about Lapis were warranted.

"What does the examination involve, exactly?" Lapis asked, feigning nonchalance.

You don't know despite being a priest of the god of knowledge? Halfway through that thought, Loren realized he was being poisoned by Lapis's bad habit of explaining everything away with her priesthood. He hurriedly cleared his mind. It was unrealistic for the priests of the god of knowledge to be walking encyclopedias. Lapis was a very well-informed exception; Loren knew this, but he'd immediately gotten his hopes up regardless. Not a good sign.

"Well, let's see. There's no written portion. If we implemented that, most adventurers would never rise beyond copper rank."

Many adventurers couldn't read, most couldn't write, and a majority couldn't do either. Having a written test would have made rising even to iron rank a Herculean task. Although that did imply there were written tests for some of the ranks higher than iron; at those levels, strength wasn't everything. For some challenges, knowledge and wisdom proved necessary as well.

"The exam is purely practical. To be more specific, you will conduct a mock battle with an examiner selected by the guild."

"You're gonna have Lapis do that too?" Loren asked.

As Ivy didn't know Lapis's circumstances, Loren did his best to sound concerned for his partner, who didn't look well-suited for combat. Truthfully, Lapis's safety was the least of his concerns. They could hardly explain to some guild proctor that Lapis was a demon and Loren suspected her physical strength exceeded even his own.

If Lapis got in a funny mood and was twisted a few ways she preferred not to be, sure, she might snap and show off her real abilities. Loren's pity was more for the examiner who would have done nothing to deserve such retaliation.

“Priests and magicians are exempt from the combat test. Instead, we will have her demonstrate one of her blessings.”

The training hall was a vast, empty one-story building. The ground was bare dirt, and the hall had been constructed to allow adventurers to train with both weapons and magic. Essentially, anyone connected to the guild could use it. Parties that recruited brand-new adventurers would practice coordination there, and those newcomers would train with the advice of their seniors.

Of course, adventurers were hot-headed and impatient by nature, and they rarely made use of the facility. In many cases, the guild’s promotion exams ended up being the one and only time anyone cracked open the doors.

“All right, seeing as that one’s a guarantee, what are we going to do about Mr. Loren’s opponent?” Lapis asked, sounding rather disappointed.

Not too long ago, Lapis had reclaimed both of her arms, which had been somewhat forcibly taken from her to diminish her inborn demonic abilities. She hadn’t seen combat since, and she probably wanted to see what she was capable of. Loren was relieved that the guild wouldn’t present her with the opportunity.

“Why of course, I’ve heard that Mr. Loren is quite the skilled swordsman, so I have provided someone of considerable ability.” Ivy made a sweeping, theatrical gesture toward a figure awaiting them in the hall.

A figure with a slender but well-tempered build was topped with red hair and keen eyes. Catching sight of them, the young man startled and looked between Ivy and Loren.

“An elite among iron ranks. It’s Mr. Claes!”

“Wait a second! You want me to spar with Loren?”

Claes was clearly panicking, and Ivy looked at him curiously. Presumably, he had been tricked into playing examiner without any proper explanation, and the next exchange only confirmed this.

“I didn’t hear anything about this! I’d have turned you down if I knew I’d be up against him!”

“Wasn’t the deal that I’d spend a night with you if you took the job and successfully defeated your opponent?”

“You’re the one who proposed that!”

“But you’re the one who told me to get my room key ready because no copper was a match for you.”

“Geh…”

At a loss for words, Claes could only stand silent as he was subjected to cold stares from Lapis and Loren.

“Mr. Claes, you already have Ms. Ange, as well as that knight and that priest. You’re the leader of a harem party, and you’re still trying to sink your claws into a guild receptionist?” Ivy asked.

“It’s a personal matter, so I’m not gonna comment,” said Loren. “Just know, when you die, it will definitely be because of a woman.”

“Can we just forget about my private life?” Claes turned defiant, or rather defensive, not shrinking from their frigid judgment. It looked like he wouldn’t learn his lesson until he really did have a brush with death.

Loren gave up and asked Ivy, “So the long and short of it is, I have to beat him in a match?”

“Yes, please beat him so badly he can’t even stand up again,” Ivy said with a smile.

“Hold on!” Claes hurriedly stepped in. “Please wait! Don’t lie like that!”

As Loren urged him to explain, Claes kept shooting cautious looks at Ivy, as if to ensure she didn’t add anything uncalled-for, before going over the actual rules.

“Generally speaking, the result of the mock battle doesn’t matter. Losing too badly will deduct points, sure, but as long as you put up a good fight, that won’t disqualify you. If the result of a match between a normal copper and iron rank was the determining factor, hardly any adventurers would ever pass.”

There weren’t many adventurers who started out with sword skills on par with Loren. Coppers who could defeat those of a higher rank, or who surpassed

their higher-ranked peers in technique and experience, were incredibly rare. It was hardly surprising that victory wasn't the promotion condition, but Ivy seemed intent on having Loren beat Claes to a pulp.

Lapis brought her face close to Ivy's ear and asked, "Could you tell me what's going on?"

"The truth is, that man comes on to any and every receptionist who catches his eye," Ivy replied in a similarly low whisper. "He shows no signs of improvement or remorse no matter how many times we warn him. Sometimes he even hooks a new girl who doesn't know any better, so we've decided this can't go on."

"So you used yourself as bait to lure Mr. Claes here. Is that right?"

"Yes. He fell hook, line, and sinker for those salacious conditions."

Loren did feel sorry for Ivy and the other receptionists, but listening to her so calmly admit her deception, he was also beginning to feel bad for Claes. Claes's attitude was certainly a problem, but Loren had to wonder if there was a better way to go about solving it.

"But even if you did trick him, a promise is still a promise, right?" Lapis asked.

"Admittedly, but with Mr. Loren's skills…"

"If the outcome isn't taken into consideration, he could lose on purpose," Lapis proclaimed with a smile. Claes and Ivy both froze.

Loren lowered his shoulders and sighed, knowing something outrageous was about to happen. He decided he would just watch and see how it turned out.

"Now then, both of you," said Lapis. "How about a little auction? The item up for grabs is the right to decide whether Mr. Loren takes this seriously or holds back to a degree and loses at a suitable time."

"Please wait, Ms. Lapis! That's fraud!" Ivy protested, flustered.

"Fraud? I don't see any fraud. It's of no consequence whether he wins or loses. What matters is the journey, correct? And we're not talking about promoting Mr. Loren based on any deception. Either he seriously beats up the examiner, or he shows off his skills in earnest, then concedes."

“Losing on purpose should go against the pride of a swordsman!”

“I’m not a swordsman, precisely,” Loren noted. “I’m a mercenary. Pride doesn’t really matter to me, as long as there’s money involved.”

It would be a different story if it was life or death, but this was a mock battle. He wouldn’t gain anything with a win, nor would he lose anything with a defeat. On the other hand, going along with Lapis’s sinister scheme might earn him a bit of pocket change.

Loren’s response seemed to come as a surprise to both Claes and Ivy. Claes relaxed while Ivy remained stiff, awkwardly turning to stare at Lapis’s face.

Lapis gave it to them straight. “Now then, we have Mr. Loren’s input. How much can you dish out?”

Both sides simultaneously snatched their wallets from their pockets and hurriedly counted out their contents.

As Lapis watched over them with a hum and a smile, Loren whispered in her ear, “Are we seriously holding an auction?”

“Who knows? A part of me wants to see Ms. Ivy in troubled tears after her trap fails to spring and she has to hand her keys over.”

“What’s my cut?”

“Seventy-thirty in your favor. How does that sound?”

“Not bad. I’m in.”

He would have declined if Lapis tried to take the lion’s share. The fact that she had offered enough to buy his immediate cooperation meant she had no interest in the monetary outcome. She just wanted to see what happened.

In this case, Lapis’s curiosity would be sated, Claes would be raked over the coals, and Ivy would get a lesson in not using people as she pleased. This was three birds with one stone, and Loren saw no reason to decline.

“Now pile up as much money as you can.” As Lapis said what a priest should never say, her innocent smile sat crooked on her face.

Claes and Ivy both began presenting their bids, and Loren could tell it would

be a while before the exam began. He stifled a yawn.

After watching for a good bit, Loren began to feel thankful that the training hall rarely saw any use. The auction had grown surprisingly heated.

Loren couldn't have cared less who placed the final bid, but to those concerned, losing spelled the end. They put in as much fervor as was warranted. What had started with copper coins quickly shifted to silver. These silver stacks grew before his very eyes.

Is the sky the limit? Loren wondered. However, Lapis had set the upper cap at whatever money they had on hand, so whoever had left the house with more coin would win. Ultimately, Ivy found victory at twenty silver.

"I had a bad feeling about today…" Ivy muttered to herself, breathing heavily with the lingering adrenaline as she watched Claes's shoulders drop in defeat. "So I trusted my instinct and stuffed my pockets with more money than usual."

She's lucky, Loren thought. He sincerely commended her. Although intuition came to many people, few followed through on it far enough to succeed.

"Next time, don't bet your room key so easily," he told her.

"Are you interested in it, Mr. Loren? The key to my room?" Ivy asked, and he wondered if she'd missed the point entirely. Loren kept his answer to a shrug.

Noticing Lapis's fearsome glare, Ivy swiftly retreated.

"Looks like there's no two ways about it," Claes declared. "Loren, I'll have to beat you to take her key."

"You're not giving up either…" Loren sighed as Claes readied a wooden sparring sword with renewed resolve. Perhaps it was commendable for someone to become so serious and sincere for the sake of their goals, but his motives were simply indecent.

"Now let's get this started!"

"Whatever floats your boat. What do we do about my weapon?"

At this question, Ivy snapped to her senses. The training hall, owing to its

nature, was stocked with weapons for mock battles. There were training swords of varying lengths and shapes, as well as maces and cudgels; they had a few types of bows too, alongside arrows with round weights in place of arrowheads.

As was to be expected, though, they did not have any swords as large as the one Loren used. Loren's sword was so thick and heavy, one had to wonder who in the world could possibly wield it. No one in their right mind would make or stock a copy for sparring.

"Doesn't this put Mr. Loren at a disadvantage?" Lapis asked.

A conflicted look crossed Ivy's face.

There were, of course, adventurers who used specialized weapons. In such cases, the specialists were allowed to use their own weapons as long as they covered the cutting edge. Blunt weapons were allowed as they were, and if any serious injury occurred during a sparring match, the guild would cover the cost of treatment. Unfortunately, covering the edge of Loren's weapon would do little to lower its lethality.

With that said, having him use anything else would mean taking the exam with an unfamiliar weapon, putting him at a true disadvantage.

"Should we put off the exam until we've prepared something?" Ivy suggested, her tone doubtful.

With the guild receptionist at a loss, Claes lowered his weapon.

Lapis seemed to agree—the only option was to halt the exam until the conditions wouldn't put Loren at worse odds. However, the man in question simply removed the sword from his back, leaned it against a wall, and casually picked up a wooden two-handed sword.

"I'm not too confident with this one, but we'll have to make do."

"Are you sure?" Ivy asked. After all, he would be going up against Claes, who was quite skilled among iron ranks.

"You're not gonna find a replacement for that thing. It doesn't matter if we do it now or later, it's all the same."

A hint of gravity snuck into Claes's typically carefree expression. "Aren't you

underestimating me a bit? Going at me with an unfamiliar weapon?”

Loren, meanwhile, lightly swung the wooden sword around, testing it as he turned to the young man. “Hey, I just increased your chances.”

Claes instantly switched mindset. “I thank you for your consideration, Loren.”

Lapis and Ivy both lowered their shoulders and sighed. Did the key to a woman’s room really outweigh his professional dignity? That did sound like Claes, and neither felt like exerting the energy to complain.

“Whatever, just get it over with already.” Ivy waved her hand in an arbitrary starting signal.

“This has become quite haphazard,” Lapis said with a wry smile.

Under their watchful eyes, Claes diligently took a stance with his one-handed wooden sword.

In contrast, Loren took up a somewhat strange pose. Up to that moment, he had held the handle normally, but suddenly he switched it to a reverse grip, the tip of the blade pointed at the ground and the hilt against his chest. This was practically the reverse of a knight readying their sword, and Claes and Ivy seemed a bit surprised.

“What’s that?” Claes asked.

“Don’t worry about it. This is how my swordmaster taught me to clear my head,” said Loren, quickly switching back to an overhead grip and taking his stance. “You gonna start?”

“Oh, right. Come at me. You can have the first move.”

Loren was a lower rank and using his blade for the first time, so upon taking his stance, Claes offered Loren the initiative. Loren wasn’t much insulted by this. Without any particular technique, he lifted the sword high and brought it down.

His usual blade was a weighty one. Once switched out with a wooden sword, the speed at which he could lift and swing his weapon was incomparably faster. Still, he had attacked from the front—far too honest and obvious, at least as far as Claes was concerned. The young swordsman held his blade diagonally and

managed to divert almost all of the force.

Claes leapt into a counterattack, but before he could close in, Loren dodged back to take distance. Claes bounded after him, only for the sword he had deflected to swing up from below. He knew it was just a wooden blade, but the wind raised by the slash sent a chill down his spine.

Claes grit his teeth. “You sure you haven’t actually wielded a sword like that before?”

“Nah, this is far from my best.”

If the speed of that reverse slash wasn’t his best… A helpless laugh escaped Claes’s lips. Any carelessness in his approach and his torso would be cleaved straight through. Sure, it was a wooden sword, but enough force could turn even a spoon into an incapacitating bludgeoning device.

Loren’s movements certainly weren’t as sharp as with the hefty two-hander he usually swung, but they were still the honed maneuvers of someone who had trained with a blade for many years. Claes raised his guard and didn’t attack.

“Are you still giving me the initiative?” Loren taunted.

Claes shook his head. “No, it’s my turn now!” he said, sharply stepping forward and slashing.

Loren’s wooden sword could be used with one hand or two—it was smaller than his normal blade, but longer and wider than the one Claes wielded. As a result, it wasn’t as versatile, so the technique required to use it was more straightforward.

Loren had chosen it for its similarities to his usual weapon. By comparison, Claes’s one-handed sword compensated for lower might with speed and maneuverability. Taking advantage of these perks, Claes emphasized his own speed as he swung, but Loren calmly withstood this flurried onslaught, blocking and dodging with quick, minimal movement.

“It’s fundamentally different,” Lapis muttered as she watched.

Loren’s usual fighting style involved using his might and the weight of his

weapon to hammer down blows while completely disregarding his opponent's defense. He couldn't bull through Claes's defenses when his weapon was made of wood.

Meanwhile, Claes was faster, and he could inflict several consecutive blows in the time it took Loren to unleash one. Nevertheless, Claes was unable to weave through Loren's masterful guard, and the match continued, neither side able to reach the other.

"Mr. Claes would have already died a few times if they were using real swords, though."

"Mr. Loren is amazing," Ivy marveled at this appraisal. Her face stiffened, however, at Lapis's next words.

"If Mr. Loren had been using his greatsword, I believe Mr. Claes would have died a dozen times over by now."

"I'll give them a little longer. If neither side manages to land a decisive blow, I'll stop the match." While Claes was unable to pierce Loren's defenses, Loren's attacks were parried, which gave Claes an opportunity to counterattack. It wasn't a stalemate, per se, but Ivy understood it would be unproductive to let this continue too long.

Lapis seemed to be on the same page, but suddenly her eyes narrowed.

Did she notice something? The moment Ivy thought this, a small figure pushed between the two combatants.

"Stop!" Ivy cried out, almost before she'd realized.

Loren and Claes had been about to unleash attacks just as the little figure appeared at the most dangerous moment of all. Worse, the figure was so small that it could only be a child, and there was no way a kid could survive such an onslaught.

However, the result Ivy dreaded never came to be.

Loren and Claes both stopped mid-attack. The wooden swords in their grasps had lost their blades, a bare inch of cross section exposed above the hilts. For a beat, their severed blades seem to hang in the air, then they fell, spinning down

to lodge in the floor.

“Wh-what?!” Claes gawked at his broken sword in shock.

“What’s your deal?” Loren demanded of the newcomer, thoughtlessly casting aside the useless scrap in his hand.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just saw something a little interesting, so I wanted to step in. Are you what they call an adventurer?”

The figure, who spoke in a bizarrely self-aggrandizing tone, turned out to be a girl far smaller than either of the two fighters. Her clothes were fashioned from expensive cloth and well-tailored to boot. These were the sorts of garments a daughter of a noble house might wear—they definitely weren’t meant for someone who would elbow in between two swordsmen, especially not when she had no weapon in either hand.

Her long, platinum blonde hair was pin-straight, glossy, and obviously well-maintained. Had she been leaning on a windowsill, staring longingly out at the world, she would have been the spitting image of a sheltered young maiden.

However, she had cleanly broken both swords. She was at the training hall for some reason, and neither fighter knew what that reason was, nor how she’d pulled off her trick. That only made them warier.

Paying no mind to their suspicion, the girl scanned the area and boldly proclaimed, “I have a job for you. You’ll hear me out, won’t you?”

She declared this with such confidence, in fact, that nearly everyone nodded without thinking.

Chapter 2:
Move to Explain

“WEREN’T WE SUPPOSED to be talking about a job?” Loren asked.

They’d left the training hall in favor of returning to the adventurers’ guild bar. The blonde girl across the table seemed terribly uncomfortable and out of place, sitting deep in the simple bar chair, but she looked around with open curiosity. Sitting beside her, Loren watched her with extreme suspicion, and beside him, Lapis smiled as though she wasn’t suspicious in the slightest.

“That we are, but you chose quite the rowdy location for this discussion.”

As usual, they were surrounded by adventurers looking for work—alongside the usual drunks—with waitresses deftly weaving between them. It was definitely a lively spectacle.

“Not to your liking?” Loren asked.

“No, it has its own charm.”

Even if he wanted to go elsewhere, Loren didn’t know any quiet, stylish establishments that might be to the girl’s fancy.

Perhaps Lapis would have an idea, but the food served at whatever place she recommended would no doubt be expensive enough to pop Loren’s eyes out of his skull; he didn’t feel the least bit inclined to risk asking her.

<Mister, Mister. Please be careful.>

The voice of an invisible girl echoed in his head—a lone girl who had become a Lifeless King, the very highest form of undead, after she had been offered an entire city as a sacrifice. Having lost her corporeal body, she existed solely in spiritual form and was currently renting space in Loren’s head. Her name was Scena.

<She’s giving me a strange feeling. To be more precise, she gives off a scent similar to my own…>

“My, you have a strange aura,” the blonde girl said. “You’ve tamed a certain something within you, haven’t you?”

“Choose your words better. I haven’t tamed jack.” A menacing, even murderous warning escaped Loren’s lips before it even occurred to him that the girl might have sniffed out his secret.

Putting aside the fact that Scena was undead, she had unmistakably saved him on numerous occasions. He couldn’t stay silent when she was referred to like some sort of beast.

Loren’s malice had been tempered on the battlefield. Though the waitresses weren’t the direct targets of it, the dangerous aura he exuded made them stop in their tracks. The customers nearby widened their muddled, inebriated eyes, staring at him. And yet, bathed in such murderous intent, the girl didn’t so much as flinch. She observed Loren’s face with studied nonchalance and a glimmer of intrigue in her eyes.

Feeling rather irked by her attitude, Loren considered abandoning this talk of jobs and whatnot and leaving. But when he moved to rise, his body stiffened at a sudden gust of cold wind. Perhaps it had just been in his head, but the chill settled into his bones and he found himself back in his seat.

“I don’t mean to offend. I admit I chose my words poorly. I could never ask for your forgiveness, but please accept my apology.”

The girl suddenly took on a noble tone and lowered her head. But Loren couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

A true strangeness unfolded around him: customers frothed at the mouth, waitresses collapsed on the floor as their legs gave out—all victim to that mysterious cold. Not a soul knew what had happened. In fact, among all of them, it seemed only Loren and Lapis realized the gust had come from the girl sitting in front of them.

“It does seem as though you’ve caught the eye of something incredible,” Lapis joked, even though she must have suffered the same chill.

The girl, or rather the something incredible, smiled, not the least bit perturbed.

<She’s probably an Elder, Mister.>

“An elder?” Loren echoed aloud.

The girl clapped her hands together, as delighted as any child stumbling upon a rare prize at the fair. “Oh, I thought I was hiding it quite nicely. You did well to figure it out.”

“Huh? Is this the day Kaffa finally falls? I’ve seen all sorts of places crumble since I started working with Mr. Loren, but is this the big one? I’ll need to get my money and belongings out of here before it’s all gone,” Lapis muttered as Loren pressed Scena for more information.

<In short, a vampire,> Scena explained, confident in her knowledge; she was a Lifeless King, after all.

Vampires were the stuff of legend: bloodsucking fiends who attacked humans, feasting on blood for sustenance and power. Victims unlucky enough to be sucked dry would be brought back as low-grade undead, in thrall to their murderer. Vampires were creatures of calamity; the old tales said that, worst-case scenario, a single vampire could bring an entire nation to its knees.

Vampires could furthermore be divided into several types based on how they were created. The least powerful vampires came about when any normal person was bitten; they would, in turn, join the ranks of their sire. However, even the lowliest of these boasted fearsome strength, enough to wipe a town or village off the map.

Above this mundane variety of bloodsucker stood those who—similar to what had befallen Scena—were turned into vampires through magic and ritual. These were called Pure Ancestors, or simply Pures, and it was a Pure’s power that nations mostly feared.

However, there existed a tier even beyond that: the Elders that Scena spoke of. It was difficult to say that Elders were born or made, strictly speaking. They were said to be manifested by the world itself for some incomprehensible reason.

With immense mana reserves and a hideously powerful amount of dark energy, Elders were untouchable by the average magic or enchanted blade.

Their lifespan was essentially infinite, and they possessed a worrying resistance to otherwise helpful standbys—holy water, sunlight, and silver—that proved fatal to most undead. Opinions were divided among scholars over whether they could even be classified as undead given this, and a conclusion had yet to be reached.

"So this thing is a high and mighty Elder?" Loren asked.

"'This thing' can hear you. However, as I was the one who misspoke first, I'll permit your own faux pas," said the girl, her cheeks puffed out in indignation.

At a loss for what to do with a tiny, horribly powerful vampire, Loren shot Lapis a troubled look. If Scena was to be believed, the girl before them could wipe out the entire kingdom on her own. Honestly, Loren felt this was well beyond him.

"For now, would you mind telling us your name, Ms. Elder?"

Understanding Loren's glance, Lapis took up the negotiator role with surprising ease. Given her personality, Loren had expected at least some reluctance or teasing; that she rushed to his aid without any needling made it clear that this opponent was indeed terribly dangerous.

"My family name is too old to speak. You may call me Dia," the girl said with a slight nod.

Lapis returned the gesture before continuing. "Next, about this request of yours. What sort of job is it, and can it really be left to mere mortals such as ourselves?"

Rationally speaking, if Dia really was the sort of entity Scena claimed she was, she would have no reason to offer a job to some lowly humans. That was all Lapis meant by the phrasing, but the Elder girl's face turned bitter the moment she heard the term "mere mortals."

"I also wanted to ask the other one, that youngster, but… The impudent fool." Irritation crept into her voice.

It would have made sense if everyone who witnessed Dia's appearance would hear out her request, but Claes and Ivy were nowhere to be seen. The recollection was terrifying now that Loren knew what she was, but once Dia had

halted the match and offered a job, Claes had told her, “I’ve got no business with children. Come back in a few years.”

As a result, he was spun about two and a half turns vertically before being planted head-first into the ground, instantly unconscious. Ivy had frantically transported him to the hospital.

Loren hadn’t been able to figure out what Dia did to Claes, but it hadn’t seemed like any magic he knew. He had wondered if Claes was actually weak enough to be swung about by a young girl, but now he was surprised the guy had gotten away with just being thrown around a little.

“But there’s no use talking about those who aren’t here. Regarding whether or not you can complete my request, my answer is thus: How am I supposed to know?”

If it were possible to look at someone and divine if they could complete a job, then jobs would only go to those best suited to them. The word *failure* would be eliminated from the public lexicon, and the number of adventurers would rise exponentially. As this was far from reality, it stood to reason that the world had yet to produce anyone with such keen judgment.

“Second, as for whether you are good enough… Let’s say I would appreciate it if you took the job.”

“May I ask why?” Lapis asked.

“That’s simple enough. You’ve caught my interest enough to make me want to offer it.” Dia planted her elbows on the table, resting her chin atop her folded hands.

“Interest, is it?”

“Yes, interest. I was also interested in that gifted kid who I messed around with, but…”

Cutting herself off, Dia looked at Loren, profound meaning in her eyes. Loren, having done nothing to deserve that look, turned away, and Dia chuckled.

“You alone are more than intriguing enough to sate my curiosity. A swordsman who gives off a strange air, paired with a priest who gives off a

different, yet equally intriguing air.”

Loren’s heart skipped a beat. It seemed that the vampire girl had not only noticed Scena, she also had some idea of Lapis’s demonic nature.

“Especially that salute you performed, swordsman.”

“Me?” Loren tilted his head. He had no idea what she was talking about.

At this, Dia continued on with great amusement. “If you don’t know, I could tell you, but where’s the fun in that? How does this sound—if you take my request, I’ll give you that information on top of the reward.”

“And what’s the request?” Loren found himself asking. Lapis softly placed a hand on his as Dia dove into the details.

“Oh, it’s nothing complicated. There are some ruins south of this town, about two days if you travel on foot. I want you to escort me there. Simple, right?”

Loren and Lapis exchanged a look, both trying to weigh their client’s intentions.

They gathered supplies for a long trip and rented another donkey to carry them. After reporting to the guild that they were headed out on a personal quest, they were ready to set off.

On their way out of town, Lapis collected the auction money she was owed from Ivy. It escalated into quite the quarrel, as the receptionist insisted that the entire business was invalid given that the battle ended prematurely. They managed to reach a bargain without incident.

The rewards for personal quests were negotiated between client and adventurer without guild involvement. Dia didn’t have any money on her person, so she offered an ornament she was wearing instead—one of her hairpins. With its intricate silver ornamentation and numerous gemstones, Lapis valued it at a gold coin at least, even if a broker tried to rip them off. This was more than enough pay for the job as presented, and the contract was sealed.

“You’ve both been issued iron-rank identification tags,” said Ivy, who, after arguing hard, got off with only paying half of Lapis’s promised prize. Given the

way the exam was interrupted, Loren had fully expected to be compelled to retake it.

“But we didn’t pass, did we?” Loren asked.

