

NOVEL

10

# THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi



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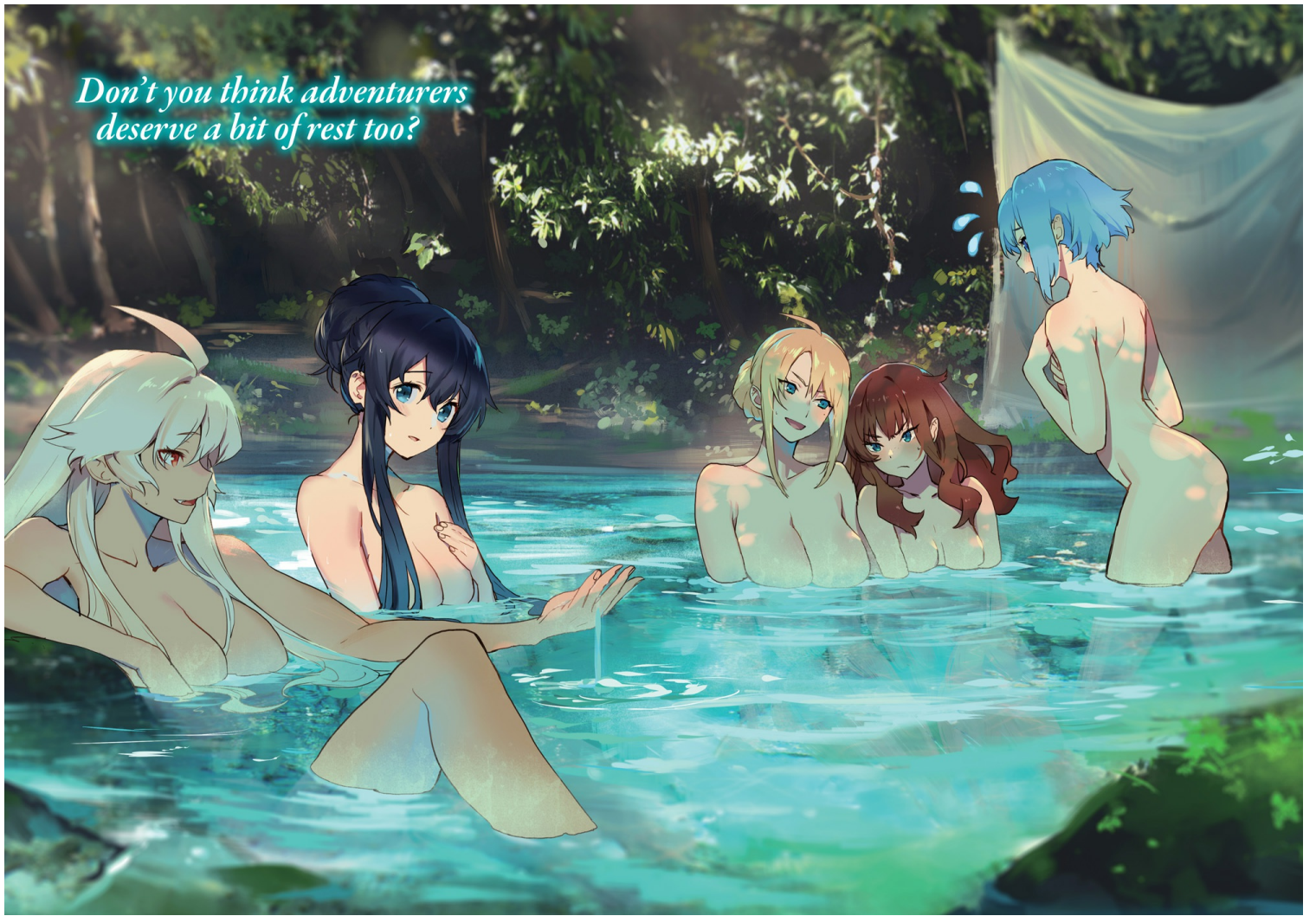


**“This is my  
recommendation.  
Karlovy, town of  
food and baths.  
If you want to kick  
back, eat delicious  
food, and refresh  
yourself, both body  
and soul, there’s  
no better place.  
I guarantee it.”**


**His sing-song tone made  
it all sound rather fishy.  
But the paper did in fact  
back up his claims. At the  
very least, he knew what  
he was talking about.**



*Don't you think adventurers  
deserve a bit of rest too?*





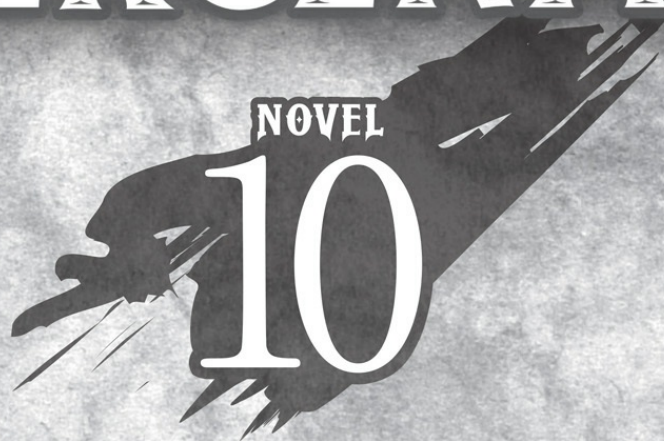


**“Now then,  
enough chatting.  
Noel, get up  
and do your  
job already.  
We mustn’t allow  
any intruders to  
leave our domain  
alive.”**

**In response to  
Magna’s call, an  
indigo hand emerged  
from the white smoke  
to grasp the rim of the  
coffin and pull up its  
owner.**



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Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 10

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Fantasie Geschichte von  
Söldner in großer Armut

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

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## Prologue:

### From False Alarm to Proposal

**A** RUMOR WAS SPREADING—and Loren didn't really want to think about where it might have come from. A certain silver-rank adventurer party had infiltrated demon territory and made it all the way to the demon lord's castle. There, they'd borne witness to a flash of light that collided with the castle walls, leaving naught but destruction in its wake.

*I'm surprised they managed to sneak that far.* Loren was genuinely impressed. However, he was pretty sure they hadn't been looking at a "demon lord's" castle. They had, in fact, located the home of the "great demon *king*" who presided over those lords. As for that flash, that had been the work of an ancient dragon.

Not that Loren could share this information with anyone.

If he did, they would naturally ask why he was privy to such things. Then he'd have to get into the whole sordid tale of Demon Lord Judie, Emily the ancient dragon, and the rest of it. At best, what was in fact honesty would be taken for a joke or drunken ramblings. At worst, someone might actually believe him.

This destruction of a demon lord's castle had been reported to the adventurers' guild. It wasn't yet substantiated, but that would take a great deal of time and effort.

*I can just let this take care of itself,* Loren decided as he tilted his glass.

Loren had dropped by the guild hall in the town of Kaffa—or more precisely, the dining area attached to it. He'd spent the early evening enjoying his drink as he lent an ear to the rumors floating around. As he listened, he found himself amazed that he'd somehow survived those ordeals and made it back in one piece.

In order to accompany Lapis to her homeland, Loren had accepted an



information-gathering quest and ventured into demon territory. The things he encountered there had far exceeded what any iron-rank adventurer should be forced to reckon with.

For starters, he'd never imagined he'd come face-to-face with a demon lord—let alone a dragon, said to be the strongest of monsters. To say nothing of an *ancient* dragon, the greatest of all dragonkind. Every encounter had pushed the boundaries of what he thought possible.

Along the way, a dwarven settlement had been wiped off the map, and for... complicated reasons, Loren had accepted a request from that demon lord. The request had made him an enemy of Magna—a black-clad swordsman whose strength surpassed Loren's—as well as Magna's dark elf companion. It had been an overall dizzying experience. For what it was worth, Loren now knew the origin of the giant sword he regularly wielded, and he had received official approval from its true owner to continue doing so.

The problem was that, on top of all that, he was now deeply in debt to said demon lord. Loren resigned himself to this fate. It was wholly unreasonable, but given his luck, it was also, in a way, inevitable.

That said, encounters with demon lords and ancient dragons were the sort of thing that generally killed a man. *I guess I must have something going for me if I survived*, Loren thought.

It was hard to imagine many silver-rank adventurers had experienced anything comparable. In fact, hardly any golds—the rank above silver—could claim to have lived through remotely similar events. Not that Loren knew any of this. At most, he considered his recent experience to have been a somewhat valuable learning opportunity.

“Ah, Mr. Loren. I knew I'd find you here.”

He turned toward the mention of his name to see his partner, the priest called Lapis, approaching while waving her hand. As she took the seat across the table from him, she placed an order for a drink and light snack with a



waitress who happened to pass.

Loren studied the girl and her black ponytail as he recalled the journey back from demon territory. After completing the demon lord's request, they laid low for a time at the home of Lapis's parents (which was, to be clear, the *castle* of *Demon Lord* Judie). They hadn't wanted to risk running into Magna, who had a bone or two to pick with them. Once a few days passed and the dust settled, they started on their way home to human lands.

They'd followed the same dwarven tunnel they had used to get to demon territory. Loren had felt a bit apprehensive about this, seeing as there were no dwarves to guide them, but Judie had assigned them a handful of demon soldiers for protection. There had also been the matter of Neg, the spider who camped on Loren's shoulder. He'd lent them far more aid than he had expected.

Demons already possessed strength that surpassed that of any human, and these folks in particular were trained soldiers. With them around, most monsters hadn't even risked approaching. Meanwhile, Neg had gestured this way and that, and by following his directions, they'd never once lost their way.

Another dwarf settlement lay at the end of the tunnel. Ritz's party had already departed, but it would have been a whole thing if they were spotted with demons, so they'd parted with the soldiers before strolling out into the open air. Once they'd passed through the settlement, they'd gone to rustle up the vehicle they'd originally taken to reach Lapis's base beneath the desert sands. Which was to say, they'd collected their frozen horse and wagon.

Three days later, they were back in Kaffa.

Loren had been curious as to how Lapis intended to transport that wagon back aboveground. In short, Lapis had waltzed into the room that connected the ruins to the outside world and used some sort of water-attribute magic to blast away the massive swathes of sand trickling down from above.

As she repeatedly cleared the falling sand, she built a spiraling path out of the



wet sand for the wagon to roll up. It was a flagrant display of brute force. Once the sand dried, the hole she made was quickly filled, and her base was once more concealed. But if she used this trick every time she wanted to leave with a wagon, sooner or later, someone was going to notice.

When Loren made note of this, she nodded. “Quite so—if I had to do this every time. But I don’t usually bring a wagon. If it’s just me on my lonesome, I can slip out quite sneakily, if I do say so myself.”

“I see,” was all he could say to that.

Thus, Loren found himself back in good old Kaffa. Alas, it didn’t look like he would have the time to catch his breath. He stared at Lapis, preemptively on guard as he waited to hear what she wanted to drag him into this time.

As Lapis waited for the waitress to bring her order, she noticed Loren’s wariness. “What’s wrong?” she asked with a curious tilt of her head.

“Just wondering what you’re up to.”

“I’m not really in the mood to be ‘up to’ anything just yet,” she replied, reeking of weariness.

This came as quite a surprise to Loren. He’d assumed Lapis had tracked him down with a very specific agenda. That she would say, “Yes, here’s where I want to go next.” Hearing that she had no such intentions felt...weird.

“I’m glad that I got to go home after all my time away, but with all that’s happened...” Lapis said. “It feels like forever since I’ve been back in town.”

“I hear you.”

“Don’t you think adventurers deserve a bit of rest too? Especially when we’ve been working for such a terribly long time. I believe we require adequately commensurate time off.”

She was making perfect sense—but for some reason, Loren’s survival instinct stirred in the deepest depths of his soul. It wasn’t that Lapis had just said anything that warranted extra caution. Loren understood this well enough, but



faced with an unexpected turn of events, he was on edge.

“I’m with you when you say we need time off. Thing is, time is money, and I don’t have a lot of that to work with. In short, my wallet’s in no state to take a vacation.”

Loren had received a reward for the information-gathering quest into demon territory. As for what information his party had reported, Loren had entrusted this entirely to Lapis’s discretion. After all, he didn’t have the first idea what was reasonable to share with the guild—and what wasn’t.

Lapis seemed to understand this. She started writing her report before they even reached Kaffa and submitted it as soon as they entered town.

But the money they’d received for their troubles was far from a fortune, and Loren’s pockets were feeling rather light. No one was pressing him for payment, but over the course of this job, he had racked up more debt not only with Lapis, but with her mother as well.

Loren wasn’t shouldering the whole sum entirely by himself. His party had been assigned responsibility for half of the total damages—so individually, he was in charge of only a third. This did little to change the fact that it was an exorbitant sum.

To start, he’d shared the burden with Lapis and Gula—the third member of their party, who wasn’t currently present. However, Loren was the only one with debts withstanding. Lapis’s mother Judie had covered her share. Meanwhile, though Loren had absolutely no idea where Gula had scrounged up the funds from, she’d immediately fronted her portion.

“Hell will freeze over before I get myself indebted to a demon lord. I gotta pay as soon as I can,” she’d declared.

When Loren vocally puzzled over where she’d gotten her hands on that much cash, Gulla hesitantly replied, “Well, you know. I might not look it, but I was called a dark god, once upon a time. You ever hear of a dark god with money problems?”



“You gonna be a little more honest?”

“Pulled some strings with Greed and Lust.”

Though Gula looked human enough, she was actually an entity from an ancient era, the dark god of gluttony. Gula was babysitting the other dark gods—the party had come across and captured Sloth, Greed, and Lust. Evidently, she’d taken advantage of their powers to gather the funds she needed.

Loren tried to ask for the specifics, but perhaps wary of where those questions would lead, Gula had completely disappeared after that day. Loren didn’t feel like tracking her down, so he’d simply let her be. A part of him wondered if he might come to regret that decision.

“Mr. Loren? Are you listening to me?”

Lapis pulled him from his thoughts by calling for him from across the table. His drifting eyes met hers.

“Sorry. I wasn’t.”

“Honesty is a virtue, but it’s rude to tune out like that.”

“Sorry. So what was it you were saying?” Loren urged her to repeat what he’d failed to hear, and despite the discontent look on her face, Lapis reluctantly obliged.

“I’ve already given up on your finan—ahem. In any case, I was in the middle of inviting you on a holiday, one sponsored by yours truly.”

“So you’ve given up on my finances, eh? We’ve accepted the fact I’m never gonna have any money.”

“Didn’t I just say honesty is a virtue?” Lapis asked with a wry smile as she glanced away.

Loren wasn’t keen on pursuing the matter. In any case, though he wouldn’t have claimed he’d been working nonstop since becoming an adventurer, neither could he say he’d ever really taken a real vacation.

## Chapter 1:

### Meeting to Acceptance

“**V**ACATION? FROM ADVENTURIN’? Is adventurin’ the sorta industry you can just take off from? Must be a pretty sweet deal, then.”

Gula finally arrived around the time Lapis finished the food she’d ordered and transitioned to enjoying a spot of tea. Loren had already eaten and had spent the time taking sparing sips of his cheap ale. He had, however, still managed to drink far more than he’d intended.

“I mean, every job’s gotta have the occasional vacation, right?” Loren said. The idea that a single break was considered a luxury just didn’t sit right with him.

Gula sat beside Lapis, tutting and waving her index finger. “How naïve, Loren. There’re loads of back-breakin’ jobs out there that don’t give you a single day off.”

“You think so?”

Although she sounded serious enough, Loren struggled to imagine it. His own experience as a mercenary had involved time off whenever there wasn’t a war going on—which was most of the time. Adventuring was the only other job he’d ever had, and Lapis didn’t seem to have any issues with the notion of taking a break.

*So what else is there?* he wondered. He ran through just about every place of employment he’d ever come into contact with in the course of his life—the inns and grocers, the armories and tailors, even transportation and hospitals. As far as he could tell, the people supporting these establishments all enjoyed the concept of vacation, if to varying degrees.

“What kinda job are you talking about?”



“Well, if I’m remembering right, funeral homes, priests, coffin sellers...”

“Don’t wanna hear it. What sort of era did you crawl out of?”

Gula looked miffed when Loren cut her off. But she recovered soon enough and turned to Lapis. “So you’re not gonna be vacationing in Kaffa, I take it.”

“Naturally. A vacation must be taken in a proper vacationing locale,” Lapis stressed.

Not that Loren could picture what she meant by that. For some reason, the image of a cemetery crossed his mind. However, that put him in the same camp as Gula, so he hurriedly banished the thought from his head.

“Any candidates?” Gula asked Lapis, unaware of the scene in Loren’s brain.

Lapis produced a few sheets of paper from the breast pocket of her vestments and spread them over the table. Based on a quick scan, they all seemed to be titled with the name of some town or another, and listed those towns’ selling points.

“I looked into suitable locations at the library.”

Loren knew that books were incredibly expensive. On top of the time and effort it took to pen them, there was a great deal of menial labor involved in copying them for circulation. Only people with a considerable degree of education could read and write—and since only a select few of those could work as scribes, it wasn’t easy to secure talent.

The longer a task took to complete, the greater the prices involved. This applied to most things. Loren could understand why a single tome cost so much. You couldn’t just walk off with such a precious item on a simple basis of trust. If you wanted to take desired information out of a library, you had to do what Lapis did and copy down only the necessary portions.

“It doesn’t seem right to choose purely on my personal preferences, so I’d like to solicit everyone’s opinion on the matter.”

“Huh? Me too?” Gula exclaimed, startled.

Lapis nodded, her face set as if to say, *What are you so surprised about?*

“Well, I mean, isn’t this supposed to be a private getaway for you two?”

“Oh, no no no. This is a vacation for the whole party,” Lapis answered with a smile. Although Loren’s eyes didn’t miss the brief moment of realization that crossed her face.

Presumably, Lapis had only just realized she could have planned it that way. Now, even if she hoped to lead things in that direction, she’d already brought it up and could no longer keep Gula out of the loop.

If she tried cutting Gula out, she risked disappointing Loren. He might even reject the break altogether. As a matter of fact—having picked up on all this—Loren found it quite commendable that Lapis intended to stick to her word.

“So what sort of place are you thinking?”

“I believe I’ve chosen locations where one might rest and recuperate while partaking in fine cuisine,” Lapis explained.

Loren read the pages again, noticing that they were mostly remote towns a good distance from the capitals of their respective nations. Lapis seemed to believe that the countryside beat the city for restfulness, and indeed, it would be far easier to breathe there than it would in a crowded jungle of stone buildings.

Additionally, she had chosen sites close to a lake, river, sea, or mountain. This was presumably because those regions tended to have tasty local specialties. Towns smack-dab in the middle of the country also had good food, but out-of-the-way places were more often home to rare delicacies.

“If you’re headin’ out anyway, I’d say it’s best to visit places you usually don’t go to,” said Gula.

“That’s true, but we’ll tire ourselves out if we travel too far.”

“True, true. That’s a problem.”

Their means of transportation were either by horse or on foot. That ruled out



most places in the continent's northern and eastern territories, seeing as Kaffa was in the southwest. Sure, there wasn't much excitement to be had in visiting somewhere just around the block. But a round trip to the opposite side of the continent would tire them out and defeat the purpose of the holiday.

"So that leaves either the west or the south," said Loren. They could reach most places in the general area after only a few days of being jolted around in a wagon. Considering that it took a good seven or eight days to reach demon territory—at least via the normal route—he could tolerate a few days.

"Right. In which case..."

Just as Lapis was about to select a paper that fulfilled all these requirements, her actions were suddenly halted by a voice that cut in from the side.

"Oh, long time no see. Discussing something important?" said a young man.

Loren glanced over to see a red-haired man wearing well-tailored leather armor reinforced with metal plates. It took only that glance to tell his gear had been bought at quite a pretty penny.

Loren had never seen this armor before, but he did have some recollection of the face. Before he could remember exactly who it belonged to, however, Lapis spoke a name with profound ire:

"Mr. Claes?"

"I am honored that you remember me, Ms. Lapis," the man said with a beaming smile.

This was the iron-rank swordsman Claes, who they'd worked with a few times before.

Claes possessed a rare ability called a "gift" and was quite a skilled adventurer, all things considered. Although he had been a touch arrogant when they first met, he'd improved his personality as they worked together, and now he showed Loren and his party a certain level of respect.