Ivy nodded as she handed over two iron tags. “Strictly speaking, you did not.”

After taking one and checking it over, Loren confirmed it was indeed the tag identifying an iron-rank adventurer. No fake or forgery, at least as far as he could tell.

“Then why did we pass?” Loren asked with a tilt of his head.

“I don’t know. There may or may not have been a certain push from somewhere or another to get you through,” Ivy answered, matching his head tilt angle for angle.

That was difficult to swallow, but there wasn’t much to lose in accepting it, so Loren did. Lapis, meanwhile, set off toward where Dia waited.

Their meeting point was the south gate of Kaffa. Catching up to Lapis, Loren handed her the new iron tag. Lapis narrowed her eyes, examining the tag for a moment, before turning toward Dia.

“Was this your doing?” she asked the girl.

“Who could say?” With that obvious avoidance, Dia suggested they get going if they were ready. Given Dia’s fine clothing and hairpins, they initially assumed she would charter a carriage, but Dia intended to walk the whole way.

“You would never find a carriage that could satisfy me in a town like this.”

The ride quality of a carriage could vary wildly by style and build. The cheapest ones could be summed up with the word “abysmal,” while the sort used by royalty suppressed the bumps of the road with all manner of tricks and mechanisms before they could bother the delicate bottoms of wealthy passengers. In one of those, it hardly felt like you were moving at all.

“If my other option is to ride in some shoddy cart masquerading as a carriage, I’d rather rely on my own two feet.”

“Wouldn’t you rather put up with a bad ride than wear yourself out?” Loren asked.

“As if I get tired.”

Undead didn’t feel fatigue to begin with. This applied to Elder vampires as well. If she couldn’t get tired and sore, Loren had to wonder if ride quality even mattered. According to Lapis, though, high-ranking vampires tended to fixate on the strangest things.

“You need not prepare food for me. Though I wouldn’t mind joining you for a drink.”

“Like you’re old enough to drink. Oh, I guess you’re older than you look.”

“You won’t be popular if you fuss over a woman’s age.”

“Like you’re old enough to lecture me about love. Oh, I guess you’re older than you look.”

“You’re doing this on purpose, I see. Bastard.”

It was quite surreal to see Dia—who wasn’t dressed for foot travel in the first place—grab Loren, who was far taller and wider, by the waist and swing him around. What’s more, Loren was wearing his long black coat and carrying his own belongings, and his massive sword was slung over his shoulder. Between his weight and the weight of his equipment, it would have been difficult for an ox to make him budge.

At this rate, they would gather the attention of everyone passing by and become the stuff of rumors, Lapis mused as she watched Dia swing Loren around like a large, frowning ragdoll. Those fears were soon proven unnecessary.

As Lapis, stuck leading the donkey along, squared up to deflect attention, Dia hoisted Loren under one arm, freeing up the other to stop Lapis. “I said south of Kaffa, but I never said a word about taking the road.”

At Lapis’s questioning look, Dia pointed in a completely different direction—toward a grassy plain with no sign of human traffic.

“We’ll head straight toward our destination. This way.”

“I’m afraid there’s no road there.”

“No need. I know the exact direction. Follow my lead.” With that, Loren still in

tow, Dia began striding through the long grass.

What to do, what to do? Lapis wondered. Now that Loren was being dragged off, she couldn't just watch him go. With a small sigh, she pulled the leads and ventured onto untrodden land.

A little girl carrying a muscular man, then a woman and a donkey. Perhaps if anyone were around, they might have found it quite strange; with no witnesses, however, and with none of those involved caring a whit, it was of little consequence.

"Hey, you," Dia called out along the way.

Lapis realized that neither she nor Loren had introduced themselves. "My name is Lapis, for what it's worth."

Usually, she would have noticed her own lack of manners much earlier, but Dia seemed so uninterested in that sort of thing that it had never even occurred to Lapis.

"Oh, Lapis, is it? Then what is this one called?"

"That is Mr. Loren. Please return him promptly—he's mine."

If Loren weren't so scramble-brained after Dia's rough treatment, Lapis would never have blurted out something so outrageous. However, her expression was incredibly serious; as surprise flitted across Dia's expression, Lapis snatched Loren out of her arms and slung him over her own back.

The way she could shoulder the man so easily was largely owed to the reclamation of her real arms. Her prosthetics had been high-end, of course, but she had always been worried about them detaching from her flesh and blood, and so avoided exertion lest she yank them right out.

"I knew it," said Dia. "You're no ordinary woman, Lapis."

"I'm perfectly ordinary. It's not like I have any powers specific unto me."

If Loren were in command enough of his senses to listen, he would have registered some complaints, but as far as Lapis was concerned, she hadn't told a single lie. Lapis was perfectly ordinary: a perfectly ordinary demon.

In human society, Lapis could pass as a stupendously capable magician and

priest, but among demons, she wasn't anything remarkable. As a matter of fact, she had been driven from her home to get a bit of experience under her belt. She didn't consider herself weak, but she wasn't particularly strong, either. She was ordinary, without anything to make her stand out among her peers. Dia was simply measuring her against the wrong criteria, which Lapis had no obligation to clarify. Having the girl misunderstand, and continue to misunderstand, was simply convenient.

"Don't you mean in your homeland? I'm talking about here." Dia chuckled, having seen straight through her.

Lapis cursed to herself. She had been aware there was a chance Dia had connected all the pieces, and this confirmed it.

"No need to make that face at me. It's a waste of your good looks. If your partner—Loren, yes? If he saw you now, he would squirm free from even the tightest of love's embraces."

Lapis puffed up in offense at Dia's teasing, but she maintained a level tone. "Like you're old enough to talk about life. Oh, I guess you're older than you look."

"You're really trying me with your audacity. Would I be wrong to be angry at this point?"

"You'll get more wrinkles if you frown, Grandma."

"Grand—I admit I *am* old enough to be your grandmother…"

"How many greats shall I append to that, then?"

Dia's face stiffened, but Lapis did have a point, and she didn't want to object enough to diminish her maturity.

"W-well… I've lived for five hundred years. Add as many as you like."

That was a sufficient shock for Lapis. Lapis was a young demon, and while she knew theoretically how long a vampire could live, Dia had outstripped her expectations.

"Five hundred… You experienced the days of the ancient kingdom firsthand?"

The once-flourishing ancient kingdom—which had ruled over the entire

continent—had collapsed for unknown reasons roughly three or four hundred years ago. Generous estimates put it at four hundred, and either way, Dia must have been alive at the time.

“Indeed, though only the end of it.”

A smile no child could muster bloomed on that young face. Lapis inadvertently slowed, distancing herself, but Dia’s smile vanished, and the girl was a girl once more.

“As I experienced it, I could give you a very detailed account of that old kingdom. Of course, I had barely been born when the collapse began, so I’ve had to fill in some of the gaps with the words of my older brethren.”

“Just out of curiosity, how old would the oldest of your kin be?” Lapis was fully aware that her question was quite impolite, but she also knew she wouldn’t get another chance to ask.

After thinking over it a moment, Dia answered, “I don’t know whether this is true or not, but our eldest claims to have been born in the age of gods.”

It was said that in beyond-ancient days, the gods had descended to shape the world. Over many long months and years, they’d given birth to all manner of entities to lay the foundations of existence. Only once the gods were sure their creations could manage the world did they return to the realm of divinity. Ever since, they’d watched over the mortal world from their realm. This was the fundamental tale passed down throughout the world.

Of course, that had been so long ago that it was idiotic to even try numbering the years, but popularly this era of divinity living amongst mundanity was referred to as “the age of gods.” Thus, if Dia’s words were to be believed, the oldest Elder had coexisted with the creators themselves.

“That’s awfully intriguing.”

“It’s all hearsay to me. There’s nothing better to do along the way, so I could tell some old tales.”

Suddenly, Lapis was completely invested. Dia’s face was half-sour, half-smile as she took a few steps to distance herself from the intense sparkle of Lapis’s eyes.

“Why did the ancient kingdom fall?”

“I don’t know. It was gone before I knew it. Our race barely interacts with humans, you see. They see us as monsters more than anything else.”

A two-day journey meant they would need to spend a night along the way. Naturally, Loren and Lapis had prepared for this, and they were searching out a good spot as the sun reddened.

Loren had regained consciousness on Lapis’s back, and presently he was unloading the donkey and erecting a tent. Lapis dug a shallow hole, piling withered grass and firewood inside to set alight. She assembled metal rods around the pit, and from this rack she hung a pot filled with salted meat and minced root vegetables. Lapis tended her rough soup and peppered Dia with question after question where she sat by the fire.

“Why are Elders grouped with vampires? From what I’ve heard thus far, it seems quite strange to categorize you as undead at all.”

“You would have to ask whoever did all this categorizing, but I presume it’s due to our unavoidable impulse to drink blood.”

Elders didn’t possess even one of the weaknesses of a normal vampire. They weren’t impeded by running water, they weren’t weak to silver, and they walked around under the light of the sun with perfect calm. All the same, they had that damning marker of vampirism: the insatiable desire for blood.

“Apart from that, we’re also somewhat weak to blessings, but the main reason would have to be, well, the diet. ’Tis the blood-drinking that maketh the vampire, after all.”

Even so, Dia herself didn’t seem confident. Regardless, while Elders rarely needed to feed, they were unable to stave off a desire to drink blood—human or similar—for very long.

“There’s just no cure for it. Animal blood is no substitute, and human blood, raised for us and voluntarily given, isn’t much better. Once the hunger comes, even an Elder’s willpower cannot resist.”

“Does that mean you’ve supped on a great many people already?”

Lapis posed the question very casually, but the words carried weight. There were only two options for those who became some Elder’s meal: they either became a low-grade undead or a vampire, both of which entailed death.

“Yes, well, let’s see. At my level, one person per year sustains me well enough. I don’t go around gorging myself like some others.”

“But that’s still five hundred people. An incredible amount.”

Perhaps the number was even higher than that. While Dia was a vampire, she had been made rather than turned after some years of human life, so she’d presumably had a ravenous vampiric childhood. There was no guarantee that her age exactly matched up with the number of sacrifices to her longevity.

“It’s up to you to decide whether five hundred humans over five hundred years is great or small.”

Five hundred seemed like a large figure, but it did feel so much smaller when placed over five hundred years. In any war lasting that long, several hundred times that would have been lost.

“But isn’t that still a lot, considering all the humans eaten up by your species as a whole?” Loren asked while driving stakes into the dirt to affix the ropes.

His words returned Lapis to her senses. Perhaps five hundred over five hundred years was a small figure for Dia alone, but add all of who-knew-how-many Elders together and the number of lives lost was multiplied by…dozens? Hundreds?

“If you’re only talking Elders, there are a dozen or so,” Dia said as if a tidy baker’s dozen of lives every year was nothing.

This was still less than a fraction of the casualties in war. *Of course, wouldn’t it still be quite a tragedy if a dozen people went missing in a year* without *war? Has no one gotten to the root of this?* Lapis wondered.

“Besides, we surround ourselves with villages of humans who offer us their blood.”

“You’re raising them as livestock?” Lapis’s question came out in a stilted tone

as she processed the implications of that little fact.

Dia shook her head. “Regardless of the outcome, that wasn’t our intention. In exchange for the sacrifice of one human a year, we offer protection and various other boons to the villages. That is our agreement.”

“So they *are* livestock, right?”

“Regardless of the outcome, I said. This system is far better than abducting victims to suck dry. They usually choose the oldest resident or the one closest to the grave.”

“I’ve never heard of any village like that,” said Loren. If such villages had any contact with the outside world—be it through trade, gossip, or travel—there was no way yearly sacrifices to the undead could have remained hidden for centuries on end.

“Of course not. They are hidden, secluded, and sealed off.”

With trade restricted, defenses to deter outsiders, and other concealment measures, the Elders had a tidy arrangement to maintain a stable and everlasting source of blood, all unbeknownst to the outside world. According to Dia, at least.

“Are you sure you should be telling us that? You’d better not come around to tie up loose ends later,” Loren said, fearing that the only people who heard such things found themselves eaten or abducted.

Dia waved this off as easily as a bad joke. “Why should I care? No matter who you tell, they’ll take it as the ramblings of a madman.”

“I doubt anyone would believe we heard it from an Elder in the first place.”

Adventurers sometimes took on normal vampires in their quests. Even that, however, was beyond what coppers were capable of, and irons would need to resolve themselves to heavy injuries before facing such an enemy. True Elders could only be dealt with by legendary heroes, or by nations and guilds making full use of their resources.

In any case, normal vampires and even Pures were still within the realm of possibility. Once an Elder entered a tale, however, all believability went right

out the window. Very few people ever came across an Elder. They were the provenance of fairy tales, or so the general wisdom went.

“We’re actually not that insular, but we don’t usually reveal our identities. No one would know I was an Elder if I didn’t tell them so. This is a special case.”

After all, Dia had only revealed her identity because Scena sniffed her out. It made sense that she wouldn’t have come clean if Loren hadn’t muttered the word.

“Since we’re already on the topic, I’ll tell you that my request has to do with one of the hidden villages.”

By now the tents were up, and Loren wandered over to take a seat near the fire. While Lapis never took her eyes off Dia, she continued stirring the pot to keep it from burning. At times, she added a pinch of salt to tune the flavor.

“Truth be told, I’m the youngest of the Elders.”

“At five hundred years old?”

“Yes. The others are all older, and Elders are generated naturally, so there’s no telling when the next one will arise.”

In short, Elders had no blood relations, vampirically speaking. It was impossible to predict when or where one would appear, and not a single new one had popped up in five hundred years. As a result, the baby of the pack had five centuries to her name.

“Young, inexperienced Elders operate under the protection of our, well, elders. We receive education until we’re recognized as being able to stand on our own. Until then, we build our knowledge and power with the guidance of our teachers.”

“So, Ms. Dia, you’re saying you’re under someone’s protection. Ah, could you have a taste of this, Mr. Loren?”

Lapis scooped a small portion from the pot, pouring it into a bowl that she handed to Loren. It was all a very serious soup undertaking, but Dia paid it neither interest or attention.

“I am indeed under someone’s protection, but I won’t say a single word about

the other Elders. I may speak of myself, for myself, but I have no qualifications or permission to speak on behalf of the rest."

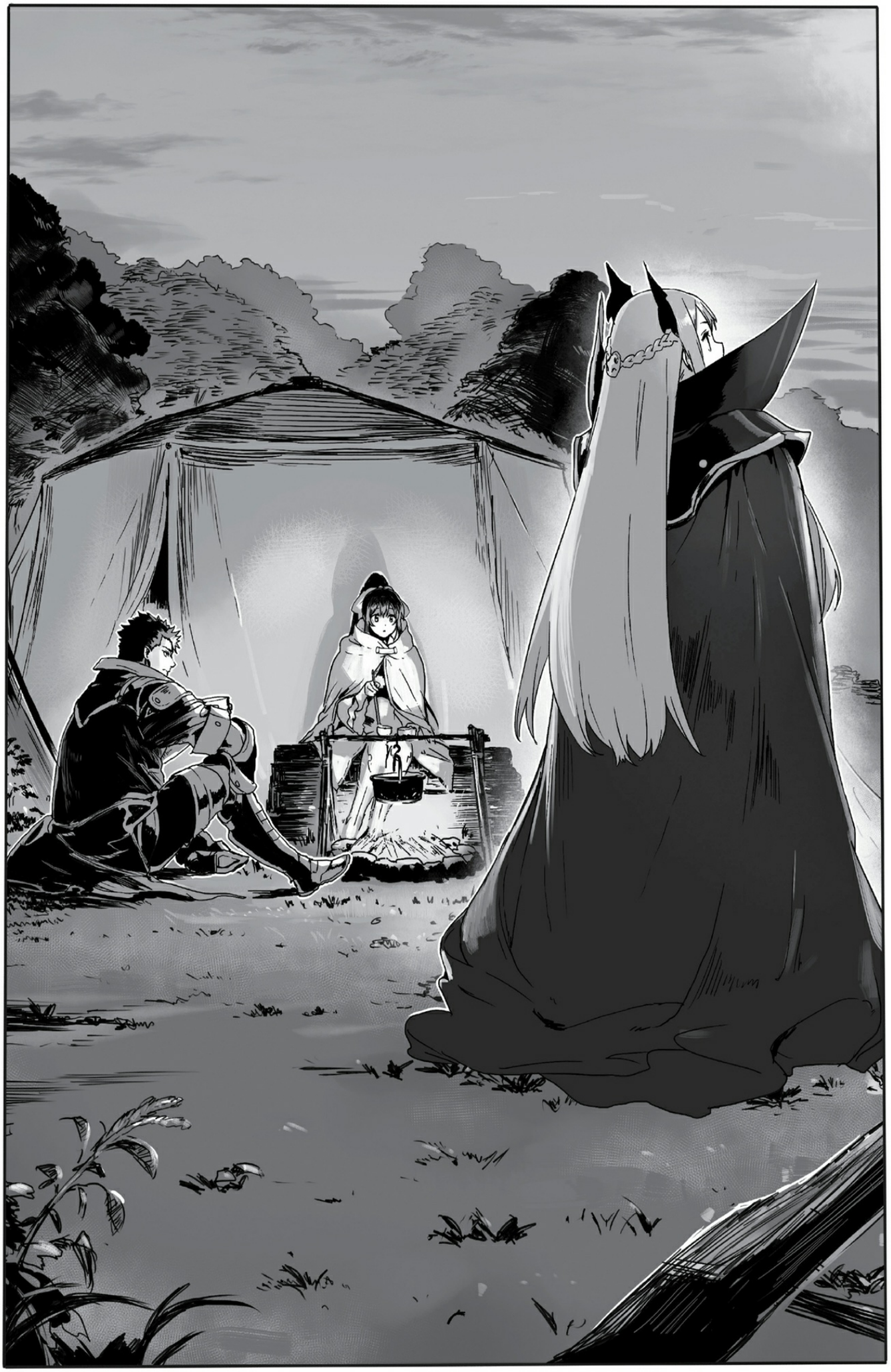
"Sure, whatever. Needs a bit of salt, I'd say. Pretty bland, to be honest."

Elders sounded far beyond the reach of lowly mortals, and Loren didn't feel the least bit inclined to involve himself with them.

That being the case, he had no use for any information on said other Elders. The taste of Lapis's stew was far more pertinent to his well-being.

"I think you ought to get used to blandness in this occupation…" Lapis grumbled as she dumped extra salt into the pot. "But so be it. Ah, please go on, Ms. Dia."

"Something about this seems off to me, but very well. When an Elder leaves their guardian's protection, they are granted a base, as well as some human villages around it."



“You mean…”

Dia had told them they were headed for abandoned ruins. By the sound of things, those ruins were possibly to be Dia’s base, but Dia shrugged.

“I was simply ordered to go there. I don’t have any information regarding what’s to become mine or not. Perhaps that is the case, or perhaps it’s merely where I will find information pointing me in the right direction.”

“Is this like a test to qualify you for independence?”

“You could see it like that.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with us pitching in on that test?”

After all, this looked to be a trial to prove that a young Elder could take care of themselves. Did paying for the help of strangers count as being independent?

Dia nodded. “Using others to reach an objective is a skill in and of itself.”

“It doesn’t sound too dangerous, simply going to a pre-prepared destination.”

Lapis’s optimism was quickly squashed.

“I wouldn’t have asked for your assistance if that was all there was to it.” Dia looked at the sky and sighed. “For starters, my guardian will place trials before us, each of which I must pass. The other Elders will also have deployed a considerable number of obstacles. It will not be so easy to arrive at our endpoint.”

“Why would the other Elders obstruct you?” Lapis tilted her head.

With a light scoff, as if the answer were obvious, Loren returned his empty bowl to Lapis and said, “Well, I’m sure even Elders have power struggles.”

“He’s right. We’re sentient beings, aren’t we? Two will start a fight, and three will start a power grab. This is as true for Elders as it is for everyone else.”

“Is it just me, or have we been dragged into something incredibly troublesome? Should we have asked for more?”

Dia’s quest for independence meant being recognized as an adult and solidifying her place as an Elder. She had no authority while under someone else’s protection and was not yet taken seriously among her fellows. Neither

Loren nor Lapis had any way of knowing how much influence the ten-odd Elders had in the world, but if Dia reached adulthood, she would probably join the ranks of whatever Elder was acting as her guardian. This was bound to displease some Elder or another, and so they'd moved to interfere.

"If you successfully come of age, as it were, Ms. Dia, are you going to join your guardian's faction?"

"It would make sense to. I have a debt to repay, and I will be even further indebted after being given a share of their land and people. I wouldn't dare turn traitor the second I gained independence." At that point, Dia smiled. The troubles brewing ahead clouded both Loren and Lapis's faces, yet Dia cheerfully declared, "So I'm counting on your assistance in my coming of age. No need to make such faces; I'll think of an additional reward once this is over, and I'll gladly offer any information I have along the way."

The finished stew was divided into bowls. Lapis continued hammering numerous questions into the young girl, while Loren, who wasn't too keen on history, took his bowl and ate. He had taken the job already; completing it was his only option.

"I can take the night watch. I don't need to sleep, after all."

Lapis's stew was disappearing and, as she said from the start, Dia didn't eat a drop of it.

Lapis went out of her way to make it, Loren thought, but he wasn't about to wrestle a human meal into a vampire.

"Do vampires only ever drink blood?" Lapis asked.

"That's not entirely true," Dia replied. "I simply choose not to eat."

"Shall I catch a rat or snake? I can squeeze it out for you."

"It's not as if just any blood will do," Dia said with a sullen look. Not that Loren or Lapis knew the difference between rat blood and a juicy human artery.

Dia insisted they were different, and she was the subject matter expert. That was that. Loren quietly produced a leather flask of wine from his bags. At first,

Dia complained that it smelled of hide. However, she must have felt awkward watching the others eat, as she eventually took a small sip.

Her proposed turn on watch came once dinner was over.

Loren rejected the idea outright. “Hey, we can’t have the client on watch duty.”

Dia was certainly a vampire, an Elder even. Still, she was the one paying them. As a hired blade, he couldn’t let his client take on petty work. Lapis shared this opinion, but Dia tilted her head a bit and answered, “I really won’t sleep.”

In fact, Loren wanted Dia fast asleep. She seemed harmless enough, but she was still a vampire; he sincerely feared what she might do if left to wander at night. Unfortunately, if she said she didn’t sleep, it was silly to order her to do so.

“That’s your problem,” he ultimately told her.

“No, I don’t mean because I’m an undead or a vampire or whatnot. It’s going to be dangerous tonight.”

Dia’s tone was so casual he almost let it slip by. Loren hurriedly caught the thought before it flittered away: “What was that about tonight?”

“I believe it will be dangerous. It’s about time for those who do not wish for me to reach the ruins to interfere.”

“What’s going to come, specifically? You got any info?”

“I can’t rule anything out. It could be humans, monsters, or other vampires. They will send whatever they can arrange.” She spoke of such dangerous things as though she were discussing tomorrow’s breakfast menu.

Nothing good’s gonna come of this job, Loren thought as he reached for his sword, only for Lapis to place a hand on his wrist.

“Lapis?” he asked.

“*You* should sleep, Mr. Loren. I think you’re going to need it.”

“What do you intend to ask her once I’m out?”

“When did you learn to read my mind, Mr. Loren?!”

“You wear it on your sleeve!”

“You sure are relaxed, aren’t you?” Dia mused.

Glaring at Lapis’s business smile, Loren peeled her hand from his wrist. Perhaps he was a bit rough, as she rubbed the back of her hand as she brought it to her chest.

Seeing Loren draw his sword, Lapis turned to Dia with a sigh. “Why don’t we march on, then? By the look of things, no one’s sleeping tonight, so there’s no point in loitering around the campsite.”

If no one was resting, the tent and sleeping bags were just taunting them. If they packed up now, they had rested their legs enough to walk through the night.

“Personally,” said Dia, “*I* want you two to get some sleep. There will be quite a bit of work for you, come tomorrow. That’s why I thought I would watch over you until morning.”

“Now that sounds concerning.”

There wasn’t much to plan for without the specifics, but it definitely wouldn’t be easy, if Dia was prepared to sacrifice a night of sleep over it. If that wasn’t bad enough, it was an Elder—a nonsensically powerful being—telling them all this. Not a single thing about the situation put Loren at ease.

“There’s a reason I asked assistance from humans whose abilities fall short of my own. I am a vampire, and so are my pursuers. Naturally, they will be well aware of my vital points and weaknesses.”

Thinking this over carefully, Lapis motioned for Dia to continue.

“To summarize, I’m expecting our foes to prepare something intended to specifically stymie me, an Elder. As such, I’ve sought out the help of mortal adventurers.”

The Elders could easily pinpoint each and every weakness that Dia possessed. She was one and the same, after all, and the youngest of them to boot. They’d be exacting in their plans.

“We still have some distance to cover before our destination. I don’t think

they'll bring out their most lethal obstacles just yet. I want you to rest while you can."

While Dia reassured them that the situation was not as bad as they thought—not yet, at least—she also confirmed it would only get worse.

"Incidentally, what sort of hazards might they set up to impede an Elder?"

Unlike Loren, Lapis seemed intrigued by these attacks Dia was concerned about. While vampires, Elders didn't seem to have any glaring weak points. What would prove fatal to a normal vampire or Pure was a mere pinprick to them.

"I doubt you would be able to take advantage of them if I told you. The simplest way would be to overpower me with the strength of another Elder. It is obvious that any older than I would be stronger, and I am the youngest."

Dia chuckled at her own lack of prospects. Her words were a death sentence for her human (or human-ish) hired help.

"In that case, aren't we screwed the moment one of those Elders pounces?"

"Not entirely. I'll be beaten, yes, but the Elder won't have the strength to deal with you while overpowering me. As long as I'm with you, I don't run the risk of facing off against an Elder directly."

"It's kind of a consolation prize, but I'll take it as some good news for once." Lapis's voice and expression made it doubtful she actually thought so.

Loren didn't think they had a chance in hell of winning if they went toe to toe with an Elder. They couldn't even rely on Dia's strength, which she was very plain about.

"If that happens, won't you be wrestling some other Elder, and we'll be left to deal with whatever minions they've dragged along?"

"That sounds likely."

"What are we even up against, dammit?"

"I couldn't say. At the very least, I don't think they'll bring anything that could really *kill* me."

If Dia was trying to console him, she was failing miserably. There weren't many things in the world that an Elder couldn't handle, but things would turn utterly hopeless for her mortal companions if some terrible foe was tossed into the ring.

"Well, I doubt there will be any high-tier dragons involved. Hopefully."

"I'm throwing in the towel the moment I see one."

<I can do something if it's on the level of a bone dragon, Mister,> Scena replied, encouragingly, to Loren's fed-up tone.

The monsters known as bone dragons were, strictly speaking, a tad different from the dragons Dia spoke of, but that didn't make them any less threatening. They'd been chased by one before, and while Loren didn't know about Lapis, he wasn't confident he could defeat one in a head-on confrontation.

"But I don't know about the low-tier variety," Dia continued. "Wyverns, lesser dragons, and the like. They're hardly different from beasts, so I'm sure my fellows could procure a number."

Wyverns were beasts that looked as though a lizard had failed to become a dragon. Their front limbs had adapted into wings, and they stood on only their rear legs. Lesser dragons, meanwhile, were the lowest of the species. They thought only of hunting, mating, and increasing their numbers.

In a certain country on the continent, special means had been devised to use these beasts as messengers or to launch support fire from overhead. Surely an Elder could manipulate any beast a human could, and they could expect some among Dia's trials.

"Incidentally, there would be nothing strange about encountering a Pure either."

"Ain't that a kick in the teeth."

If it's that bad, at least make it sound like it, thought Loren. Although presumably the presence of a Pure wasn't much of a threat to Dia. The power difference between a Pure and an Elder was near insurmountable, but Loren was a mere human. He didn't want to run into any extraordinary monsters if he didn't have to.

“There are feuds and factions among vampires as well. The Pure became undead of their own accord for great power and longevity. They’ll suck up to one Elder or another for their own benefit.”

“So even death couldn’t free them of those shackles, eh? Tragic.”

Dia seemed to have another take on the matter. “No one escapes such chains of obligation until they’re dust in the wind. The Pure become what they are through magic and ritual; they’ve merely chosen to be bound by the shackles of the undead rather than the living. Is choice a tragedy?”

Is that how it works? wondered Loren. Only the Pure would know.

“I’ll be able to handle it if a Pure comes sniffing around. You can sleep if you want to,” Dia said, as if they were the ones paying her. Then she picked up the wineskin from which she had been taking sips over dinner and held it to her chest.

It was quite a strange sight, to see a young girl cradling wine like that. Loren stabbed his large sword into the ground beside him and began watching for signs of anything at all. Lapis tossed another log into the dwindling flames.

Chapter 3:
From a Battle to a Talk

TIME PASSED. When the moon crossed the apex of midnight, Loren was staring up at the sky, using the flat of his planted blade as a backrest.

Nearby, Dia downed another cup of wine—how many had it been so far? Then there was Lapis, who prattled on with her endless questions. For some reason, she kept sneaking glances at Loren.

Ultimately, despite all the trouble they'd taken to set up camp, no one was going to sleep. Just as she promised, Dia intended to spend the entire night without a wink of it, and Lapis's curiosity compelled her to extract as much information from the girl as demonically possible.

In Loren's case, he was repulsed by the very notion of sleeping while his client stayed awake. He also had the nagging feeling that something terrible would happen if he left Lapis and Dia alone together.

The two of them hardly knew one another, but Dia had been alive in the days of the ancient kingdom—to a priest of the god of knowledge, an opportunity like this didn't wander along every day. Dia's knowledge was surely incredibly dangerous, and as an Elder, there was a good chance she didn't care what human secrets she spilled. As the girl answered whatever was asked of her, there was no telling when she would divulge something that could lead to the end of the world.

"He has no faith in you," Dia chuckled, noting Loren's wary eyes.

Lapis puffed out her cheeks. "Yes, but he trusts me, so it's fine."

How exactly is that any different? Loren wondered. Further musing was cut off when he picked up a pungent scent mixed with the night breeze. He stood.

"So they're here," said Dia.

"So it seems," Lapis replied.

They noticed at almost the same time, and as Loren plucked his sword from

the earth, Scena suddenly entered his field of vision with a flutter of wings.

<I'll be sharing your eyes, then.>

Human through and through, Loren couldn't see far in the dark, even on a moonlit night. Only when Scena synchronized her eyes with his did his vision expand to that of a Lifeless King. The darkness cleared in the literal blink of an eye. The plains stretched out to the edges of Scena's perception, and Loren winced at what he now saw amidst the grass.

Countless shadows dotted the landscape, still as statues. They surrounded the campsite, no expression to speak of on their mask-like faces. Their clothes would be normal attire in any regular town, but not what should be worn in the middle of this empty stretch of nothing.

Loren asked himself why he hadn't noticed until so many had gathered, but through the sight of a Lifeless King, he caught the flickering red within every hollow eye. He surmised this was proof that every single one of these figures had been bitten by a vampire.

The undead possessed hardly any presence. Sure, you could hear them if they moved, or smell them creeping close, but their lifeless bodies were little different from inanimate objects. What feeble auras they did give off could be easily covered up by the presence of stronger entities—for instance, Dia and her interrogator Lapis.

"You didn't notice, Lapis?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Loren. I was too focused on talking to Ms. Dia."

Even with her two prosthetic eyes, it wouldn't have been strange if she noticed the vampires before Loren. However, Lapis had been so busy drawing information out of Dia that she'd completely disregarded her surroundings.

"Don't blame her. I didn't notice until it got this bad either," Dia insisted, but Loren had not intended to chastise Lapis. It wasn't like he'd been any keener, so he could hardly push the blame onto others.

"Of course," Dia continued, "the reason I didn't notice is because they are of no consequence to me."

“Worry a bit, would you…?”

Just because she could handle it didn’t mean she could stop paying attention. However, come to think of it, normal vampires really weren’t a threat to Dia; maybe she could ignore them even when surrounded, like a person swarmed by gnats.

“Aren’t there too many to fight? And wait, are they *all* vampires?”

“Not all of them. Look closely.”

On Dia’s words, Loren brandished his large sword and focused. Sure enough, only a portion of the many figures possessed those flickering red pupils. The others simply stared ahead with hollow, lifeless eyes.

“Remember what I told you?” Dia said. “Only the undefiled may become true vampires. We would have a bigger problem if so many chaste men and women were simply lying around.”

“So you’re saying…” Lapis seemed to realize something. She squared her shoulders, looking around in surprise.

Sensing what she was trying to say, Dia returned a single, slow nod. “They must have attacked some random town or outpost and sucked all the residents dry without regard to the consequences. Quite atrocious.”

As if this statement set them off, the figures filling the landscape began to close their circle. With sunken eyes and gaunt faces, they reached out as if grasping for something that wasn’t there. They advanced slowly, their legs dragging behind them, and while Loren hesitated for a half-second, he quickly readied his sword.

Terrible as it was to imagine, there was no cure for those who suffered a vampire’s bite.

“Looks like I gotta do it.”

If he let these victims roam free, they would wander elsewhere to seek out even more victims. The greatest form of compassion would be to put an end to these unfortunate souls before they dragged anyone else down with them. Loren saw this as true mercy; he lunged forward, smashing his blade into the

shoulder of the nearest thrall.

Once given speed, his abnormally weighted blade dug into the pitiful body without resistance, cleaving through flesh and blood with equal ease. Viscera splattered across the grass.

His return swipe hammered into the hip of another foe, bisecting them diagonally. The undead's upper half bounced away over the plains while its lower half fell twitching.

Loren had effortlessly taken out two of the flock, but this didn't brighten his mood in the slightest. There were so many that losing two was meaningless; more shuffled up to take their place, as if the loss had never occurred.

What's more, likely owing to the blood now spilled, the individuals with red eyes grew quicker on their feet. They overtook the slow crawl of the rest to close in on the campsite.

"Damn, you're annoying!"

The first one leapt, and Loren's sword met it with a mighty smack. A moment ago, he had cleaved through his foe, but this time, the vampire sandwiched the blade between its hands, pushing back before that extraordinary blade could reach its body.

A vampire's might far exceeded that of its mortal ingredients. Their monstrous strength, beyond human ability, made them a formidable foe. Using that uncanny prowess, the vampire managed to slow the force of Loren's attack.

In the next instant, however, the massive blade picked up speed again, and it pulverized the face of a dumbfounded vampire.

<You're getting the hang of it, Mister!>

A self-enhancing technique using mana. Lapis had taught it to Loren once before, and he had managed to activate it of his own volition. With this technique, a new layer was added to his already tremendous physical might. For a few brief, glorious moments, Loren could enter the realm of the superhuman.

“I can’t keep it up, though. Turns out I don’t have much mana in me.”

He’d already fiddled around enough to confirm that he could maintain the technique for five minutes, give or take. Five minutes was nothing in the full scale of a prolonged battle, so he’d tweaked his deployment of this little trick.

Without sparing a passing glance for the vampire that accepted his sword to its face, now crumpled on the ground, Loren made a great horizontal swing. There was a great cacophony of metal meeting bone and flesh as everything in the path of his blade was swept into the air. This went far beyond human capabilities.

Loren used the enhancement for only the brief moment of the swing. Since he couldn’t keep it active over a full battle, he would only leverage it when necessary and handle the rest with his own musculature.

This was simple enough to put into words, but in practice, it was exceedingly difficult. If he messed up the activation timing, the output was significantly lower than his normal swing. However, with his intuition and skill as a warrior, he was able to draw out firepower beyond even his usual intimidating swordplay.

“Turn Undead!”

Beside him, Lapis continued exercising her skills. Each time she used *Turn Undead*—a priest’s divine ability to purify the wicked and unnatural—a number of those dark figures were burned to ash in white flames before they could even raise a scream.

This ability had proven completely useless against Scena once she had become a Lifeless King, but their current foes were no such thing and it took immediate effect. Watching the undead disappear one after another, Lapis clasped the prayer pendant hanging around her neck.

“Look at that, Mr. Loren! I’m actually doing something properly priest-ish!”

“Did you need to add the -ish?” Loren grumbled, turning several bodies to piles of meat with each swing.

When dealing with the undead, a consecrated weapon, or at least one made from silver, was a must. Loren's sword was made of an unknown black material, and he'd nursed some concerns about its efficacy against the horde. However, no matter how sturdy the undead were, it seemed even they could no longer operate once their bodies were pulverized or torn apart.

"This is incredible. I'm impressed you can accomplish so much with a human body," said Dia, watching from behind. The pair were whittling down the encroaching horde with such deft skill that they were practically putting on a show for her. On top of that, neither Loren nor Lapis were taking any significant injuries as they carried out their one-sided slaughter. "Perhaps I won't have to lift a finger."

"I wouldn't mind a little assistance," Loren suggested. He still felt reluctant to put his client to work, but there were times when that was unavoidable. For example: when dealing with the red-eyed vampires mixed in among their assailants.

The normal undead could be rendered powerless without much trouble, but Loren found he couldn't beat the vampires so easily, not without bursts of self-enhancement. Even if they were dispatched in mere seconds, using the ability still drained his mana inch by inch. Once his fatigue piled up, the enemy could gradually overwhelm him with sheer numbers.

"A little? Would this suffice?" Dia waved her slender hand.

The air did not shudder, the earth did not rend. It truly was a soft, casual motion, and just with that, the head of every enemy within the campfire's light flew as if by some child's joke: *Pop goes the weasel*.

As they were already dead, this wasn't accompanied by some flashy burst of red, just the dull thud of heads hitting the ground. The bodies remained standing, blood slowly oozing from severed necks as they crumbled.

It was such a calm slaughter that Loren, and even Lapis, swallowed a nervous breath.

"You have until the last foe, or until the sun rises. I don't care which, but in any case, do your best."

As if to insist that her job was over now, Dia sat cross-legged next to the fire.

If the hired blade defeated fewer enemies than his client, there was no point in hiring him at all. Loren needed no further prompting to brandish his sword, while Lapis kept her hands clasped, incessantly using *Turn Undead* to whittle down their enemy's numbers.

Ultimately, Loren swung his sword until daybreak. The undead were slow, and they were not individually a threat, but there were so damn many of them.

Cut and cut though he did, their numbers never seemed to shrink. He worried they might be overwhelmed. However, once a dim streak across the sky made clear that morning was on the horizon, their assailants stopped attacking, stumbled back, and slowly disappeared off to do who knew what, who knew where.

Once they were out of sight, Loren forcefully unclenched fingers practically bonded to his hilt, letting his greatsword fall to the ground. They would have been in real trouble if the proportion of vampires to zombies had been any higher.

He'd only managed to hold them off because most of their assailants were slow in step and reflex. Otherwise, he would have run out of strength somewhere in the quiet hours of the night; his body was so worn, he could easily picture himself collapsing beneath them to become their next meal.

He couldn't rest forever. Their attackers had dispersed at daybreak, but that didn't mean the party was in the clear. He didn't know who was behind the assault, but they'd been attacked at their campsite. That meant that their opponent knew their location, and there was no telling when the next danger would strike.

"Let's get moving," said Loren. "We won't be able to hold them off from here."

"You really put us to work, you know," Lapis complained as she swiftly began packing up camp.

Loren stood to help her, but she held up a hand to stop him. "I'll take care of

it. Please get a little rest, Mr. Loren."

Though she had used *Turn Undead* all night, it wasn't the same as a true blessing and didn't require much strength. Not to mention, Lapis was a demon, built of fundamentally different stuff. She didn't show any signs of fatigue beyond the obvious sleep deprivation, and Loren accepted the boon she offered. As he watched Lapis work, he took long, slow breaths, letting his body go limp in his attempt to recover as much as he could.

"I'm astounded you managed to swing that thing from dusk 'til dawn." Dia's astonishment was directed at Loren's sword.

The blade seemed to be composed of various materials from the hilt to the tip, but it was all a uniform shade of black. After a night of grinding through the undead, it was slathered in a thick layer of blood and grease. If he didn't at least wipe it off, he feared the weapon would weaken from rust, but his body wasn't listening to him. Even if he could reach out, he didn't have the motivation to draw it from the ground.

Upon seeing Loren's quivering hand reach for the sword, Dia darted over. "Just recover for now. I can, at the very least, clean it for you." She grabbed it by the blade, lightly plucking it from the soil Loren had last impaled it into.

A small girl easily lifted a sword taller and wider than she was, but what really shocked him was the way the blood stained her fingers.

Vampires were famous for drinking blood. Upon touching or seeing blood, a vampire lost all rationality, slaughtering everyone in the vicinity to seek more sustenance. Although an Elder, Dia was still a vampire, so she surely possessed some of the incumbent bloodlust.

Loren worried that she would be swept up by hunger upon touching the blood of the turned humans. Contrary to his concerns, she stared at her soiled hands with disgust. She took a wet cleaning cloth from Lapis and began wiping down the blade in earnest.

"H-hey," he cautioned.

"Worry not. An Elder may need blood once a year, but we can suppress our other urges with mere willpower. In exchange, there is absolutely no way to

overcome that annual impulse.”

“I’m just asking for reference, but that one-time thing isn’t coming soon, is it?”

An instinct so intense she had no hope of bucking it off. Dia was tiny, but she was an Elder; if she attacked them under the influence of her unholy appetite, Loren didn’t think they stood a chance in hell. From the way she explained it, whoever was chosen as her sacrifice was fated to be drunk dry with no hope of healing or resurrection, and she’d chewed through five hundred of them so far.

Loren didn’t have high hopes for waking up some kind of vampire, either. He had heard that the abilities of a vampire’s victims depended on the abilities of their sire. Even those turned by normal and Pures were substantial threats, and five hundred Elder victims wandering around would have ended the world ages ago.

“Well, you know. When it happens, it happens,” Dia said, looking away. A chill ran down Loren’s spine as he willed his aching body to move and get away from her.

Dia frowned. “I was joking. I already finished this year. Otherwise I would never seek assistance from a human, would I?”

“You gotta admit, that was in bad taste…”

After all, it was a life or death matter totally beyond his control or escape. It was far too tasteless a joke. Wiping away the sweat that had coated his face in that horrid instant, Loren returned to his relaxed position.

Dia hoisted up the clean sword and handed it to him.

“A magium greatsword. Quite a rare gem for a human. You must have paid a fortune for it. Treat it well.”

“Magium?”

“What? You were using it unaware?” Dia raised her voice, genuinely surprised, and Loren glanced at Lapis.

She was still hard at work, and she didn’t seem to have picked up on their conversation. As she packed things away, she was oblivious to Loren’s stare.

“You must, at least, know of the demons who live in a basin of the great mountains at the center of this continent, yes? Magium can only be mined from their homeland. Passing mana through the metal draws out its various attributes. Oh, but it’s very rare to see a sword made completely out of the material. Usually, it’s just used to plate the surface, like gold on cheap jewelry. Sometimes only the edge, to save on materials.”

“So it’s pricey?”

Considering this new information, the sword had to be incredibly valuable. It was easy to picture it going for a ridiculous sum, but he wanted a concrete figure.

“As far as I can tell, this one is pure magium all the way down to its core. On top of that, both the hilt and blade are packed with so many spell sequences, why, it’s ridiculous. At this point, I don’t know why they didn’t fit in a sequence to make it lighter… But maybe they didn’t have the space,” Dia muttered before remembering Loren’s question. “Adding together the material and rune costs, this sword would go for more than ten times its weight in gold coins. Not that a swordsman would relinquish such a weapon for any fee.”

Loren gulped. The money he’d borrowed from Lapis to buy it was considerable, but it turned out the blade was worth far, far more than what he’d paid. As he sat there, mouth agape and lost for words, Lapis popped her head up from behind.

“Why, that’s incredible. You sure are lucky, Mr. Loren, to be able to buy something so amazing.”

“You sure you can write it off like that?”

There was some nuance to Lapis’s words. When Loren bought the sword in the Kaffa weapon shop, both the shopkeeper and Lapis had been acting very strangely. It was safe to say Lapis had set up the whole situation beforehand, making it seem as though the sword had oh so coincidentally happened to be in that shop for Loren to purchase.

Was it really okay to *coincidentally* come across such an item for less than a fraction of its worth? Lapis answered this with a nod and a smile.

“What else is there to say about it?” she asked.

“I see. I guess that’s about right.”

Dia didn’t weigh in on their conversation, but she understood enough of Lapis’s situation, and was clever to boot, and as such came to her own conclusions.

“Just because it’s valuable, that doesn’t mean you can sell it off, okay?” Lapis insisted.

“I know, I won’t.” Loren took the sword out of Dia’s hands, stood, and hung it on his back.

Watching this with a satisfied look on her face, Lapis clapped her hands together. “Now then, we’ve finished packing, so let’s get moving already. I’m sure you’ve recovered a bit, Mr. Loren, but it would still be quite troublesome if we were attacked again.”

“Don’t even joke about that. I won’t be able to handle those numbers again for a while. I’m the weakest one here, you know.”

Although he said that, he could feel his body recovering at an abnormal rate. Of course, he didn’t have anything to do with it. Within him, Scena was injecting some of the life force she’d saved up from her energy drain attacks, clearing his fatigue at speeds that would usually be impossible. If she put in too much, she risked drying up her own powers, but it was a small thing to clear up some petty human weariness.

Loren still worried about her, but she waved those concerns off with a laugh, insisting, <I managed to drain quite a bit from those attackers. Don’t worry about it, Mister.>

His face settled into a wry smile.

“Still, I have to say, compared to your sword and coat, the armor underneath is quite rudimentary,” Dia weighed in, taking the lead deeper into the plains.

Of all Loren’s equipment, the sword and coat had also been *coincidentally* procured, but his clothes and leather armor were perfectly ordinary market fare. As far as Loren was concerned, they fulfilled their purpose well enough. He

didn’t have the need or means for anything high spec. But Dia didn’t accept this as a satisfactory answer.

“You’re already using first-rate items, so at least wear armor to match.”

“I don’t have the money for that.”

Good items cost money—that was common sense. It wasn’t as if he would never come across goods going for far lower than they were worth, but he was hardly ever that lucky. At least not without Lapis’s intervention. And though he’d paid some of his debt, he still owed her ten gold, and it wasn’t like he was earning much of anything to pay her back.

“Watching the work you put in last night, I was just thinking that your reward was a bit lacking. If I successfully obtain a base of operations, I shall provide you with more suitable equipment.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I have a deal to go halfsies on all rewards with my partner here.”

Loren couldn’t accept a reward only he could use. Of course, he could pay half of its value to Lapis in money to make it fair, but he didn’t have enough in his wallet to cover half the cost of a piece of equipment gifted by an Elder.

“I don’t really mind, you know. It would make my job a lot easier if you had better equipment, Mr. Loren.”

“I get where you’re coming from, but…”

“If you’re that unhappy about it, we could always increase your debt for half of the value.”

“Yeah, no.”

Sure, there was neither interest nor urgent need to repay her; the debt wasn’t some great burden. It was still preferable to maintain the status quo rather than dig himself deeper.

“Very well, then Lapis will have her own reward. Will that solve the issue?”

“I guess so.”

“We did it, Mr. Loren. We got a bonus! Doesn’t that make you want to work

harder?”

Lapis sounded giddy enough, but the mere thought of how they’d earned it… The sheer number of undead in that attack weighed heavily on Loren’s mind. It was hard to imagine that was the greatest force an Elder could muster. The closer they got to the ruins, the higher the chance of an attack from something even more mindboggling.

I’ll only be happy about a reward once I return alive, he thought coldly to himself as he picked up his pace slightly.

After setting off from their campsite, they still had a day to go before they reached their destination. If all went smoothly, they would be at the ruins by evening, but Loren suggested limiting themselves a bit and spending the night a short distance from their destination.

Dia was reluctant to stop, wanting to reach the ruins as soon as possible and discover what awaited her, but Loren turned a deaf ear to her arguments. He slowed, and they slowed with him.

“You must have something in mind,” Lapis said, having offered no other opinion on the matter.

Making a sullen face, Dia glared at Loren. *It better be a good reason or else*, the air around her seemed to say. It wasn’t as if they had anything better to do apart from walking.

“First,” Loren said, “it’ll throw off our enemy’s schedule.”

“Their schedule?”

“Yeah. I’m just assuming here, but our enemy probably figured out the exact route Dia’s taking. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to send so many undead straight to us last night.”

And that had been a flock so great that the combination of Dia’s contributions, Lapis’s endless wave of *Turn Undead*, and Loren swinging his sword from dusk ’til dawn hadn’t wiped them out.

Someone would have noticed a great mob of undead if they’d wandered

about during the day. No one had raised an alarm, which meant their enemy had started the flock's march from the opposite direction just around nightfall. To accomplish this, their foe would have needed a general idea of where they would set up camp in advance.

"We're not following the roads. It wouldn't be strange if we'd run into a small village by now, but we haven't, not even a farm. Your route avoids them, right?"

Villages didn't exist only along the major roads. Small settlements cropped up all over the place; even off the road, it was strange for the party to have seen neither head nor tail of civilization.

"Indeed. I wish to avoid needless conflict and chaos. As there are people out to get me, I would be unwelcome in human habitation."

That was putting it lightly, not that Loren intended to correct her. He found it commendable that Dia didn't want to drag any innocent humans into the mix, but it was also a bit too late for that. That flock of undead had surely sprouted from a Pure or Elder making a mess of any number of towns.

He kept this to himself, offering a prayer to the victims whose names and origins he would never know.

"I'm thinking our foes are using that to piece together our route. Going off our movement speed, they can tell roughly where we'll be and around when we'll be there, and they've got a schedule based on that."

"So by purposely lowering our speed, we will introduce a discrepancy into their predictions."

This would be largely pointless if their foe was conducting more active recon. Maybe he was overthinking himself into a false sense of security, but it was better than throwing their hands up and doing nothing.

"On top of that, I want it to be daytime when the big trouble comes calling."

"I'm perfectly capable at midnight or midday."

"You're perfectly capable, maybe, but I'll be in trouble. Why does a puny human have to charge into the heart of danger right at the witching hour, when

the undead are at their best?”

The undead were weak to the light of the sun. Even an Elder, who scoffed at the puny powers of sunburn, might find themselves the slightest bit less terrifying. Noon was the best time to fight any undead, when their abilities were at their lowest.

Those ruins were a glaring unknown. If the party arrived in the evening and started their search as night fell, they’d be fighting evil by moonlight.

“We risk facing another attack at camp, but it’s better than entering those ruins at night.”

“I’m a bit concerned that not enduring a second round of that mess isn’t your top priority,” said Lapis. “But you’ve put quite a bit of thought into this, Mr. Loren. I’m surprised!”

Dia didn’t seem as pleased. “I feel like you’re prolonging the issue, but if you have a proper reason, and you’re not simply dragging your feet, then so be it.”

Loren’s explanation made it harder for Dia to hurry them along. She could have kicked up a fuss, but she let him make the call. Given his luck, Loren was certain they’d be staring down the barrel of another problem before too long. Then he noticed Dia gazing into empty space as if she had caught sight of something.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Without offering an answer, Dia remained fixated on that point in space. “Is this…by chance?”

Then her face lit up, and she ran forward before either adventurer could grab her. Loren and Lapis, having just come to the decision to slow down, were left to watch Dia book it across the plains, smile on her face and arms outstretched.

“Master! What are you doing here?!”

As she shouted, the empty space in front of her bent and warped. Loren and Lapis went on guard, but Dia stood there, arms spread, not the least bit wary.

A hand reached out of that distortion in space, taking it by the edge and pulling it wider. Once it was wide enough for a person to pass through, out

stepped a woman. Her black dress was cut to reveal her bust, and her platinum blonde hair fell in waves to her waist. After slowly looking around, taking stock of her surroundings, the woman’s gaze fell upon a smiling Dia.

The woman scowled and dropped a fist onto the crown of the girl's head.

"Ow! M-Master?" Dia protested, rubbing her head.

The woman thrust out her index finger, her expression alone enough to kill a man. "I am no longer your master, you idiot. How are you supposed to stand on your own like that? Waiting for me so defenselessly—what would you have done if I were your enemy? Are you asking to be killed?"

Dia's shoulders fell at this scolding. "But Master, I could tell it was you by the spell structure…"

"Gah… It's not a bad thing to be confident in your abilities. However, overconfidence leads to carelessness. Do not forget that."

"I'm sorry, Master."

Dia gave off the air of a dejected puppy. Meanwhile, Loren and Lapis, who had witnessed the whole spectacle, were frozen, struggling to identify the right course of action.

Upon finally noticing them, the woman cleared her throat before bowing with such polish that even Loren, who didn't know etiquette from a hole in the ground, could tell she was refined.

"I apologize for my sudden intrusion. I did not mean to startle you."

"No worries… And just who are you?" Loren asked.

Dia's lack of caution gave the impression that this encounter might not end in a brawl. Nevertheless, some mysterious woman had just manifested out of thin air; it was impossible not to be wary of her. Loren kept a hand on the hilt of his sword, posing his question without coming a step closer.