Claes's outstanding talents had also earned him support from the country in

which they worked. On top of that, he was the leader of a party with three women.

Loren was about to prod him about this again—only to trip on a moment of self-reflection. Apart from himself, his own party was all women too. *Do I have to drag another guy into this party just to make it clear I'm no Claes?* he wondered.

"I don't think I've seen you before, madame. Loren, your party has grown ever brighter and more beautiful since we last met."

As far as Loren was concerned, the adventurer called Claes had one fatal flaw: He was an indiscriminate womanizer.

*That's definitely going to be what kills him, one of these days.* Loren was convinced. It wasn't the kind of personality defect that any amount of lectures or warnings could fix...but it was also Claes's life to live, and so Loren left him to it.

That womanizer now had his eyes on Gula, his handsome face breaking into a fulsome smile as he offered a theatrical bow. In response, Gula's face screamed, *The hell is he up to?* She glanced at Loren and pointed at Claes, but Loren didn't feel up to explaining. He simply shook his head.

"Are you on your own today, Mr. Claes? Or did your girls finally lose interest?" Lapis snuck a touch of poison into her bright smile.

Claes didn't seem the least bit aware of the venom. He scratched his head with a cheerful laugh. "No, I don't think that's the case... Hopefully."

"Then I must commend their perseverance."

Claes's traveling companions were a knight, a priest, and a magician. As noted, all women. For some reason, they had yet to be discouraged by his philandering and had continued to be his comrades.

"If Mr. Loren were like that, I'd have headed straight home," Lapis grumbled.

Loren sent her a look, thinking, *Don't be too hard on him.* Either way, Claes



took a seat—though no one had invited him. Loren asked in as level a voice as he could muster, “So, what are you here for?”

“Well, I noticed you were distressed about where you should spend your time off.”

Yeah, they’d been debating it, but no one had been particularly *distressed*. Loren thought he’d point this out, but then realized it wasn’t that important. He shut his half-open mouth, then opened it again. “The fact you’re stepping in means you must have good intel.”

“Naturally. I don’t shamelessly intrude for no reason whatsoever.”

Claes was the sort of person who could be relied upon to thoughtlessly barge into any matter where a woman was concerned, but he was otherwise tactful enough. Additionally, unlike Loren, courting women was an everyday affair for Claes. It was only to be expected that he’d know far more about how to enjoy his free time.

“I’m not paying you for the info,” Loren made sure to preface. Perhaps that made him come off as a cheapskate, but he thought it best to clear that up beforehand.

Claes answered with his usual unruffled smile. “Of course. I’m not in the business of selling information.”

“Well, I’ll listen if it’s free. So what’ve you got?”

Claes’s eyes wandered over the papers Lapis had laid across the table. He picked up one of the sheets and held it out to Loren. “This is my recommendation. Karlovy, town of food and baths. If you want to kick back, eat delicious food, and refresh yourself, both body and soul, there’s no better place. I guarantee it.”

His sing-song tone made it all sound rather fishy. But the paper did in fact back up his claims. At the very least, he knew what he was talking about.

“It’s not a terrible choice. I did read that it was a good tourist destination.”

“A town known for its food, huh...”

The moment Claes recommended it, Lapis seemed just as suspicious as Loren. However, she'd read and copied down the info herself, so she couldn't reject the idea out of hand. Gula already seemed spellbound, but then, she'd just been told the place was known for its food.

“To be honest, we're planning to head there to rest our bones soon,” said Claes. “If we go together, you'll save on the carriage fee, and I can even show you around.”

“So what are you scheming, really?” Loren immediately cast doubt on this apparent goodwill.

Claes froze, a smile still on his face. He seemed well aware of how dangerous it was to keep secrets from someone like Loren. His face abruptly clouded over, and he confessed in a low whisper. “Well, err... I might have made the girls just a little angry, so... We're taking some time off to make up for it, but...I'm not sure if I'll be okay on my own, so...”

“Yeah, got it. Keep it a secret from them.”

It seemed Claes wanted to avoid treading on eggshells for the whole trip. He was trying to bolster the size of their travel party in the hopes this would give him more opportunities to avoid conflict.

“In that case, there's obviously got to be something in it for us, right?”

“That's... Yes... I'll offer my gratitude from my wallet...”

*He's not a bad guy...* Loren thought as he watched Claes shrink back. It was precisely because he was by and large a good person that his party members continued to put up with him. But he still needed to be scolded now and then, and the moment was now.

“Don't worry, I won't do anything to get in the way of your vacation,” Claes insisted. “Could you consider it a favor and tag along?”

Though Lapis seemed deeply troubled by Claes's honesty, she signaled to



Loren she had no objections. Gula didn't know Claes very well and didn't care about much else, compared to the prospect of a place with good eats.



“I’ll consider it. We’ve got our own issues to deal with,” Loren replied, quickly and coldly, putting Claes on edge.

The guy needed a bit of suspense in his life, a little uncertainty to make him learn. At least, that was the way Loren saw it, so he declined to give a clear answer one way or the other. Claes’s pleading eyes were thus ignored.

Having said that, Claes’s proposal did have some appeal. It would be an incredible boon to place the financial burden on his shoulders rather than Lapis’s.

Additionally, neither Loren nor anyone else in his party was accustomed to this variety of travel destination. Claes, meanwhile, looked like he played around more often than not, and any first-hand information he could provide might just be useful. They would effectively be on a guided tour.

Loren would have jumped at the offer had it come from anyone else. After Claes was driven away, Loren told Lapis and Gula he would accept, and the party dispersed for the day. The following morning, Loren’s regular room at the inn had a visitor: the magician called Ange, who was one of Claes’s party members.

“I’m so sorry. It seems our Claes is making trouble for you again.”

Ange invited him to the dining area on the inn’s first floor (which Loren rarely ever visited), where she sat meekly curled up as she apologized.

Sitting across from her, Loren waved a hand as if to say she needn’t worry. “If it was trouble, we would’ve turned him down on the spot.”

“I thought he might have messed with your travel plans.”

“Not exactly. Really, we’ll be stealing straight out of his wallet. That good by you?”

Claes was covering Loren’s crew out of his personal funds rather than his party’s, but they would still be lightening the pockets of the party leader. Loren



wondered what Ange had to say about that. Her reaction blindsided him.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. In fact, take everything you can get.”

Ange went on to explain that Claes’s tendency to hit on girls was directly correlated to the amount of money in his pocket. If they managed to wring him dry enough that he couldn’t fund his own antics, he might quiet down for once.

“Also...he’s right. The mood in our party’s been pretty grim. Sure, we want to make peace and be friends again. But I’m not confident we can manage that without help...”

Loren understood what Ange was getting at. Even if everyone wanted to smooth things over, four people who were already at odds traveling together presented too many opportunities for the atmosphere to turn sour. By bringing along folks who had nothing to do with their drama, they’d have more opportunities to kiss and make up—so to speak. So understandably Ange wanted Loren to tag along as well.

“And so long as you’re around, Claes might curtail his philandering as well.”

“I could give him a good yank in the right direction.”

“I...can’t ask that much from you.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re not strangers. Lending a hand to that cause won’t get in the way of my fun.”

Though Loren might have thought otherwise if he were only going with Lapis. Since Gula was coming along, he was already preparing to be a little vigilant. Keeping a leash on Gula would probably take so much effort that adding Claes wouldn’t make a significant difference.

If Lapis could hear his thoughts, she might smile and say, *You’re a busy man*. But Loren was fine gritting his teeth and knuckling through these particular troubles.

“Then...”

“Yeah, we’re happy to accept your offer. Honestly, I was fine with it the

moment I heard from Claes. But if I gave him the okay right then, I thought he'd get a little too full of himself."

*A little mean, I know,* Loren thought with a wry smile.

Ange politely lowered her head, looking as serious as could be. "Again, I'm so sorry. We're in your debt."

"You'll be helping us out on the trip, right? It all evens out."

Loren's smile grew wryer still as he watched Ange curl up even further. Then his face turned grave, and Ange steeled herself for what he was about to say.

"So being real here," said Loren. "What do you think about Claes?"

"That's, well...err..."

"I can kinda tell from your reaction. Now I'm just asking out of curiosity, but have you ever considered getting him indebted to you to make sure he sticks around?"

"I-indebted?! No, I wouldn't go that far..." Ange hurriedly shook her head.

"Well, what if your parents got him on the hook for an outrageous sum?"

"Umm, Loren? What's gotten into you? How should I put this...you sound like you have a personal stake in that question." Ange's face was stiff, and her own question was a tad concerned.

Loren thought for a second about how to answer. After a moment, he heaved a deep sigh, shook his head, and said, "Nah... Forget it."

"Right..."

He'd simply been looking for a normal woman's take on his situation. Ange's reaction suggested that it was distinctly *abnormal*.

Yet while Ange was a run-of-the-mill human, Lapis was a demon. It wasn't that odd for their sensibilities to differ. *Maybe I should bring it up if I ever get the chance to talk to a run-of-the-mill demon,* thought Loren.

After this exchange, Loren headed to the guild and used their services to

contact Claes. He could have left a message with Ange, but Loren thought that he perhaps shouldn't tell Claes that Ange had gone out of her way to convince him to take the job.

"She's wasted on you."

"What are you talking about?"

Claes seemed utterly confused by this conversation starter, which Loren dropped the moment Claes arrived. Loren assured him it was nothing and got to the point.

"About what we discussed last night. We'll accept."

"Really? You're the best!"

Claes's face lit up and he lunged across the table in delight—only to run straight into Loren's hand. Loren locked a harsh glare onto the man.

"However, *we're* going on vacation. Don't expect too much. Try to handle as much as you can on your own."

"I'll...do my best." Claes didn't make any promises without due consideration.

*Despite the circumstances, I can't say I hate that about him,* Loren thought. If Claes held his tongue, he came off as quite an affable young man. *Seriously, can't we do anything about his women problems?* Loren wondered; yet if the problem were so easily solved, Claes's party members would have taken care of it already. The words terminal illness crossed Loren's mind.

"We'll invest some of our own funds into the trip, but I'll have no reservations about relying on you for most of it. Be ready."

Loren hesitated to bring up his party's money—after all, it wouldn't be his, it would be Lapis's. He didn't want to make it sound like he held the strings of someone else's purse. Yet Claes seemed to take his hesitation differently.

"Never fear. I'm the one who brought this up, so rely on me as much as you need," he declared.



This was a commendable attitude, so long as you forgot the context of the situation. Loren found himself giving candid advice. “Can’t you put that noble attitude to better use?”

Claes wasn’t a bad person; Loren understood that. In fact, Loren couldn’t help but wonder: If he liked women so much, wouldn’t he get better results if he acted prim and proper rather than hitting on any and everyone who came into view?

Claes didn’t seem to get it. “It’s in my nature! I can’t help it. Whenever I happen to spy a beautiful flower blossoming before my eyes, I’m overcome by the urge to pluck it.”

“Why can’t you be satisfied with the flowers you’ve already got?”

*You’ve got at least three different varieties in hand already,* thought Loren.

Claes’s eyes widened, and he yelped, “Loren, do you want me dead?!”

It was so overblown that Loren nearly fell out of his chair. He kept himself upright with pure willpower, held in the urge to punch Claes, and said, “If that’s enough to kill you, then die!”

Loren’s rough voice and clenched voice made Claes back off in a hurry.

*This might really be a terminal illness,* thought Loren as he loosened his hand.

“So when are we setting out?” Loren hesitantly asked.

“I haven’t booked a carriage yet; I was planning to do so right after this. How does tomorrow afternoon sound?”

This was a trip for pleasure’s sake, but it wasn’t so different from traveling for work. They needed proper supplies for a journey, and that would take time to gather.

“Sounds like a plan.”

The next day would be long enough to do everything that needed doing. The main problem was the fact Loren had no money, and he would have to petition

Lapis to get whatever he lacked. The thought was not an encouraging one.

“Then we’ll go with that. I’ll touch base with my comrades, so could you spread the word to yours?”

“Yeah, sure. How about we meet at the east gate?” Their destination was a town due east of Kaffa. Loren couldn’t think of any better place to start.

“Yes, let’s go with that,” Claes nodded. “Then tomorrow at the east gate, at the first chime of the afternoon bell.”

“Got it. Anything I should bring?”

It would have been less accurate to say that Loren was none too knowledgeable about Karlovy and more accurate to say he knew absolutely jack squat. He therefore figured he should check in with Claes, who had been the one to recommend the place.

Claes thought for a bit. “I think you’ll be fine as long as you have everything you’d take for a normal journey. Oh, and you might want a large cloth and a yokui. I’m sure you could get one in town, but you’re a pretty big guy, so they might not have your size. Not to mention, everything’s pretty expensive there.”

“Yokui?” Loren echoed the unfamiliar term.

“Huh? Are you the type of guy who goes in naked? Well, I guess there’s some charm in that.”

“No, what is that?”

“You don’t know about yokui? I guess I can’t blame a novice in the art of relaxation. Karlovy is the town of food and baths. They’re famous for their fine cuisine and their splendid natural hot springs.”

Loren had heard of hot springs before. They were apparently points at which hot water naturally gushed up from the ground. Some folks built facilities over them to use this water for bathing.

According to Claes, nothing prohibited people from entering the public bath naked, but anyone who didn’t want to expose their skin would wear robe-like

bathing apparel.

“With your build, you might not find one off the shelf. If you need it tailored, you’d better hurry and get it made.”

Loren’s main takeaway from this was: *Sounds like a pain.*

Using so much water just to wash his body already sounded like a luxury. To then commission an exclusive piece of clothing made specifically for the act sounded like a completely unnecessary expense.

He wondered if he’d picked the wrong destination. But as long as Gula and Lapis were looking forward to it, he didn’t feel right changing his mind. Loren began to ponder over how much money he’d have in his wallet by the end of this.



## Chapter 2:

### From the East Gate to the Border

THE NEXT DAY, just before the chime of the afternoon's first bell, Loren and his party gathered at Kaffa's east gate. They were dressed and armed as usual, though their bags were slightly bulkier.

"I never considered the yokui," said Lapis.

Yesterday, Loren had told her everything he'd learned from Claes. It seemed the yokui had wholly slipped her mind as well, and so they'd found themselves running around Kaffa's tailor shops. Unfortunately, hardly anyone in Kaffa took baths, and no stores kept the garments stocked. Loren and Lapis had to have their measurements taken for custom apparel.

As was his nature, Loren had worried that they wouldn't receive the clothes in time. However, the yokui were of simple construction, consisting of an opaque white cloth draped over the shoulders and fastened at the waist with string. The eminently plain garment was completed within half a day of the measurements.

"They were a bit more expensive than I would have liked."

Seeing as they'd had no time to spare, Lapis had put asked them to place their order at a higher priority. This meant she'd had to pay a rush cost. *Are these really that important?* Loren wondered. But Lapis seemed to consider it so.

"I'm not about to expose myself to a total stranger," she argued.

"Didn't you have a bath at your place?" Loren asked. Between the fact that she didn't already have a yokui and her reluctance to show skin, it sounded like Lapis was unaccustomed to bathing.

Lapis stared back blankly. "Of course I did."

"Really? You don't seem too comfy with the idea, though."

Though Loren wasn't about to announce it to the world, Lapis's "place" was a massive castle. It was so large, in fact, that you could forget one or two—he'd believe it if she said it housed several dozen baths.

With a blush, Lapis explained, "We have a bath, naturally. But I likewise naturally never went in with anyone else. I never had to worry about being seen."

"Sounds like Karlovy does divide their baths between men and women, though, right?"

Lapis's reaction made it seem more like they were headed for a mixed scenario, so he figured he should check. Back in Loren's mercenary days, he'd just wiped his body down with a cloth soaked in warm water, or taken a dip in a river or lake if one happened to be on hand. However, even when a mercenary company got up to such things, it was common sense to partition the men from the women.

"Of course! If it was a mixed bath, I would utterly refuse to partake! Okay?!"

"That's your call. But you know, if anyone does see you, it'll just be women, right? Is it really that much of a problem...?"

"It's not happening. *Absolutely* not," Lapis declared. It seemed this was a matter on which she wasn't going to budge an inch. So Loren changed the subject.

"Did you get one for Gula?"

Gula hadn't joined them on their little shopping trip. Since she hadn't had her measurements taken, she would be the only one without a yokui. However, Lapis had considered this.

"Since we didn't have her exact measurements, I had them make one using my rough estimates."

"I don't really mind being naked," Gula said, making it sound like this was kind of a drag. But Lapis glared at her firmly, which made whatever else Gula was

about to say suddenly fade into inaudible murmurs.

*I mean, she's not the one who's gonna be naked, so does she really have to glare like that?* Loren wondered. But when he opened his mouth, he found himself talking about something else entirely. "So you had them throw one together anyways?"

"Huh? Yes, well, Ms. Gula wasn't with us at the time. There wasn't much else I could do."

After peering for a bit at Lapis's curiously cocked head, Loren glanced at Gula. He peered at her for a bit too before muttering, "I can kinda see the punchline already."

"Punchline? Whatever do you mean by punchline, Mr. Loren?"

Neither Lapis nor Gula seemed to catch his drift. Before Lapis could interrogate him further, a carriage approached their party.

"Were you waiting long?" Claes's buoyant voice came from the cabman's perch.

Ange was sitting next to him, apologetically lowering her head. A blonde-haired knight and blue-haired priest stuck their heads out of the carriage as well.

"No, not that long," Loren answered. As he hoisted up his bags and approached, the female knight opened the door, beckoning him inside.

The vehicle was fashioned like a stagecoach, with two rows of seats facing each other. One of these rows had been left empty for Loren's party.

"Leila and...Laure, was it?"

"Yes, it has been a while. I'm honored you remember."

"A pleasure."

The knight and priest nodded and offered their greetings as Loren took a glance around the carriage.



Claes had been the one to rent it, and he must have paid a fair bit. It was tidy and spacious. On top of that, the seats looked comfortable, and its passengers probably wouldn't be too worn out even over a lengthy journey.

"Should the three of us take this side?"

"No, if possible, it'd probably be better if one of you joins us," Leila said.

Loren had the largest build, and thus took up the most space. If two other people shared his bench, they'd be quite cramped. Though no one had said anything in particular, Gula promptly took Leila up on her kindness and plopped down with the members of Claes's party.



“It ain’t easy being big,” Loren said as he apologetically took his seat.

Laure sent him a sociable smile—until her eyes stopped on his shoulder. “Is that a decoration? It’s quite well-made.”

Her eyes had latched on Neg, who was gripping the shoulder guard of Loren’s armor. With his black, lustrous body, Neg looked like an intricate adornment, so long as he stayed still.

According to the silver-rank adventurer party Loren’s group had worked with previously, Neg was a considerably dangerous beast. But he seemed to have taken a liking to Loren, who thought of him as harmless enough.

“An obsidian spider? No, it couldn’t be...right? Are those things ever friendly with humans? In the first place, can any spiders grow fond of humans...?”

Leila’s eyes narrowed, her brow knitted, and a bead of sweat dripped down her brow. She had just about figured out Neg’s true identity, but her own common sense stopped her before she could reach the truth.

“Is everyone ready? Then we’re off.”

Claes had waited for the moment everyone was seated. He quickly called out, and upon ensuring no one had any problems, Loren nodded up at him. Claes tugged at the reins, prompting the horses to start up at a slow trot.

“What was it again? Err...the name of the town,” Loren asked.

“Karlov?” Lapis followed up.

Loren pressed a hand to his brow and nodded. “That’s the one. Karlov. How long until we get there?”

He knew it lay in the continent’s southern region, and that it was “the town of food and baths,” but he hadn’t heard a thing as to how far it was from Kaffa, or how long it took a carriage to get there.

“Umm, how long was it again?” Lapis passed the buck to Leila.

Folding her arms in front of her chest, Leila thought a moment before

answering, “It’s across the border. We should expect a few days to say the least.”

“That’s a while...”

“I believe we’ll be at the eastern border in roughly four days, so it should be a day or two after that,” Laure added.

Loren had expected it to be more than a day or two, but he hadn’t thought they’d be wasting that much time on the first *leg* of the journey. He was starting to get a little worried. *Are my supplies going to cut it?*

“No need to worry about the trip. Sure, you’ll have to use some of your own stores, but we should be mostly fine with what’s loaded on this carriage.”