"My, I must have failed to introduce myself. I am… Yes, let's go with Sierra."

That was hardly her proper name, and she'd just appeared in clothing completely unsuited to the open plains. On top of that, Dia was very open in calling her "master." Putting all that together and arriving at the obvious conclusion, Loren knew he was about to be incredibly redundant.

Nevertheless, he cautiously asked, "So you're…an Elder as well?"

“Indeed I am. As well as the former guardian of Dia, this girl you are assisting.”

Sierra looked to be around her mid-twenties. But as she proclaimed herself Dia’s guardian, and she seemed to be a teacher of sorts, she was at least over five hundred years old. Here was the very Elder who had devised this trial to prove Dia’s independence, the cause of all the trouble they were going through.

“And to what do we owe a former guardian’s visit?”

Even if Sierra was related to Dia, even if she was an Elder protecting her protege, anyone would be cautious of a vampire after last night’s assault.

It seemed Sierra knew what Loren was getting at. She didn’t look insulted by either Loren’s hand on his weapon or Lapis’s ready stance. With a serene expression, she answered, “If it were only the exam Dia had to face, I naturally would have kept my silence. However, it seems a troublesome individual is getting in her way, so I came out of concern.”

“You were worried about me, Master…” Dia said, making no attempt to hide the joy on her face.

Loren worried that Dia was being far too incautious; Sierra must have shared his concern. The woman intercepted Dia with a fist as Dia tried to embrace her in glee, and she held Dia’s head back as she went into another lecture.

“How long are you going to act like you’re still my apprentice? The reason you were allowed to seek independence was because everyone recognized that your magical abilities surpass my own, yes? If you call yourself a proud Elder, then be careful what you say and do. How many times must I tell you?”

“You know, I’m not trying to get between master and student here.” Loren wasn’t trying to save Dia, whose eyes were teary as she rubbed at her head, but this sounded like it had the potential to turn into a long lecture indeed. So, he stepped in before it could pick up steam. “If you know who’s out to get us, then maybe passing on that info should take priority.”

“You…have a point. The one trying to interfere with this exam is Stoss. She’s not one of our strongest, but that makes her the most troublesome.”

“What do you mean?” Lapis asked. “Why would her lack of abilities make her more of a problem?”

Sierra voice betrayed her irritation. “The more powerful an Elder, the less they rely on the strength of others. Coming at it from another angle, Stoss’s lesser abilities mean she surrounds herself with useful pawns.”

“So our opponent has a lot of mooks. That certainly is troublesome.”

Sierra nodded before turning back to Dia. “Given my position, I am unable to offer you any assistance. You should be fine with your own magic, and I trust the people you’ve chosen, but don’t let your guard down.”

“Master…”

Concern crossed Dia’s face. This time, Sierra greeted her distress not with a fist, but with a gentle hand. She showed her smile for the first time.

“Come, come. Don’t make that face. You’re my apprentice, are you not? I’m sure you will do just fine. I look forward to the day you overcome this challenge and join our ranks,” Sierra said as she continued patting Dia on the head. Dia leaned into it for a moment before looking Sierra straight in the face and offering a firm nod.

Chapter 4:
From Vigilance to Interception

SIERRA DISAPPEARED just as abruptly as she'd arrived, Dia seeing her off into nothingness with a smile. Apparently, Sierra's business was done, with all necessary information imparted. Contact with Dia had been kept to a bare minimum. Due to the nature of the trial, Sierra couldn't interfere too much regardless of who Dia was squaring off with. They also had to consider that it would be dangerous if this Stoss character figured out she'd been implicated and set up appropriate countermeasures.

Loren would have appreciated an Elderly helping hand, but there seemed to be unshakable rules in place, established who knew when, and so Sierra offered nothing more than information.

"Should we not be grateful we at least received information?" Dia rebuked Loren for his dissatisfaction.

Dia seemed to think it fortuitous that they even knew who their opponent was. As far as Loren was concerned, knowing that their enemy was an Elder with plenty of pawns at her disposal didn't give them much of a leg up.

It was, however, a stretch for Loren to so bluntly speak his mind to his client, so Lapis took up the thread of conversation.

"You must really love your master, Ms. Dia," she said.

Dia broke into a wide smile. "Yes, of course. My master has been looking after me for so long, and she's so incredibly kind."

Lapis smiled back. "She went out of her way to deliver that intel, after all."

Perhaps because her master had been complimented, Dia glowed with even greater happiness.

Loren couldn't help but be concerned at this display of childlike vulnerability. Come to think of it, Dia had lived for five hundred years, but she still wasn't recognized as an adult. She had spent her entire life learning under her master,

and it felt accurate to say that her entire world revolved around that teacher in the way a child might regard their mother.

Thinking about it that way, the depth of her trust was more understandable. At least, it felt cruel to scold her when she smiled and spoke of her master with such joy on her face. Loren held his tongue.

<Are you wary of her master, Mister?> Scena reached out to him. As she rode along in his existence, Scena could pick up some shadow of Loren's emotions.

"When on the job, you gotta suspect everyone who isn't in your band. That's how mercenaries do things," he muttered softly to himself, not wanting Dia to hear.

"Speaking of masters, Loren." Dia, in high spirits, twirled to face him. "I'm curious about the one who taught you the blade."

He was a bit put off by the change in topic, but he knew that turning his own thoughts over wasn't going to lead to any new conclusions about Sierra.

"What about my master?" Loren asked her.

"Well, who exactly was he?"

The image of a man crossed Loren's mind. A man who'd picked him up from some corner of the world and raised him as a mercenary. How had Loren come to meet him? He didn't even know. It had happened further back than he could remember.

It hadn't been long since they parted, and yet when he thought about it, it seemed like a lifetime ago. The company had fallen during battle. Loren didn't know where his master was, or even if he, or anyone from the company, was still alive. Loren nevertheless got the feeling that man in particular was knocking around somewhere, somehow.

"I was a mercenary before I became an adventurer. I learned from the leader of our company. Of course, he said I had no talent for it, so I barely learned a thing."

The failures at finesse had spurred Loren to take up a massive sword as his main weapon. He had no talent when it came to technique, so he forged his

physical might to compensate. With the chief's support, he'd devoted his life to training until he wielded a weapon so massive no one else could even lift it.

"He wasn't that famous. Didn't have a moniker or anything. Good at looking after people, but pretty average as far as mercenaries go."

That was Loren's personal opinion, at least. The chief had done a good job rallying the men, and his experience spoke volumes when he took command on a battlefield. Several times, his presence had subverted a massive disadvantage. Of course, the company still met a messy end; at this point, Loren could hardly claim his mentor's leadership skills had been top-notch.

"Was he human?" Dia asked.

It was quite a peculiar question, given what Loren had said thus far. Loren inadvertently found himself staring at Dia's face. He was sure he'd be able to tell if she was messing with him, but she looked just as serious as could be. This was no joke, so he took a moment tracing all his memories of the chief before he gave her his answer.

"I'm pretty sure he was. Nothing strange comes to mind."

"I see. That is most peculiar," Dia said, looking rather unsettled. "Do you remember fighting that dashing youngster at the training grounds in Kaffa?"

"Do you think I'm senile? It only happened the other day."

"And instead of your usual sword, you wielded a normal two-handed blade."

Not that he had done so by choice, given that the guild was reluctant to stock practice weapons only one guy could use. Thinking back on his duel with Claes, Loren recalled how Dia had taken interest in the gesture he'd performed before the duel.

"First, the one who taught you swordplay knows how a knight does battle. The type of swordplay you demonstrated was based on the foundational school taught to knights."

Why had the chief known a knightly fighting style? That was curious, surely, but not particularly strange. It was possible the chief's swordplay just happened to resemble it by coincidence. Even if it wasn't happenstance, it wasn't rare for

a knight expelled from his order to turn to mercenary work.

Moreover, even if the chief was never a knight himself, he could've studied under one of those fallen knights. Or say none of that was the case—anyone well acquainted with the battlefield would have clashed with knights countless times. Perhaps their opponents naturally picked up some of their tactics over time. Loren couldn't say there was anything overtly non-human about a mercenary who knew knightly combat.

"He must have been quite a genius then, if merely fighting knights allowed him to pick up the style well enough to teach others," said Dia.

She was of the opinion that a genius on that level would be known throughout the land. However, Loren had never heard a peep about his company chief being famous. Loren admittedly wasn't very interested in that sort of gossip, but even he was acquainted with famed names such as the Blade Fiend, Cleaving Gale, and Infernal Edge. If his own leader was world-renowned, there was no way he'd have been oblivious to it. Loren felt confident saying the chief had been a good mercenary, a decent leader, and mostly just some guy.

"We can put that aside for now. That wasn't really the peculiar part."

"There's more?"

"That salute. A knight's salute."

To hear Dia tell it, this was a gesture performed between knights prior to a duel. A signal of their pledge to uphold chivalry and fight in a forthright manner. Naturally, it was not the gesture of a mercenary.

Loren *had* found it rather strange when it was taught to him. There was no time to do it in the heat of battle, and it was completely unnecessary for anyone who didn't abide by the rules of honorable combat. But for whatever inscrutable reason, the chief made sure Loren could give a proper salute before anything else.

He wasn't so insistent on it after Loren took up the greatsword, but he still drilled it in that Loren should perform it whenever he was fighting with a normal blade, especially one-on-one. Loren considered it a way of paying respects to the man who'd taught him how to fight, but Dia seemed perplexed.

“I know it’s strange for a mercenary to do,” he said. “I get that.”

“Not entirely. It’s not about whether you salute or not. Rather, the issue lies in *how* you salute.”

Loren had to cock his head at this. He wasn’t sure how she wanted him to answer.

“A knight’s sword is to be offered to their lord; thus, the tip must point upward.” Dia walked a little farther down, grabbing a short tree as she passed by. With a careless tug, she snapped the trunk, nearly the width of her own wrist, neatly at the base. After plucking the branches off like flower petals, she gripped it in front of her chest.

She held the treetop toward the heavens above. This was, apparently, a knight’s usual salute.

“And yet you saluted with the tip facing down. That is abnormal.”

“I’m sure it’s different from country to country. I don’t even know where our chief picked it up.”

There were plenty of nations in the world, and who knew how many chivalrous orders in each. With so many knights running around, who was to say the captain’s salute wasn’t from some far-off official order? Hell, maybe they’d stolen it from him.

“Sword styles may differ here and there, but the salutes in this part of the world are roughly identical. It would be a strange knightly bunch indeed that pointed their swords at the ground, no matter which one it was. Of course, this is all knowledge I’ve picked up from master—however, that comes from an Elder far older and wiser than any of us.”

“You said ‘roughly,’ right? Roughly doesn’t mean exactly, does it?”

There was always an exception to prove the rule.

Dia wasn’t convinced, shaking her head as she tossed the brutalized tree over her shoulder. “Of course there are exceptions, but only one I can think of… And that’s what bothers me. After all, that exception is one that no living soul should know of.”

“You’re not gonna tell me it’s some vampire knight thing, are you?” Loren asked. It was hard to imagine that the chief was some sinister undead.

Dia shook her head at the suggestion. “Vampires have no knights. We don’t have a country to begin with.”

“Then what…” The look in Dia’s eyes cut him off and left him floundering for words.

“I can’t speak of it lightly,” Dia explained, sounding unsure. “We must consider the possibility that your chief simply put his own spin on the practice. I’ll need more information before I draw conclusions. What is his name?”

A man who had passed onto Loren every technique he knew. A man he considered like unto a father, even if they shared neither blood nor name. “Juris Mutschild. Was always bragging about how he had a family name even though he was a mercenary.”

“I see. Allow me to ponder the matter. Once I get my thoughts in order, I’ll tell you anything relevant.” With that, Dia started off toward her destination once more, ending the conversation by force.

As Loren chased after her, he racked his brain for any further information on the identity of his company chief—an mystery he had never given thought to before, and a riddle he would never answer on his own.

The next stretch of the journey went by without incident. As their foe relied on the undead to do her dirty work, she wasn’t keen on sending weakened minions to attack during the day. After the assault on the camp, Loren didn’t feel so much as an irritated presence.

They’d long since left the road behind, so there were no travelers to cross paths with, and Dia intentionally avoided any human settlements.

Aren’t we worried about wild monsters? wondered Loren. However, he realized early on that they had less than nothing to fear in that regard.

The girl leading their little pack—a normal young lady by all appearances—was the highest form of vampire. She had lived over five hundred years. While

she had suppressed herself in town to protect her identity, she had no reason to hide out in the plains with only Lapis and Loren as witness.

Unleashed, her aura was a towering presence, a looming power. Any monster with even an iota of sensitivity knew to stay the hell away. Wild beasts, respecting the apex predator, gave them a wide berth.

Several times, Loren glimpsed some hulking monster on the horizon. Several times, he watched those dim shapes take notice of the Elder and run for the hills. As long as Dia led the way, even the most starved, ravenous beasts presented all the threat of frightened rabbits.

With this protection, they journeyed on without any notable trouble and stopped about a stound away from their destination. Dia declared it a good spot for a short rest.

“What about spending the night?” Loren asked.

“I think we could still make it before nightfall if we kept going,” Dia said, sounding doubtful. The sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon, but it had a ways to go. However, Lapis and Loren both put in a vote to set up camp.

“There’s such a nice view here, after all,” said Lapis.

“I want to get it over with before anything gets in our way,” said Loren as he unloaded their bags from the donkey.

Dia thought they would be pitching a tent again. She frowned at the items Loren picked out. “What are you doing now?”

Loren had taken out a metal spade that was certainly sturdy enough to serve as a weapon in a pinch. However, it was an unremarkable thing, meant for a humble life of digging holes and a common sight at any given campsite.

Naturally, Loren’s next action involved digging. He stabbed the tip of the spade deep into the ground, and at first Dia wondered if he was digging a latrine or something. Thankfully, that wasn’t what he had in mind.

The trench he dug was deep and wide. With mighty heaves, he discarded dirt to form a heaping pile to one side; as Lapis wasn’t doing much else, she took out another spade and began leveling and patting down this excess.

“What are you preparing for?”

Dia received no answer. Loren silently continued to dig, and Lapis continued to build a modest fortification. Eventually, Loren dug out a rough circle, meeting his own starting point. With that taken care of, he set to expanding it. It was soon as deep as his waist and wide enough for two Lorens to walk side by side.

All the dirt was gathered on the inner rim of this hole and packed by Lapis into a dirt wall that rose about waist height as well.

“This is an encampment, isn’t it?” Dia said, finally realizing what they had built.

It was the sort of fortification an army might set up, rendered in three-person miniature. Only with this work done did Loren set up a tent inside their new fortification. He knocked down a small section of wall to form a path and headed out to gather dried branches and grass from their surroundings. Lapis went off separately, collecting stones ranging in size from a fist to a baby’s head.

She piled them up in a corner of camp, then left again, complaining that she hadn’t found nearly enough. Dia was starting to see the shape of their ambition.

“Do you think there will be an attack?” she asked.

They’d built a stronghold to intercept their attackers, complete with rudimentary moat and wall. The stones would let them retaliate from within.

“This is their last chance before we reach the ruins,” said Loren.

He didn’t know if their destination would mean safety, but if their enemy wanted Dia to fail, then the best way to do so was to make sure she never reached her goal in the first place. A tent pitched on the last leg of the journey was too enticing a target to ignore.

“But was it not your intention to throw off their schedule?” Dia asked.

Unless Stoss had rustled up some very useful spies, she had no way of knowing they’d dropped pace or chosen now to set up camp. She’d have no idea where to launch a proper attack.

“If we marched according to schedule, we’d be at your ruins already.” While

they were setting up the encampment, the sky had streaked peach, then crimson. The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon. “She should have aimed an attack at our destination by now, so soon she’ll know she’s lost us.”

It was twilight, and the undead would soon gain full strength. Quite convenient for their assailants. The way Loren saw it, it would be foolish, not to mention risky, to face an attack on the same scale as the last without any preparations.

However, only a stound’s walk from the ruins, neither Lapis nor Loren nor even Scena or Dia sensed even a trace of their foe.

“If I missed the mark, and they didn’t try to attack the ruins first, that means she knows we ain’t there.”

“So you’re saying we’re being watched?” Dia asked, her gaze darting frantically across the plains. “But there’s nothing, not as far as I can see.”

As the sky grew darker, Loren’s human eyes grew less effective. To an Elder, however, the darkness was true home. Dia’s vision wasn’t obstructed at all, and she could see just as well as in broad daylight.

Loren shrugged. “I doubt they’d have us under constant surveillance. This is just where an attack makes the most sense, if we’re not where we’re supposed to be. Not that I’ll be disappointed if they *don’t* attack. Hell, I’ll be jumping for joy.”

“It’s far better than facing them without any preparations, right?” Lapis continued for him, now satisfied with her pile of rocks.

From among the various stones, she picked out a smaller one, wound her arm back, and threw it outside the encampment. Loren heard the stone whistling through the air as it disappeared beyond the darkness at tremendous speed.

With his mortal eyes and ears, Loren couldn’t tell where the missile landed. But Lapis was squinting in that direction, and Dia followed her gaze. Apparently, they could see where the rock made impact.

“They fly quite nicely, wouldn’t you say?” Lapis asked.

“With that sort of output, you might take a normal vampire down with two or

three direct hits.”

Loren had merely hoped the stones would slow down the zombies who failed to become vampires. With Lapis’s demonic might behind them, it seemed they could do rather more than that.

“Will they be useless against Pures?”

“Pures and Elders can alter their own bodies,” Dia said. She waved her right hand dismissively—a hand which dissipated into mist and spread out before their very eyes. The formless mist followed Dia’s wrist closely, as if rooted in her bones. Before long, it coalesced and transformed back into flesh. “With good aim, it may somewhat deter a newcomer. Against one of the older ones, it would be barely better than nothing.”

“Though I’m guessing it would perhaps annoy an Elder?” Lapis asked.

“Even I could completely nullify a stone of larger size. I can’t imagine it would work on the others. Want to test that?” Dia was goading Lapis a bit, but Lapis only shook her head. It was good to know the stones were at least somewhat useful, so Lapis set out to collect any she’d missed.

As daylight dwindled, Loren checked his weapon. He was confident in his physical strength, but he couldn’t launch deadly stones like Lapis. Like any human, he had to rely on more specific tools to get the job done.

The first of those tools was a sturdy, slender cloth attached to a handle. He folded it in half, placing a stone at the seam. This was a sling—a weapon designed to hurl small stones into the distance after building up force. If the stone was too large, it would tear right through the sling itself, but Loren was certain he could make some trouble with a rock the size of his own fist.

“Now to make sure I know what I’m aiming at…”

<Leave it to me!>

Scena’s voice echoed in his head and the darkness clouding his sight cleared. His surroundings remained washed out and colorless, but he could make out shapes at a much greater distance. He nodded, satisfied.

“Our preparations are complete. All that’s left is to wait and see.”

“So you won’t be getting any decent sleep tonight either.”

That would deprive him of two consecutive nights of rest. An Elder and a demon might be good to go after that, but Loren was human. Two sleepless nights—nights spent locked in combat no less—would put quite a strain on his mind and body.

“I could do with a nap, whatever happens.”

“Then would you like to sleep until the attack?” Lapis suggested. “I can wake you up.”

Was she joking, or was she sincerely concerned? It made him hesitate, even if he had no intention of taking her up on the offer. “A hired sword can’t sleep when the client is awake.”

Lapis giggled. “How upstanding. But really…”

Dia nodded in agreement.

Even with permission, this was a point Loren simply couldn’t concede. He ignored the concern in Lapis’s eyes and spent his time carefully checking over his equipment and the dirt wall.

Time passed, and the moon arced high in the sky.

Loren was fighting off his drowsiness to keep watch when he suddenly picked up a stench on the wind. He struck a palm against his cheek to fix his attention on the waking world.

He tried to restrain his own strength, but his fatigued brain failed him. As he slapped himself, his jaw let out a tremendous snapping sound and enough pain to make him teary. Lapis jerked up, casting about to see what had happened. Dia, who had fallen asleep against the dirt wall, rubbed her eyes, looking reproachfully at Loren.

He’d been so concerned about staying awake that he hadn’t paid much attention to the others. They’d gone and fallen asleep on him. But this wasn’t the time to scold. Loren stood to gaze over the wall, hoping to confirm the source of the stench, his aching jaw clenched and his brow furrowed. His eyes,

still synchronized with the eyes of a Lifeless King, took in every detail unhindered by the night.

So many undead clustered in the darkness that they sickened one to count, a flock of bone and decaying flesh.

“They’re a lower rank than last time, but there are more of them now.” Lapis sighed at the countless swaying bodies. They were still a ways off, and she could tell from Loren’s expression that the crowd wasn’t what worried him. She squinted, her own eyes going wide at the shadow rising behind the masses.

“What is it this time?”

Their reactions made clear that tonight wouldn’t be a matter of zombies and skeletons. Dia turned to take in the towering figure, surprise flickering across her features.

The massive silhouette of a dragon rose against the darkness. However, none of them could make out the light in its eyes. While ominous, it didn’t look in any shape to fight; its wings had lost their membrane, and gaping wounds covered its body. Fluids—blood, pus, and the juices of decaying entrails—splattered onto the ground from its sides and bubbled away into grimy vapor. It had lost more than half of its sharp fangs, its mouth a ghastly, gaping maw.

“Zombie dragon…”

Regardless of how the dragon had died, it had been brought back with dark magic to create the thing before them. While made of the same stuff as soft and mindless zombies, the lowest class of undead, it possessed the bulk and sharpness to render it exponentially more threatening.

Undead beasts were supposedly unable to use the abilities and magics they had possessed in life. However, their massive physical might was further augmented by the uncanny strength bestowed upon the undead. Dragon corpses were rare enough, and even more rarely resurrected, but the appearance of such a monster would have rattled nations and rallied armies.

“Well, it looks like someone is taking this seriously.”

“How considerate of them…”

“You don’t sound too surprised, Mr. Loren.”

The sight of a rotting dragon corpse should have been quite the shock, and Lapis was sure Loren should have had *some* kind of reaction. While Loren was certainly put off by the sheer scale of their new foe, the other details didn’t unsettle him.

“It’s not my first time seeing one of those things. A while back, some idiots decided to fight a war on top of a mound where one of those was buried. It rose in the dead of the night, and it was terrible.”

Living dragons weren’t easily located, but travelers and adventurers came across their corpses often enough. They usually passed from old age or fights with their brethren, so dragon bodies could sometimes be found in isolated forests, plains, or bogs.

From what Loren had been taught, these corpses would usually return to the soil, but when several terrible conditions coincided, they could become undead monsters and crawl out of the earth.

“Those out-of-the-way places are where battles are usually held, see. There’s no one around, so you can go all out without doing damage to the folks who got nothing to do with it. Maybe it became a zombie because so many people were dying right over its head, or maybe the land was cursed to begin with. I couldn’t tell you.”

“My condolences. Incidentally, what did you do then?” Lapis asked.

“I kept my wits about me and got the hell out. I got lucky enough not to die. It fell apart on its own when the sun rose.”

Zombie dragons encountered on the battlefield most often emerged naturally. After a night of death and destruction, they would return to whence they came at dawn’s first light. Usually, the body parts of a dragon could sell for a high price, so an optimistic mercenary might think survival meant a tidy profit. Unfortunately, the bodies of zombie dragons turned to ash that made such harvests impossible. In short, they were calamities that brought all trouble and no coin.

“What do you suggest this time?”

“Doesn’t look like we can get away.”

Even if they fled, there was no other prey around to distract the thing. It would be right on their heels. Loren had only survived his last encounter with a lot of luck and a lot of less lucky human distractions. He’d done his best to avoid its gaze, gaining a little ground every time it took out a different target, like the best sprinter in a hiking party pursued by bears.

Luck kept him off the list of the dead. If that dragon had decided it wanted to eat him in particular, he wouldn’t have stood a chance.

“What about exchanging blows head-on, Mr. Loren?”

“You want me to die?”

“Are you sure it won’t work? You have your self-strengthening now.”

“Yeah, no. I doubt a bit of boosting will take that thing down.”

“I see.”

Less set on pessimism, Lapis picked up a stone and wound up a pitch. The advancing horde looked even less human than the last batch, so she didn’t hesitate. The stone flew straight, scattering rotting flesh and juices as it pierced through several zombies and skeletons, immediately laying them to rest once more.

The next one had a similar effect, and the next one as well. Zombies were gored, skeletons were shattered.

“Damn…”

“I’m confident in my arms now that I’ve recovered them. It’s all thanks to you, Mr. Loren.”

Did I even do anything? Loren wondered as she continued her cannonade.

Their numbers were great, but zombies and skeletons moved sluggishly. Neither Loren nor Lapis lit a light in this dark night; without a fire, their foes had a poor grasp on their position even as they drew closer to the encampment. Lapis’s barrage was a one-sided assault on the undead mass.

Loren couldn’t chuck stones to such an effect, so he swung his sling, relying on

precision to take out his targets. The undead pushed in from all directions, using sheer numbers as a weapon to inch ever closer.

“Something’s not right,” Dia muttered, now throwing stones alongside Lapis. “The zombie dragon in the back is a formidable foe, but the rest are hardly anything but bone.”

“That’s more than enough, if you ask me.”

“Perhaps. But these are supposed to be impeding *me*, yes? Did Stoss really think an Elder would be unable to handle this?”

Their enemy wasn’t concerned with killing Loren or Lapis. She wanted to keep Dia from passing the exam and becoming a fully realized member of the Elders. However, these half-baked tactics were completely ineffective. The previous attack, with vampires mixed in among the shambling horde, had resulted in a whole lot of nothing. The zombie dragon was the only real threat, its zombie vanguard nothing but a gooey joke, and even that looming shadow meant little to a magically gifted Elder.

“What is she thinking?” Dia asked.

“Perhaps she wishes to remove your helpers before the real plan begins. Or maybe this attack is a diversion. It is possible that some much more threatening trap lurks beneath all this noise. That’s just off the top of my head, but I’m sure there are other possibilities.”

Lapis picked up one of the larger stones, rearing back and throwing it as effortlessly as she had the smaller ones. It flew just as fast, dragging even more undead along and pulverizing them into a multi-layered, rotting pancake. An overwhelming stench filled the plains. Lapis furrowed her brow as she readied the next stone.

“Incidentally, Ms. Dia. What would you say your odds are against a zombie dragon?”

“I would not struggle against it. However, as it was once a mighty dragon, it might put up a bit of a fight.”

<Even I would struggle a bit against it as I am now,> Scena said, eavesdropping as always.

Loren had wondered if a Lifeless King would have been able to snuff it out, but the answer wasn't in his favor. When was it ever?

<It's more difficult to interfere with the physical world now that I've lost my material body. It's too big for energy drain to do much real damage, and I can't use magic unless I use it through you, Mister.>

Scena's verdict came not from her own knowledge or experience, but from the inherited wisdom of a Lifeless King. Loren could trust her assessments.

Then what if you were in your natural state? Loren asked, keeping the question inside his head.

<I would wipe it out in the blink of an eye,> Scena replied proudly.

Every so often, Loren was reminded that the sweet young lady taking up space in his soul was an awe-inspiring entity.

<When it's close enough, I'll deploy energy drain. The effect will be slow, but I'll weaken it by the time it reaches us, so please take care of the rest on your own.>

Scena did whatever she could despite her limitations. Loren offered his thanks as he swung the sling again. Before they could do anything about the zombie dragon, they would need to take care of its vanguard. It hadn't made itself a priority.

"You can't purify it with *Turn Undead*, can you?" he asked Lapis.

"No matter my purity or piety, that's pushing it a bit far."

Loren had held out hope a priest's power might be useful even against undead the size of a cathedral, but he honestly hadn't expected much. He let it slide without getting on her case.

"Either we stall it until morning, or I take it out…" Loren muttered.

"H-huh? Did you just ignore me? Hey, wait…?"

As Lapis needled him, he shoved a stone into her hands and got her back on task. He then picked up another one for himself. However, even Lapis couldn't gather infinite stones in mere hours, and their stock dwindled.

“I’m going to have to go out there, aren’t I?”

They’d made a dent in the horde, but plenty more remained. Far more than Loren could count. If they lacked the ammunition to smash them from a comfortable distance, Loren would have to wade into the mob.

He knew he could deal with zombies and skeletons easily enough, but he feared for his life when sizing up that zombie dragon. Even so, the night hadn’t yielded many options. He steeled himself, slowly drawing his sword from his back.

Chapter 5:
Interception to Transit

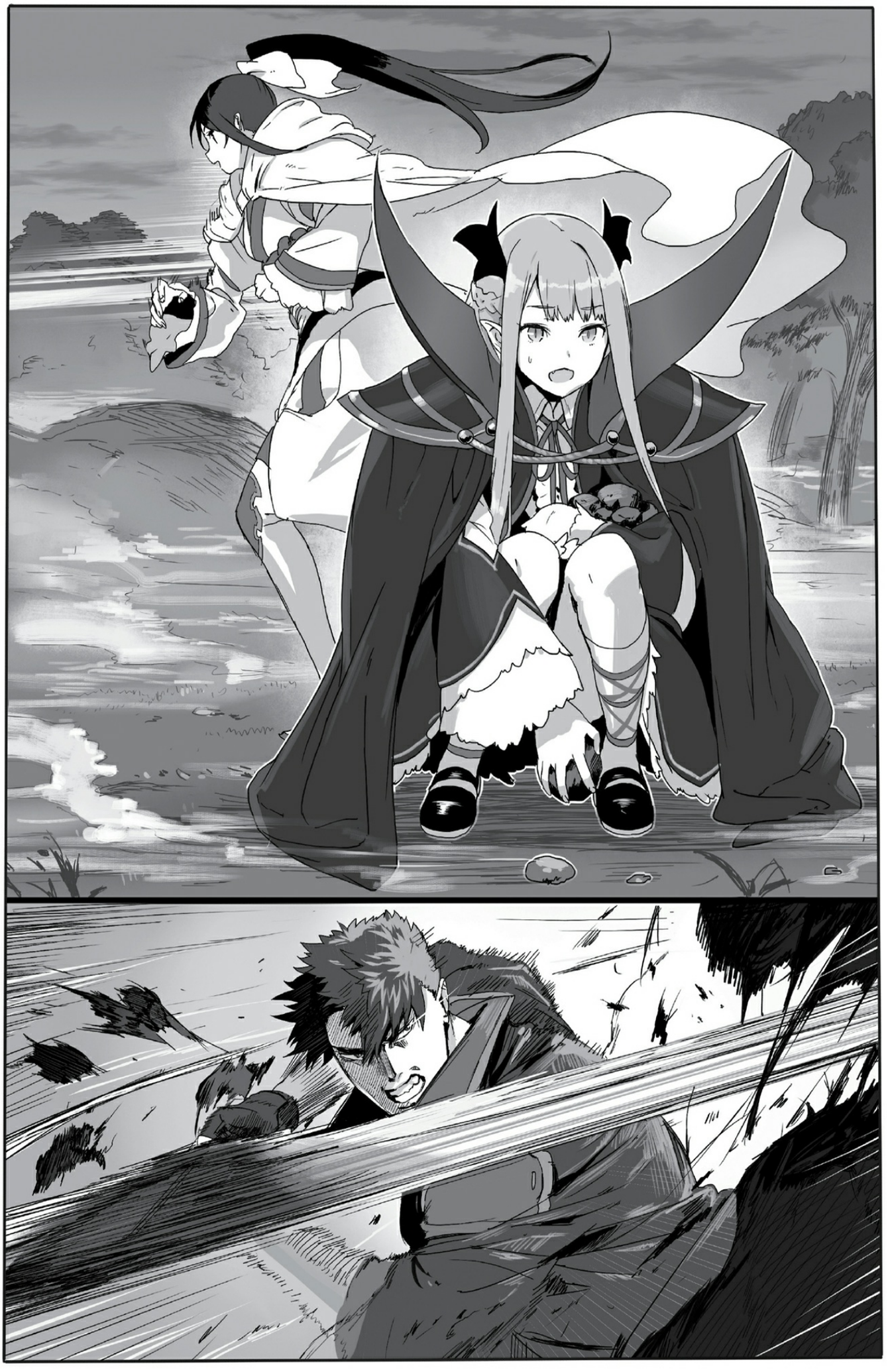
STONE AFTER STONE flew from their encampment. As the undead were battered, pierced, and shattered, Loren drew the greatsword from his back and took one huge leap over the wall and its moat. The moment he touched down, he leveraged his momentum into a broad swing, slicing through the gathered undead.

Watching him from behind, Dia hesitantly spoke. “I’ve been thinking about something recently, working alongside you two.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Lapis asked, never hesitating in her assault.

“He’s…human, right?”

Dia pointed at Loren, brandishing his sword on the other side of their fortifications. With no allies and no obstacles to hinder him, Loren was able to swing his weapon at maximum range and strength. The moment a zombie or skeleton came near him, it was instantly sundered or smashed.



With movements as casual as a maiden reaping wheat, he incapacitated multiple foes with each swing, cutting down their numbers far quicker than Lapis had with her stones.

“He’s human, no matter how you look at him.”

At Lapis’s offhand assurance, Dia pulled a face and crossed her arms. She clearly didn’t buy it. Lapis found herself halting her stone-throwing and observing Loren. Lapis knew Loren as nothing more than an incredibly skilled mercenary. She had never once thought of his abilities as anything superhuman.

Sure, she knew something not-so-human was currently dwelling within him, but even taking Scena into consideration, Loren was human through and through. At least, Lapis hadn’t seen anything to convince her otherwise.

“But look at that sword he’s wielding. Do you think a human could swing that thing with such skill?”

“True, but on the contrary, I think his weapon is just proof that he’s human.”

Dia didn’t grasp the meaning of that. Lapis could feel she wanted a better explanation, so she threw a heftier stone to burst the head of an approaching zombie with the weight rather than the force, then continued.

“No elf would be able to lift that, no matter how hard they tried. He can’t be a dwarf either, given his height and all.”

“Perhaps.”

“No sane demon would even consider swinging around something so large and unwieldy when they have more convenient options. Why, only a human would think up something like that, and only a human would use it. That’s just process of elimination.”

Her claims were incredibly biased, but she spoke them with such conviction that Dia was compelled to nod along. That did, however, leave some questions unanswered.

“But only a demon could have made that magium greatsword, correct?” the Elder girl asked, sounding rather perplexed. “Why would they make something

they wouldn't use themselves?"

"Now that you mention it, that may be true. I mean, it's not as if I know where that thing came from." Lapis didn't feel like admitting to her involvement in the origin of Loren's sword. Nor did Dia feel motivated enough to pursue the matter.

All that remained was a question that no one could answer.

"Incidentally, and I'm not too concerned about the specifics, but where might someone procure such a thing?" Dia asked.

"I don't quite know, but hypothetically speaking, maybe someone spotted it in the back of their parent's storehouse and brought it along thinking it might be useful for something. Yes, that person may have thought they could make a fortune with so much raw, valuable material if they broke it down. Hypothetically. Not that I would know."

The next rock released from Lapis's hand returned several more bodies to the dirt. She glanced down, noted that she was almost out of ammo, and decided it was as good a time as any to begin chanting *Turn Undead*.

"If it was at the back of the storehouse, wouldn't that mean it's very valuable? Whoever it was, I'm surprised their parents never noticed."

"After lopping off their daughter's arms and legs, and gouging out her eyes, one sword is a small price to pay. I'm sure it won't be an issue."

"You're talking about your…parents…right…?" Dia's voice quavered at these ominous words. It was true, of course, but Lapis didn't want to upset the girl.

It was also true that, compared to what her parents had done, she had considered liberating a few things from the storehouse little more than a petty, childish prank. She didn't expect everyone to agree with that, but she wasn't submitting her deeds for committee approval.

"I won't pry any further," said Dia. "I'm terrified to learn what happens next."

"Not prying sounds super. Not that anything so scary happened to me, of course," Lapis answered before returning her attention to Loren.

As long as he was up against minor undead and had full use of his sword,

Loren was in hardly any danger. Her gaze quickly shifted to the zombie dragon as it approached slowly but with certainty.

The zombie dragon dragged itself along by inches. It was still some distance from their encampment; if she wanted to, Lapis was perfectly capable of bombarding it with magic from afar. *Unfortunately*, Lapis thought to herself, *I can't imagine my magic would do anything against the defenses of such a creature*.

"Hypothetically, if we leave the smaller ones to Mr. Loren…"

She narrowed her eyes slightly, locking in her aim. In her hand was a stone about the size of a child's head. To a human it might have been heavy, but she raised it up in one hand, spun to build force, and let it rip.

They were on flat land, and the stone flew true, directly at the head of the zombie dragon. Her shot hit the mark perfectly. An uncanny sound thundered across the plains as scales, blood, and rotting flesh splattered away and the rock shattered against bone.

Lapis studied her results. "I thought I could chip away at it a bit…"

She picked up another stone. As more flesh sloughed away from the wound, she was able to see the white bone of the dragon's skull. However, it was undead and insensate, and it pressed on, never faltering.

"This might prove to be a bit difficult."

The next stone also lopped a chunk of flesh off the zombie dragon's head, but that did little to deter it. Her attacks seemed fruitless, but Lapis's hands did not rest. She continued to throw stone after stone. Each shot peeled back more of the rotting skin, but the zombie dragon hardly noticed, never flinched.

"Well, I've exposed it a bit; do you think I should switch over to magic?"

"If it's magic you want, then leave it to me," Dia said, turning her palm toward their hulking foe. With its scales stripped away, surely Lapis had opened a gap in the zombie dragon's armor.

Then let's go with a decently powerful shot, Dia thought. Her expression immediately morphed to one of shock.

“That…can’t be…” The words fell from her lips in a stunned whisper.

Had she heard something? Lapis didn’t know, but Dia had reacted as if someone had called out her name. The girl was certainly acting strange.

“Ms. Dia?” Lapis asked.

She had been so full of confidence only seconds before, yet now she hesitated to use any magic at all. She didn’t respond to Lapis’s call; instead, she lowered her hand and stared at her fingers as if she didn’t understand what was happening.

Something had clearly gone awry. Lapis had no way of knowing what, let alone how to fix it, so she focused on what she *could* do.

“Let it swirl before mine eyes, o crimson flames, ye storm and burst, *Firestorm*!”

Lapis ceased to hesitate once she knew Dia wouldn’t make a move. Her fire magic took instant effect, lighting the night with a crimson blaze that swirled with the zombie dragon at its center and devastated everything in its vicinity.

With little that was flammable in the area, the flames dissipated as soon as the magic ended. The undead roasted in its power crumbled to the ground. Meanwhile, the smoldering zombie dragon, alight here and there and with large patches of its skin charcoaled, continued shambling toward them. It hadn’t slowed and it didn’t stumble.

“Good grief, how am I supposed to deal with this?”

“That should be my line. Why would someone dressed as a priest be able to cast magic like that? A most intriguing precedent, I must say.”

That wasn’t Dia, but a voice that came from very nearby. Lapis instinctively raised her guard, grabbed Dia, and leapt over their fortifications. Following on her heels was a young-looking man in some kind of butler’s outfit with red eyes and long, fluttering white hair.

The man crossed the wall and moat with great composure, landing lightly and bowing with incredible elegance before them.

“I am a Pure in service to Elder Stoss. My name… I do not really have one.

However, I do rank first among Stoss's Pure, so you may call me First."

"Very well, Mr. First. What did you do to Ms. Dia?" Lapis lowered Dia to the ground and stood guard in front of her.

Dia had begun to behave strangely just before he appeared. This First must have done something to render her powerless.

He waved away the question. "What might you be talking about? Even if I did have an answer, would I be under some obligation to explain it to you?"

"I guess you have a point."

"More importantly, should you not worry for yourself? My master ordered me to eliminate the adventurers assisting Lady Dia, you know." First placed a hand to his chest, glancing up from his bow to see Lapis sneering.

"Mr. Loren!" she raised her voice. "I will be engaging this Pure. Could I leave the zombie dragon to you?"

"You're a real slave driver, but what can you do? Finish up before I die!"

"Leave it to me."

Secure in Loren's answer, Lapis pressed her right fist against her left palm, cracking her knuckles like a prize fighter. "I can work out all the bothersome questions later. For now, I ought to prioritize eliminating the threat," she said.

"My, what a violent young lady. Do you honestly believe you have the slightest chance of defeating me?"

Neither side possessed any weapons. However, with a high-ranking vampire in one corner and a priest in the other, anyone might assume that the clerical party was at a severe disadvantage.

Lapis was certainly a priest, but that wasn't all. She didn't falter in the slightest at First's question—she stuck out her right hand, beckoning him to get on with it.

Loren had noticed Lapis's opponent before she even called out to him. Priests weren't front-line fighters, and he knew he should have gone to help her, but

he had his own business to deal with. Eventually, his bloody, sticky swathe through the undead had caught the attention of the dragon. He was feeling a little overwhelmed, being the target of a giant zombie and all, but it wasn't like he could pack it up and leave.

Loren was tall for a human, but he had to crane his neck to see the zombie dragon in all its gory glory. If its massive body had still been a weapon instead of a rotting mess, Loren would be dead no matter how well he fought. He was still alive after its first assault because it couldn't leverage its bulk.

"It's decayed, after all…"

It could only attack with its forelimbs and head, which were relatively intact. The rest of it was too thoroughly rotted. Fetid flesh slopped wetly down its sides with every step, oozing pungent juices. A truly ferocious attack might kill Loren, but it would also tear the thing apart.

All the same, while its arsenal was limited, each strike it mustered was potent enough to kill or grievously wound Loren. He couldn't drop his guard for a second.

He evaded a powerful bite and leapt out of range of a swiping talon. Faster than it could retract its outstretched leg, Loren hammered his blade down, sending chunks flying and unleashing more rancid odor.

As an undead, the zombie dragon could not feel pain. It still knew something wasn't quite right when a blade was wedged into its leg; instead of drawing the limb back, it smacked its talons against the ground to crush the pest. Unfortunately for it, Loren was already gone.

Twisting and turning, Loren delivered a merciless blow to the opposite forelimb. This sent up another great spray of viscera, but a rotten dragon was a dragon still; not even Loren and his demonic greatsword could mar its flesh too deeply. To make matters worse, the zombie dragon was a beast that never faltered. It would counterattack as soon as he struck it, giving him precious little room to gather his strength for a sufficiently vicious strike.

"This is getting me nowhere. Well then."

<Ah, you're plotting something nasty, aren't you, Mister?> Scena mused.

She must have caught on to his next plan, but Loren paid her no mind. He took his hilt in a firm grip. Before, he had maintained a narrow stance, which allowed him to immediately go on the offense after dodging. Now he spread his legs, firmly rooting himself in place.

<Mister? What are you trying to do? Don't tell me…>

Borrowing Loren's eyes, Scena saw the dragon's talons coming down at them, and despite herself a scream echoed out within the confines of Loren's mind. Loren, unmoved, drove his blade straight into the dragon's crushing limb, shoving the sword far deeper than he had managed before. The air was filled with the screech of metal grating against bone.

Of course, even if Loren possessed strength that gave an Elder pause, he couldn't dream of severing a dragon's limb in one strike. Even so, he used the impact to muddy its aim, guiding the talons to land just barely to the side. By the time the dragon's strike hit the ground, Loren had already withdrawn his sword. He spun, using the force of the draw to land another blow on the zombie dragon's planted leg.

Metal and bone met once more, and Scena watched in disbelief. For starters, even if the undead were frailer than their mortal fellows, it was inconceivable for a human to shift a dragon's attack through brute force. It was hard enough to believe that Loren had connected a follow-up blow after that, not to mention that both of his strikes sunk deep enough into dragonhide to hit bone.

On top of *that*, his greatsword seemed not the least bit damaged after being used so crudely.

<It always amazes me… Are you really human, Mister?>

"Who cares what I am? Lend me a bit of mana, why don't you?!"

Only then did Scena realize Loren had used Lapis's strengthening technique for that series of attacks. It had taken an exorbitant amount of mana to deal with the dragon's onslaught, and Loren was in short supply to begin with. Two blows had drained his reserves nearly dry.

<I see. Then I'll supply the mana for you!>

As high-ranking undead, Lifeless Kings were deep wells of magical power.

Scena's Lifeless King powers had failed to fully manifest, so perhaps she didn't stack up to the real deal, but she possessed far more mana than Loren.

Of course, as an astral body, Scena ran the risk of fading into oblivion if she ran out of mana completely. She needed to save a bit for herself whenever she doled it out. But Loren, with little to draw on naturally, had learned to economize; his technique would be far more efficient with her mana than any other help she could lend.

Luckily for Loren, the zombie dragon sent after them wasn't exactly in showroom condition. The decay ran too deep; much of it had fallen away or rotted to sludge. So hollowed, it was unable to use its *Breath*, a dragon's most troublesome attack. Clinging to the reflexes of its life, it retched as if trying to summon up that terrible magic. Each time, wisps of smoke seeped out of its nostrils and ragged maw, but nothing came of it.

Had it been able to use its true abilities, the battle would likely have gone differently. However, once debilitated and faced with Loren, who dodged every strike, the dragon found itself in a losing corner its life hadn't prepared it for. It was unable to escape the loop of dodge-and-strike, and the wounds on its arms, neck, and head piled up.

The dragon had an unlikely peer in Lapis, who also found herself subject to a one-sided rain of blows. The Pure called First continued firing off spell after spell, and Lapis had to stand in front of a motionless Dia to block them.

"Oh dear, where did that attitude go? You've been on the defensive for quite some time now," said First as his fiery projectile collided with Lapis's protective shield and melted away into nothing.

That was hardly First's last shot. Bolt after bolt, strike after strike, spells of every elemental attribute pounded against that magical shield.

"Now, now, won't you get tired soon? Can you keep defending? Do you even have enough mana?"

First's provocation didn't elicit so much as a twitch in Lapis's eyebrows. Her eyes remained fixed on his face, her hands moving without rest to strengthen

her defenses for each spell.

Ultimately, it was First who grew bored with their never-ending exchange. He'd started off with consecutive low-output spells, and as those failed to get past her, he attempted something a little more powerful.

"Then how about this?" He took a casting stance only for his face to suddenly contort in pain. "Gah?!" he cried out as he jumped back.

His spell preparations fizzled out. However, that was the least of his worries. Lapis now stood next to him, her fist extended.

"What… What just happened?"

It seemed obvious enough, when one considered the situation. Sensing that First was preparing something awful, Lapis had closed the distance and smacked him—yet First couldn't believe it. She had stayed on the defensive this whole time, dressed in vestments that weighed her down. How could she have closed in faster than a Pure could perceive?

More unbelievable was the idea of her delicate fists dealing any damage. Standing at the top of the average vampire hierarchy, Pures couldn't be damaged by the puny iron weapons wielded by adventurers. Even silver weapons, effective against the undead, could only cause pain to a Pure and fell short of enabling killing blows.

Yet this priest's fist concealed enough strength to make him wince.

"How did you…"

"Are you done attacking? In that case, I have a good idea of what you're capable of, so I'm considering going on the offense myself."

"What nonsense." First tried to correct her misconceptions, but was interrupted by a fist to the jaw.

Lapis closed in again before he realized what hit him, jabbing his solar plexus. As he crumpled to grab at his stomach, she dropped an elbow into the base of his skull.

That would have been the end of any human, but it wasn't lethal to a Pure. The pain of impact left him in a daze, but First managed to peel away by flailing

his arms.

Lapis let out a composed sigh. “Well, I expected that blunt force wasn’t going to cut it.”

Lower-class undead, like the zombie dragon Loren was facing, could continue attacking without regard to agony. Vampires, on the other hand, maintained both sentience and bodies closer to their living counterparts. To them, pain mattered.

But undead were undead, and their pain seemed to be a fraction of what a human suffered. Her lethal blows took the Pure by surprise, but didn’t seem to do any lasting damage.

“If you don’t scream or feel fear, there’s no joy in breaking you,” Lapis complained.

“What exactly are you?”

“Before I destroy you, let me ask again. What did you do to her?” Lapis’s attitude changed as she pointed at Dia, collapsed in a heap. The look in her eyes sharpened, her intimidating aura nearly physical. First took a step back.

Lapis continued glaring, closing in on him one step at a time. “Answer, and it won’t be too painful.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

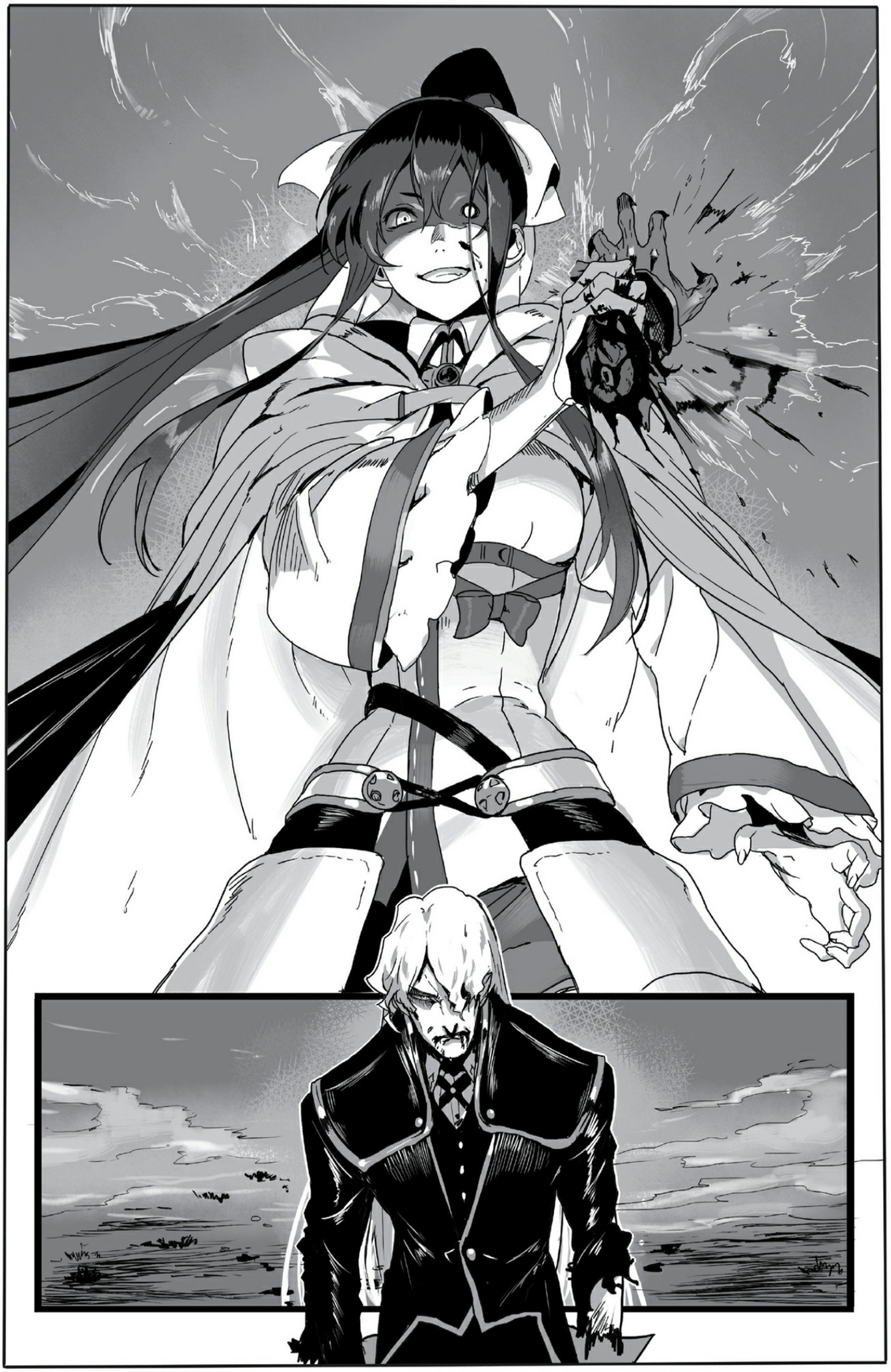
A burst of lightning accompanied his yelp. Lapis waved it away with one hand. First reached forward with his right hand, hoping to cast a spell from inside her defensive perimeter—but she grabbed his wrist.

“Absurd! You want to compete with a Pure in strength?!” He tried shaking off her grip, but it was as if his wrist had been fixed in space. It wouldn’t move, no matter how hard he tugged against her. “How the hell are you doing this?!”

“I’m the one asking questions. Not you. If you don’t want to answer, I’m sure you will soon. I’ll hear you out whenever you’re ready.”

First couldn’t free himself with strength, but perhaps a point-blank blast of magic would do. He pointed his free hand at Lapis, only for his right wrist to be crushed and his hand torn off right before his eyes.

“How nice of you to offer me your other hand too.” Lapis chuckled as she grabbed Faust’s remaining wrist. His bones whined a grating protest under the force of her grip. “I’ll have to answer your generosity in kind. Oh, I’ll be very tender, don’t you worry.”