“You’re well prepared.”

“That’s because Claes opened his purse this time around,” Leila said with a grin. “So we spared no expense.” She produced several cups from under the seat, then pulled out an expensive-looking bottle of wine and waved it around.

“Drinking this early in the day? Lucky you.”

“Would you care to join me? We have plenty to spare.”

Loren took a cup off of Leila and let her fill it with the pricey wine. But his eyes flickered with concern toward the back of the man in the driver’s seat. “You sure this is fine? I know I’m mooching off him too, but I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“Oh, this isn’t going to run him dry. Even if he is left destitute, well... He’s got us,” Leila replied with a mischievous smile. “For the time being, we plan to punish him until we’re satisfied. And if he actually repents, perhaps we’ll forgive him.”

“That’s...something.”

Although Leila didn’t sound like she was about to give up on Claes, she wasn’t going to show any mercy either. The red of the wine in Loren’s cup began to take on the hue of blood, and he no longer felt compelled to take a sip. And yet



all he could do was offer a troubled laugh.

With Claes at the helm, the carriage proceeded on and on down the eastbound road. It took four days to reach the kingdom's border, and this time passed without a single notable incident.

The trip was essentially Claes's way of apologizing to his party members, while Loren's party was merely taking advantage of it. Thus, there was little for them to do. They rocked around in the carriage, at times enjoying the breeze with Leila and Ange, and at others relishing the food brought from Kaffa. It really was a leisurely way to pass the days.

Loren kind of pitied Claes, who had driving duty for the entire length of the journey—and who on top of that was setting up every camp on his own, as well as booking the inns when they stopped in a town. Whenever Loren tried to help, Ange, Leila, or Laure would softly insist he didn't. So he was left with a lot of free time on his hands.

"Karlov is in the republic of Zharolis. It's led by a congress of councilmen who are—technically—chosen by election."

Having anticipated this line of questioning, Lapis produced something like a cheat sheet from one of her bags. The paper listed out all manner of general facts.

"They opted for this form of governance due to the many clans that populate the land. In truth, it's less a nation and more a conference of many regions that are governed independently. They have no overall ruler, although the councilmen are usually the clan leaders or their next of kin."

The word *clan* earned a puzzled look from Loren. Lapis pondered over this expression, wondering if her explanation had been insufficient.

"The majority of Zharolis's population are beastkind. They have separated into clans based on their physical characteristics, and they rule the land in like

part.”

The beastkind was a most peculiar race. Every individual of their line sported a body part with the characteristics of a wild animal. Those with similar traits gathered to form a clan. The extent to which one took after a given animal also varied by clan. Some were indistinguishable from humans at a glance, while others looked no different from animals walking upright.

Lapis explained, “It is said that those with the strongest characteristics have the purest blood. I’ve heard that those of the so-called origin clans are almost indistinguishable from animals.”

“They say it’s because the clans are tight-knit communities, but you rarely meet them outside their own nations,” added Leila, who had been deep in her cups the whole time. “You hardly saw any beastkind in Kaffa, right? The only ones who ever head out of Zharolis are those with special circumstances, the overly curious, and the exiled.”

Leila seemed to have quite a taste for wine. From the moment they’d set off, she had happily dived straight for the bottle whenever she had the time. That said, she paced herself and drank in relative moderation. She never had more than a slight blush to her face, and her words were properly enunciated.

“They’re not ill-tempered, but many of them tend to handle disputes more violently than not. Also, they take pride in the thickness of their blood. The closer they are to the origin clans, the more stuck up they get. Ah, and I’ve heard bad things about the fox and rat clans. Be careful.”

“Then won’t they look down their noses at us? I mean, we don’t got any animal traits at all.” Loren was beginning to fear they really had chosen the wrong place to kick back and relax.

Leila shook her head. “They see us as an entirely different matter. We’re not part of the system.”

“Though they’re not particularly friendly toward us either,” Laure added.

Laura was a priest to the god of water. She didn't seem too fond of alcohol and barely touched whatever Leila offered to her. When she was idle, she produced a book from her bag—apparently one that covered the god of water's teachings—and read it over and over. She never seemed to tire of it.

“It's possible for human-and beastkind to procreate, but that thins the blood. It doesn't happen out of highly unusual circumstances—especially as, apparently, whenever it looks like it might, everyone tries to discourage the union.”

“Not that this has anything to do with us,” Leila said with a cheerful smile, letting more wine flow to the back of her throat.

Laure had the same smile, which presumably meant neither had any intentions of leaving Claes's side. *Are they bragging?* Loren wondered with a grim expression. As always, he shot a look at Claes's back.

Regardless, the carriage pressed on. It was nearly noon on the fourth day of the journey when they finally arrived at the border.

Generally speaking, those in the adventuring trade didn't have to deal with many bothersome procedures to cross borders. The adventurers' guild was a massive organization whose influence spanned the entire continent, and registration with this guild allowed one to pass through most checkpoints without issue.

“I know it's not my place to speak, but this feels a bit off. I mean, the fact you and Claes can both enter another country that easily.” Loren figured this wasn't something to say too loudly, so he whispered it to Leila.

She whispered back, “How do you figure?”

Though Claes's status was technically just “an adventurer,” he was an adventurer on whom a country had pinned their hopes, and there was a high chance he would one day enter their service. Leila, who had been assigned to watch over him, was similarly an adventurer. However, if Claes were to officially join up with the kingdom, she would almost certainly take up a post as a knight.

After that, allowing either to cross a border would be akin to allowing the infiltration of a foreign agent.

“Basically every nation sponsors people in a similar way. They can’t just single one of them out and bar them from entry.”

“If they did, they’d just be asking for someone to give their own adventurers trouble. They’d be ejected from other nations too.”

“And if adventurer movement comes to a standstill, they’ll be less able to keep public order and eliminate monsters. That costs more personnel and money than it’s worth.”

“When you boil it down, they surely know they *shouldn’t* let us in, but they look the other way. Although it would likely be different in wartime,” Leila concluded.

*I see*, Loren thought. However, he soon found himself muddling over another question, and he tapped Lapis on the shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Do the soldiers seem a little off to you?”

As they were walking through the departure procedures, the soldiers on hand were human soldiers of the Waargenberg Kingdom. Once these proceedings were finished, their group would cross to the Zharolis side, where they’d have to go through more steps to document their arrival. However, the Waargenberg soldiers were acting a little strange.

Their group had already presented their guild registration, so all that remained was to wait their turn to be processed. Claes spoke to one of the soldiers, that soldier was looking at him with pitying eyes.

*This doesn’t bode well*, thought Loren. As soon as the soldier left, he opened the small window connecting them to the driver’s seat as soon as that soldier went away. “Hey, Claes. Did something happen? I didn’t like the look in his eyes.”

“I don’t really get it either. I noticed the odd looks too,” Claes said.

Ange nodded—she’d been sitting beside Claes, and she’d noticed as well. Seeing as they had both picked up on it, the soldier must have been rather blatant about it.

“I tried asking, but he just said we’ll know when we get there. *Something* must have happened.”

If it was something life-threatening, the soldier wouldn’t have beaten around the bush. He would have just up and told Claes the reason for his behavior. Thus, it couldn’t be that dangerous. But it was still curious.

“Turning back’s always an option.”

“That would be somewhat troublesome.” Claes understandably seemed reluctant. They’d already spent a few days getting to this point. If they turned right back around, it’d be hard to say they managed to enjoy their vacation.

*Well, Leila might be satisfied, given how much she’d been drinking,* thought Loren. *But everyone else is just getting more and more tired without anything to make it special.*

“They’d at least stop us if it was dangerous, right?” Loren asked.

“That’s their job.”

“Then let’s go as far as we can. It’s not too late to consider our options after we figure out what’s going on.”

That would at least be better than throwing up their hands and turning around. Loren’s proposal received unanimous approval, and the carriage moved on from the Waargenberg side of the checkpoint. The Zharolis side wasn’t far at all, sitting across a thin buffer zone. The wagon was in the midst of spanning this distance when Loren felt the presence of surrounding vegetation grow suddenly thicker.

“The land of Zharolis is a land of forest, grass, and whatnot. Anyways, it’s characterized by its mass of greenery,” Lapis said as she gazed out the window.



“They’re advanced carpenters, but they don’t really truck with stone.”

“Sounds like a country that burns easy,” said Gula.

The carriage reached the checkpoint just as Loren ordered Gula to keep her dangerous ideas to herself. And there, Loren came across a sight he’d never beheld in human lands.

Loren was taken aback by the massive herd of twitching animal ears and swaying tails.

The checkpoint itself was constructed no differently from the one on the Waargenberg side. But while the soldiers pouring out of it looked no different from humans at first glance, the ones not wearing helmets were crowned with triangular ears. From their waists dangled tails of various sizes and shapes that swayed to and fro.

Their apparent leader—or at least, the highest-ranking soldier on site—was distinguished by their equipment, which was a cut above the rest. More pressing was his appearance, which was essentially that of an animal that had learned to walk on its hind legs.

*I guess he’s from one of those origin clans,* thought Loren. He had rarely ever met beastkind on the battlefield during his mercenary days. Even when he had, as far as he remembered, they’d been basically ordinary humans with an animal body part here and there. This was the first time he had seen one so close to the beastly side of the spectrum.

“It seems to me that this checkpoint is under catkind jurisdiction,” Lapis explained as she gazed out the window.

“Is that different from beastkind?” Loren asked, somewhat startled.

“No, no, the larger taxonomical class is ‘beastkind.’ If we further divide beastkind into clans, however, we would say these hail from the catkind clan.”

“So there are a lot more variations of that kind?”

“Indeed. Dogkind, rabbitkind, foxkind, ratkind—the list goes on.”

Loren was visibly impressed as Lapis fluently described the lay of beastkind land. However, when he glanced at the others, he saw that Leila was drunk, Laure was focused on her book, and Gula didn’t look like she was having a good time.

“What’s wrong, Gula?”

“It’s nothin’, really. Just recalled a nasty little thing I was about to forget.” As Gula answered, she was chewed through a hard baguette, not so much as glancing outside. She ate it plain, without sandwiching anything between the bread, her face slack—as though she had no idea why she was doing it at all.

*What happened?* Loren wondered. Then he realized a certain possibility. “You having a flashback?”

“Oh. I guess this *is* a baguette... No wonder the taste hit me right in the heart.”

It seemed Gula had only just realized what exactly she was clutching and gnawing. She lifted the lengthy lump of bread to stare at it long and hard. She hadn’t even known what she was eating.

*Is this serious?* Loren wondered. But he reminded himself he was dealing with a dark god of gluttony, one who stuffed basically anything that fit into her mouth. Perhaps she was fine after all. “If something’s up, tell me. Don’t bottle it. That’s not gonna do anyone any favors.”

“I can’t tell if you’re tryin’ to help me or threaten me.” Gula let out a vague laugh. Then, seeing that Loren’s eyes were quite serious, she waved her hands dismissively. “I’m fine, I tell you. I’ll forget it again soon enough.”

Loren wasn’t optimistic enough to take her word for it. But if Gula was going to insist she was fine, it would be best not to pry any further.

To lighten the mood, Lapis opened the door to the driver’s seat, allowing the conversation between Claes and one of the border guards to drift through.

“Adventurers, huh? From Kaffa in Waargenberg. You’ve brought quite a few people, I see. Where you headed? On a job?”



Checks on adventurers were generally quite light, but some caution was warranted when an armed party of seven was on the move. Of course, Claes had nothing to hide. His answer was plain and to the point.

“We had some money to spare, so we’re off to Karlovy for a stretch of rest and relaxation.”

“Karlovy? Oh, Karlovy, you say...”

The soldier’s tone dropped the moment he heard the name. Obviously, something was going on. The man immediately walked away, but Claes tried to call him back.

“Did something happen in Karlovy? The soldiers on the other side also seemed a tad taken aback.”

“You’ll...see when you get there. Trust me, you don’t want to hear it from me. It’s not dangerous or anything.”

They were all being so cryptic that Claes had to contain the urge to raise his voice. He patiently summoned as much nonchalance as he could. “No need to hold back on our account. You really won’t tell us what happened?”

“It’s really nothing. Nothing you need fear.”

“So it’s not dangerous or anything?”

“You’ll know when you get there.”

To make clear the conversation was decisively done, the soldier opted to leave at a sprint. Even if they called out again, they wouldn’t eke out any more information.

“Again?” Loren called through the window.

“Yeah. Something’s definitely up, but I can’t imagine what.”

“I guess we’ll know when we get there...”

Although there was still a chance they’d never even notice once they found out. *They’d surely warn us if it was something serious*, thought Loren. That said,



it was nothing to write home about for the Waargenberg soldiers to dismiss the happenings of another country, but surely the Zharolis had some sort of obligation to inform visitors.

“Are we going to run into any settlements along the way?”

Soon, the checks were over, and they couldn’t linger at the checkpoint forever. Other travelers waited behind them, needing to get through as well. Claes lightly whipped the horses drawing the carriage, starting them on their way once more.

“I’m sure we’ll run into a town or two.”

“Then should we try gathering info there?”

“That might be for the best.”

Soldiers were potentially obligated to hold their tongues, but a villager might let gossip slip. Claes urged them on with these faint hopes in his heart.

With that, they had entered the territory of the republic of Zharolis. However, they were unable to make any headway in their quest for a source of information. They had to spend the night somewhere en route to Karlovy.

Once they realized this, they searched for an inn at the one village they found along the way. Unfortunately, the villagers weren’t so welcoming.

“It really feels like a remote borderland town. Not a single inn, apparently.”

They only barely got permission to park their carriage in a vacant lot at the village edge. Claes descended to arrange for a place to stay, but no more than a few minutes later, he was back.

“I guess it’s because travelers never stop by, but what a cold reception.”

*Isn’t it a good reception if they’re letting us stay at all?* Loren wondered. On top of that, they were permitted to draw water from the well. A village’s well was more or less its lifeline, and allowing an outsider to use it was favorable treatment indeed, as far as Loren was concerned.

“We’ve got the wagon and the tent to sleep in. We should count our blessings.”

They were camped on the edge of the village, but still within its bounds. That mercy lowered the chances of monster attacks in the night. They’d still need someone on lookout duty, but it wouldn’t be so nerve-racking.

Claes’s focus was somewhere else entirely. “It’s plenty sad to me; I’ve lost the opportunity to cozy up to adorable beastkind girls.”

He said this with no shame whatsoever.

*He hasn’t learned a thing*, Loren thought as he let out a great, theatrical sigh. “Make sure the others don’t hear you say that.”

“Especially origin clan girls! You’ll never meet them in human countries. I thought it’d be a valuable experience.”

“You go for that?”

A woman of an origin clan would be bipedal and have roughly humanoid anatomy, but she would also look like an animal. Loren wasn’t remotely intrigued by the idea, but it sounded like Claes was a different story.

“That aside, you did ask about Karlovy, right?”

Despite his predilections, Claes had the appearance of a charming young man. Loren had figured he’d arouse less suspicion among the villagers than his own ex-mercenary mien. He’d given Claes strict instructions to gather any information regarding what the soldiers at the checkpoint had refused to reveal.

He’d considered sending one of the girls, but they had their own share of problems. Leila and Gula were out of the question—the former was drunk, the latter in a bleak mood.

Ange, meanwhile, seemed keen to push all the odd jobs onto Claes for the entire course of the trip. And if Loren left it to Lapis, he suspected she would interrogate the poor villagers to reveal utterly unnecessary personal facts and

details. Laure had the opposite problem; she gave off the impression that she would instantly drop anything too touchy.

“I did *try* asking,” said Claes. He hadn’t completely forgotten Loren’s orders. But his expression wasn’t promising. “Unlike those soldiers, it seems the villagers have no idea what’s going on in Karlovy.”

*So the info’s not that widespread*, Loren thought, clicking his tongue.

The soldiers were briefed on intel from the government, but that info didn’t necessarily reach the residents of some remote village.

“There *were* people passing through on their way back from Karlovy. They didn’t stop in town, so the villagers didn’t ask what they’d seen. But they were in a bad mood.”

“So this was mostly a waste of time. Well, it happens.” Loren was still thankful to know that people were able to leave Karlovy at all. Now he could be sure they’d make it back intact themselves.

“The way I see it, whatever’s going on isn’t exciting enough to warrant gossip,” said Claes. “That tells us something in itself.”

“That’s not wrong, I suppose.”

If some major incident had occurred, word would get out one way or another. Whatever it was, it had been contained, its influence unfelt outside of the immediate vicinity. That was how Claes had resolved to feel about it, at least.

*Though I see where he’s coming from*. Loren’s impression of Claes improved slightly. Unfortunately, even if this incident was relatively contained, they were headed straight toward its epicenter. They’d have to face it whether they liked it or not. The fact that they were essentially wandering in blind was far less than ideal.

“We came for vacation,” Loren muttered. “I don’t want any trouble.”

They were traveling for the sole purpose of taking time off. But it was starting to look like they wouldn’t be able to just kick back and relax.

*Just how unlucky can we be?* Loren's shoulders dropped and he shook his head.

## Chapter 3:

### Arrival to Entanglement

**A**FTER STAYING A NIGHT in the village, they set off again for Karlovy the next morning. Their feet dragged as they imagined the troubles that lay ahead. But the journey was smooth, as they encountered neither monsters nor thieves.

A half day later, they arrived in the town of Karlovy. Though a town in name, it was more like a village with its simple architecture and layout, which consisted of lines of wooden buildings. It was like a village had grown without expanding its infrastructure until it had surpassed anything that could be properly called a “village.”

Grassland and small forests predominated the surroundings, and while the terrain was flat, they could make out herds of grazing animals and wild beasts in the distance. This was the epitome of a peaceful retreat.

“Not bad, as these things go,” said Loren.

And he meant it. There was no pollution and the air was good, and he could feel a gentle breeze blowing through the open carriage window.

Upon arriving in town, the group waited in the carriage while Claes went around to find an inn where they could park. Under normal circumstances, it would have been difficult to find rooms for all seven of them, and Claes was worried that they might have to stay at different inns. Those worries soon disappeared.

The town lacked energy. Everywhere they looked, they saw shops and stalls targeting tourists, and the inns seemed to be of decent number and size. But despite all that, the town seemed sapped of life. It was as if Karlovy was stuck in a standstill, waiting for something, anything, to happen.

No one was walking the street advertising inns or touting their wares. Every clerk behind every stall looked terribly bored, lounging in chairs, or on the edge



of their counter of wares. It didn't look like anyone was doing good business.

But it wasn't that the merchants and artisans wanted for motivation, it was more that there were no customers in sight. They couldn't do anything even if they wanted to.

*What happened?* Loren wondered as he peered at Karlovy through the window, the wind ruffling his hair.

"Something's clearly afoot," said Lapis, who had maintained her seat next to Loren for the entire trip.

"Plenty of shops, but no customers. I don't even see any would-be tourists."

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't really matter what's going on behind the scenes, so long as we can enjoy our vacation." Lapis's words were fairly cold, but her tone was entirely nonchalant. But she was right, and Loren wasn't going to argue.

Even if some terrible monster had scared away Karlovy's customer base, their group was armed with Lapis, Gula, and Claes's whole party. They could most likely whip any monster into shape and enjoy their vacation regardless.

In fact, they collectively had the strength to shrug off most things that would be a matter of life or death for most people. As this fearsome thought struck Loren, a voice rang out in his head—the voice of the Lifeless King known as Scena, whose spirit lived within him.

*«Worried you don't measure up, Mister? Don't sell yourself short.»*

*You're overestimating me,* thought Loren.

Certainly, he'd encountered the sort of foes no copper-or iron-rank adventurer ought to face, and he'd moreover survived. However, that had mostly been down to luck and the contributions of his party members. Loren was quite convinced he'd have been long dead had he been on his own.

He directed this thought at Scena, and though she seemed to waver, she didn't add any additional commentary.

*I guess I let her down. I bet she wishes she was inhabiting someone stronger,* Loren thought with a wry smile. He kept staring out the window, watching as Claes returned.