At this sinister declaration, First lunged desperately with his fangs; the moment he opened his mouth, his canines were torn out. He jerked his right arm, hand severed at the wrist, up to cover his mouth; before he could utter a single protest, his left wrist received the same treatment as the last.

With no hands left on First, Lapis shifted her grip to his shoulders. Then his knees were kicked in so he couldn't stand, and he was left gaping up at her.

"We have plenty of time until he settles things over there." Lapis glanced at Loren before strengthening her hold on First. "Now how about we get started?"

He could hear the protestations of his body as his flesh and bone were squeezed near to bursting. Only at this last moment did First fully internalize that the girl in priest robes was not who she appeared to be.

"I thought I was dead," Loren muttered as he stuck his sword into the ground to prop himself up.

The night had dragged on as he fought the zombie dragon. Unable to use its *Breath*, the dragon continuously lashed out with its teeth and talons, and Loren cut into it whenever he got the opportunity. It took a bit of back-and-forth for him to get one forelimb lopped off, and several more for the other. Finally, once the damn thing was immobile, he sliced into its neck and showered its head with blows to shatter its skull and render it completely lifeless.

He'd been the dragon's enemy through a long battle, and it had landed a few good hits strong enough to send him flying. Wounds peppered his body. His coat and leather armor were in tatters, no longer in any usable condition.

"This is terrible. Do I seriously gotta replace everything?"

Lapis had gone out of her way to supply the coat, but with so many holes and tears, it would likely be impossible to repair. Loren pulled it off, folded it, and shoved it into his bag. His armor was barely dangling from his body, and it fell off as soon as he tore the remaining threads and undid the metal clasp. He carelessly tossed it to the side.

"The rot's clinging to me."

He hadn't allowed himself to be bothered by it during combat, but when he blocked attacks, avoided them too narrowly, or landed his own blows, the zombie dragon's bodily fluids had sprayed out and stuck to his body, giving off a horrifying stench.

It's not going away until I change, Loren thought with a sigh. His clothes weren't cheap. Sure, he could replace them at any second-hand store, but Loren was a tall man, muscular and long-limbed. Without tailoring, it was a trial and a half to find anything that fit him right without squeezing the life out of him.

He had an extra of everything in his bags, so he was fine for now, but he would have to replace the sad remains of his current outfit. His mood soured further as he realized he would once more have to prowl the stalls, shops, and back alleys for clothing.

His body wasn't in an ideal state either. Undead didn't care one whit about proper hygiene, and zombies were the dirtiest of them all. Dirt and worse got into any wounds they inflicted, which meant even a small scratch would quickly fester. To prevent gangrene, he would have to find fresh water to scrub out his wounds, and alcohol, if he could find it. Otherwise, he'd find himself with rotten scabs, or worse yet, facing down a life-threatening infection. That kind of foe was harder to stab than any dragon.

Surely the talons of a zombie dragon were even more unsanitary than usual. Loren couldn't help dwelling on it as he kicked his haggard body into gear, opened his bag, and popped open the lid of his metal flask. Before he knew it, he had already taken a swig of the clear alcohol within.

"Don't drink it, you numbskull," he scolded himself.

He knew mercenaries who drowned themselves in ale, insisting that healing started from within, but Loren hadn't seen any proof of that. The fight had left him thirsty, but that had been a waste of alcohol when he had wounds to treat.

Steeling himself, Loren took another mouthful and sprayed it across his arms and legs. He dripped the flask over his head and let it stream across his abused back.

The harsh sting of alcohol invaded his nostrils, which was much better than

the rot. After covering himself in most of his stash, he sent the rest of it down his throat. His spirits rallied as he capped his flask.

"How are things on your end?" Loren called out, switching out the flask for a roll of bandages. He was accustomed to the work of dressing his own wounds. It had grown very quiet, which probably meant that Lapis had finished her own fight. Searching her out, he found her not too far away, mouth half-open as she stared at his back.

She wasn't injured, from what he could see. Her pure white robes were neither torn nor stained, and they didn't seem to have a drop of blood on them.

"Oi, Lapis. What's up? Quit spacing out like that, it's a waste of your pretty face."

"Ah, err, well. Thank you? I guess? No, I mean, Mr. Loren…umm, you actually managed to defeat the zombie dragon?"

"Yeah, because it couldn't use its *Breath*. One way or another… Sorry, Lapis, I ended up ruining that coat you got me."

After a night spent hacking at dragon bone, he worried for the state of his sword as well, but it was in far better shape than his coat. It had fought with him until then, and it had neither the smallest nick or dent to show for it. It really was a masterpiece; he needed to thank Lapis for putting it in his hands.

"The coat… No, the coat is inconsequential. You defeated an undead dragon, and the only lives lost were your coat and armor?"

"As you can see. There were a couple moments where I worried about getting pancaked, but I got the best of it in the end." Loren pointed at the rotting mass, now barely maintaining draconic shape. Covered in deep slices, with its two forelimbs severed and its head badly beaten in, it was fast becoming more trash heap than creature.

Letting out a long, deep sigh, Lapis put a hand to her brow and shook her head. "Finish up before I die, you told me. Then you slay the monster before I can help out. What's wrong with you, Mr. Loren?"

"That's… Well, you know, I gave it a shot and it worked out." He hadn't done anything wrong, but somehow he still felt like apologizing.

Lapis glared at the wreckage. “What about my plan to improve my image by gallantly saving you when you were in a pinch?” she muttered, frustrated.

“Who cares about that?”

“I was saving my strength for a cool finishing blow.”

“Like hell you were. What would you have done if you didn’t make it and I died?”

She was being silly, as far as Loren was concerned. He often forgot for long stretches that Lapis was a demon. Every now and then, she got strange ideas in her head and reminded him of her true nature. He wouldn’t get very far telling a demon to act less demonically. Powerless to win the argument, he let his shoulders slump.

Meanwhile, as Lapis joked around and put up an unbothered front, under the surface, she desperately held herself back from blurting out something dumb.

A zombie dragon was certainly much, much weaker than a dragon. Dragons wielded ferocious magic and breath attacks, but zombification robbed them of their intelligence alongside those abilities. Loren had faced down a monster that moved solely on the desire to devour anything that caught its eyes, a beast that fought with its massive body and monstrous strength.

If the zombie dragon could “only” hurl around tons of rotting flesh and sharp claws, that challenge still far exceeded the mettle of any human. Lapis hadn’t really thought it was something Loren could fight off alone.

“Well, let’s just say it all worked out,” she said.

“I’m not convinced, but whatever. What happened to that Pure or whatever?”

Just as Lapis had worried about Loren’s one-on-one match, Loren had assumed Lapis would struggle against the Pure. She had been dealing with a top-class vampire, after all. Demons were powerful, but Loren had expected a hard fight with some injury. From what he could see of Lapis, it was as if nothing had happened at all. For a moment, he wondered if the Pure had run away.

Lapis's smile tilted uneasily as she scratched her head. "Yes, well, how should I put this? My inner demon went on a bit of a rampage, perhaps?"

"What?"

"Maybe I got just a wee bit serious about the fight, and maybe then I got a little carried away."

"Hey now."

"B-but can you really blame me? I've got my arms back after so long, and I just so happened to run into someone who didn't break when I got a little serious. He even recovered pretty fast when I did hurt him, and then it was like the brakes were off, or rather…"

"Lapis. You seem to forget that you're a priest pretty often." Loren glared at her, and she opened her mouth to muster an apology. Really, though, it would be all excuses in the end no matter what she said, so she shut her mouth and apologetically lowered her head.

"So what happened to your victim?" Loren asked.

"After I twisted him up a bit, he suddenly turned to ash and blew away."

No trace of a corpse remained. This was a special death for vampires, she explained. Their very existences deviated from the natural order, and they faced the recoil from this upon death. In short, they could no longer maintain their earthly forms.

The most obstinate vampires could revive even from this state, but only if the ash was properly collected. They would need to be incredibly powerful to resurrect after being swept away by the wind. It was essentially impossible.

"Not that I know what happens to Elders. But that seems to be the case for the Pure."

"Speaking of Elders, where's Dia?"

In the midst of their conversation, Loren realized he couldn't see Dia anywhere. He feared she'd been abducted by a surprise attacker, but Lapis pointed him in a different direction. He looked over to see Dia on her knees, silent and still.

Loren cocked his head. “Did he do something to her?”

“I’m not entirely sure. She suddenly flopped over like that.”

“You weren’t able to get that information out of the Pure?”

“I did my best to squeeze it out.”

She had turned the screws both physically and mentally, but First had ultimately died without coughing up anything. Lapis couldn’t deny that she had gone too far, but he had been so numb to pain and quickly regenerated any limbs he lost. Half-hearted torture attempts had seemed pointless, and as soon as she’d stepped it up, she’d killed him.

If she’d had a chance to prepare and pack the correct tools, she had a general knowledge of the right pressure to apply, so to speak. It might even have worked on a vampire. Unfortunately, she hadn’t managed much with only her bare hands.

“But it looks like Ms. Dia does have an idea of what happened.”

At the very least, she would know what was done to her. She had muttered something just before her collapse.

“Let’s hope she can tell us when she calms down.”

“For now, we can either get moving, or you can do something about that mess. Can’t stand the stench.”

The source of said stench was the moldering body of the zombie dragon and the piles of dead skeletons and zombies, a dreary landscape on the whole. Lapis looked it over and nodded, then began thinking about how they would transport Dia while she was trapped in her daze.

Chapter 6:
Surmise to Search

THEY ULTIMATELY GAVE UP on cleaning the campsite. Too many bodies littered the plains, and the zombie dragon was so massive they couldn't think of *how* they'd tidy it away.

Since they couldn't do anything about the mess, it still reeked. They hightailed it out of there as quickly as they could, on the way to their destination before the sun rose.

"We wouldn't have gotten a wink of sleep there."

Tallying all the enemies fought and defeated—the countless undead, the Pure, and the dragon—they must have done considerable damage to their enemy's forces, even if she'd held some back. It was hard to imagine she could fling another army of that size their way any time soon.

"Are you all right, Mr. Loren? Humans die far too easily without sleep. I'm quite concerned," said Lapis. She carried Dia, still unresponsive, slung over her back.

After the attack, Dia was stuck in her stupor. They'd packed their belongings, and still she remained with her knees planted on the spot. They couldn't just leave her there, but that didn't mean they could sit around until she snapped out of it. Loren offered to carry her, but Lapis turned him down flat.

Loren was used to doing the heavy lifting, but Lapis had her own concerns. The thought of Loren, a dyed-in-the-wool human, putting his neck anywhere near Dia's mouth filled her with anxiety.

"We'll be in real trouble if she bites you."

"Doesn't the same go for you?"

"I, well, I'll do something about it," she said with a laugh. Demon or human, any living thing bitten by a vampire followed the same messy path. Lapis's confidence made Loren curious about what a demon in danger could do.

“Putting that aside, we’re quite an efficient pair, aren’t we?”

Loren wondered what she could possibly be talking about. He glanced at Lapis to find her staring back with incredible earnestness.

“I mean, we’re walking through the open plains at night without a light,” she said.

Only then did Loren realize he was still seeing through Scena’s eyes. A normal human would need a lantern or torch. Demons and Lifeless King-infused mercenaries, however, could see everything as clear as if it were midday. Only the poor donkey trembled in fear as Loren led it along through the darkness.

“Will you still be able to do that when you get your real eyes back?” Loren asked.

Lapis smirked triumphantly. “Anything I can do now, I can do better as the real me.”

“Including beating up a Pure barehanded?”

“Piece of cake. In fact, an even bigger piece of cake than tonight. Now that I can concentrate all the mana I’d been using for my arms into my legs, I’ve really improved at close combat. However, I’m always afraid that if I push myself the way I want to, they’ll come off at the knees.”

“A priest…”

“Should I start calling myself a warrior monk now?”

Loren couldn’t help but wonder if that was really okay with the churchy folks. He told himself it was none of his business as long as Lapis didn’t care. That was the end of the matter.

“Is Dia still out of it?”

“Hmm. Let’s see.”

Lapis glanced over her shoulder. Sensing their attention, Dia raised her face slightly. She looked scared and confused—after seeming so calm and mature for her appearance, she now displayed the childish fear one might expect.

“She’s over five hundred though…” muttered Loren.

“Shouldn’t we show some compassion by not bringing that up?”

“What made her collapse in the first place? Right in the middle of battle?”

They needed to know. Dia hadn’t been in any shape to explain, so the matter had been shelved. Now that she was showing signs of life, she owed them a rundown. Dia clung to Lapis’s back, gaze lowered.

Still no good? thought Loren. Maybe it was time to change the subject.

But after a moment’s silence, Dia quietly murmured, “We Elders…are unable to say our own names.”

“Makes sense.”

Loren had noticed her refusal to introduce herself with a family name, and Dia probably wasn’t her real name either. And from the way her master had introduced herself—*let’s go with Sierra*—she was using an alias as well.

Figuring there was some cultural meaning behind it, Loren hadn’t pried, but it seemed to be an Elder-specific quirk.

“For Elders, our real names are linked directly to our very existence.”

“Hmm?”

She said it in a tone of dire seriousness, but Loren had no clue what she was on about. He glanced at Lapis, who knew more about magic and the like. Lapis was deep in thought, trying to wrap her head around the matter.

“Are you talking about true names?” she finally asked.

“Precisely.”

“I see.” Lapis nodded. “Do you want to know too, Mr. Loren? I wouldn’t mind explaining if you begged me.”

That she would act so haughty about her superior knowledge needled at Loren, but he kept his reaction from reaching his face and responded as if it was of no interest at all.

“Don’t care. Scena probably knows.”

That got Lapis’s dander up. “Wait! F-fine, I get it. Please ask, or rather, please let me explain. She really is quite troublesome, that Ms. Scena… Even more so,

that only Mr. Loren can see her. Ahem, true names, was it? A true name is something everyone possesses. It's a name that defines one's unique existence."

"Can you dumb that down a little?"

Loren was more educated than your average mercenary, but his arcane knowledge was purely practical. To say he was hopeless when it came to magical theory was no exaggeration.

Lapis searched for the right words, her expression troubled. "Yes, well, you see. How should I explain this… That's really all I was taught about it…"

"It is a magical name," Dia weighed in, taking pity on Lapis's floundering. "Speaking it will give you control of whoever it indicates in their entirety. Does that make it easier to imagine?"

Lapis peered into Loren's face, eager for him to grasp the lesson even if she wasn't the teacher. Loren hesitated, then nodded. He understood, if only partly.

"So he used your magical name?"

"He did," Dia said, hanging her head again.

Loren could see where this was going. It wasn't the direction he'd hoped for, but he needed to hear it from Dia herself. Placing a hand on the back of his own neck, he squeezed it a bit to distract himself as he went on.

"Apart from you, who else knows it?" This question received no answer. That was an answer in and of itself, so he went on, "I could try taking a guess. Wanna hear it?"

He waited until Dia told him to go on.

"I'm guessing the only other person who knows your true name is your master, Sierra. You don't go around announcing something that important to all and sundry."

"By that logic, Mr. Loren, wouldn't Ms. Dia's master be our enemy?"

Sure, Dia's true name could have been forced out of Sierra, but it was hard to imagine First doing such a thing against an Elder. This sort of secret usually came straight from the horse's mouth. Either Sierra had given it up voluntarily,

or Dia had let it slip somehow.

“Yeah. I think Sierra’s our culprit.”

“Can I ask why?” Dia’s voice quavered. Her disbelief battled against a hard truth: there were no other options.

Pretending he didn’t notice how upset she was, Loren continued. “That zombie dragon. Did you see how huge it was? Someone would’ve noticed if it was just wandering around. A huge, stinking monster like that? It would cause a riot.”

“So you’re saying, because it silently crept up on the campsite without incident, there’s a chance it was somehow laying in wait for us.”

“And that’s after we purposely changed our speed to throw off their schedule. If they still knew where to find us, maybe someone was checking in.”

“I see. And that casts doubt on Ms. Sierra, who did in fact come to greet us just before. But why would she do such a thing?”

“How am I supposed to know anyone’s motive? Especially when it has to do with Elder vampires bickering.”

“Elders can be pretty proud about our areas of expertise,” Dia whispered. “Perhaps that could explain it.”

Loren thought back to the conversation they’d had with Sierra when she’d looked in on her pupil.

“And magic is your master’s field?”

“Mr. Loren, you don’t mean…”

“That master of hers said it herself. The whole reason Dia was allowed to try for independence was because she surpassed her master in magical ability.”

If your own disciple surpasses you, isn’t that proof that you’re a good teacher? thought Loren. He didn’t know what an Elder would have to say on the matter, though.

Dia could have written it all off as nonsense, but she seemed to agree. “That… may be so…” she muttered, unable to deny Loren’s theory. She buried her face

in Lapis's back, hiding it from view.

"Anyway, we just gotta get to the ruins," Loren declared as they hurried through the night.

Dia didn't respond. Instead, Lapis wondered aloud, "If the exam itself is rigged, it's entirely possible that we won't find what we're looking for at our destination."

"No, I think they'll have a real goal set up," Loren said, strangely confident.

"But wouldn't that be pointless if Sierra intended for Ms. Dia to fail before she even reached the exam?"

"Not if she wants it to look like a valid test. Who knows what the other Elders would have to say about this kind of betrayal?"

The other Elders, who recognized Dia's magical capabilities, must be keeping a watchful eye on Sierra. Whatever Sierra was supposed to give Dia as proof of success—presumably whatever a young Elder needed to thrive on their own—must have been prepared.

"If Elders know how to keep up appearances, it'll definitely be there. Even if it goes to waste."

"Say it is there. What do we do then?"

"That's simple. We nab it, set up those ruins as a base, and confront Sierra."

Dia lifted her face at this—the prospect of facing her master. She looked at Loren, who turned his face away.

"You've gotta be your own woman now. What does it matter if you lose a teacher? If you were still reliant on her, that'd be a different story, but if you want to be first-rate, then there's no need to cry about clashing with a rival."

"But…"

"And if you really like your master that much, get strong enough that she knows she can't challenge you. Then get along again, even if you have to do it by force. Are you all right with getting killed just because your master's

jealous?”

“Not exactly…”

Loren poked her right in the center of her scrunched forehead. He pushed even harder as her eyes widened in shock. “Then think about what you want to do. Not like your master’s gonna pop up again.”

He thrust her away with one final, strong prod. Dia glared at him through teary eyes, but as she rubbed her brow, a bit of her initial brazen fire sparked back to life.

“You don’t think Ms. Sierra will interfere anymore?” asked Lapis, who had kept silent until Dia regained some of her equilibrium.

While Dia would need more time to really collect herself, she at least seemed a bit more energetic.

“I doubt it,” answered Loren. “That’s my hunch, at least.”

“May I ask what that theory’s based on?”

“If she seriously wanted to kill Dia, there were plenty of simpler ways to go about it.”

Sierra was Dia’s master, after all. On top of Dia’s obvious fondness for her, she knew the girl’s true name. There was plenty of opportunity and countless ways to take Dia out of the picture without having to use the exam as an excuse. There had to be some reason why she hadn’t taken the easy way out; Loren guessed it came down to optics.

“I mean, her pupil’s stronger than she is. If that pupil suddenly dies on her watch, then suspicion falls on her master.”

“And that’s what kept her from openly targeting Dia?”

“Yeah. Now that Dia’s out of her nest, she leaked key info to someone who would get the job done.”

The pieces all fit for Lapis, but some gaps remained in the puzzle. “Then she could have eliminated us and Dia as soon as the exam began. Why wait until we’re this far into it?”

Loren shook his head. “She taught Dia. A student who kicks the bucket three minutes into her final exam? That reflects badly on the teacher. Sierra’s got pride in her magic, so she couldn’t stand it if word got out she’s an incompetent master.”

In short, Sierra needed to ensure that any watching Elders saw an exam proceeding apace; if they observed Dia prove her worth against a giant undead dragon, even better. That must have taken time and resources—but as long as she impressed the others, what happened to Dia after those grand displays wasn’t Sierra’s responsibility.

“And the time to show off is over.”

“This is becoming a real thorn in my side.”

“Life’s a pain. Guess that’s true for vampires too.”

As far as Loren was concerned, every sentient being in every country in all the world went about their lives more or less the same. Only the rare soul among them might come up with something truly unheard of—geniuses and those who lived on completely different planes of thought, perhaps. It was hard to come by a genius, and as far as Loren knew, beings beyond human comprehension only existed in fairy tales.

“In that case, then the Elder Ms. Sierra mentioned—Ms. Stoss…”

“Either she was being used from the start, or she seriously intended to eliminate Dia and Sierra intervened to offer an assist.”

“I’m starting to pity her a bit.”

“Really? I’m not.”

As Dia’s bodyguard, it made no difference to Loren who their enemy was or who that foe was being used by. He would defeat them, no bones about it. If he could complete a job without an all-out brawl, great. If fighting was necessary, he preferred to take care of it quickly.

That was the beginning and end of his opinion on Stoss. Of course, that was putting aside how foolhardy it would be to pick a fight with her in the first place. Loren understood that, when it came to a punch-out with an Elder

vampire, the odds were stacked against him.

“Anyways, we get to the destination, clear whatever trial or test awaits us there, declare Dia independent, and that’s a job well done.”

“You make it sound so easy, but isn’t that incredibly difficult? Now that she’s thrown her hat into the ring, Ms. Stoss isn’t going to surrender just like that.”

If she’d remained some ominous force acting from the shadows, Stoss could have called it a day when she ran out of backup or got bored. Since Sierra had revealed Dia’s true name, though, she’d staged an attack of incredible scale. Stoss’s losses were now significant, and her pride was on the line.

“Even if Ms. Sierra doesn’t reappear, Ms. Stoss will confront us eventually. Do we have any hope of defeating an Elder?”

“Yeah, no. But are we gonna let that stop us?”

Giving up now would mean abandoning Dia. Loren knew this was their last chance to seriously consider the option, but Lapis just shrugged without a word.

Truth be told, she wouldn’t hesitate to turn around right this minute, but admitting that would surely sully Loren’s opinion of her. That didn’t mean she had to say everything he wanted to hear, though. She’d leave the decision to him.

“Now I’m gonna go off track a bit here,” muttered Loren. With the big questions answered, they set off across the plains again. Lapis either wasn’t listening or didn’t care, but Dia turned to him. “Say that gal you’re trying to settle things with—say she achieves her goal despite our best efforts. Maybe instead of facing off with her, you might want to strike a deal and salvage your relationship.”

“That’s…”

“I’m not saying it’s gonna happen. You wouldn’t think about profits and losses over a grudge. But if it’s just a bit of envy, it wouldn’t be crazy to put up with that if you could get what you want out of the situation.”

Loren looked at her, his solemn expression entreating an answer. Dia stared back for a long moment before she nodded and tapped Lapis on the shoulder to

get her attention. When Lapis stilled, Dia lowered herself off the demon's back and onto her own two feet.

"In any case, it all hinges on me becoming a proper Elder."

"Sounds about right."

"Let's proceed cautiously. Soon, it will be daybreak. We would do well to arrive while the sun is up, yes?"

The last attack had kept them occupied through most of the night, and they'd only set off sometime after midnight. However, their campsite hadn't been far from their destination, and they would inevitably reach these ruins before sunrise if they didn't drop the pace. *So she's finally collected herself enough to realize that*, thought Loren.

As Dia predicted, they reached the ruins as the sun rose. All that remained of some once-grand structure were some vague piles of rubble in the middle of the desolate plains. Try as he might, Loren couldn't build it up as an appropriate base of operations in his mind.

"You sure this is the place?"

Dia was the only one who knew where they were headed. Loren and Lapis had simply followed her lead.

"There is no doubt about it. It's here," Dia replied, confident as anything.

He looked around, still not seeing anything that looked more like a proper ruin than a pile of rocks. As long as Dia hadn't made a huge miscalculation in her directions, this was the only possibility.

"There's nothing here," Loren said.

Well, Dia had told them in advance that there was no guarantee their destination was meant to be a base. If there wasn't anything here, then surely there was some marker or tool for the rest of her journey. A prospect concerning enough to trouble Loren.

The next thing on his pile of worries: no one had attacked them as they approached the ruins. It was, of course, entirely possible that Stoss's forces had

been exhausted by the night's attack. Perhaps there was no need to be so wary, but the silence brought an uneasy mood.

"Finding what we need here must be part of the exam," Dia said.

"I don't see anywhere to search…"

They were surrounded by dirt, grass, and a bit of crumbled stone. It had obviously been years since anyone stopped by to tidy up the place, and the shambles that remained didn't look ready to surrender any clues.

Perhaps the answer lay buried under the earth—in which case Dia would need to excavate the entire site. Even with an Elder's magic, she would need a crew for a job like that.

"Digging without any leads will be an immense undertaking. Let us conduct a proper search before we attempt it."

Loren already looked fed up with the work awaiting them. Dia reassured him by putting her slender fingers together and giving a single subdued snap.

It was a meager sound. Loren heard it only because he'd been watching Dia, but Lapis, scanning their surroundings, didn't notice at all.

"It seems this place will be usable as a base," Dia said. "There's a large, empty space beneath us."

"How can you tell?" Lapis asked, sounding rather impressed.

Dia puffed out her chest and said, "The spell rides a small wave of sound to probe through solid surfaces. It's quite convenient. If you don't know it, I could teach… No, you are a priest, correct?"

"Yes, it's a bit of a shame."

Priests, generally speaking, didn't use conventional magic. Nothing physical or legal barred them from learning, but given how long it took to gain their god's favor and learn blessings, there was little time left to spare for other skills. This was common sense among the clergy.

In Lapis's case, her impressive natural talent and her chosen god allowed her to manipulate both blessings and magic to a degree. However, Dia seemed to think that adding a vampire's magic to her repertoire would be too much, even

for her.

Only Lapis knew whether this was true. From how she let the subject drop, Loren thought Dia had the long and short of it. But Lapis's next words proved them both wrong.

"It's a bit too plain for my tastes."

Does this girl pick up spells purely based on aesthetic appeal? Loren wondered. She was the one investing time and effort into learning spells, though, so it wasn't his place to judge.

"Now then, there should be a way down somewhere around here," Dia said.

She began wandering around to investigate, her hired help ambling along behind. If anyone strayed too far from the group, they risked being singled out by their attacker. They'd made it this far without incident—or at least without getting maimed—and it would be a waste to get careless now.

There wasn't so much as an irritable sparrow in sight, but they were both on their guard. While Dia devoted all her attention to her search, they kept a close lookout.

"I don't see anywhere you could hide something."

Dia crisscrossed the ruins aimlessly without anything to show for it. Loren couldn't offer any advice; he was a professional in some things, but not in finding the hidden entrances to ancient ruins meant to house terrifying vampire lairs. Meanwhile, Lapis focused on their surroundings, tuning out Dia's search entirely.

"I doubt it opens from inside. This must be a test," said Dia.

"You've surpassed your master, right? Can't you just snap your fingers again or something?"

"Don't be unreasonable. The difference in magical skill doesn't matter. In these games, whoever sets the board has the advantage."

In a pitched battle or confined space, Dia might have an advantage. Digging around for clues in piles of rubble was a different story. She stared down the enemy of a vast plain and vague clues, with no solid information on what she

was looking for or how it was hidden. There were plenty of places to search and an eternity of time to waste.

“I’ll keep at it until my legs give out,” said the vampire.

“That’s probably a long way off. You think we’ll find it in our lifetime?”

Dia bared her fangs at Loren’s cynicism. “I’ll fail the test if I take that long.”

“Say what you want,” Lapis interrupted, “but we’ll probably be here for a day or two.”

They both looked at her, wondering how she could possibly know that.

“On top of that, there’s no guarantee that whatever we’re looking for stays in the same place, or that it’s here for the entirety of the day.”

“You mean it could completely vanish based on time?”

“Yes. Moreover, vampires set this up. We can’t disregard the possibility that they hid something that only appears at night.”

“You have a point.” To her credit, Dia was quick to admit it. “Worst case, it could be dependent on the position of the sun, moon, and stars…”

“I don’t wanna ask, but… How many years would it take for all those conditions to align?”

The scope of it was ridiculous to Loren. But given the lifespans of Dia and her fellows, he couldn’t dismiss it out of hand. Elders might set up an exam with some truly absurd conditions.

“That depends on the necessary alignments. If it’s not rare or precise, it could happen every couple of minutes. On the other hand…decades.”

“This is no joke.” Loren screwed his face up at this timeframe that Dia presented with the utmost seriousness. Perhaps that was the blink of an eye for an Elder. Loren was human, however, and hanging out here for even a month sounded unbearable.

Dia picked up on his frustrations. She smiled wryly. “Indeed. If our jokes prove true and they expect me to linger until the next eclipse, I will simply have to surrender.”

“So it’s possible?”

“It is. After all, I think that would be a very efficient form of harassment.”

A simple but insurmountable barrier. Theoretically, their enemy didn’t have to lift a finger to stall for years. No matter how Dia protested, the argument could be made that these were the conditions to pass, perfectly reasonable for an Elder, and there was no recourse to be had.

“Just curious, what’s the longest we’re looking at?” For once, Loren asked out of pure curiosity.

“There was a certain condition I saw once in the days of the ancient kingdom. It was only met every several hundred years.”

Loren wished he’d kept his mouth shut.

Of course, Dia was amazing for recalling that off the top of her head, but twiddling their thumbs for that amount of time was out of the question. For one thing, Loren would be dead several times over.

“I can’t stick around for this,” he concluded.

“That’s a bit much for me too,” said Lapis.

“Understandably so. In that case, the moment we figure out the right conditions, I’ll end the quest and pay your reward. No need to worry,” Dia reassured them.

“You think that’s why there haven’t been more attacks?”

“Do you mean it wouldn’t be worth the effort? Then they wouldn’t have attacked us from the start. Since they did, I presume the conditions must be within the realm of common sense.”

But how far is an Elder’s common sense from a human’s? Loren couldn’t help but wonder. Luckily, Dia smothered his pessimism in the cradle.

“Here,” she declared. “I believe this may be it.”

She stopped and stared at the ground. As far as Loren could tell, it wasn’t a particularly special spot, just some patch of dirt. However, once he focused and used Scena’s vision, he could just make out a faint insignia.

“It seems that someone purposely used an incredibly weak spell to cast a concealment over it.”

“What a mean-spirited little puzzle. It would take months for a human magician to find it. Ah, can you see it, Mr. Loren?”

“Just barely, thanks to Scena.”

“As expected of a former Lifeless King. She’s quite convenient,” Lapis mused, her gaze shifting to a point just past Dia.

Loren turned to see what she was looking at. The search had taken quite a bit of time, and the sun towered high over the figure that had joined them.

“Did you find something, Dia, my dear?”

The voice and silhouette were feminine. With one step closer, the figure revealed herself to be a tall woman with long red hair and pale, corpse-like skin. Like Dia, she wore expensive silk clothing that no one would expect to see out in the middle of nowhere.

“It’s bad form of you to appear this late into the game, Stoss.”

“On the contrary, I think this sort of thing hurts most when you have your goal in sight but fail to grasp it.”

“That’s what I meant by bad form,” Dia said, sounding thoroughly fed up.

In composed contrast, the woman placed a hand to her chest and performed an impeccable bow as she introduced herself. “I am one of the Elders; you may call me Stoss. As you may have guessed, I don’t care to see little Dia passing her exam. I doubt we will get along, but it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“So the biggest pain reveals itself,” Loren spat as he readied his sword. Lapis took a ready stance with her bare hands.

Dia glared at Stoss but made no preparations of her own. As if to answer the girl’s glare, Stoss’s viciously pointed fangs peeked out of her crooked smile.

Chapter 7:
From an Appearance to a Settlement

"I DIDN'T THINK you would make a personal appearance. I'm honestly a little surprised."

Stoss snickered at Dia's words. Her menacing laugh made Lapis retreat one stiff step as Loren inched forward to fulfill his role as the vanguard.

"Are we really going to do this, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked. "We're at quite the disadvantage."

Lapis's voice faltered with unease, and Loren couldn't blame her.

Their foe was empty-handed and he was wielding a sword, yet his palms were coated in sweat and persistent chills ran down his spine. He was probably shivering like a knock-kneed coward. Loren was well-acquainted with the battlefield, but the danger he sensed from Stoss shook him to his core.

"I didn't expect her to be this much of a threat, even as a hostile Elder…"

Even Lapis, who had easily triumphed over a Pure, was plainly

overwhelmed. She tried to keep a brave face, but sweat dripped down her face and neck.

As the beads of sweat traced her pale skin, she made no attempt to wipe them away. If she lost focus for even an instant, she knew she was dead.

"So what Dia told us about the insurmountable wall between Elders and Pures is true… I would rather punch my way through a hundred Pures barehanded."

"How adorable you are. To think a hundred of them would be a match for me." Stoss laughed as if a precocious child had told her a particularly silly joke.

It was a complete dismissal, but they understood that she could walk the terrifying vampire walk. Stoss just stood there, right in front of them, yet neither Loren nor Lapis could detect any opportunity to attack. No matter how Loren sliced it, any attack would leave him dead on the ground.

“Are we completely screwed then, Lapis?” he asked.

“If I at least had all my limbs… But right now, it’s not looking very promising.”

“As expected of an Elder, I guess.”

“It would be different if Ms. Dia could join in.”

Loren glanced behind them at Dia. She was biting her lip and staring vexedly at Stoss. The moment she met Loren’s gaze, she gently shook her head. This was, again, understandable.

She and Stoss were both Elders, but there was a vast gulf between them.

“I’m sure you’re already aware, but I know your true name.” Stoss’s cheerful declaration proved two things. First, that Dia’s master Sierra was on Stoss’s side. Second, that if they fought here and now, Dia wouldn’t be contributing to their strength. “I don’t even need to tell you where my intel came from, do I?”

“I never realized she was so envious of me.”

For some reason, Stoss’s eyes widened just slightly at this statement. “My poor Dia, there seems to be a misunderstanding.”

“What?”

“Sierra isn’t trying to kill you,” Stoss explained with a grin. “Nor does she hate you. She likes you so much it creeps me out.”

“Hah?” It was Loren’s turn to make a dumbfounded noise.

Sierra had divulged information that ruled Dia’s very existence. They had faced down legions of undead and nearly died as a result. Anyone would have been surprised to hear that the mastermind behind all that actually adored her victim.

“Quite simply, yes. What she couldn’t stand was *someone else* nominating you for the trial.”

According to Stoss, Sierra had methodically planned the best time for Dia to reach independence. Unfortunately for Sierra, another Elder noticed that Dia’s skills had surpassed her master’s. This Elder insisted it would be a waste for someone with such skill to be treated as a child, and then one thing led to

another.

As plans went forward for the exam, Sierra voiced her opposition as Dia's master. But when it was put to a vote, she lost, and Dia was sent off to her grand, dangerous coming-of-age. Sierra couldn't accept it and so decided to intervene however she could.

"Yes, I think it's idiotic as well. I just had to play along with that pathetic tale, and that's all it took to get an Elder on my side. Quite worth it for me, don't you think?"

"The hell's up with that… So, what happens after this?"

"If Dia fails her exam, the Elder who recommended her so ardently will have their name dragged through the mud. Then, as you can imagine, Dia's examination will be fully entrusted to her master. Sierra can cherish her all she wants, and the exam will occur on Sierra's original schedule. And that's about as far ahead as she thought."

"You're really loved, Dia…to a concerning degree," Lapis stated plainly.

Dia cast her eyes down, her face bright red. It was impossible to tell if she was happy or mortified.

"Well, now that you have the whole sordid tale, would you mind giving up here?"

"That's unreasonable…" Dia blurted out, and Loren found himself on a similar page.

It wasn't rare for an apprentice to be dragged about by their master's whims, but to keep Dia in line, Sierra had leveraged an Elder power struggle, expended armies of undead, and sent a Pure to be killed by Lapis's hand.

This went far beyond what could be called a whim. Not that Stoss seemed to care; she flipped a lock of red hair out of her face. "If I play my cards right, I'll have both Sierra and Dia in my debt. That's more than a fair trade for a Pure and a zombie dragon."

"You sure you should be letting the cat out of the bag like this?"

Surely Sierra wanted all this kept on the down low and well away from Dia's

ears, but here Stoss was giving the villain monologue unprompted.

Stoss calmly shrugged. “Two Elders in my corner will compensate for my losses, but honestly, am I not allowed to resent the misuse of my resources?” she complained. “On top of that, silly Sierra told you about me beforehand, didn’t she? I’m just getting a bit of revenge.”

In short, Sierra had pinned the blame on Stoss to make sure Dia never suspected her master had a hand in their troubles.

“For ancient beings, your planning is a little slapdash, ain’t it? The moment her true name came out, it was obvious her master was behind it.”

“Well, we thought you pests would be wiped out after two attacks, didn’t we? As long as I could incapacitate Dia after that, we could talk our way out of the rest. Surely, if that didn’t work, it would be easy enough to fiddle with her memories while she was unconscious.”

“How did you intend to deal with the skill differential between Pure and Elder?” asked Lapis. “Without her true name, I don’t think the force you sent could have done anything against Dia.”

“There are a handful of Pures specialized in combat who could keep an Elder busy. Although I hear you ripped the child I sent to shreds…”

Stoss’s eyes shifted uneasily to Lapis. While Dia had seen through Lapis’s identity the moment she laid eyes on her, it seemed Stoss wasn’t so certain. That alone suggested that Dia was the stronger, and smarter, of the two.

“In any case, that’s all there is to it. My point being, I want little Dia there to drop out. I could drive you off through combat, but that would be tiresome *and* troublesome, and you don’t want to die, do you?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I want to die,” said Loren, his sword still in hand, his stance never relaxing. His gaze remained pinned on Stoss, who sneered at the miniscule threat he presented. To Dia he said, “You’re my client. I just follow your orders.”

“If you think this is impossible, we’re more than happy to run away,” Lapis added with a smile. She too remained at the ready.

“Your orders, please.”

“I…” Dia hesitated for a moment. Then she lifted her face to look Stoss in the eye. “I am not a puppet to my master’s whims. I’m taking the exam and shall do whatever I can to pass.”

“You heard her.”

“So that’s it? No more negotiations? I mean, you won’t die, Dia, so that’s all well and good. The other two probably will, though. Are you sure?”

Stoss’s cup ran right over with ulterior motives. *If you don’t want to die, then start persuading the girl,* screamed her sickly-sweet tone.

Loren scoffed. “Mercenaries, see. Once we’re hired, we do the job. We never betray our clients unless they betray us first.”

“Though we’re adventurers now. Job titles are quite important,” Lapis retorted, looking at Loren reproachfully.

Paying her no heed, Loren narrowed his eyes. “We’ve reached an agreement. What about you?”

Folding her arms in front of her chest, Stoss closed her eyes and heaved a deep sigh. For a normal foe, this would have given Loren a million openings for attack. But even if he swung now, he knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“Then you leave me no choice. I shall get rid of the disturbances, defeat the pupil, and finish my job.” Stoss spread her folded arms wide, sneering as malice rose in her voice. “Short-lived ones. If you believe your strength can reach an Elder, then come as you may. At least give it your all so you may cross the Styx without regrets!”

The intimidating aura she exuded weighed down on Loren with a physical pressure. He adjusted his grip on his sword and burst forward to meet his enemy, unerring.

Once the matter was decided, Loren charged without hesitation. He moved so fast it startled even Lapis and Dia, who might have guessed his reaction.

Yet even from that first swing, he was badly outmatched. His blade tore

through the air with a shriek as he swung, not even grazing Stoss as she leaned nonchalantly out of the way. He tried to catch her on the return swing, but she'd already moved out of range.

"What an interesting weapon you have there. A magium sword? An antique, perhaps?"

"Who knows?"

He activated his self-strengthening for a brief instant, swiftly closing the distance to attack again. Again his blade was unable to capture her. Before he could make his next move, the smiling woman manifested right before his eyes, startling him into a backward leap.

"Your reaction speed is decent."

In the gap between his attacks, Stoss had slipped in so close that he might have felt her breathing, if she did such a thing. She didn't give chase, though; she merely pointed a finger.

There was no chanting. She didn't say the spell's name. The ball of fire erupted from her fingertip, and Loren blocked it with the flat of his blade.

As the force from the explosion pushed him back even farther, Loren kept a tight grip on his weapon.

"There's more where that came from."

Indeed, the next shot came immediately. Spell after spell burst into the flat of his greatsword. Loren braced his legs to endure it.

"Please don't forget about me."

Lapis slipped into range while Stoss's attention was focused on Loren. Stoss barely glanced at Lapis's well-aimed fist before it collided with an unseen wall.

"Are you a warrior monk? You don't look the part," Stoss said, her dress fluttering as she drove a knee into Lapis's flank.

Lapis barely managed to block and was unable to kill the momentum. She was all too easily thrown, rolling several times along the ground. Moving with the force to create distance between them, Lapis quickly stood in her dirty white robes. She had no time to take her stance; upon seeing Stoss pointing at her,

she retreated.

Several bolts of lightning struck where Lapis had stood. They gouged the ground and left a cloud of dust in their wake.

The dust left Stoss unable to see the result of her attack, so she turned her eyes to Dia, who had yet to move at all. And, without looking, she caught Loren's falling sword between her fingers.

"Oh, dear. Or perhaps as expected of magium, I should say. I can't break it."

"Goddammit!"

Loren couldn't wallow in shock at her easy grasp on his blade. He tried to pull back, but even as he heaved with all his strength, the sword remained stuck fast, as if nailed in place. The kick he unleashed in desperation was intercepted as easily as Lapis's fist.

"What naughty feet you have. It's very ill-mannered to kick a lady," Stoss scolded as she swept out the hand in which she clutched his sword. That simple gesture lifted Loren clean off the ground. She let go at the apex of her swing and sent him flying away, sword still in his hands.

"I should praise you for not giving up your weapon, but that's really all you *can* do."

He didn't take his eyes off of her as he landed. She took a step toward him, and he turned the inertia of his roll into a dive away.

Stoss kicked off to chase him, the shock wave created by her step sending Loren tumbling farther.

"Turn Undead!"

On Stoss's next step, a white light burst from the ground at her feet in a towering, luminous pillar. Here descended the ability unique to priests. Stoss faced it head-on, but when the white light dissipated, she had not a hair out of place. There she stood, wearing a slight smile.

"That tickled. You must be devout indeed."

"I'm an exemplary priest of the god of knowledge!"

“Not a monk…?”

In Stoss’s moment of confusion, a massive blade flew at her neck with a thunderous roar. As expected, it hit an invisible wall and stopped a hairsbreadth from her flesh. Loren had spanned the space between them in one bound to attack; he retreated again the instant he realized it was ineffective.

Stoss touched a hand to her exposed neck and laughed. “You’re an excellent swordsman. But that’s all you are.”

“Yeah? Glad to hear it. Now I’m gonna wipe that smug look off your face, so prepare yourself.”

“Eloquent too. But you shouldn’t boast of things you’re incapable of.”

She laughed again and he grit his teeth.

Sure enough, there was a despair-worthy gap between them, a chasm. His sword’s weight, not to mention his own, should have been a burden, yet Stoss had sent them flying one-handed like a child swinging a flower basket.

She activated magic with no forewarning. Her resistance was so high that she didn’t flinch from a powerful *Turn Undead*, and she possessed an invisible shield that completely blocked all physical attacks. Forget defeating her, Loren couldn’t see a way to land a single blow.

“That doesn’t mean I’m running away!”

Loren activated his self-strengthening again. He kicked off the ground with bolstered legs and unleashed a fearsome slash. Stoss moved to catch it in her hand again, but upon seeing a strange glow in his blade, she swung her arm up to parry instead.

Beads of light scattered in all directions, but these were no sparks. A sound, not as expected from clashing blades, echoed out around them. This time, both Loren and Stoss had to back off at the impact.

“That’s an interesting weapon. What did you just do?”

After firing a bolt to keep Lapis in check, Stoss stared at her right hand. Her pale skin wasn’t broken, but reddened as if smacked by a ruler.

Meanwhile, Loren dug the tip of his sword into the dirt, panting heavily as he

leaned on it like a staff. He exhaled steadily at Stoss's question, then regained his stance and answered, "Think for yourself, Elder."

"How stingy. Very well."

Admittedly, I didn't come out completely unscathed, thought Stoss. She had blocked the slash itself but had been unable to stifle the force behind it. Stoss was surprised that a human—a mere swordsman at that—had managed such an attack, but now she knew the worst he could do.

She could heal this paltry damage within a few seconds. Even if he hit her like this a hundred thousand times, she would be alive and kicking at the end. What's more, a glance at his condition made clear that this attack had expended most of his energy—though what energy, mana or stamina, she couldn't quite tell. *He can't use it consecutively*, Stoss concluded.

However, as Loren rallied himself and charged once more, Stoss realized she'd missed the mark.

"At it again, are you?"

In fact, Loren's second approach was even faster than the first. Stoss steadied her arm, matching the blow and sending Loren reeling back. She winced at the pain that assailed her and looked down at her arm, not sparing a second for her opponent.

Once again, his greatsword hadn't breached her skin. However, the damage she incurred was more significant. The reddened area was wider. A hint of shock crossed her face as she looked to the man on the ground.

On the other hand, Loren was fighting off an exhaustion that threatened to consume his entire body. Luckily for him, Stoss was still dismissing him and didn't counterattack. He hauled himself upright using his sword as support.

Loren himself didn't understand the significance of his blow, but thanks to Dia, he now knew that various spells were woven into the magium greatsword. When he dashed forward, on top of using self-strengthening, he imagined lowering his blade with all the strength in his body. The might of his blow increased accordingly.

That wasn't enough to smash through an Elder's defenses, but he could at

least do a little damage. He couldn't help but smile at getting to her, if only a little bit.

But it came at a cost. Each time he attacked, he felt his strength draining away. Had Stoss been seriously trying to kill him, he would have been completely defenseless after every slash.

<Are you all right, Mister? Should I send a bit more?>

Normally, he would have run dry of mana after a single one of those attacks. He could only manage a few in a row thanks to Scena letting him borrow her power.

<She's an Elder all right. My energy drain is barely doing a thing to her. The drain is still working though, so I don't have any problem with mana supply.>

Sorry about that. I know it's hard on you, but lend me a bit more, Loren answered in his head. Instantly, his body brimmed with energy. Each time Loren attacked Stoss, Scena used her energy drain to replenish the power he lost.

<It will be impossible to drain her to death. I don't know how she's doing it, but she's replenishing herself as soon as I take anything.>

With their massive reserves of mana and life energy, Elders boasted abnormal levels of recovery, so much so that Scena's energy drain couldn't put a dent in Stoss's strength. But it was more than enough for Scena to lend a hand in Loren's offense.

"*Turn Undead! Turn Undead! Turn Undead!* A little rest and then another *Turn Undead!*"

"Ah, seriously! You're annoying, you know that? You already know it won't work! It doesn't hurt, but it makes me tingle!"

"*Turn Undead!* So I'm at least managing to harass you! *Turn Undead!*"

While Loren recovered, Lapis exercised her priestly rites in rapid succession, drawing Stoss's attention. Even if she couldn't deal damage, she would still be an irritant. Stoss swung her arm, sending dirt and rocks hurtling toward Lapis. But even as she rained down attacks, Lapis's martial abilities allowed her to evade them. And, whenever the opportunity presented itself, she used *Turn*

Undead, which she could keep up for ages.

"Take another one!"

Loren kicked off and slashed with even more power than before. Stoss had been so focused on Lapis that she was once again forced to parry the blade directly with her arm.

The third strike was different from the two before it. Again, it didn't cut Stoss, but this time it wasn't repelled. Loren's greatsword was locked against Stoss's arm.

“You got even stronger! What are you supposed to be?!”

“I’m just an adventurer!” Loren yelled, trying to dig his blade into flesh. Stoss, unable to bear it, lashed out with a kick. Loren couldn’t dodge after throwing all his strength behind his attack. He took her knee straight to his abdomen, yet kept hold of his hilt. He rolled across the broken stone of the ruins and broke into a terrible coughing fit.

“That was quite the attack, but you wouldn’t reach me with a hundred, no, two hundred of those,” said Stoss. She adjusted her disheveled dress and rubbed the spot where her arm had clashed with the blade. “If you’re counting on Dia there to join in, just give up. She can’t move as long as I hold her true name.”

Dia hadn’t so much as twitched since the battle began. She understood that one wrong step would make Stoss use her true name. That would only make everything worse. It was still possible for Stoss to bind her even if she didn’t move a muscle, but Stoss was busy fending off Loren’s attacks and didn’t seem keen on splitting her attention further.

“There’s more where that came from. *Turn*—”

“Shut up already.” Stoss swung her arm before Lapis could finish. An explosion erupted at Lapis’s feet; in the middle of her chant, Lapis failed to dodge. She was blown backward and fell limp to the dirt.

“Lapis!” Loren shouted. After nearly hacking up a lung, he was caught in the motion of wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when he saw her go flying.

Fortunately, Lapis sprang up, waving to reassure him. “I’m all…all right. I’m built pretty sturdy, I am.”

“I thought I knew what we were up against, but these Elders are crazy,” Loren couldn’t help but grumble as he took up his sword again.

As arrogant as a queen on her throne, Stoss scornfully replied, “Then you did not truly understand. Give up, human.”

“Can you buy me some time, Lapis?” Loren asked.

With nothing else to do, but refusing to give up, Loren cut at Stoss again.

Lapis readied herself to support him as Stoss intercepted the attack barehanded, but Dia suddenly called out a request.

Lapis turned curiously to see Dia, standing much closer than she’d been before, staring fixedly at Loren locked with Stoss. For a moment, she forgot where she was. “You need…time?” she asked.

“Indeed. I need time to talk to Loren.”

If Dia drew attention to herself, Stoss would bind her with her true name. If they wanted to break through Stoss’s defenses, they needed to be able to set up a proper strategy.

Not a wild request, even if Lapis couldn’t see any way of breaking through Stoss’s defenses no matter how much they talked about it. She could only bet on the chance that Loren and Dia might work something out together.

“I can’t buy too much.”

“A little is enough. It will be over soon,” Dia replied firmly. This convinced Lapis that she really did have something in mind.

Lapis put her fists together. Luckily, they were in the middle of some ruins in a desolate plain, where no one could say a thing about her using her full abilities. Her body wasn’t complete, and she didn’t think she could do any real damage to an Elder, but she was confident she could at least complete Dia’s request.

“Please keep it short. I don’t want to die.”

“I know,” Dia said with a resolute nod.

At Dia’s agreement, Lapis used the same strengthening technique she had taught Loren, infusing her entire body. She felt her power rising as she shouted, “Tag out, Mr. Loren!”

“Lapis?!”

Although Loren was surprised, he backed off as instructed. Lapis advanced with clenched fists before Stoss could chase after him, swinging faster than her

own eyes could perceive.

“Seriously, what are you?!”

Lapis’s fists didn’t reach Stoss. The impact still stopped her in her tracks, and she peered at Lapis with bemusement.

“A devout priest to the god of knowledge, and an adventurer! And Mr. Loren’s partner too!”

“You’re definitely leaving something out of all that!” Stoss practically shrieked. Lapis continued throwing punches with wild fury, paying Stoss no heed.

That’s definitely not how a priest fights, but I guess it’s Lapis, Loren thought, perhaps a bit uncharitably, as Dia appeared beside him.

“We need to talk, Loren.”

“Will that talk help our situation?”

“It will. But first, show me your sword.”

Loren held out the blade that had been clenched in his fists throughout the battle. It was a massive weapon that even a giant would have difficulty wielding, but Dia took it from him and held it lightly, her eyes racing over its surface. After a moment, she returned it to him.

“All right. I have an idea. You see…”

Dia beckoned him close. She brought her mouth to his ear, cupping her hands so only he could hear. Loren listened in silence for some time. When she was done he parted from her, eyes wide in disbelief.

“Will that really do it?”

“Presumably. I can’t speak with absolute certainty, but that should make Stoss back off.”

“I’ll do it if I have to…but are you sure?”

“Don’t worry. Just do it.”

Her will was strong, absolute. Loren didn’t question her further.

“Fine. If you’re good with that, I’m not gonna stop you.”

“I’m counting on you. You will only have one chance.”

Dia’s eyes turned from Loren to Lapis, still entrenched in combat. The demon was exchanging blows with the Elder, and Lapis remained at a clear disadvantage. After all, Stoss’s defenses wouldn’t break no matter how hard Lapis hammered her fists down, while Stoss’s attacks steadily chipped away at Lapis’s stamina.

Yet she wasn’t completely defeated. Here was Lapis, drawing out a battle with an Elder: she really was a fearsome, nonsensical girl.

“This is late in the game, but you aren’t human, are you?” Stoss asked.

“I don’t see any reason for me to answer that question,” Lapis said.