“I don’t know whether to call our luck good or not,” Claes said. The moment he was back in the driver’s seat, he had the carriage moving. It let out a loud clatter as it rolled down the empty road, but Claes’s clear voice traveled well enough to pierce through the noise. “I didn’t have any trouble getting us an inn.”

“Isn’t that just good?” Loren asked for the sake of it. He was well aware that wasn’t necessarily the case.

Naturally, Claes picked up on his skepticism. With a cynical smile, he shook his head. “Of course not. Well, let’s talk about that later. For now, we should get some food. It’s about time, anyway.”

It was indeed time for lunch—albeit a late one. They’d considered eating at midday, but by then they had nearly arrived. They’d figured that for the price of a bit of endurance, they could procure a meal from a town famous for its food. Thus, they were all suffering from an acute case of empty stomachs. Claes’s proposal was met with no objections.

Yet Loren had an inkling of Claes’s intentions. He’d just booked an inn, but instead of heading there, he was shepherding them to a meal. Humans were the sort of beings whose decisions largely hinged on their mental state. When hungry, they were prone to anger, and when satiated, they could put up with most things. There was no telling what depths of fury Claes might summon if he delivered bad news while everyone was starving.

Claes was preemptively mitigating damages by waiting until everyone was satisfied and peaceful to bring up what he’d learned. Loren couldn’t tell how successful this would be, but he prayed it worked out.

With that in mind, Loren noted that the carriage was headed toward the sort of expensive storefront he never even considered entering under normal

circumstances. This rich ambience, ever out of reach, made his mouth unconsciously fall ever so slightly agape.

It wasn't top-of-the-line, per se, but the massive shop had to take quite a lot of money to maintain and operate. While the group stared up at it, Claes went in to ask where they could tether their ride.

Ange's mouth was also hanging open, and once Claes returned, she indignantly asked, "We're supposed to go in *here*?"

Claes held up a pacifying hand and gave her a cheerful smile. "Of course," he said. "And it's all on me. Everything's under control."

The man patted a hand to his chest like he was swearing an oath, and this earned him some cheers from the girls. Even if you excluded Claes and Loren, he was declaring that he would cover five people—no limits.

*I guess he's bringing in a lot these days*, Loren thought with a sigh.

"And you keep *yourself* under control," Loren told Gula, whose eyes had begun to sparkle at Claes's proposition.

Though Claes was presumably unaware of this, allowing Gula to order food with no hard limits would end in her running through the restaurant's entire stock. It wasn't like Claes's funds were endless.

Not that Loren had anything against emptying Claes's pockets. But they'd just arrived at Karlovy, and it would be a pity to run out of funding so soon. If it came to that, he would feel especially bad for Ange and company.

"Just once, I'd like to eat freely and without a care," Gula grumbled, her eyes trailing off into the distance. It sounded like she had anticipated Loren's warning.

Loren couldn't even envision how much food that would be. What's more, a full stomach apparently weakened Gula's dark god abilities, so it'd be hard to justify letting her go hog wild.

"So what do you serve here?"

The front door gave way to high ceilings and a vast dining area, but it was conspicuously empty. A few customers sat here and there, their plates laden with a variety of stews and grilled foods. Loren's vacationing party consisted of seven members, and there weren't any other groups of that magnitude. Thus, the waiter seemed to be especially accommodating as he guided them to their seats.

"We can prepare most things," the waiter said. "But I *must* recommend the meat. Karlovy's famous for its assault bull stew and roast. You can pick up some jerky on the way out too."

The waiter skillfully talked up not only the menu but souvenirs. He was promptly ignored, and Claes picked out a few of the local favorites to order.

"We can't have meat without something to drink," Leila said in high spirits. "Claes, I'm counting on you."

Claes smiled. "I know, Leila. I'll get a few bottles too."

This drink order was promptly delivered to a second waiter.

Though Loren had been listening the entire time, he had absolutely no idea what was about to emerge from the kitchen. The sheer quantity, however, made it hard to imagine Leila was about to down it all on her own. *I guess I'll have to steal a sip and see*, he thought as he took a seat.

A while later, the food arrived. So much food, in fact, that Loren grew anxious as to whether they'd be able to finish it all. An entire procession of multiple servers streamed by, plates in each hand.

The metal plates steamed with bouncing fat that snapped and crackled. These dishes were masterclasses in stimulating the appetite in terms of both appearance and scent. Only seven people were dining, but the food they'd ordered looked like it could feed at least twice that many.

"Hey, this is a little..."

"Looks like I underestimated the difference between a beastkind portion and

a humankind one.”

It seemed beastkind ate substantially more than humans. As a result, the amount that qualified as a single order naturally differed. Claes had failed to take this into account.

“It feels like a waste to leave it uneaten.”

“Yeah, about that.”

Loren didn’t know how much Leila, Ange, and Laure could pack in even if they stuffed themselves full. However, so long as Gula was around, the concept of leftovers was basically a thing of the past.

“Are you going to take care of it, Loren? I guess a big guy like you has a big appetite.”

It was understandable to assume Loren was the biggest eater, given his appearance. Loren knew why Claes was saying that with his usual charming grin. But reality was about to strike, and Loren felt a headache setting in as he imagined the one-woman play starring Gula that was about to unfold.

He sympathetically patted Claes on the shoulder.

Though the amount of food on their table was quite fearsome, so too was the appetite of the girls sitting around it. It was astounding, as far as Loren was concerned. At first, he thought Gula would be the grand vanguard of their fighting force, but as it turned out, she wasn’t fighting alone.

“Indeed, wine for meat, and meat for wine. The strong flavors intensify the taste of the drink. How lovely.”

Leila gobbled up a plate of salty, thinly sliced meat at such speed that Loren didn’t think she chewed before swallowing. The meat came with a well-charred crust and a deliciously pink interior. The delicate slices vanished into her mouth, each followed by the tip of her wine glass. It was an incredible departure from her usual composure.

Beside Leila, Laure stabbed into a steaming mountain of meatballs with her

fork, selecting them one by one. She never once paused, her arm moving in a ceaseless flow. To Loren, watching the meat mountain's sure and steady decline was kind of like watching the construction of a great public work in reverse.

Claes eyed the scene with a strained smile. Beside him, Ange had gone red from her drink, and she snuggled up to him, downing glass after glass of sparkling liquor as she worked through the skewered steaks laid out before her.

Ange bit each skewer at the base, then with a yank, popped off the meat all in one go, depositing the meat in her mouth and returning the naked skewer to the table. By the time she'd chewed through and swallowed one share, her hand was reaching for the next one. The table was already piled high with the remnants.

A glance to the side, however, revealed a sight that surpassed all of these efforts combined. And of course, it was Gula.

The other girls only kept their favorite dishes in reach and handed the rest to the others. These dishes were passed around until they inevitably reached a certain end. In short, everything the others weren't particular about became Gula's.

Gula brought these untouched dishes to her mouth without a moment of rest or hesitation. So much disappeared into her maw that one found themselves wondering how she could possibly fit it all into her body. Even after all that, her appetite never seemed to diminish.

"Loren, how much does it cost to feed that girl?" Claes asked.

Loren thought for a moment, unsure how to respond. If he were honest, he would admit that Gula could eat things that weren't even food. By the power of her authority, everything from monsters to humans was on the menu. Basically, you could just give her whatever was lying around and she'd chow down. But he didn't expect Claes to understand if he said as much.

*Then what should I say?* Loren wondered. But as he thought, someone answered in his stead—the woman beside him, who was calmly and



deliberately cutting her steak into bite-size pieces and separating the lean meat from the fat.

“She usually shows a touch more restraint,” Lapis said in the midst of her methodical display. “However, now it seems like she feels obligated to finish what would otherwise go to waste.”

“You sure about that? At the rate she’s going, I’d say she could polish off a whole bull.”

*Not just one. She’d eat two or three, no problem,* Loren thought to himself.

Lapis averted her eyes, trying her hardest to keep Gula’s dining habits out of her line of sight as she indifferently answered, “Certainly not. No human could hope to do so much.”

“But she single-handedly finished off that whole roasted pig. I ordered that as a *joke*.”

Loren’s eyes darted toward the end of the table. There he beheld a large empty plate that must once have borne something truly massive.

“Are you sure you have the right of it?” Lapis asked. “She must have shared some with Ms. Leila.”

A pig was smaller than a bull, but eating one whole was categorically an inhuman feat. Loren was able to plow through a fair amount if he set his mind to it, but he didn’t have to try to know that an entire pig was beyond him.

“And I ordered a good few T-bone steaks...”

“I helped myself to a portion of those.”

Some of those T-bones were among the pieces of steak that Lapis had worked so hard to divide. She’d cut everything so neatly that it was hard to say what any of them had originally been, but the distinct T-shaped bone was indeed still on her plate.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean, I’m glad she’s eating them...and I apologize if I’m mistaken, but that Gula girl... She didn’t even bother to remove

the bones. In fact, if I'm not seeing things, she crunched them up between her teeth."

A T-Bone was a bone-in steak cut from the short loin around the lower back of a cow. When partaking of this cut, one generally left the bone behind. On top of that, while ordinary cow bones were already quite hard, the bones of assault bulls were even harder. Yet despite the loads of empty plates piling up around Gula, there was no trace of any bones to be seen. Where could they have gone?

"Didn't she just discard them in the bin when you weren't looking?"

"You can't really eat assault-bull bones, can you?" Claes muttered.

"If a cow like that existed, it would be extinct by now," Lapis casually replied.

She answered with such cool, calm collectedness that, although Claes didn't seem fully convinced, he was compelled to just go with it. However, Loren was watching Lapis closely, and he didn't miss the slight quiver of her steak-cutting hands.

In a nutshell, Lapis was well aware that she was pushing it with this hand-waving, but she couldn't think of anything better.

*What a bother*, Loren thought. He had no way to issue a stern warning to Gula at present, and neither could he tell her to spit up the bones she'd so brazenly devoured, so Loren settled for glaring at the dark god in grim silence.

Upon noticing this glare, Gula stopped shoveling food into her mouth with a blissful look on her face. She choked a bit and had to smack her chest. Then, teary-eyed, she dumped a cup of water, wine, or whatever down her throat.

"That aside, Claes. You ordered a lot for our very first meal. You sure you're gonna be all right?"

"Given the size of our party, I expected that coins wouldn't cut it."

With a slight jingling, Claes produced a small sack from his breast pocket. It contained several precious gemstones. He'd brought gold coins as well, but the gemstones were more portable overall, being lighter and more valuable, though

you'd lose some change on the transaction fees. If you wanted a large amount of cash on hand, they could be most convenient.

"Couldn't you have gotten the guild to pay your tab via transfer or something?" The guild was a massive international organization, and Loren suspected they had something like a banking service.

But Claes shook his head with a laugh. "You can get away with that within your nation of origin, but it's more difficult when you cross borders. Once you head into a nation ruled by a different race, it's basically impossible."

"I guess that makes sense."

Loren nodded and was about to return to his meal when he noticed something casting a shadow over Claes from behind. He raised his line of sight. Claes had noticed as well, and he idly glanced over his shoulder.

"Looks like you're enjoying yourselves, eh? How about you share some of that fun with us?"

Four men stood behind Claes. Each was quite muscular, and the leather armor they wore made clear that they were no ordinary citizens. Their faces resembled those of the average human, but feline ears protruded from their skulls. Evidently, these were run-of-the-mill beastkind, as opposed to members of an origin clan.

*I guess the beastkind have to deal with these sorts too—the folks who try to swindle pocket change out of anyone having a good time,* Loren mused.

"Sorry, but I've got a lot to pay for. I honest to goodness don't have anything to spare," Claes replied with a smile. But Loren noticed his eyes do a quick scan of the four men's chests—obviously, to confirm he was indeed speaking to men. In the end, Claes had determined that he had absolutely no interest in any of them.

*I guess my instincts were on the money,* Loren concluded. He hadn't taken them for women either.

One of the men playfully patted Claes on the head. “Hey, now, don’t be so cold. You’ve got to be shelling out a fortune if you’re catering to these lovely ladies. And you don’t have any change for these pitiful souls? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The girls were so focused on their meals that they didn’t seem to notice the developing situation. As Loren wasn’t the target at present, he sat back to wait and watch. Lapis indifferently sliced up another steak. Only her eyes occasionally flicked up to look at them.

“Well, pretty girls do cost a pretty penny, you see,” Claes chuckled as he glanced at Loren.

*Does he want me to intervene?* thought Loren. But Claes hadn’t yet made a verbal request, so he pretended not to notice. Loren selected one of the steak slices Lapis had produced and tossed it into his mouth.

For some reason, Lapis’s eyes were slightly narrowed. Loren tried to pacify her as he watched avidly to see how Claes would deal with this. He wanted to see how capable the sort of beastkind who picked random fights with restaurant customers really were.

“No more beating around the bush. How about you hand me a bit of what you just stuffed into that pocket?”

Claes had tucked his gem sack away the moment he realized someone was behind him. Unfortunately, it seemed he had been too late. He’d already drawn the attention of these ruffians. “What to do, what to do... Loren, do you feel like lending a hand here?”

“They’re your guests,” Loren said curtly.

Claes must have expected that. He begrudgingly stood, scratching his head, and turned to attend these so-called *guests*.

Once Claes was facing the four men on his feet, they were momentarily flustered. It took them that moment to recall that the odds were four to one.

Then they grinned and closed the distance.

“Let’s take this outside,” said Claes. “I don’t want to cause trouble for the establishment—or my comrades.”

“Just you? The big guy’s not gonna help?” one of the beast men said, sending a mocking look to Loren, who immediately turned away.

Appearance-wise, Claes looked like a mild-mannered pretty boy. They’d obviously much rather fight him than the burly mercenary, Loren, and they weren’t going to linger on the worse option. Though they flung out this initial taunt, they took it no further.

“Not much else I can do... If they take me out, I leave the rest to you,” said Claes with a jovial wave of his hand.

“We’ll manage somehow,” Loren replied.

Claes exited the restaurant alongside his would-be attackers.

Lapis’s eyes trailed the beast men. “Are you sure this is all right?” she whispered to Loren.

“Sure. If not, I’ll do something about it,” Loren said, though he doubted he’d have to. Claes was so skilled that he’d become an iron-rank adventurer long before Loren. He wasn’t going to lose to some random hoodlums, soldiers, or adventurers.

In any case, if these schmucks had actually been strong enough to take on Claes, they wouldn’t have been extorting money from folks at a tourist spot in the middle of the day.

*It shouldn’t be a problem,* Loren thought. This time, when he reached for another slice of steak, Lapis was waiting for him. He felt a firm smack on the back of his arm guards and hurriedly retracted his hand.

## Chapter 4:

### A Questioning to an Explanation

**T**HINGS WERE GETTING rather noisy outside. Deciding it was time, Loren gave Lapis—who was back to cutting steak—a pat on the shoulder before he stood from his seat and headed out.

It was hard to imagine Claes could have been injured, but you always had to consider that million-to-one chance. After all, not only was Claes outnumbered, but Loren got the sense he'd been blessed with a good upbringing. A dirty trick could well take him by surprise.

A waiter approached Loren before he could leave. Loren gestured to the rest of his comrades, indicating they were still eating, and that he was not in the midst of a dine and dash. This allowed him to slip out.

A crowd had formed on the street corner, centered on Claes and the four beast men.

"Get him!" an irresponsible rubbernecker cried out.

Loren watched Claes's movements with great interest. Claes was an iron-rank adventurer, and one upon whom a kingdom had pinned its hopes. As expected, his every move was swift and precise, and though four people were swinging at him, he didn't look remotely like he was on the back foot.

*And yet...* thought Loren.

If Claes were to wield a weapon, he would cut his assailants down in no time at all. This was, however, a bare-fisted slugfest. Getting a good punch in wouldn't end things, and as long as Claes's fist failed to knock an enemy out, they'd punch back or grab him when he got close. It was a brawl, plain and simple.

Loren could tell that Claes was accustomed to combat, but not to brawling.



His worries soon proved themselves warranted.

Claes knocked one of the men to the ground—having already done this several times—and prepared to face another attacker. However, the man he thought he'd taken out suddenly grabbed his leg. Claes's lack of fisticuffs-related experience meant he didn't fully understand how hard he had to hit before his opponents stopped coming. On top of this, he wasn't that experienced when it came to bare-handed martial techniques.

The cherry atop the sundae: beastkind were stronger and sturdier than humankind. A little roughing up wouldn't incapacitate them.

*I guess they're not part animal for nothing,* Loren mused.

With his leg seized and mobility impeded, Claes slowly began to take the brunt of the attacks. Up to that point, he had managed to evade with elegant footwork. After losing his maneuverability, he had to guard with only his two arms, and three people were a little too much to deal with.

"Good! Keep him there!"

"Slippery devil! I'll bust you up until you've got a whole new face!"

Claes struggled to shake the man off his leg, but the man kept a desperate grip on him.

*Can't he just use Boost?* Loren found himself wondering. But perhaps a small-time punch-out wasn't the place to reveal a gift that was supposed to be your ace in the hole.

That said, at this rate, Claes was going to be beaten up and robbed.

*I think he'd be better off using it,* Loren concluded.

"Good grief—this is why I don't like dealing with men!" Claes grumbled. He landed several punches on the beast man gripping his leg, trying to dislodge him, but the man was too low for him to land an effective blow and his grip prevented Claes from getting a kick in. At the end of all his struggling, it was Claes who ended up losing his balance and landing on his bottom.

The beast man gripping Claes's legs immediately shot up, lifting his feet high to prevent him from standing again. The remaining three rushed to pin Claes to the ground.

Claes did his best to struggle from his losing position, but his flailing only chipped away at his own stamina. His movements were gradually losing their practiced air.

"You held out well for a human."

"How about giving up? Or haven't you had enough?!"

Held against the ground as he was, Claes would soon lose all means to defend himself. His face had already taken a few good blows, but he nevertheless continued to resist. The beast men were growing irritated. Finally, one of them grabbed Claes by the lapels, hauled him up, and forcefully slammed him back into the ground.

"Gah!" Claes cried out in pain. The beast men hammered their fists into his face.

The punches sliced his gums and blood flowed from his lips. He moved his arms to fight back only to be slammed into the ground again.

"He's finished," one of the men said irritably. "Let's end this and have his girls repay us for our pains."

Though it had been four-on-one, the beastkind men had taken more than their fair share of blows. They no longer felt satisfied with the thought of beating Claes into unconsciousness and pilfering whatever was in his breast pocket.

*There's at least two people in that restaurant who are a whole lot scarier than Claes,* Loren thought as he slowly walked toward the men pinning Claes down. "Claes. Pretty poor show."

"Hey, I'm too nice for this," Claes joked as he was lifted up again.

Loren looked at him tiredly. *What did you even come here for?* he wondered

as he turned to the beast men glaring at him. “Haven’t you done enough? I’ll have him pay for your bruises. How about you leave it at that?”

“You gotta be kidding me. You think a little pocket change would patch this up?!” one of the men snarled.

Loren sighed. He idly reached out and seized one of the men by the collar—just as his companion was doing to Claes. Faster than the man could resist, Loren mustered his strength and lifted his body into the air with fearsome momentum. His feet left the ground all too easily.

The beast men were all well-muscled, though Loren was a touch taller.

“Hey, you bastard! Let go!”

“Claes, I’m guessing you’re not used to street fights. How about I teach you one of the basics?” Loren said to Claes, more or less ignoring the man who was kicking and screaming as he tried in vain to escape Loren’s grasp.

Claes stared up at him blankly. The other men, who were still pinning him down, seemed similarly confused. They looked between Loren and their flailing friend, totally ignorant as to what was about to happen.

“When you’re in this situation—”

Loren slammed his captive’s back against the ground with tremendous force. The unlucky beast man released a pained groan. But Loren wasn’t done. As the man lay winded, Loren pressed his boot into the pit of his stomach. An even stranger cry escaped the man, and specks of blood frothed with his spit. The sound under Loren’s foot was clearly that of something breaking. The beast man squirmed for a moment, but ultimately threw out his arms and legs and stopped moving.

“—you’re stronger if you don’t think.”

Loren stomped the man once more, just to be sure. Once he’d confirmed the man was completely still, he removed his foot and kicked the body aside. It was less a question of how badly he was injured and more one of whether he was

still alive at this point, but Loren showed him not the least bit of interest. He surveyed the beast men holding down Claes.

“Who wants to join him?” he asked, as casually as if he were inviting them on a stroll.

“Y-you! Don’t you care what happens to this guy?!”

One of the beast men had drawn a small knife and held it to Claes’s throat. A feeble attempt, as threats went.

Claes’s eyes widened as he spied the glint of cold steel, but again, Loren was unperturbed. His only response was to grab the man who’d pulled the knife. This time, he yanked the man into the air, and with the same momentum, spun him and slammed him down.

The man was thrown so fast he was unable to cushion his fall. Without even a chance to cry out, his eyes rolled up into the back of his head, and the knife fell out of his limp hand. His body let out a dry, cracking sound.

Loren made sure he was fully unconscious before he kicked the knife at the gawking crowd. As the knife clattered toward them, the onlookers watched in stunned silence.

“Anyone want to be number three?”

Loren was neither smiling nor scowling. This really was just an earnest question. The two remaining men hurriedly backed off, freeing Claes in the process.

With his newfound freedom, Claes stood and swung his arms to stretch them out. He rubbed where he’d been hit and smiled wryly at Loren. “I know you’re trying to offer me a lesson, but I don’t think I can live up to your example.”

“Yeah, not with those arms, you can’t.”

Claes was well-trained and relatively muscular—but not nearly as much as Loren. He probably couldn’t freely swing around the greatsword Loren wielded on a regular basis.

“I’m not telling you to copy me. Just remember how to think in this kind of situation.”

Having thoroughly lost the will to fight, the beast men sat on the ground, staring up at Loren in terror.

Loren loomed over them. “Waste time thinking about your next move, and you’re just slowing yourself down. Killing them would be a crime, yeah, but you gotta go at ’em like you might as well do it anyway. Otherwise, it ain’t even a fight.”

“That’s more upsetting than it is scary.”

Though they were a little late to the revelation, the two beast men quivered, having realized they’d picked the wrong guy to mess with. Their companions on the ground weren’t dead, evidently—one broke into a coughing fit, while the other groaned. But they were too hurt to move properly and were writhing feebly.

The crowd had fallen entirely silent at Loren’s monstrous one-handed feats of strength. They’d only watched the fight from afar, but most were rooted to the spot.

“You’ve drawn quite a crowd,” Claes noted. “What does one do about that?”

“Someone’ll report it eventually. The guards should be on their way. Then we explain the situation and I’ll be arrested for a spell.”

Despite their hopes, they’d kicked up a decently large ruckus. The guards that rushed here would likely be compelled to temporarily arrest Loren to quiet the crowd. After all, *someone* had to be taken in; two beast men were heavily injured, and Claes was quite the worse for wear himself. Loren was the only one who was completely unharmed, and he was the one who’d taken the two men out. He had resigned himself to his fate.

“You need not trouble yourself,” a voice called out to him. “I have more or less grasped what happened here. Once we look into the matter, I’m sure we’ll

find you are not at fault.”

Although Loren and Claes turned at the same time, Claes was the first to react. By the time Loren had had a good look, Claes had already walked over with a radiant smile that made it hard to believe he had just been in a fight.

*He never learns,* Loren sighed.

He’d gotten a long, hard look at the newcomer as Claes strode forward so eagerly. *This must be one of those origin clan folks.*

Her face was truly that of a cat. The beast men he’d beaten up looked more like humans onto whom cat ears and tails had been affixed. In her case, however, it was more like a cat had taken on some human characteristics.

Her clothes were well-tailored and structured for mobility. Although she had a proper bulge in her chest area, every inch of exposed skin was covered in a fine layer of fur.

“My, what a beauty you are. I would be so honored to learn your name, madam. You may call me Claes, and I am a human adventurer.”

“A-a pleasure, I’m sure. I am Menuett Singapler of the origin cat clan. I serve as the lord of this town.”





*What's the lord doing here?* Loren smelled something fishy, but Claes was too focused on the fact that he'd encountered just the origin clan girl he'd been hoping for. Meanwhile, Menuett seemed somewhat put off by Claes's reaction. Loren felt exactly zero urge to get involved.

"Miss Menuett? Your name is as striking as your visage. I'd just love to get to know you better..."

"Err, to the point. Yes, as to this matter... I believe that the two of you are the victims, but I cannot acquit you without a proper investigation. Would you accompany me for the time being?"

"Of course. You have only to give the order, and I'd follow you to the ends of the earth."

"That's not what I meant..." Menuett winced. Claes didn't seem to be listening to a word she said.

In any case, it didn't seem like they'd be able to up and leave just yet. Loren scratched his chest, mulling over how he'd explain this to the girls still enjoying themselves in the restaurant.

It ended up being far simpler than he'd expected. When all was said and done, Lapis was the only one still totally sober and awake. Claes's party had been done in by the alcohol, and while they hadn't drunk themselves into unconsciousness, it was hard to say if they were actually listening.

Lapis looked perfectly fine, while Gula slept soundly and happily, a satisfied look on her face. Even when Loren shook her, she showed no signs of waking.

Given little choice in the matter, Loren explained what he could to Lapis. He'd told Menuett he'd head wherever she directed him, but that he needed a moment. With her consent, he and Claes headed back into the restaurant. They had a big job ahead of them.

"Would it be better if I drank myself under the table as well?" Lapis mused.

“Then Mr. Loren would have to carry me.”

“Give me a break. Anyway, the fact you’re still sober is the only reason you get to come to this interrogation with me, right?”

“Yes, yes, both options have their pros and cons. That’s why I’m still mulling it over.”

Lapis looked like she really was racking her brain. Loren could only smile wryly. As they spoke, Claes paid the restaurant bill, and they got to work transporting the entirely drunk—and less entirely sane—party to the inn where they planned to stay the night.

Claes went so far as to use his rare *Boost* gift, transporting his party members at an incredible speed. Even if the reason he was using it was as ridiculous as it was hopeless, Loren was still impressed. Nonetheless, he grabbed Claes by the neck when the man tried to use the chaos to princess-carry Gula away with the rest of the girls. Instead, Loren passed Gula’s body to Lapis.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Loren asked Claes. “Now, I’m sure this isn’t the case, but you’re not trying to get on my bad side, are you?”

“Heavens no. I have only the best intentions...”

“Oh, really? Then spare yourself the trouble.”

Loren glared down at Claes’s unfaltering yet stiff smile with an intimidating air.

Lapis watched this absentmindedly. But she couldn’t hang around forever, and so she slung the dark god’s body over her back. Gula was very slightly taller than Lapis and her attire was a bit more, ahem, assertive than Lapis’s reserved vestments.

“This is a tad irritating,” Lapis grumbled as she stared down at the girl’s tube top.

Loren looked between them and earnestly asked, “Is it really something to worry about?”

“When it comes to such things, the people in question may well be more concerned than anyone else.”

“Is that how it works?”

Loren didn’t fully understand whatever was going through her head, but he wasn’t about to challenge Lapis when she got insistent.

And so, they placed their sleeping party members at the inn. Those that remained conscious headed to where Menuett had arranged to meet. The sun had sunk quite far by then, and their destination was a strange place.

“This...ain’t a lord’s estate.”

Menuett had given them a certain address on a sheet of paper. As Loren walked toward it with Lapis and Claes, they agreed they definitely, definitely weren’t headed toward the estate at the center of town. Instead, it seemed they’d been directed toward some sort of shop on the outskirts.

“I have to assume this is the so-called red-light district,” Lapis said, as expressionless as her tone was indifferent.

Indeed, the ambiance wasn’t what you’d call great, and a rather degenerate odor lingered in the air. The district into which they’d ambled was nothing short of shady. The streets were illuminated in mysterious shades of red and pink—Loren couldn’t even imagine how the light was produced—and thuggish beast men roamed the roads. Beast women clad in alluring outfits weaved between them and gathered here and there.

A sickly sweet fragrance wafted on the breeze. When Loren inhaled deeply, a syrupy sensation lingered in his lungs. He didn’t even try to hide his grimace. Meanwhile, Claes looked around with great interest.

“Well, I’ll bet there’s one of these at every tourist destination,” said Loren.

“This isn’t the sort of locale someone calling themselves a lord ought to use as a rendezvous,” said Lapis.

“Personally, I’m quite thankful,” said Claes.

“You shut it,” Loren and Lapis said in unison.

Claes, who knew when he was beaten, shut his mouth. But his eyes continued to dart here and there, and he didn’t seem about to keep them to himself. The only thing he refused to pay attention to were Loren and Lapis’s fed-up looks. Instead, he waved at any beast woman who beckoned to him.

“So which shop is it?”

“That one, probably.”

Lapis pointed at a building that looked sort of plain compared to the more dubious architecture surrounding it. The several ruffians at its entrance made Loren hesitate to get close, but he knew they’d be in for nothing but trouble if he ignored the orders of the town’s lord. Despite his reluctance, he walked toward the entrance.

One of the beast men stepped up as he noticed Loren’s approach. “Who’re you supposed to be?”

There was a knife in his hand, which he showed off unsheathed. Loren wasn’t particularly impressed by this, but perhaps the man was just doing his job. He handed over the paper he’d received from Menuett.

“We were summoned by the person who gave us this.”

The man’s eyes shifted suspiciously and came to a stop on the letters on the page. After glaring at them a second, he looked up and jerked his head toward the building. “Enter. Someone inside’ll show you the way.”

“Sorry for your troubles.”

The man wasn’t about to be any friendlier, but he seemed to be the sort who took his job seriously. After telling them to enter, he dismissed them out of hand. Loren offered him a curt thanks before leading Lapis and Claes past.

Inside, the building was dim, and closed doors lined both sides of a corridor. A beast woman waited near the entrance, clad in clothing that left precious little to the imagination. She bowed the second they’d stepped through the door and

announced that she would be their guide. They followed her down a corridor and came to a stop in front of one of the doors, which she motioned them to enter.

There was nothing inside, save for a single round table surrounded by a few chairs. Menuett sat in one of them, wearing the same clothes she had earlier that day. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Sir Loren."

"I ain't the sort of guy who gets a 'sir,'" Loren bluntly replied.

In his place, Claes courteously lowered his head and sallied forth. "All our thanks for the gracious invitation, Lady Menuett."

"No, umm, err. It wasn't an invitation, per se." Menuett hurriedly tried to correct Claes, but it was unclear if he even heard her or not. "I had a real reason to summon you here today..."

"Claes, we're not getting anywhere with that. Shut up for a bit."

Menuett noticeably wanted to get to business, but Claes was closing in, keen to extend the pleasantries. Although Loren had no obligation to intervene, he had a grim vision of everyone talking in circles.

Claes reluctantly drew back, and with a relieved expression, Menuett motioned for them to sit. She only opened her mouth once she was sure they were settled. "Would you care for some food or drink?"

"Business first. You didn't choose this place just to ask us about that tussle, did you?"

If they had been summoned to the lord's estate or the garrison, Loren would have bought that this was a basic interrogation. Instead, they were in some random shop in the red-light district. It was hard to imagine this had anything to do with legal processes, so what was it *really* about? Loren had to know.

"Right... Very well. Are you aware of Karlov's recent misfortune?"

"Not in detail, just that something is afoot," Lapis replied before Loren could. "That quite a large portion of your customer base has been left unsatisfied.

However, did you screw up that badly?”

“It was no mistake on our part. We’ve conducted a preliminary investigation, but...it’s regrettably not looking good.”

“What happened?” Loren asked.

Menuett seemed reluctant to say. She opened her mouth several times, only to close it. But she fought through her hesitation upon realizing it would be more difficult to continue the conversation if she wasn’t up-front. With a deep sigh, she looked Loren straight in the eye. “Karlový is a town known for food and baths. Delicious cuisine and hot springs were our main selling points, but a few days ago, the hot spring suddenly became unusable.”

“How so?”

“The quality of the water changed. As is, we fear the spring might have some negative effects, so we’ve banned all use.”

Karlový being “the town of food and baths,” both of these things were subject to strict scrutiny and regular assessment. Recent analysis had revealed that the water was now harmful. With that, one of the town’s main tourist attractions had been temporarily closed off to all comers.

“I see. So that’s why so many people are leaving in low spirits.”

They’d come here precisely because of those magnificent baths, only to find said baths off limits—of course they were annoyed. Moreover, whatever those customers went on to tell the rest of the world about Karlový might spell the end of the local tourist industry, or even the entire town.

“You strike me as skilled adventurers. As the representative of this town, I’d like to make a request.”

“What could it be, my dear?” Claes asked. “Whatever troubles you have, only say the word and—”

There was a dull sound. Claes cut off.

Eyes half-closed, Loren stuck up a thumb to Lapis, who stood behind Claes



with a chair in her hands.

“Huh? Err, what?”

“Don’t worry. Go on.”

“Y-yes... As for the details of the request.”

The request entailed investigating the source of the hot spring. If the water had become harmful, perhaps something was contaminating it at some point along its course.

“Publicly, we’ve announced that the issue will be resolved with all due speed. Of course, I had no basis for claiming the work could be done quickly. But if I didn’t say as much, our guests would inevitably riot, and the townsfolk would likely join.”

The hot spring was the town’s lifeline. If it really was beyond saving, there was no knowing how badly the residents would take the news. The investigation had to be conducted in secret. This meeting had been arranged in the red-light district to prevent any eavesdropping.

“What do you say? Would you consider taking on the job?” Menuett leaned in, pressing Loren for an answer.

As someone who’d just come here to enjoy his vacation, Loren had absolutely no desire to take on a job. However, the mood in town would be grim until the issue was taken care of, and food prices would only continue to rise.

“Please. I’m begging you here.”

Sensing his reluctance, Menuett began lowering her head so far that her forehead pressed against the table. Loren didn’t know how to deal with someone—who was to all appearances, a cat—lowering her head so desperately. In his distress, he found himself exchanging a look with Lapis.

“So you ended up taking that job?”

The next day, they were standing at Karlovy's southern gate. This question was posed by Leila, who was both fully armed and folding her arms.

Loren nodded, though slowly.

"Can I ask why you accepted it?"

"Well, the biggest reason is that your leader jumped at it before he even heard any details," Loren said.

Leila turned a cold look on Claes. For reasons that surely had nothing to do with his behavior, the man had become the pack animal for his entire party. He shuddered under Leila's gaze and shuffled out of her field of view.

"The lord was a woman, I take it," she said to Loren.

"Got it in one. I would have turned her down, still, but... Well, that ship had already sailed. And I felt kind of responsible when I wasn't able to stop him in time..."

*Should I have gone further? Even if I had to beat him into submission?* The thought circled around Loren's head with no answer forthcoming.

He'd come to Karlovy for some rest and relaxation. It was absurd that he had to work. And yet, even if he wanted to enjoy the place, half the charm was currently gone. Knowing this, he couldn't fully indulge himself, and it wouldn't be so bad to throw in a bit of elbow grease if they could put everything to rights.

"I heard the hot springs were unusable. What's the actual situation?" Leila asked as she took the lead, passing through the gate.

Loren went after her, then Lapis, Gula, Ange, and Laure, with Claes at the very back. They set off to the south.

"Apparently, the hot spring water was always a tad cloudy, but the sediment was white. Then it suddenly turned brown, with the smell of rust and rot."

"Doesn't that mean some blood got in the water?"

“Can’t be sure, but I see where you’re coming from. But how much blood would you need to ruin a hot spring big enough to support a whole town?”

You’d never notice a small quantity of blood in the water. It might cause some short-term distress, but it wouldn’t lead to this kind of ruckus. What they were looking at was enough blood to ruin every bath in town. If it really was blood, then a massive amount had been poured into the spring, either at the source or somewhere along the way.

“It’s hard to believe.”

And if it *was* blood, it shouldn’t be flowing so endlessly. Once the source had bled out, the springs should have returned to their original pristine state.

“It would be a different story if a wounded dragon fell into the headspring, something. But given everything, I don’t know if we should assume it’s blood just yet.”

“Then what do you think it is, Loren?”

Loren shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s why we’re investigating.”

“Point taken. But you know...”

Leila simply couldn’t stop talking as she led them along. *She’s chattier than I assumed*, Loren thought to himself. But her questions also ensured the rest of the party had the info they needed, so he wasn’t going to stop her.

“The lord should have a few soldiers on her payroll,” said Leila.

“Well, yeah. But her soldiers are gonna be beastkind, right?”

Loren’s response seemed to baffle Leila. She furrowed her brow as if asking him to elaborate.

“I can’t say *I’m* any more gifted in the area...but beastkind? They aren’t the best with investigations.”

“Oh... I see.”

Though there were a fair share of exceptions, members of the race known as

beastkind were often unsuited to fine detail work. This seemed to be something the beast folk were well aware of themselves.

“The lord said she might just make the problem worse if she sent her own soldiers.”

“She’s aware of her own faults and sourced a countermeasure. That makes her a worthy lord in my book,” said Lapis. Loren and Leila weren’t quite as sure this was impressive, and their smiles were vague.

“Still, I don’t think it’s exactly commendable to issue a job request to adventurers you’ve only just met,” said Leila. “Especially not directly from the lord.”

“The spring may be the town’s lifeline, but it’s not important enough to be a military secret,” said Loren. “If they don’t handle it quick, the info’s gonna get out sooner or later.”

“The request came directly from the lord because she just so happened to be searching for the right person for the job when she ran into Mr. Claes,” Lapis said,

“Claes?”

Leila looked genuinely surprised, but Lapis’s face remained impassive. Loren could understand how they felt. From Lapis’s point of view, when compared to Loren, Claes was obviously easier to make a deal with. It was only natural that the lord had taken notice of him.

Meanwhile, Leila saw her leader as someone with a serious weakness for women, to the point that he couldn’t resist them. To her, Loren was obviously the better candidate for a serious job. She seemed surprised that Claes had been singled out. But as she thought about it, she caught on. “So she picked up on Claes’s womanizing tendencies...”

“She didn’t spell it out, but...”

Lady Menuett had homed in on them because her instincts had told her Claes

would be unable to refuse her request. At the same time, she'd sensed she would get nowhere by dealing with Claes directly, so she had recruited Loren to act as her go-between.

"Even a complete stranger sees straight through him? That idiot..." Leila spat as she glared at Claes.

Claes's eyes darted this way and that as he searched for a place to hide. But he came up short and had to walk backward, using the bags on his back as a shield.

"Perhaps it's animal instinct, but that lord has quite keen intuition," sighed Leila.

"If the job's been accepted, there's nothing for it," said Loren. "It may have been foul luck, but either way, we were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I'm actually rather looking forward to this," replied Lapis, much to their surprise.

Neither Loren nor Leila expected Lapis of all people to be up for the task, and they stared at her blankly.

"I mean, this is the hot spring of my dreams," Lapis explained. "I was so looking forward to enjoying a long bath, and it would be just awful if I don't get to. At this point, we *must* pin down the cause and get those baths back up and running. There's not a second to lose."

"I see," Leila nodded, somewhat sympathetically.

"The reward money's not bad, either. And we'll get a bonus if we succeed in getting those baths usable again."

"So in short, the job itself is just to investigate the problem. Not find a solution."

Investigating the problem and resolving it were two entirely different requests, and one was unquestionably more difficult than the other. Leila asked just to be sure.

Loren nodded. “Yeah. Our main objective’s just to look into it. She said we don’t need to take care of it if it looks out of our league.”

“But that she’d love it if we could. So I’m aiming for nothing less.”

There was a clear difference in enthusiasm between Loren and Lapis.

*I guess this is the gap between a bathing connoisseur and a bathing amateur,* Leila thought. Personally, she was with Lapis. She’d do whatever she could to get those baths back in order.

“I heard we were headed south, but where exactly are we going?”

“Apparently, the waterway that draws the hot spring water into town is underground,” Lapis said, tapping her heel against the dirt.

The canal was buried to prevent contaminants from falling in, but that also made investigation difficult whenever something went awry.

“It will be difficult to investigate the underground flow, so we’re headed for the hot lake at the other end.”

If there was no issue on the other side of the canal, they could conclude that the issue lay somewhere along the course. Thus, the spring was a good place to start.

But there was something Leila had to confirm. “Hot lake?” she said, echoing the unfamiliar term.

“There is a lake at the end of the canal where the hot water from the spring collects. When I say ‘hot,’ I mean it’s near boiling. It might be dangerous to get too close,” Lapis courteously explained.