“The swordsman is human… But then what are you doing here?”

“Adventurer work. Also, being a priest to the god of knowledge.”

“The god of knowledge has some incredible followers.”

Lapis grinned. She kept up her assault until she heard Dia call from behind, “Lapis! We’re done! Switch out!”

Without another word or gesture, Lapis hammered in one straight punch with all her weight behind it. On top of her immense physical might, she injected the blow with a vast amount of mana; while this still failed to pierce Stoss’s focused defenses, the impact sent the Elder sliding backward and gave Lapis the opportunity to promptly retreat.

Her space was filled by Dia rushing forth, her dress fluttering in the wind. Dia stared Stoss down; Stoss’s lips bent into a crooked smile.

“Don’t you understand how pointless this is? I have your true—”

“Silence.”

Dia wasn’t keen on listening to what Stoss had to say. She clenched her fist. Seeing her aggression, Stoss was about to bring forth the power of Dia’s true name. Her eyes narrowed doubtfully when she saw Loren take his stance a short distance behind Dia.

However, no matter what Loren did, he was no threat to her. Stoss laughed, knowing this would be another wasted effort.

“Do it, Loren!” Dia cried, readying herself to fight.

“You got it!”

On her signal, Loren swung while picturing all his strength pouring into his blade. Of course, he was so far back that his blade wouldn’t even reach Dia, let alone Stoss. But, in the middle of his attack, Loren let go of his sword.

“What…?!”

Stoss didn’t know what they were trying to accomplish, but she knew she had to stop Dia. A split second before Stoss said her true name, Dia’s head flew clean off, and her body kept right on going. The thrown sword had spun through the air and sliced through Dia, who had not even attempted to guard.

As her mind was bound at the mention of her true name, the life drained from Dia’s face, but her body continued forward without the influence of her brain. Her outstretched fist pierced straight through Stoss’s chest, the other Elder too seized by surprise to block it.

For a brief moment, the clash of power between two Elders drew the world to a pause. And the sword continued to fly. Dia’s decapitated body was practically in Stoss’s embrace as the blade’s edge met Stoss’s neck.

“Grr…grah?!”

Stoss’s powers were overcome. She had lost her defensive barrier, and her body was unable to withstand such blows. Even so, she desperately mustered her strength, but it was already too late. The magium sword cut through her slender nape as if their hard struggle had been a dream. Her head flew high into the air.

The bodies of two headless women fell to the ground. Their two heads soared and landed nearby.

Lapis was at a loss for words, while Loren was on his knees, having poured everything he had into that attack.

“You’ve got…to be kidding me,” Stoss said, now reduced to a head. How she

was producing any sound, staring at the impaled and severed body that housed her lungs, was a riddle for another time.

Dia's head was quickly retrieved by Lapis.

"She had you cut off her head before she could hear her true name…and launched a suicide attack with her body. That's not sane."

"Perhaps. But it was a fine plan, wouldn't you say?" Dia's head replied, perfectly content to be cradled against Lapis's chest.

Even Lapis didn't know how Dia spoke without full vocal cords, but her voice was no different from when she was firmly attached.

Stoss started. "B-but just because you've cut off my head, don't think—"

"Oh, I'm aware," said Dia. "That's precisely why I'm doing this."

Dia glanced at the two entangled bodies, and her torso burst into an inferno of flames. The flames spread to Stoss, whose lifeless body could no longer defend itself. The headless corpses disintegrated before their very eyes, floating away as dust in the wind.

"Hey!"

"Now you quite literally can't lift a finger. Do you want to continue?" Dia grinned, and Stoss couldn't muster a reply.

As Elders, they wouldn't die even if they were left as talking heads. However, they were at a severe disadvantage with their bodies turned to ash. They couldn't fight like this, and even if Stoss wanted to bind Dia with her true name, it wouldn't really leave her worse off than she was now.

"I won't stop you if you want to continue. Though I don't know what will happen to you then."

"Grr… Well, I…"

"What would happen if we dug a hole and buried her? Would the body regenerate?" Lapis inquired with a beautiful smile. No one there could have stopped her if she decided to do some gravedigging. Loren had run out of strength, and the two Elders were, well, as they were.

“She’ll recover, but it will take a good amount of time.”

“D-don’t think this is the end of it! I know your true name!” Stoss said, her frustration clear.

Dia accepted this as if it were nothing. “Why should I worry about that? I’ve lost the majority of my body. Once I’ve reconstructed myself, I’ll be someone new. And that will be the end of it.”

“You can change your true name?” Lapis asked.

“Not normally. But when I’ve been this badly damaged, the regeneration will surely create some discrepancies with what defined me before. It is a good opportunity.”

From her perch in Lapis’s arms, Dia looked down at Stoss’s head where it lay on the ground. Stoss desperately grasped for a counterargument, but with no body, there was little she could do. After minutes of desperate thought, she found nothing that could turn the tides.

“I give up… Please don’t bury me,” she ultimately said, her voice quavering.

“Very well, no burying. Then burning it is.” Leave it to Lapis to propose something even more terrible.

And so the battle with the Elder ended with only one person left standing.

Epilogue:
Bedridden to Rest

"JUST BECAUSE you couldn't tear through an Elder's barrier, that doesn't mean you should tear through my cute disciple. Don't you think that's simply barbaric?" said a piercing cold voice through an amicable smile.

Loren raised his head from his pillow, gazing grimly at the voice's owner.

Long, straight, silver-blonde hair and nearly transparent pale skin. He could have called her beautiful and no one would have objected. While her features were naturally harsh, she managed to conceal it beneath a plastered-on smile.

Her current clothes were suited to a regular person taking a stroll through town, but the faint air of nobility about her made them seem like a mismatch.

This woman sat in a chair by his bedside.

"How about you put a hand to your heart and ask yourself why it came to that?" Loren asked, his cynicism palpable. The weariness Loren felt made it tiresome even to speak. But he knew she would hold it against him forever if he kept his silence.

The voice's owner lightly brushed her hair aside and answered, quite shamelessly, "I couldn't help it. I did it out of love."

"What troublesome love that must be."

Her smile didn't crumple at his thoroughly aggravated tone.

They were at the hospital in Kaffa, in a room Loren was beginning to think of as his own. He just lay there, barely even lifting his neck to speak.

"It would have ended much easier if you had simply persuaded Dia to give up on the examination."

"Don't blame me; it's not what she wanted. Just be happy at your pupil's growth, you idiotic master."

He felt a chill the instant he blurted out his opinion. However, Dia's master

Sierra didn't seem truly put off. There was no telling what would happen after he called her—an entity that could wipe Kaffa, and even the entire kingdom, off the map—an idiot, but he simply couldn't change his impression of her.

"So what's that student of yours up to now?"

"Well, she's been reduced to a head. She's made things quite inconvenient for herself, but she's steadily preparing for her independence in a place I've set up for her."

Stoss had stood as the final challenge to Dia's independence as an Elder. After much trial and error, only Dia's not-quite-suicide attack and the full might of Loren's sword had brought her down.

Decapitation couldn't kill an Elder, but getting Stoss out of the way meant there was nothing to stop Dia from passing her exam. She was apparently in the process of preparing to live on her own at a designated base.

They'd won. The request was completed, but the cleanup was a pain.

Two Elders were reduced to heads, their bodies burned to ash by Dia's magic. Loren had seen that much before he'd fainted on the spot, physically and magically drained.

As the only able person left, Lapis followed Dia's instructions to open the entrance to the base in the ruins. She then carried down an unconscious Loren and carelessly tossed Stoss's head somewhere. Once things were settled, Lapis slung Loren over the back of the donkey—the poor creature had nearly been forgotten—and he was in Kaffa by the time he woke up.

He was diagnosed with extreme fatigue. Unable to afford to hold back against Stoss, he had quite literally given it his all. He had drained his mana and life force until he was reduced to this pitiful state.

When all was said and done, the hospital was getting a little too used to him showing up in need of days and days of bed rest.

"Dia told me, 'If you do what I say, for the time being, Master, I will let this be water under the bridge. Otherwise, I'll hate you for the rest of my life.' Now I just have to listen to her, don't I?"

“You Elders do have long lives ahead of you.”

Sierra’s smile was tinged with melancholy as she heaved a deep sigh. She was just reaping what she’d sowed, as far as Loren was concerned. But he understood it would be harsh to be hated by the one she had adored for all her long life.

Being Dia’s housemaid for a while is a cheap price to pay, he thought.

“Do you think she’ll forgive me in a hundred years?” Sierra asked him hopelessly.

“Damn, that’s a long time. How am I supposed to know what happens that far away? And why should I even care? Not like I’m gonna be alive.”

“You’re so cold, Mr. Loren.”

“Shut it! Don’t touch me! Don’t look at me like that! And don’t bloody shake me!”

Loren wailed as she swung him back and forth by the shoulders. She carried on for a while despite his complaints, only letting go when she realized his eyes were spinning and his body was limp.

“So anyways…” he said. “You came all the way here to complain to me?”

I’ve had enough, he thought. Loren stared at the ceiling as Sierra clapped her hands together as she recalled her true mission.

“That’s right. Dia told me to drop by.”

“Well, here you are. Now back to your grave with you.”

“You really are cold. Do you think any other mortal would find fault with an Elder gracing the side of their sickbed?” Sierra asked as she opened the small purse resting by her feet. She stuck a hand in and pulled out something so large it never should have fit.

It was leather, folded. She tossed it into his lap.

“What is…oof!”

She’d handled it so lightly. Only once it landed across his aching legs did he realize how heavy it was, and it knocked the words right out of him. He quickly unfolded it.

It was a leather jacket, chestnut brown. It must have been made to fit him—it was quite large and incredibly weighty.

“You ruined all your armor and whatnot on the job, didn’t you? Dia said she wanted me, her master, to pick out a suitable replacement. So I just went out and grabbed something.”

“Is this armor?”

“Triple-layered Pegasus hide. Fine chain mail and impact-absorbing materials have been sandwiched between the layers. The outer leather has already been enchanted to resist magic.” Sierra continued blithely on as she tossed a set of gloves and boots onto his knees. “Same material, just a bit tougher. They have protections similar to the jacket.”

“Why are you throwing them at my knees?”

“Because I want to break—I mean, because there’s simply nowhere else to put them.”

Despite the ominous beginning to Sierra’s sentence, the boots and gloves weren’t made to bust knees. Loren feared the boots would dirty the sheets, but they seemed to be either new or well-cleaned and left no scuffs.

“You received your cash reward in advance. Shall we consider it all settled?”

“I’ll gladly take any bonus you’re offering.”

“Greed will ruin you. Live modestly.”

Sierra closed the lip of her purse, hooked it over her shoulder, and stood. She shrugged as she looked down at Loren on the bed. “I should be going now. I wouldn’t want to bump into that scary girl after staying too long. And I have a few more errands to run for Dia. She’s only just starting out—there are plenty of things she needs. And she’s relying on me to get everything.”

“You have it tough, I guess. Well, good luck.” Loren didn’t sound too concerned. After all, Sierra was getting her just deserts.

Sierra waved, turned, and began walking. Then she stopped and turned back. “Right, right. I nearly forgot to pass on Dia’s message,” she said.

“What is it?”

Loren had been unconscious when he left the ruins. Dia had been unable to move, and so they’d never properly said their goodbyes.

“First,” Sierra said, raising her index finger. “She said, ‘I don’t plan on changing the location of my base in the near future. Come by if you need anything. I will do my best to help.’”

“Well, thanks for that. Tell her we know we can depend on her.”

Sierra lifted another finger. “Second, about that head of your company you told her about.”

“Oh, right. That happened.”

Dia had been so curious about it that Loren couldn’t help but tell her the name of his company and mentor. She said she’d tell him if she figured anything

out, but nothing had come of it yet.

“The name Juris Mutschild is still unknown to her. She’s going to continue her investigation. However, while it is still uncertain, she decided to hand over some information about your salute.”

“I see…”

Dia had gotten really stuck on that too, all the ways that Loren’s salute differed from a proper knight’s. She had all sorts of ideas about it.

“It is customary for a knight to offer their sword to their lord. However, a single order of knights instead points the tip down, offering their devotion to the earth.”

“Huh, what sort of order?”

“The Fourth Knight Order of the Neuna Kingdom of Magic. Commonly called the Planetes Knights. They hardly ever operated as an organization, with each member going off and doing their own thing. From what I’ve heard, these knights have quite a bit of freedom.”

“I’ve never even heard of that country.”

Not that Loren was some geography whiz. He had moved from place to place on the chief’s orders. He fought wherever he ended up and quickly found himself indifferent to the names of the places around him. Even so, there were a lot of places he knew he’d been. The country Sierra brought up wasn’t one of them.

“Of course you don’t know it. In fact, I’d be shocked if some random human had that info.”

“I think I remember Dia saying the same thing… Where are they?”

A country no one knows about… Must be in some unexplored land, Loren thought.

But Sierra shook her head. “It’s a country that exists nowhere in the world. That’s why no one knows it. Only those of us who have lived long enough even know of it.”

“That’s…”

“Remember this, and don’t disclose it to anyone. Neuna is what you people call the ancient kingdom, a nation that has long since fallen. I don’t know how your sword instructor picked all this up, but he might be involved with that kingdom in some way.”

Loren was left speechless. Honestly, a part of him didn’t really care. It wasn’t as if anything would change if his chief knew sword salutes from the ancient kingdom. But he couldn’t help but be curious. Where, how, and why had his chief come to know such a thing?

“That’s all we know for now. We’ll inform you if anything comes up. That was Dia’s message. Did you catch all of that?”

“Yeah… Tell her I said thanks.”

“Of course. Oh, right. I should thank you too. Now that girl can finally stand on her own two feet.”

“Thanks from you? Why the hell would you—”

With one final wave, Sierra turned, and this time she was gone. After seeing her off, Loren let out a deep sigh. He tossed the jacket, the boots, and the gloves onto the chair where Sierra had been and flattened himself back on the bed.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Loren? Any pain, itchiness, or general discomfort?” Lapis entered on the heels of Sierra’s departure. “Huh? Where did that jacket come from? You didn’t go out and buy it, did you?”

Loren was in quite a state, weak as a kitten. He had recovered a bit as he slept, but he wasn’t well enough to take a jaunty shopping trip around town.

“Did you pass anyone on your way in?” he asked.

Lapis tilted her head. “No, not a soul.”

Timing-wise, she surely should have passed Sierra. It was odd that Lapis hadn’t seen anyone, or so Loren thought, but then he stopped worrying about it. He was dealing with an Elder who had lived hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Perhaps it was child’s play for her to avoid Lapis’s detection.

“I guess that’s fine then. Dia sent it as a bonus reward.”

“Who delivered it?”

“No clue. They left as soon as they dropped it off.”

There was no need for Lapis to know that Sierra had visited. At present, there was no reason to tell Lapis what she’d said about the ancient kingdom either. It wasn’t as if Dia’s suppositions had any weight to them, or as if telling Lapis would accomplish anything other than getting her worked up about archaeology.

“You’re hospitalized again, Mr. Loren. Your medical bills are piling up.”

“Not what I wanted to hear… But please take the costs from my share of the reward.”

“You’d be losing around half of it.”

“That’s fine. I’m thankful I have any left at all.”

It was far better than going further into the red and raising his debt.

Loren lay down and shut his eyes. Sierra’s words were a bit of a shock, but his remaining weariness made it difficult to do anything but go back to sleep. He could think about it later—when he knew something a little more certain. Or perhaps he would be forced to think about it, eventually.

Unable to resist the drowsiness assailing him, Loren fell into a deep abyss.

Bonus Story:
From the Notes of a Certain Priest

"YOU'VE GOT TERRIBLE TASTE in men," a passing male demon told me. I chased him down, beat him up, and threw him headfirst into the trash.

Hello, Lapis here. My reputation as a perfectly average demon must be growing. I'm sure that man will have a good talk with the rats and nameless insects at the bottom of the bin and learn the foolishness of his ways.

I'm sure I've done a good deed, but I must wonder what a demon committing good deeds will do for our respectably vile public image.

Now then, it all started when the adventurers' guild wanted Mr. Loren to take a promotion exam. In my opinion, they took far too long to recognize Mr. Loren's capabilities. In fact, I wanted to demand an explanation for why he was only being promoted to iron rank.

It's Mr. Loren we're talking about. He could do just fine as a silver or gold rank, but every organization is filled with hard-headed

people at the top. I'm starting to think the guild would function better if we cleared the air a bit.

Yes, I fully intend to punch a few ventilation holes through the building if this happens again.

They won't know I did it, of course. It would be pointless if I became a criminal and could no longer work with Mr. Loren.

With that said, Mr. Loren took them up on the offer and faced off against Mr. Claes. The exam was the perfect excuse to settle things with him, wasn't it? I'm pretty sure Mr. Loren could have done it, even with a practice weapon. An unfortunate accident during an exam wouldn't be considered a crime, right?

I'm sure plenty of people would understand and agree. It would have been for the sake of the many unfortunate women who will fall victim to Mr. Claes in the future.

The pre-match auction was a treat. I earned a bit of money, and I'm hoping Ms. Ivy learns her lesson. Even so, I knew Mr. Loren had it in him. There were no practice swords that fit him, so he used a normal longsword and still managed to fight more than equally with Mr. Claes.

I was a bit curious about his stance before the battle began. He apparently learned it from his chief, who taught him how to use a sword, but it was more etiquette than combat-related. Even I, as a priest to the god of knowledge, knew nothing about it. This made me incredibly curious as to where his chief learned it.

There was an intruder in the middle of their mock battle. My first guess was that she was a lost child, but then I realized she had to be something special. After all, even I—a demon—didn't notice her until the very last moment. Not to mention how she managed to break both Mr. Loren's and Mr. Claes's weapons at once.

Putting Mr. Claes aside for the moment—although Mr. Loren was using a wooden blade, it is quite impressive that someone managed to break it. Mr. Claes was quite taken aback, but Mr. Loren at least kept a cool facade. As expected of Mr. Loren.

Now about the one who jumped in. She turned out to be a young girl. Of course, no ordinary young girl could have blocked an attack from Mr. Loren, and I knew she wasn't what she seemed. I did not, however, expect her to be an Elder.

The moment I found out, I feared a rumor would spread that Kaffa had fallen to ruin. No, a town would be the smallest loss. It wouldn't have been strange if the entire country fell apart. There isn't enough paper in the world to describe the shock I felt upon receiving a request from such an entity, so I shall omit it.

One wrong step and she would be beyond even my considerable self. I really didn't want to partake in the conversation.

Even so, I never knew Elders underwent ceremonies to come of age. That was news to me. In addition, I thought I might receive information about the stance Mr. Loren performed before that duel, so I wasn't completely against taking the job.

I'm happy that there's no lack of new information when I stick with Mr. Loren, but I would prefer it if he stopped drawing such outrageous entities to him.

The Elder called Ms. Dia requested our escort to a designated spot. The road there was quite worthwhile, I must say. After all, she had lived in a time when the magically advanced nation referred to as the ancient kingdom still existed. She was a walking encyclopedia of sorts, and I learned all sorts of things just by asking.

Unfortunately, she was an Elder who held little interest in the world of man, and there were a considerable number of things she didn't know. It was still an incredibly valuable experience to get so much info directly from an Elder.

Curiously, another Elder was trying to get in the way of Ms. Dia's trial, and we were informed that this enemy would definitely send someone after us. I shuddered at the thought of an obstacle set up by an Elder. However, so long as the Elder herself didn't appear, we would just have to deal with it.

As Mr. Loren would probably struggle against Pures, a vampire rank below Elders, I knew I'd have to step up when the time came. That was what was on my mind as the night washed over us. I never thought we would be attacked by enough undead to fill my entire field of vision.

The true terror of vampires is how they can multiply infinitely by drinking the blood of their opponents. And, of course, their strength. Normal people would be torn up like old rags even against low-ranked and barehanded vampires. No matter how many were defeated, their numbers grow the moment they take one of your allies.

With that being said, I am a bit of a priest, you know. I can exhibit my abilities to the fullest against the undead, and there is no way that Mr. Loren would ever fall to mere low-grade vampires.

Still, the battle lasted from midnight to daybreak. We probably pushed it a bit.

It wasn't much for me, as I was just using *Turn Undead*, but Mr. Loren had to swing around that sword of his. With his stamina, I've begun to doubt that he's human at all. Though that's probably thanks to Scena inside him. I'm in awe at the versatility of her energy drain. Isn't it too convenient? She can use it both as offense and defense.

We were on the move as soon as we'd fought off the attack. On the way, we actually ran into Ms. Dia's former protector, another Elder. She called herself Ms. Sierra, but how strange it was. It was rare enough to come across an Elder, yet I was meeting two in such a short span of time. If such strange things keep happening, they'll no longer be strange at all.

Putting that aside, Ms. Sierra encouraged Ms. Dia, informed her that the enemy was an Elder named Ms. Stoss, and left upon saying she couldn't interfere.

It seemed Mr. Loren wanted Ms. Sierra's assistance, but perhaps that was asking for a bit much. Of course, I found it questionable that she came at all, purposely offering information to someone who was in the middle of a trial.

I mean, was the trial not designed with that in mind? If I were to impose the same exam on someone, I definitely wouldn't leak an enemy's name even if I knew it. This absolutely isn't because demons have worse natures than Elders. Certainly not.

I wanted to warn Ms. Dia, but she had absolute trust in her master, and I didn't want to ruin her mood. Mr. Loren was already wary, so that was that.

Anyways, we were attacked again. They were a bit more motivated this time, and there was a zombie dragon among the other undead.

They sometimes pop up on battlefields, according to Mr. Loren. They're not so common to me. After all, dragon corpses never end up in demon territory without a bit of fanfare. They're not always in the best condition, but the materials from dragon corpses are quite valuable, so the bodies are always spotted and stripped before they can become undead.

I've heard that some do manage to slip through the net, but they don't appear very frequently.

For some reason, Ms. Dia couldn't move during the zombie dragon attack. To make matters worse, a Pure appeared, and oh what a hassle that was. This was not the time to show self-restraint, and I used magic and even let my demonic nature slip out.

I briskly cleaned up the Pure while Mr. Loren held the dragon at bay. That was all well and good, but once I was done, I found Mr. Loren had taken care of the zombie dragon on his own.

I couldn't contain my surprise.

Even if it had weakened upon becoming an undead, he was still technically facing off with a mighty dragon. That just wasn't something a swordsman without magic should have been capable of defeating single-handedly, but Mr. Loren is abnormal in many ways, so maybe abnormal things simply happen to him… Should I really accept that?

I went a tad overboard on the Pure, in any case. The brakes didn't quite work—or should I say my wild side awakened? Anyway, I beat him black and blue and twisted him up until he was ash. 'Twas very refreshing, to be perfectly honest.

I frantically had to stop Mr. Loren when he said he wanted to carry Ms. Dia. If he carried her on his back, then naturally that would put her face near his neck. How could I possibly allow a vampire's face to be anywhere near there?

It would be the same if I carried her, but that was better than Mr. Loren becoming a vampire, so I put her on my back. Of course, I lied when I said I could do something about it. Perhaps I could if I wasn't dealing with an Elder, but an average demon couldn't possibly resist something on her level.

Along the way, we spoke about who was behind it, and it was undoubtedly Ms. Sierra. The decisive evidence was the invocation of Ms. Dia's true name.

In regards to true names, I can only explain them as well as I explained them to Loren. They are peculiar names that link directly to one's existence. That's roughly correct.

Ms. Dia fell into a slump upon learning she was up against her beloved master, and Mr. Loren had to cheer her up. You can't blame me for being a tad envious. Would he do the same if he found me in a similar situation?

He probably would, but I won't know until it actually happens. And then, I'm sure I'll end up causing so much trouble for him, so I hope it never does.

Dia recovered with a bit of encouragement. We arrived at our goal, and there,

we met the Elder Stoss who Ms. Sierra had warned us about. I thought I understood well enough, but Elders are really quite ridiculous. Even together, Mr. Loren and I were no match for her.

I knew I would have to strengthen my resolve, but that was when Ms. Dia used a suicidal charge to allow Mr. Loren to lop off Ms. Stoss's head. They were taken out together. It seems only an Elder can face an Elder. As a result, both of them were left as heads.

I had to handle the rest on my own. It was a great success that neither of us suffered any serious injuries on a job dealing with Elders. It seems Mr. Loren received a reward while I wasn't looking, but if it strengthens him, I should welcome it.

Still, something occurred to me while I stared at his sleeping face on the hospital bed. Mr. Loren could surely complete normal adventurer work while humming a merry tune. So why do we keep getting dragged into things so far beyond us?

And, even though it's all beyond us, how do we keep managing to make it through? Just what sort of star was Mr. Loren born under?

In any case, as long as Mr. Loren's safe, his debt still stands, and he sticks with me, I'm actually quite indifferent to the rest.

Afterword

A PLEASURE TO MEET all you newcomers, and welcome back to everyone else.

Here, I bring you *The Strange Adventure of a Broke Mercenary*, and Volume 5 at that. I hope you enjoyed it.

To those of you who purchased the book, I would feel greatly blessed if this book can provide even the slightest bit of entertainment. If you haven't bought it yet, or you're considering buying it, I earnestly beg you to take it to the register.

Your investment in the story means everything. That is the sort of industry I work in.

If you're picking up this series for the first time, you'll probably find Volumes 1 to 4 lined up beside this book. You'll make the author dance his shorts off if you take them all to the cashier. If the books aren't there, you could place an order for them.

Once this book is out, I think the comic version I advertised in Volume 3 should be in publication as well. There should be a notice about it on Hobby Japan's home page, so please check there.

I'm not throwing it to the wind. I am trying to provide you with the most precise and up-to-date information on the matter. The thing is, the info I have on hand is a tad vague at the moment… Publishing uncertain information would make it feel like I'm lying to you.

I still have a bit of space here, so let's do a bit of advertising.

Volumes 1 through 17 of *New Life+* are on sale. I would be very fortunate if you picked up a volume of that book alongside this one.

If the books aren't at your local bookstore, you could place an order for them. You should be able to find the right sites if you Google the name. I'm not trying to be careless. The information may or may not be more valuable if you find it

with your own hands.

Now on to my words of gratitude.

Thank you to the entirety of Hobby Japan's editing department. To the proofreaders, the marketing team, and the designers. To peroshi-sama, who designed the Elders in this volume as if they were SSRs in a mobile game. Truly, thank you.

To my editor K-sama, who always finds the time to have long phone calls with me.

And my deepest thanks to you readers.

As always, I pray that your patronage may bring us together again.

—Mine

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