“The lake is around half a day’s walk from here, due south.”

The path was a gentle climb. The town used the difference in elevation to transport the hot water.

“Curiously, there’s a forest around the lake, according to the lord.”

“Is it really that curious?” Leila asked. She didn’t see anything odd about a

forest growing around a lake.

Lapis shook her head. “It’s in the vicinity of *near-boiling* water. That’s hardly the proper environment for woodlands. It’s strange to think a forest might really be growing there. Additionally, hot springs typically form when geothermal energy heats groundwater, so they’re often close to volcanoes. There aren’t any volcanoes around the lake we’re headed to.”

In the absence of volcanoes, hot springs usually arose when the ground expelled some sort of gas, which in turn usually made for a habitat unsuited to most life. This spring seemed to be the exception to the rule, and Lapis couldn’t contain her curiosity.

Of course, she was well aware that even if she spelled all this out, the others would be content to write it off as an exception—nothing worth getting so worked up over. Knowing this, she held her tongue.

“There are always extraordinary cases,” she said. “Perhaps we’ll understand when we get there.”

*Yes, we have to get there to get anywhere,* Lapis thought as she walked beside Loren. While Leila was pulling ahead, Ange was falling behind. Lapis called out to the stragglers to pick up the pace.



## Chapter 5:

### Onward to Chaos

THEY PRESSED ON. As they'd been told to expect, their eyes were soon greeted by lines of trees. The wind took on a slightly warm quality, and a faint peculiar scent wafted here and there.

"Oh, right, I forgot to mention." Loren brought his foot down on some kind of black creature, mustering his strength to pull out the greatsword he'd stabbed into it. "Some dangerous critters show up around here. You better watch out."

"I'd appreciate it if you would mention such things beforehand," Leila said through gritted teeth.

After extracting his blade and wiping off the blood, Loren shrugged. "Yeah, I really should have said somethin'. My bad."

"Precisely, your bad! I almost had a heart attack!" Ange protested, her voice shaking terribly as she forced out her protest.

Loren lowered his head to her in sincere apology. He knew it was dangerous to fail to alert your companions to danger beforehand, and was well aware of the degree to which he'd dropped the ball.

"Umm, what exactly is that?" Laure asked, pointing at the thing under Loren's foot.

It had burst through the trees and taken a horizontal swipe at them, at which point Loren had sliced it down in the same motion with which he'd drawn his sword. Since it bled, it had to be some sort of lifeform. But it was large, and she hadn't quite pinned down its nature.

"A bear, I think." Even Loren had acted on pure reflex. He hadn't exactly figured out what it was he was hitting.

"A...bear?"

“This is a young black bear. Male, presumably.” Lapis stooped down beside it as she shared some of her wealth of knowledge. She stood and brushed off her knees. “They’re supposed to be rather formidable, but one strike was all it took.”

As Loren had intercepted it head-on, that one strike had split the bear’s head clean open.

“Is it edible?”

“Of course it is. It’s an animal.”

“Then should we trim it up and take it home?”

It felt like such a waste to abandon the body untouched, so Loren drew a dagger from inside his jacket. Perhaps it would be difficult to make use of every part of the beast, but it wouldn’t take long to extract enough to spice up their dinner.

“I’ll dress and butcher it. Everyone else can rest.”

“Let me help. I’m not a total amateur,” Leila said, but Loren softly declined.

“Don’t worry about it. You won’t want to see anything strange pop out, right?”

“Something strange?”

“Just between us—” Loren leaned in slightly, dropping his voice to a whisper so the others wouldn’t hear. “The lord told us she’s already given a similar job to a few other parties.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“If we received the job after them, that means those other parties weren’t able to complete the request.”

Being half a day’s walk away, the lake wasn’t exactly close to town. But it wasn’t far, either. Yet despite the short distance, not a single party before them had managed to make it there and back.

“You don’t mean not a single one returned?”

“Seems like. If they did, there’d be more info. But we barely know anything.”

There was no way to know how these parties had met their end, but there hadn’t been any traces of them on the road they took to get this far.

*So where did they go?* Leila shuddered as her eyes turned toward the corpse of the black bear.

“No way of knowing for sure. But there’s always a chance.”

With no reply, Leila retreated to where the rest of the group was watching.

*Honesty’s a virtue*, Loren chuckled as he got to work taking the bear apart. “We can’t carry all of it, so I’ll just pick out what looks tasty. As for the rest... Well, I’m sure some hungry beast will clean up after us.”

“Leave it to me,” Gula proclaimed, proudly patting herself on the chest.

Loren hadn’t nominated her by any means, but she was the only person present who could rid them of the bear remains. For the time being, Loren neatly carved chunks of meat off the most obviously edible parts—the flank, the arms, the leg, and the back. He checked the bear’s innards just in case and removed the heart and liver while he was at it.

Most of the great volume of blood soaked into the ground, though Neg sucked up a few mouthfuls when no one else was looking.

The stomach was mostly empty. Loren didn’t find what he feared he might, so either this bear hadn’t made a meal of those who’d come before, or it had been so long that they’d been thoroughly digested.

“I tried being picky with what I cut, and it’s still a lot of meat.”

Given the massive size of the black bear, the chunks of meat Loren had taken were quite large and heavy.

*What do I do about this?* he wondered. But Lapis instantly began to pluck a wide assortment of grasses and leaves from the surrounding area, then briskly

used them to wrap and package the meat. She stuffed the cuts into the large bag on Claes's back before he could so much as let out a peep of protest.

Now the bag was even closer to bursting, but the man's wry smile and lack of complaints made clear that he accepted his role.

Loren used a cloth to wipe off his bloody equipment, and then they were on the road again. It wasn't long before they reached trees that grew incredibly closely packed together, given the sweltering heat and suffocating humidity. Soon after, they were met with the sight of a massive lake—the source of a ghastly stench.

“So this is the place.”

Loren stepped off the path, crossing the tree line to stand at the shore. He grimaced at the wet, warm breeze and the odor it carried as he took in the scenery.

This was their destination: the lake where the spring water pooled. The lake itself had quite a complicated shoreline, most of it hidden by the trees, so he couldn't immediately identify any problems from where he stood.

Even so, he could tell there was quite a distance from the bank to the opposite shore, which spoke to the lake's size. As he'd been warned, the surface was very slightly brown. The mingled stench of rust and rot plunged into his nose, making the whole experience incredibly unpleasant.

“This eliminates the possibility that it's going wrong on the way downhill.”

As the lake itself had come down with the same symptoms as the water in town, the issue had to be in the lake itself—or closer to the source.

“Right. Now where do we go from here?”

Loren discerned practically nothing from a cursory look around. At the very least, he couldn't perceive anything that might be muddying the waters. He wondered if the cause lay somewhere in the depths?

Removing his gloves, he exposed his bare hand, crouched down, then reached

out to touch the surface of the lake. His fingertips had barely brushed it when he yanked his hand back.

The speed indicated to Lapis that something must have happened. She prepared a healing blessing and tried to take his hand, but Loren stopped her. Taking a cloth from his bag, he wiped the scant liquid from his fingertips and discarded the cloth on the ground.

“Mr. Loren?”

“For starters, it’s damn hot. Also, there’s something strange about the water itself. I felt a tingling—and I think my skin melted.”

Loren didn’t know where the water was gushing from, but he’d assumed it would have cooled by the time it reached the shore. But the moment he touched it, it had been like he had stuck his hand into a fire.

After he wiped his fingers off, they felt smooth and slick. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that his fingerprints were gone. He was forced to conclude that the water had melted the top layer of his skin.

*I see. So if you drew this stuff into a bath, your business would be doomed,* thought Loren. “One thing’s for sure: Going in there’s out of the question. It’s suicide.”

“Then...”



“Let’s take a good look around first. We might find something.”

Leaving as soon as they arrived would hardly count as an investigation. They would need to hang around for at least a little bit, and where they chose to do that was a matter of some import. If they picked the wrong location, the humidity and smell would be unbearable, but they also needed someplace that would let them observe the lake. Loren proposed they walk a little farther down the shore, and no one objected.

Thus, they started following the shore around the lake. It took only a short while for Loren to notice something. Amid the brown, muddied water, there were some portions that were crystal clear—though they were few and far between.

“The hot spring water’s supposed to be a cloudy white, right?” he confirmed with Lapis.

She nodded. There was no mistaking it.

“Then what’s going on here?”

“Perhaps whatever colors the water is not at the source, but in the lake itself. Or maybe two different streams feed the lake water.”

If there was something wrong within the lake, there would be places where it was more potent and places where it was less so. The other possibility was that there was a second water source from the contaminated one, which would cause patches where these two sources hadn’t yet mixed.

Loren thought for a moment. “But if there are more than two sources of water, does that mean it was patchy even before things went wrong?”

“We can’t say for certain. Perhaps the density and viscosity changed when the water was tainted, making it more difficult for it to mix with the clear water.”

“You think we can call it quits with these observations? We still don’t know what’s wrong, but...”

“I doubt they’d pay us for that.”

Loren and Lapis took the lead as they carried on this exchange. The others trailed behind them as they walked the shoreline.

“Mr. Loren, doesn’t this look like a fine place?” Lapis said, tugging Loren’s sleeve and pointing at a portion of the shore.

It was a slight inlet, and strangely the moisture and smell weren’t as much of a problem in the vicinity. Just as strangely, the water that flowed into this inlet was purely the transparent, untainted variety.

“Let’s have a look...” Loren muttered. He exposed his hand again and stooped down to run his fingers across it.

Another mystery. The water in the inlet was only somewhat hot, and he didn’t feel the tingling sensation on his skin. He brought his damp fingers to his nose, where he picked up none of that unpleasant smell. *This should be fine, then*, he thought.

“All right, it checks out. How about we set up camp and get ready for a full investigation tomorrow?”

“No objections. Let’s go with Loren’s proposal,” Leila said, representing her party. Neither Ange nor Laure made a peep, so he assumed it was all right.

Claes had been quite organically ignored. Of course Loren felt a smidgen of pity for him, but he wasn’t going to say anything if the other party was fine with it. He glanced at Gula for her opinion, and though she didn’t look like she was having a grand old time, she did respond with a nod upon noticing his gaze.

Now that Loren was sure there were no objections, he issued his orders. “Then let’s set down our bags. We’ll clear some undergrowth and pitch the tents.”

With that, everyone got to work with their various tasks.

The water was so crystalline that Loren could see straight to the bottom of the lake. From what he could see from the bank, the bottom was covered in a



sheet of fine sand, and nothing about it seemed particularly dangerous.

A short distance from the shore, the water grew suddenly deeper, but even there it only looked to go up to Lapis's waist at its highest. Loren continued studying the water, only to be interrupted by a sudden question from Ange.

"Can't we just take a bath in this?"

By her tone, Ange must have thought she'd said something brilliant. Loren gave her a dubious look.

Sure, the water in the immediate area was the perfect temperature for a bath, and there were hardly any of the irritating contaminants. They were also far from the main road, removed from prying eyes. In fact, Loren and Claes were the only ones who might catch a glimpse.

The camp hadn't been set up right against the shore either. They had constructed it at a safe distance from the water. Given the temperature of the lake, it was hard to imagine anything was lurking inside it, but just in case something unexpected should attack, they had maintained a buffer zone.

When you took all this into account, it wouldn't be too difficult to section the inlet off from the campsite. Worst-case scenario, Loren could drag Claes off for some investigative work during the allotted bath time.

To summarize, it was entirely possible to make Ange's fantasy a reality.

*That said...* thought Loren. There was no telling what was in that lake. Just because it seemed like they'd found a perfect place to camp didn't guarantee it was a great place to strip down and hop in. *Aren't we being a little flippant?*

But Leila and Laure latched onto this proposal.

"I see, it certainly is hard to come by scenery like this."

"It's a bath that comes with a wonderful sense of liberation."

The sun was still quite high in the sky. They had left Karlovy in the morning and spent half a day getting to this point, only pausing for some brief observations. Evening was still a ways off.

*You want to bathe at this time of day?* Loren wondered—then rubbed his face to get himself back on track. The problem wasn't the time or the scenery. It was the very notion of taking a bath under these conditions. He had to do something to prevent it.

The party consisted of seven members in total. Three of them had practically cast their vote already. He could still overturn this decision with a majority vote, so long as he had the remaining four on his side...and that included himself.

But at this juncture Loren glanced at Claes. He couldn't read the man's mind, but his thoughts were unmistakably indecent. At that point Loren realized the matter had already been settled.

Realistically, there was no chance in hell Claes would ever vote against this. He was probably even hoping to hop in with the girls. Even if that wasn't going to happen, there was no way he would turn down a proposal so long as he could keep even the faintest hope alive in his heart.

"Aren't you taking this a bit too easy? There's no telling what's in there," Loren said, feeling obligated to warn them anyway.

"On the contrary," Leila said, "it's perfectly normal to bathe when you have a water source near the campsite, even when carrying out a request. It just so happens that the water is hot this time. It's nothing out of the ordinary."

It wasn't that Loren had no idea where she was coming from. Back when he was a mercenary, the company had made sure to bathe whenever there was a spring or river on hand. He'd experienced this plenty of times. The fighting trade wasn't the cleanest one, and a lack of hygiene did nothing but pave the way to disease. It was company policy to do laundry and bathe whenever possible.

"What do you think, Lapis?"

Since he had experienced this himself, Loren couldn't argue. He asked Lapis in the hopes that she would raise an objection, and after thinking a moment, she

did say, “I do think some caution is in order. But, yes, as long as Mr. Loren is keeping a lookout, I think it will be all right.”

«*Leave the long-range scanning to me, Mister.*» Scena’s voice resounded in his head, as if in response to Lapis’s words.

With the borrowed abilities of a Lifeless King, Loren would be able to sense anything that gave off a spark of life in a wide radius around the camp. If whatever came at them wasn’t alive—which is to say, if it was undead—it would be nigh impossible for it to escape the attention of the Lifeless King who was herself the highest class of undead.

There were exceptions, of course. Say an Elder—the highest class of vampire—was to suppress their presence and close in from the bottom of the lake, they might evade Scena’s notice. However, it seemed idiotic to even humor the possibility that an Elder would slink along the sandy bottom to harm the girls while they were bathing.

“I mean, we came to the town of food and baths, and we haven’t even had a bath yet,” Lapis blurted out her true feelings.

To Loren’s dismay, this was the general consensus. Strangely enough, the only one who didn’t look excited by the prospect was Gula. But she wasn’t so put off as to actually push back, and she instead held her tongue.

“How about it, Mr. Loren?”

“Fine, have it your way. For starters, get the rope.”

Five affirmative votes, one half-hearted endorsement, and one against. There was no overturning this decision. Loren yielded to the majority. However, the next thing he said seemed a bit off.

“I never thought I’d be building a bathhouse out here,” he grumbled under his breath. But once he had made his decision, he devoted himself to carrying it out.

They left the undergrowth near the shore uncut so it could form a natural

wall. Then they cast a rope between two trees and hung cloth across it from end to end to form an artificial wall. A strong enough wind might reveal glimpses of what awaited behind it, but they were in the great outdoors. They'd just have to put up with that kind of thing.

Several layers of cloth were spread on the ground, creating a place to change and wipe down. They laid sheets of cloth over large rocks to create seats as well. After that, the work was pretty much done.

"Hey, Loren. Mind telling me why tying me up was the first thing you did?"

Near to where Loren worked lay Claes, whose limbs had been bound with rope, and whose eyes were covered with cloth. He'd been tossed to the edge of the camp in this fettered state, as he'd just get in the way. But he'd managed to wriggle over like a caterpillar and made it all the way back.

"Do I really have to spell it out?" Loren asked, amazed at his tenacity.

"If it's because you think I'm going to peep, I find that incredibly offensive. Please amend your opinion of me," Claes insisted from his place flat on the ground.

Loren was just a little surprised to hear this. Claes indiscriminately pursued any woman he so much as glimpsed, and Loren had been convinced he'd do everything in his power to spy on the bathing girls. But Claes's protests had an air of genuine integrity.

"Creeping around so dishonorably is out of the question. I'd be honest about my intentions and boldly request permission to join them!"

"Got it. You stay there for now."

That wasn't the sort of thing confidence could fix. If it were a matter of only Ange, Leila, and Laure, Loren would have considered letting Claes try his luck. However, Lapis and Gula were with the other girls, and Loren wasn't about to let Claes ogle *them*.

"Oh, like you don't want to catch a glimpse!"

“Sure, I wouldn’t hate an eyeful or two. I’m a man.”

Loren wasn’t wholly uninterested. But tales of those who’d spied on bathing female mercenaries were a dime a dozen, and they ended in grim fates that defied description. Loren had seen the actual wounds himself—the aftermath of these same tales.

Mercenaries also said things like, *That only happens if you get caught. Just don’t get caught.* Loren found this quite flippant. His more pragmatic take was: *No, it only happens because you tried to peep. So don’t.*

“I’d rather keep my limbs. I don’t plan on trading a pinky or earlobe for a bit of fun either.”

“You’re scaring me...”

“I heard a story, you know. The lady said, ‘You only need one of them to function’, so she crushed the other. Wanna hear the details?”

“Sh-she crushed it...?”

“And the guy in question laughed and said he was just glad it wasn’t an eye.”

Loren left Claes with these ominous words as he wrapped up. The bath had mostly taken shape, and as he crossed the cloth wall, he ran into the girls, who had come with clothes and towels.

“I’m sure you understand, but you mustn’t peep, Mr. Loren,” Lapis said before he could leave, prodding his chest with her index finger.

Claes was helplessly bound, so there was pretty much no risk of him doing the same. *I guess that’s why he doesn’t need a warning.*

Loren nodded. “I value my life.”

“And no *coincidentally* catching a glimpse through the gap either. You have to be good and look the other way. All right?” Lapis stressed the point.

“Am I really that untrustworthy?” Loren asked, looking slightly downtrodden.

But Lapis paid this no mind and if anything leaned in. “It is really, truly a no-

good thing to do. So you mustn't do it no matter what, okay?"

"How should I put this? Lapis, girl, is that, uh...reverse psychology or somethin'?" Gula asked from behind her, clutching her change of clothing to her chest.

*Well, is it?* Loren wondered, peering at Lapis's face.

Only a moment ago, she had been the picture of gravid insistence. But just for a moment, a light smile peeked through. "Just don't do it, okay?"

"Sorry to get your hopes up, but I ain't gonna."

"I'll have Ange and the others positioned so you can't see from here, but don't do it anyway, okay?"

"That ain't the problem."

"I'll be waiting."

"You're not even hiding it now..."

And with a wave of her hand, Lapis left.

Loren saw her off with a very tired look on his face. At his feet lay Claes, whose frustration was evident even over his blindfold. He was grinding his teeth something awful.

"I see, this is quite the view..." Laure said. "You couldn't get this from an indoor bath."

"I know, right?" said Leila. "If I just had a cup of chilled wine, I'd have no complaints. But I shouldn't ask for too much."

"Chilled wine? I have some."

"That's my Ange. Let's have some as soon as we're in."

Loren absentmindedly pushed away the conversations he heard from across the thin partition. He didn't know what scene was unfolding back there, but he was already realizing they had picked the wrong place to set up camp.

The reason was simple: The setting sun was sinking over the lake, right beyond the girls were bathing. That in itself wasn't really an issue, but the cloth he'd set up to conceal them wasn't that thick. A thick cloth would have taken up too much space in their bags, so it was the best they had on hand, but the result was that a certain something happened to enter his eyes.

"The shadows are... Well, how to put it. I can make things out pretty clearly."

It wasn't like Loren could actually see past the cloth. However, the shadows produced by the setting sun were directly projected on what was supposed to hide their silhouettes from the world. What's more, their close proximity meant these projections were rendered in fine detail.

Once the girls entered the water, they'd be completely unseen. But they didn't have much experience taking a hot bath outside, and with all the beautiful scenery, they were standing around a while to marvel without entering the water.

"Still, why is the water only so clean over here?"

"I can only guess, but I believe this transparent water is coming from somewhere nearby. Since we're near the source of the flow, the brown water can't approach."

"It's a little tepid."

"Lukewarm's just right if you're taking a long soak."

*So they plan to stay in there a while*, Loren thought as he listened. He worried that they were growing kind of lax, but from where he stood, he had no way of warning them.

"Well... Now that I get a look at you, you're pretty impressive, Gula."

"Hold up, where are you lookin' when ya say that?"

"The chest, mainly."

"You're not too shabby yourself. You got that redhead rubbin' them or something?" Gula asked with a somewhat vulgar laugh.

“Wh-what pre-pre-pre-post-post...”

“Leila, you’re freaking out. Sure, you’re the oldest one here, but no one thinks you’re past your prime just yet. Even if it is true.”

“Ange! You little!”

A fight seemed to have broken out. Loren watched the shadows projected on the sheet with lifeless eyes.

The shadows of Leila and Ange grappling emphasized the sway of certain voluminous portions, and though it was only shadows, he found himself wondering if he should be seeing any of this. It wasn’t like he was looking at the real thing—so sure, yeah. They couldn’t blame him and that was that.

“Calm down, you two! You might attract something if you make all that noise!”

“Silence, Laure of the Flatlands! Allow me to discipline this girl who dares insult a knight!”

“Yeah, stay out of it, curveless wonder! I’m about to teach this old lady the wonders of youth! Size doesn’t mean a thing!”

“Flat... Curveless...”

One of the shadows fell to her knees.

Laure’s companions rattled off those insults with incredible ease. A pity. Though from what Loren could see of her silhouette, perhaps the assessment wasn’t totally unfounded. There seemed to be little variation in the vertical lines that made up her shadow. She had a bit more on her than Nym, the silver-rank elf adventurer working out of Kaffa, but she lost out to the elf when it came to the narrowness of her waist. Loren found himself offering her a slight prayer going forward.

“Let’s just leave them and take a bath already.”

“You seem unfazed, Lapis...”



Leaving Ange and Leila to their petty quibble, Lapis led Gula toward the water. And the moment Loren saw those shadows, he swallowed a breath.

Gula's silhouette was fully deserving of the term "hourglass figure." The distinct volume of her chest sloped into the distinct tightness of her waist. And the curvature that flowed down from that waistline—it was only a shadow, and yet it had a mysterious, sensual promise that teased one's carnal desires.

The way she swayed each time she moved was so potent that even someone with exceptional self-control might forget himself. Loren gulped down a mouthful of spit.

Lapis stood beside her, and though she was a little outdone by those outlandish proportions, the allure of her own contours was not the least bit diminished. There was an especially splendid line from her side to her hip—that alone could have been cut out, framed, and passed off as a work of fine art. She didn't sway as much as Gula did, but the knowledge that this was very possibly due to her youth had a charm all its own.

Once Loren's thoughts reached this point, he suddenly realized he had, even if inadvertently, and even if only by silhouette, gotten an eyeful of the women bathing—and he quickly averted his eyes.

If he'd known he would see their shadows, he would have simply looked away from the start. He'd only ever glanced that way in the first place out of a concern for their safety; he certainly hadn't expected to be treated to this scene. Everything after had spiraled out from there. But when he laid this out to himself, it only sounded like an excuse. Loren fell into a new spiral, that of light self-hatred.

"In the end, I guess I'm just as intrigued," he mumbled to himself, looking at his feet, where Claes was grinning past his blindfold. To exorcise an ounce of his frustration, Loren stepped on him.

But as he ground a foot into Claes, he suddenly realized something. Lapis had bought a yokui for bathing when they were leaving Kaffa. If she'd worn it, her

shadow wouldn't have been nearly as suggestive. The moment Loren realized this, he heard a shriek from nearby.

“What?!”

He didn't know who it had come from. Loren reached for the sword on his back—then hesitated.

There had undoubtedly been a scream. It had come from the direction the girls were bathing, but if he wanted to confirm what was going on, he would have to cross that cloth. However, he didn't yet know how serious the situation really was. This led to the question of whether he should really cross.

If they were under attack, this was an emergency; it would no longer be an issue of what he didn't or didn't see. But if, on the contrary, Laure had been startled by a large bug that flew at them from somewhere, Loren's own death would be carved in stone the moment he passed the cloth.

So he hesitated. In the end, his worries came to nothing, because before Loren could step forward, the girls burst through the partition, fleeing toward the campsite.

“Mr. Loren! Mr. Loreen! Mr. Loooreeen!”

“Wait a second! Lapis! What happened?!”

The first one to burst out of the lake and take flight had been Lapis. One of the partitioning cloths tangled around her damp body as she broke through it, and she clung to Loren, wrapped up in it and unable to move from shock.

Considering the sheer dexterity it would have taken to intentionally run into the cloth, he suspected she had done it on purpose. But he wasn't about to be so coldhearted to someone fleeing danger, so instead, he lifted her up, ready to run.

Then came Gula, who wasn't quite as panicked. She was running, but she properly snatched one of the partitions and wrapped it tightly around her body before dashing toward the campsite.

After that, Laure had enough calm to cover herself, but Leila and Ange weren't so lucky.

They had been in the middle of a scuffle, making them the last to react to whatever the others had noticed. They were also the most excitable members of the party and were practically stumbling over one another as they hurtled toward camp.

Naturally, these two hadn't had the leisure to conceal themselves like the rest. Leila collided with a tree in her panic and wound up sprawled on the ground, butt naked. Ange had completely forgotten her own predicament as she grabbed Claes and pulled him to his feet.

"Hey, Claes!" she wailed. "Why are you tied up?! Something weird showed up! Something *strange*! Do you hear me?!"

"Ange! There's not much I can do in this state. For starters, take off my blindfold!"

"How can I?! We're all naked right now!"

*Then what do you expect him to do?* Loren thought as he shifted Lapis to his left arm and drew his sword with his right.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, beyond the glimmer of his greatsword, he beheld their foe. Its face peeked out of the inhospitably hot water, and it was in the midst of climbing to land.

Loren's expression stiffened as he saw it. The first thing he noted was a pair of eyes amid undulating water-blue fur. The hands it used to pull itself onto land looked human, but the half of its body that remained in the water clearly belonged to a fish. Its upper body was covered in a slimy, shifting hair-like substance.

Its tail violently pounded the water's surface, raising a spray of water as it crawled ashore and began to lurch toward the group on shore who watched this unfold.

“What is that?!” Loren cried out, understandably unsettled.

In all the time he’d lived, Loren had never encountered something like this. As it was a total mystery, even he was a touch weirded out.

What’s more, its appearance was unspeakably uncanny. The arms it used to grasp the ground looked vaguely human, but its lower half was covered in fish scales. It scrabbled at the ground as it squirmed, barely managing to make progress—an overall unnerving sight, to say the least.

Without thinking, Loren summoned his strength into his arms, and he held the end of his sword out to warn off this swarming *something*.

But whatever it was, it paid no heed to his blade. It wriggled ever closer.

Loren had some reservations about cutting down anything he couldn’t identify, but there wasn’t much he could do if it refused to stop.

But the moment he lifted his blade, the writhing mass came to a stop.

“Sa...”

“Sah?”

“Save me.”

Then, as if it had used up the last of its strength, the thing flopped down, unmoving.

Its blue fur spread out as it hit the ground. The even greater surprise was that this half-fish creature had spoken words. After inspecting it, Loren’s eyes met Lapis’s, and they both cocked their heads.

What the hell was this?



## Chapter 6:

### Control to Entry

**“A**H... WAIT, SERIOUSLY, hold on. Let me process this.”

Loren wasn't responding to something anyone had said. But if he didn't say it, he'd never be able to clear his mind. For the time being, he stuck his sword in the ground and scratched his head.

First, he had to count how many things he had to think over. Then, he'd list them out and eliminate the concerns one by one. Loren started with the issue nearest at hand.

“All right, for starters—Lapis, Gula, put some clothes on.”

*I'll start with what's least confusing*, he thought. Lapis was still wrapped in cloth under his arm, while Gula watched them from nearby.

Although Gula followed this order without a word, Lapis sounded slightly indignant.

“Wait, Mr. Loren! Do you really feel nothing about this situation?!”

“Lapis, come on. In any other scenario, I'd just go with the flow... But this is a little much. You're the least of my worries.” Loren pointed at the half-fish, half-beast entity collapsed at his feet. Though Lapis's cheeks puffed out, she clambered out of Loren's grasp—if reluctantly—and went to clothe herself, just as he'd told her to.

She changed a short distance away where Loren couldn't see. Even so, Loren's mind was jolted by the various things he did catch a glimpse of as she left. He smacked his now free left hand against his face to get himself to focus up.

“Err, Ange, Leila, Laure. You get changed too. Ange, quit swinging Claes around. Not like he's seen anything.”

Ange had been violently shaking Claes this whole time, but Loren's comment



brought her back to earth. Her face reddened and she yelped as she tossed the man to the ground before disappearing behind the trees.

After seeing her off, Laura looked down at Leila with a long-suffering expression at Leila. The knight was still sprawled out from her collision with a tree.

“Can you carry her?” Loren asked.

“Leila works out a lot...so she’s a bit too hefty for me. Not to mention I’m in a similar boat here,” Laure pointed out, embarrassed. She had only a thin sheet of cloth wrapped around her slender frame.

She did indeed look kind of feeble, and carrying Leila while holding down the cloth seemed like an impossible task. The matter would be immediately resolved if Loren volunteered to step up, but that would mean carrying a naked woman. He might not have thought anything of it if he were closer with Leila, but things being what they were, he had to show discretion.

“Fine, no choice, then.”

“Are you finally freeing me?” Claes asked hopefully from the ground.

However, Loren ignored him and called over his own party members. “Lapis! Gula! Sorry, but could you carry Leila for me?”

“Just a second,” said Lapis.

“What a drag...” Gula had finished dressing faster than Lapis, who had her layered robes to fuss over. She answered the call and left the shadows of the trees to carry Leila’s body. What she saw, however, made her stiffen. “Ah! This missy’s sprawled out butt-naked!”

“A beautiful blonde bombshell sprawled out butt-naked, you say?!” Claes sprang up, and Loren offhandedly dealt him a kick to the back of the head.

“Shut up, you’re just making this more complicated than it has to be.”

With that matter settled, it was time to address the next one. Loren cautiously squatted next to the unidentified being, which remained collapsed

face-down.

Wavy water-blue fur covered its entire head, as well as most of its upper body. This mix of fur and fish made for a rather sinister sight. However, after inspecting the unmoving body a moment longer, Loren began to suspect that the fur might actually be hair. It was an extraordinary volume of hair, to be sure, but it all seemed to originate from the top of its head.

Reluctant as he was, he tested this theory. He picked up the creature, leaned it against a nearby bush, and began to comb aside the hair covering its head and body. What appeared from within was the bare torso of a woman.

“This is one of those mermaids, ain’t it?”

Loren tied back her wet, clinging hair, wiping off the mud and whatnot with a cloth. Once that was taken care of, he found himself looking at one of those beings he’d heard of in fairy tales—the ones with shimmering blue hair, human torsos, and fish tails.

Loren’s eyes turned from her unconscious body to the lake.

The scene was dominated by the orange of the setting sun—a beautiful sight to be sure. But before it could steal his heart, he muttered words that begged to be said. “Outside the inlet, the water’s almost boiling. How come she hasn’t been boiled alive?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Loren—wait, who’s she?!” Lapis exclaimed, noticing the mermaid as soon as she emerged from the trees.

“What do you mean ‘who’? She’s the one who spooked you.”

“Huh? That creepy fish? It was a mermaid?”

The unconscious mermaid’s hair was incredibly long and wavy. When the others saw her, that hair had been thoroughly wrapped around her upper body, concealing her human features. They had consequently found this a rather off-putting sight and bolted out of the lake in a panic.

“But...this lake is hot water, right?” asked Lapis.



“You’ll have to ask *her* about that.”

Soon, the sun would set. Very much wanting an answer to all these mysteries before it got dark, Loren lightly slapped the mermaid’s cheek. They needed her lucid if they hoped to get anywhere fast. He didn’t think he’d hit her particularly hard, but Lapis stared at him with chastising eyes.

“What was I supposed to do?”

“You’re dealing with a woman’s face. A lighter touch, if you please.”

The mermaid’s appearance was certainly feminine, but everything else about her was still up in the air. *Do I really have to be that careful?* Loren wondered. But his protests would fall on deaf ears, so he responded with a halfhearted nod.

With a slight groan, the mermaid opened her eyes. Loren hadn’t noticed their color while her face was enveloped in hair, but now that they cracked open, they revealed the same sea-blue hue.

“You awake?”

“I’m...um? A-ah, that’s right!” The mermaid lurched up and grabbed Loren—who had been peering into her face—and clung fiercely to his arm. “Please save me! I need your help!”

“You can start by letting go. Then explain yourself. You can’t just pop out of a lake and expect us to follow the plot.”

Loren’s cold-hearted response left the mermaid looking somewhat miserable, but she understood what he was getting at. After releasing him, she looked him straight in the eye and got to explaining.

“I am a spirit who resides in this lake.”

Except now Loren was already confused and she’d barely started. Knowing that Lapis was better suited to handling these situations, he conceded his spot to her.

“You are a spirit, then?” Lapis asked. “Not a mermaid?”

“In layman’s terms, my nature is closest to that of an undine. That said, I am a few hundred years old.”

She went on to discuss the unusual state of the spring water—exactly what they’d been sent to investigate.

“For ages and ages, all was well in this lake. But not long ago, one of the local sources of hot water began to emit a muddy brown liquid.”

“What’s that got to do with spirits?” Loren asked.

He’d recently met an ifrit—a fire spirit—at a certain volcano. That spirit had flown into a rage after people had gotten into the habit of tossing their trash into the crater, and it had attacked anyone who approached. If that was also happening to this lake, Loren could understand why the local spirit would be moved to action.

“At a glance, it might seem like the lake is uninhabitable. However, in truth, some lifeforms can just withstand the heat in the depths.” The sorrowful spirit tangled her hands in front of her chest as she pleaded with Loren and Lapis. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the stench—the toxicity! But on top of that, the contaminated water is far hotter than it once was. For now, the lake’s residents have taken refuge in its deepest depths, where a few pockets of colder water yet remain. However, at this rate, they’ll only delay their inevitable end.”

“All right, I understand why you’ve sought our help,” said Lapis. “However, we are adventurers, and at present, I’m afraid we’re on vacation. We don’t have the leisure of working without compensation.”

As Lapis conversed with the spirit, Loren saw Gula and Laure had returned, fully dressed, and he asked them to drag Claes away. Claes had proved himself to be the sort of man who’d pursue a woman regardless of whatever animal parts she might sport without a shred of hesitation. The mermaid’s fishy lower half would under no circumstances dissuade him from pining after her, and it was all too likely that he’d volunteer to take her request free of charge.



As far as Loren saw it, Claes's inability to decline a woman's request, no matter who she might be, was both a strength and a flaw. However, now that Lapis had opened negotiations, it would be nothing but a hindrance.

"Money? In that case, err... I have a little."

"You do? What's a spirit doing with money?" Lapis asked, seeming surprised despite the fact that she'd started the talk of payment.

After mulling over how best to explain, the spirit whispered, "The truth is, more than a couple of your colleagues have come through here these past few days..."

The lord of Karlovy had said something similar, and Loren nodded.

But whatever was coming next, the mermaid struggled to say it. Her whisper grew even quieter. "A handful of them perished quite close to the lake..."

"Were they taken out by bears? And...would the money you have happen to be keepsakes recovered from those adventurers?"

"Oh, they weren't killed by bears. It was goblins—rather large ones, in fact. Black all over. As for the latter question, well, the dead have no use for money," the spirit said as though it were nothing.

However, something else about her report set both Loren and Lapis on edge.

"Large black goblins?"

"Yes, that's the only way I can describe them. What's more, they were exceptionally strong, and most of those adventurers were killed nigh-instantly..."

The spirit quivered at the memory. But Loren and Lapis were too caught up in what she'd said to pay her condition any mind.

"Large black goblins, she says..."

"I have a bad feeling about this. How about we just head straight back to Karlovy?"

“P-please, I’m begging you! I’ll even throw in this bonus!”

It was clear Loren and Lapis had already determined that this request was too dangerous to pursue further. They obviously intended to turn around and leave, and sensing this, the spirit produced a considerably large, translucent gemstone —although who knew where she’d been keeping it.

Lapis’s eyes widened when she saw it.

“I picked this up at the bottom of the lake a while back. Humans just love to get their hands on things like this, right? I’ll add it to the payment, so please, help me.”

“Hey...” Loren whispered to Lapis, whose eyes were glued to the jewel. “Is that a you-know-what?”

“Umm... Yes. Presumably.”

Lapis was always on the lookout for a certain something. In order to contain Lapis’s demonic powers, her mother Judie had stolen her eyes and her limbs. Both arms had already been discovered and restored, but they were still searching for Lapis’s legs and eyes. Also, the body parts hadn’t been strewn about the world in their original form. Thus far, each one they’d recovered had been in the form of a large, translucent gemstone.

Loren had his doubts when he first laid eyes on the rock, but Lapis’s reaction removed any room for doubt.

“That eliminates the possibility of turning her down,” Loren concluded.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble, Mr. Loren,” Lapis apologized.

Loren waved a hand to tell her he didn’t mind. Then he turned to the spirit, who didn’t seem to understand the meaning behind this exchange, mulling over what to ask her. They’d need as much info as they could get.

“Ah, before any questions, can I have a look at that?”

Lapis held her hand out toward the spirit. The spirit, not the least bit wary, placed the jewel on her palm. As Lapis examined it, Loren started in on the inquiry.

“When did the brown water start flowing into this lake?”

“A while ago.”

“How many black goblins have you seen?”

“A lot.”

Loren peered at the spirit’s face and determined that she was answering as earnestly as she could. However, her answers failed to measure up to that earnestness.

To be fair, even Loren could understand that spirits and humans might not share the same instinct for time and numbers. Problem was, there was no way he could eke out any useful information at this rate.

“Does it sound hopeless?” Lapis asked Loren as she handed the jewel back to the spirit.

It was fortunate that she seemed ready to give it back rather than run off with her pilfered prize. The spirit wrapped her fingers around the stone, carefully cradling it.

“Hopeless,” Loren agreed. “You figure anything out?”

“It appears to be my eyes. I would certainly love to have it,” Lapis said as a matter of course. But if she wasn’t going to take the gem by force, the only way they could claim it would be to complete the spirit’s request—especially as they were dealing with a *spirit*. If they let this chance slip by, there was no guarantee they’d ever meet this specific entity ever again.

“Then for starters, let’s accept and find some way to explain it to the others,” said Loren.

“Yes. The reward’s essentially a single gemstone. In exchange for taking on this request, I will pay Mr. Claes and his party members from my personal

funds.”

It didn’t sound like the spirit had claimed a huge sum from those ill-fated adventurers. Compared to the value of a precious stone of this size, it might even be inconsequential. So if they wanted to claim the stone, they would have to pay Claes’s share in cash.

Loren saw Lapis off as she went to conduct these negotiations with the still-bound Claes.

“It’s a tentative yes,” Loren said to the mermaid. “Assume we’re accepting your request. So where’s this brown water coming from specifically? Do you know?”

“Well, of course. It’s coming from the hole at the bottom of the lake.”

This answer was, once again, less than he had hoped for.

As expected, a spirit who lived in a lake knew of nothing but for the contents of that lake. It wasn’t really that strange that she didn’t know anything about anything beyond her shores. However, humans like Loren weren’t going to be able to investigate a hole in the middle of a lake full of boiling water that melted the skin.

“If we could just breathe...”

“*Water Breathing*? That’s intermediate magic, so it’s beyond me,” Ange said in response to Loren’s idle murmur.

If Loren recalled correctly, Lapis had used that very spell once before, so he figured it might work again. He kept his mouth shut not because he wanted to spare Ange’s pride but because Lapis was ostensibly a priest, which meant she shouldn’t be able to cast spells.

“If you want protection from water, I can do something about that,” the spirit said confidently.

Come to think of it, she *was* a water spirit. In fact, she was the spirit who ruled this lake, so it was safe to assume she had considerable skill in this field.

“We’re satisfied with Lapis’s offer,” said Laura. “As is Claes, of course.”

“It’ll be quite the expense, but so be it.”

Loren found himself a touch curious as to exactly how much Lapis had coughed up, but it was probably best not to push. It wasn’t like he could protest if she admitted she’d put up an outrageous sum.

“Do you know where the black goblins came from?”

“Why ask a lake spirit about the world above her waters?”

“Then have you seen a dark-skinned elf or a swordsman in black armor?”

Large black goblins summoned a couple individuals to mind. Namely, Magna, the black swordsman, who they’d last encountered near the den of an ancient dragon.

“If you’re looking for a black swordsman...”

“You saw him?!”

“Right here.”

The spirit pointed straight at Loren, and his shoulders slumped. Loren’s clothes were, admittedly, mostly black. His hair and eyes were black as well, so “black swordsman” wasn’t exactly off the mark when it came to describing him.

“We’re not getting any decent intel from her,” Loren muttered.

“There’s nothing for it, alas. It’s a tad misguided to seek information from a spirit in the first place. Their kind have never been especially attentive to their surroundings,” Lapis explained to Loren’s lament. “In this case, she’s simply reacting to the fact that something unusual has occurred in her own home. I expect she’ll utterly forget about us once it’s all over.”

“That’s not true. I’ll have to thank you properly!” the spirit argued, looking wholly offended. However, it was hard to say this was a credible claim.

“Pay us in advance. We’ll have worked for naught if you just end up forgetting us.”



“Very well. But if you run away, I’ll curse you.”

*Huh. Creepy,* Loren thought. He held out his hand, and to his surprise, the spirit surrendered the gemstone quite easily.

“We’ll set off tomorrow. I don’t wanna move when the sun’s about to set.”

“All right. Then I’ll protect your camp through the night,” the spirit declared.

Loren felt more anxious than reassured, not that the spirit seemed to pick up on this.

She turned to Lapis and said, “You were in the middle of a bath, yet? How about you resume where you left off?”

“I’m quite all right. How about you, Mr. Loren?”

“Don’t need it. Get me a wet towel to wipe down with, and I’m good.”

Not that he didn’t have any lingering attachment to the thought of a natural outdoor bath. However, he was too afraid that something else might crawl up from the lake depths, and knew he wouldn’t be able to really enjoy himself.

With the discussion wrapping up, the girls began to put the camp back in order. Loren watched them—as well as the spirit, who was setting up base by the shore—and quietly said to Gula, “How about you, Gula?”

The occasional unpleasant expressions that had been crossing her face were weighing on his mind. She had put some distance between herself and the other members of their group. When Loren beckoned her over, she approached while scratching her cheek, another troubled look on her face.

“How about what? Ain’t that kinda vague?”

“You don’t look all the way there. Just wondering.”

“Guess so...” Gula said, looking at the lake.

The skies were now dark. The water’s surface glowed as it reflected the fire burning in the campsite.

“Can’t say I’m doin’ too well. There’s somethin’ about this place. Seems

familiar, somehow. It's givin' me chills."

"We're a party and all, but I won't say you have to come with. You can wait in Karlovy if you want."

Sending a party member off on their own was usually ill-advised, but Gula had the strength to make it back to town without much difficulty. This was a feasible endeavor.

"Hey, now, don't leave me out of all the fun."

"Nothing good ever comes of dragging someone where they don't wanna go."

"Yeah..."

"It's for your sake *and* ours. Works both ways."

If Gula didn't want to pursue this request, Loren wouldn't force her—especially as there was no telling what lay ahead. If she were on her own, her choices were her own responsibility. But when she was part of their party, one wrong call on her part could expose the rest of them to danger. Loren had to be sure she was up for this.

Gula laughed helplessly. "Don't be stupid. I'm the only one in this party who's just as powerful as Lapis over there—hell, I might even have the upper hand. This ain't nothin' a measly human's gotta worry about."

"You're sure about this?"

"Just drop it, Loren. You'll lose hair, worryin' like that. Instead of worryin' about me, how about you worry about keepin' a full head of your pretty little locks?"

Loren found himself placing a hand on his head. He was far from balding, but you never knew what fortune might bring. *Worrying over every little thing's certainly not going to help*, he thought.

Loren's reaction made Gula snort. She prodded his sullen nose with her finger.

“It’s all right, don’t you worry. It feels kinda unpleasant, I’ll admit. But work is work, and I do my work proper.”

“I sure hope so...”

If you asked Loren, he’d say Gula was more on the carefree side of the spectrum. It was rare to see such a blatantly perturbed look on her face. But then again, maybe she was fine after all.

“Right, then. Get some rest and prep for tomorrow. That’s all I have to say.”

“Aye, sir. You too. You better not stay up mullin’ over useless stuff. The kind spirit over there said she’d protect us this once.”

“How much can you trust that girl?” Loren asked, pointing at the spirit, who stared fixedly at the campsite from the banks beyond the trees.

After a moment, Gula answered, “Worst case, I trust her to wake us up if something does come.”

“Is that really trust?”

Though it was a bit dicey, a spirit had no need for sleep. Gula was most likely right on that one—she would at least wake them if something happened. In that case, she could take care of lookout duty and the rest of their group could enjoy a full night’s rest.

Once the next day came, the party crawled their way out of their tents, only to be greeted with the sight of several black goblins, which had perished by way of holes that had been shot straight through their chests and heads.

“All right, everyone. Allow me to guide you to the lake!”

Loren didn’t know what the spirit of the lake was so chipper about, but she seemed downright jubilant as she beckoned to the party. Night had passed, and after a simple breakfast, the spirit bestowed the lake’s grace upon them.

This power wasn’t exactly magic. Neither Lapis nor Ange knew much about it,

leaving them to turn to the spirit for an explanation. According to her, she had granted them a reprieve from being crushed by water pressure, and so long as her grace was in effect, they'd be able to breathe underwater. They wouldn't even get wet.

"It's not permanent, so don't worry. You'll be able to take a bath once the job is done," she said.

Only then did Loren realize that while this grace was active, their flesh would be impervious to both the lake's water and its derivatives. In short, they would be unable to enjoy any Karlovy bath that used the lake water.

Perhaps this was of secondary concern, seeing as it wasn't a permanent effect, but he kicked himself for failing to check on this before he'd allowed her to use it on him.

"If you really want, I can undo it," said the spirit.

"How long does it last otherwise?" Too long, and he'd have to take her up on that offer.

The lake spirit thought, then answered, "Around a day, probably."

This answer told him two things. First, they most likely wouldn't need to have the grace forcibly dispelled. Second, if they were unable to complete the job within a day—for instance, if they couldn't find the hole they were looking for—there was a possibility they'd never come back.

For starters, no one knew what lay beyond the hole that pumped out brown water. For another, no one knew how long they'd have to travel before they found it. It was optimistic—life-threateningly so—to assume they'd manage all that in under a day.

Apart from Gula and Lapis, everyone else in their group was a human. If they touched boiling water, they got burned, and if they ran into some substance that melted skin, they wouldn't come away unscathed.

"If we're down too long and it doesn't look like we're getting anywhere, we'll

have to turn back for a time,” said Loren.

“Understood,” said the spirit. “I’ll wait for you near the entrance. If you happen to leave through a different hole, you can find me at the site where you made camp last night.”

The only remaining issues were that they didn’t know exactly how long the grace would remain effective, and that they wouldn’t be able to track the passage of time once they were at the bottom of the lake. *We’ll have to manage by instinct*, thought Loren.

“All right, everyone. This way, please.”

Loren was the first to follow the spirit into the water. It wasn’t the brown stuff, but a transparent patch that would have been hot enough for a nice bath. Yet his foot felt none of this heat. Loren proceeded until he was about waist deep, but his clothes didn’t feel even a little damp.

After confirming this, Loren waved at the others waiting on shore. Lapis took the lead, with Gula one her heels, and finally Claes’s party.

“We won’t be able to enjoy that lovely warm temperature, I see,” Lapis said with a creased brow. She tugged at her vestments here and there, confirming they were well and honestly dry.

Meanwhile Loren approached and whispered, “Did you already use that?”

“That...? Oh, yes. *That*.”

The rest of the group was marveling at this lack of wetness, but Lapis made sure no one was paying attention as she brought her face close to Loren’s. For the briefest of moments, the black eyes he was so used to seeing flashed a deep purple. Loren unconsciously pulled back when he saw this; it was less the reminder that she was actually a demon and more that the sudden change had startled him.

“Well, that’s a bit hurtful,” Lapis said.

Loren apologized as he once again peered at her eyes.

Naturally, this wasn't his first time seeing purple eyes. But it was the first time he'd stared so closely. It was likewise a rare sight to see anyone's eyes flash from black to purple, then black again. He brought his face even closer to examine her in more detail when Claes called out.

"What are you up to over there, Loren?"

Loren was at a loss for how to respond, but Lapis covered for him with an inoffensive excuse: "Oh, something got in my eye, so I asked Mr. Loren to look at it. It seems like he got it already. Thank you, Mr. Loren."

She smiled brightly and lowered her head to him.

By then, Lapis's eyes had already stabilized, black as ever. Only then did Loren realize he had carelessly closed in on Lapis's face and stared deeply into her eyes. He hastily backed off and nodded.

"Can we get a move on?" the spirit asked. "This might be your first time breathing underwater, but you can breathe as you normally would."

With those words, she submerged herself with a plop.

When diving, one usually took a deep breath, but with this grace, the party had a steady supply of air, which made such things redundant. Loren had experienced the effects of a similar spell before, but it was still a strange feeling.

That said, he was able to swim without thinking too much at all about breathing. He breathed in oxygen without issue, and so long as he was in an unpolluted patch of water, he had a clear line of sight.

The rest of the party took after him and submerged themselves. Once they were all under the lake surface, the spirit slowly began to lead them through the depths.

Loren checked to see how the others were doing, what with how different it could be to move underwater. Lapis had once endured a similar experience alongside him, and she seemed perfectly fine. Gula didn't seem too affected

either.

As for Claes's party, Loren had no idea if they'd done anything like this before. Everyone apart from Ange adapted soon enough, and even Ange, who was somewhat flustered at first, was able to move fairly well after holding Claes's hand and swimming alongside him for a stretch.

With that, they were on the move. As they proceeded, it became evident there was a surprising amount of life within the hot water. The spirit had told them that the temperature was slightly lower at the very bottom, but Loren had been convinced it would be too hot for fish to survive. Yet beneath them were whole schools swimming in comfort and ease.

Apart from the fish, he saw reptilian lifeforms here and there, as well as some creatures that looked like turtles. *I guess life finds a way*, Loren thought, rather impressed.

In the midst of these musings, he felt a slight tug on his sleeve. The water spirit had approached without his notice. What was she after? The spirit pointed her finger at a corner of the lake.

Though this area was by an edge of the lake, it was about as deep as the lake center. They could make out bare rock, and within that rock was a hole large enough for a grown adult to stand and walk down with room to spare. Most importantly, contaminated brown water poured out of it in a visible stream.

With hand signals, Loren motioned for everyone to stop, and alongside the spirit, they approached the underwater river of brown water.

Though they were protected by the spirit's grace, someone needed to be the one to find out if it worked on this stuff too. Loren took this task upon himself. He swam up to the brown water, shucked his glove, and artlessly stuck his left hand into it.

The contaminated water should have been even hotter than the clear stuff, but just like when he'd first ambled into the lake, Loren felt not the slightest hint of heat. He pulled out his hand and examined it, but he saw no sights of

melted skin or burns.

But Loren didn't relax just yet. Next, he stuck his head into the murk. Even if his skin was fine, could he make the same guarantee about his eyes, nose, and mouth? He couldn't let Lapis—or anyone—try it without confirming this for himself. Once again, it seemed the contaminants had no effect on him. Finally satisfied, he beckoned to the others.

Though Lapis abided by his hand signals, she seemed somewhat frustrated, and she smacked a hand against his shoulders. Gula, meanwhile, stared at him with an aghast expression—as did Claes's party.

The way Loren saw it, even if the brown water did injure him, there were two fully fledged priests on hand. Lapis or Laure would dive in to treat him, so injury wasn't a concern. But even if the test had been necessary, Lapis seemed to have a bone to pick with the way he'd gone about it, suddenly plunging his head in and all. The others were just surprised he'd actually gone and done it.

In any case, Lapis smacked him again and again, and he barely managed to contain her frantic gestures. He glared at Gula and Claes, whose expressions had shifted from astonishment to knowing grins, and he waved a hand to get them moving again. As they did, Loren took the lead, heading toward the murk-expelling hole.

As the lake spirit had promised at the start, she seemed intent on waiting for them at its entrance.

The light from the sky allowed them a degree of visibility in the depths of the lake, but once they entered the hole, the sun would no longer reach them. They would be thrust into pitch blackness.

How could they possibly investigate anything like this? Sensing the problem, Ange summoned two magic lights, one on Claes's left hand, and the other on Loren's.

Now armed with a light source, Loren held his left hand before him and stepped through. The brown substance gushed around him, however, which left



him barely able to see anything even with the light. He continued groping his way forward as he prayed the rest of the party trailing behind could use his lit hand as a beacon.

Luckily for them, the hole seemed to maintain the same easily traversable width for its entire length. They didn't find any branches either. It was a straight path.

After proceeding a while, the ground shifted and became an uphill slope. At the top, they emerged at a point where the force of the flow significantly lessened. Visibility was still poor, so Loren couldn't make out any details, but he believed it was more of an open room than a tunnel. Even farther in, the ceiling fell away, and he was blessed with a light that hadn't come from magic.

*It can't be*, thought Loren. He kicked off the ground, swimming toward the surface above. It didn't take long before he popped up.

"Wait a minute..." he murmured as he looked around.

At some point, the ceiling had climbed to a great height. A rumbling sound descended from part of it. That hot, brown liquid was pouring down in a waterfall that crashed down some distance from where they'd entered.

As for the new light illuminating their surroundings, it seemed to emit from the walls themselves. Loren could have sworn he'd seen something like it before. He combed through his memories until he arrived at manamen, a material he'd seen in some ruins of the ancient kingdom.

If these glowing walls were manamen, then there was a chance this place they'd just popped up in was a ruin as well. This was more Lapis's or Gula's field than his. He glanced back to ask them. They'd surfaced as well, not far away.

"Lapis. Is this that manamen stuff?"

"Good memory, Mr. Loren. However, it's hard for me to be sure from here."

She went on to explain that there were numerous things other than manamen that could cause a wall to glow. It was too soon to jump to

conclusions.

“Then what do we do now?” Loren asked.

“Well, we have to keep moving forward. From what I can see, there’s a passage behind that waterfall.” Lapis pointed at the foaming, crashing stream erupting high above their heads. She insisted she could make out something behind that mighty waterfall.

However, no matter how Loren or Claes focused and peered, they couldn’t say the same. If Lapis said she saw something, though, Loren believed her. All he had to do was convince Claes.

“You’re saying she can really see a passageway we can’t?” Claes asked.

“Lapis has good eyes. Better than either of us. Anyway, there’s nowhere else to go. How about we trust her on this one, and check to see if she’s right.”

“That waterfall looks pretty powerful, though.”

If they were caught up in it, anyone who wasn’t a good swimmer could easily drown. That seemed to be Claes’s concern, but Loren reminded him of the grace.

“Sounds like a matter of water pressure to me. That spirit said we didn’t have to worry about that kind of thing.”

Once Claes realized they could dive straight through a waterfall with no issues, his hesitation vanished. “The grace of a spirit—what a marvel.”

## Chapter 7:

### Infiltration to Probing

ONCE THEY'D CLEARED the waterfall of steaming brown water, they finally pulled themselves out of the unpleasant pool and into the passage Lapis had seen. The passage didn't run along the waterway. Instead, it seemed to extend a great distance farther into the facility. Here, too, the walls seemed to be made of manamen, and they had no issue seeing their surroundings.

As the party investigated the entrance for traps, Loren jumped straight back into the muddied water he'd just climbed out of. This earned him a bit of attention.

"What are you up to, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked, after which he climbed back out. It seemed he hadn't done anything in particular.

"Just a quick check," he answered.

"A check...?"

"Well, we needed to know if the grace endured even after we got out of the water."

The spirit of the lake had said it would be effective for an entire day, but she was still a spirit. Loren had wanted to know if the grace would poof the moment they left the water. Again, though he'd secured this vital piece of information, Lapis and Claes both protested.

"That was incredibly dangerous!" Lapis cried.

"It might not be my place to say, but I reckon you ought to at least tell us before you do that sort of thing," Claes said.

"It's not that big of a deal, is it?" Loren asked.

"What were you going to do if the grace *had* cut out?!"

“I think we’d be in pretty bad shape if we lost you before a fight, Loren.”

Lapis was concerned about his well-being, while Claes was thinking about the party as a whole. Both were making so much sense that Loren gave up trying to argue and offered an honest apology.

Incidentally, the grace had held strong. *In that case, our only concern is how long we take*, Loren thought.

“So we’re going forward, then?” Ange said to no one in particular as she gestured down the corridor.

Loren nodded. “No telling what’s down here. Everyone be on your toes.”

“I can take care of any traps. Mr. Loren and I shall take the lead,” Lapis said as she stuck herself to Loren’s side.

As there were no objections, the formation became Loren and Lapis leading the charge, then Gula and Leila, followed by Ange and Laure, and finally Claes at the back.

“Claes, don’t you think you should be nearer the front?”

“No, I’m best used at the back. I see no other option,” he said sternly.

*It takes some resolve to serve as the rearguard*, thought Loren.

But Lapis quietly whispered into his ear, “He’s most certainly ogling the girls’ behinds.”

“He never misses a beat, does he...”

If Claes wanted to admire the back sides of five women, there was indeed no other option than taking the rearguard. That said, they’d be in for trouble if he was so caught up in his sightseeing that he dropped his guard. Loren made his opinion clear with a sharp glare over his shoulder, and Claes hurriedly allowed his eyes to flit here and there, making a show of keeping watch of their surroundings.

It wasn’t like he was making any overt corrections to Claes’s conduct. A look

was harmless enough, so Loren wasn't going to micromanage.

As they got a little farther down the passage, Loren noticed Lapis was nestling closer to him, and that she was putting him between herself and Claes. Loren cocked his head, wondering if a look really was that bothersome.

In this way, they proceeded down the straight corridor until they arrived at a door. Lapis went right up to it, inspecting it for signs of traps.

"Lapis is a priest, isn't she?" Leila murmured, curiously.

"Yeah, a priest to the god of knowledge—this is right in her wheelhouse," Loren answered, sure that Lapis would have said the same.

He couldn't shake the feeling that general expectations for the god of knowledge's poor priests were rising higher and higher, but he wasn't going to take responsibility for that. If they wanted to direct their resentment at anyone, they could funnel it toward the priest standing before him.

Inspections complete, Lapis placed a hand on the door. "It seems all right. I'm going to open it."

"It's not locked?"

"How careless of them," Lapis chuckled as she pushed it open.

All of a sudden, their eyes met with those of the two large goblins on the other side.

"Ah..." Lapis froze, her arm still outstretched.

The goblins were similarly stunned, not quite understanding what had just happened. Without a word, Loren rushed past Lapis.

There was a white flash far more brilliant than the manamen light, and before these black goblins could so much as twitch, their heads were abruptly separated from their bodies. They collapsed to the floor, spurting blood.

"We're running into them already? That's tough luck," Loren said to Lapis, who was still petrified.

She finally pulled her hand back to scratch her head. “It does seem I was a little too focused on trap hunting.”

Lapis crossed the threshold while Claes took in the headless corpses.

“They look like goblins,” Claes muttered. “But I’ve never seen them get this big—to say nothing of that color. Is this a new species?”

“They’re apparently produced in this kind of ruin. Would you call that a new species?”

*At the very least, they’re not a natural one,* Loren thought. People would make a huge stink if these goblins started popping up organically, and he hadn’t heard a word of it.

“They’re large, and they must be rare, but I guess they’re not that strong,” said Claes. He crouched down by the first one to carefully inspect its motionless corpse.

Though it looked like these foes had been easily dispatched, this feat had only been made possible by Loren’s strength and the potency of his weapon. The blade of an ordinary swordsman would find it nigh impossible to cut the black goblins’ rock-hard flesh and bone. Loren was about to caution Claes on his optimism, but when he opened his mouth to do this, what had until that moment been an unmoving corpse lashed out with shocking speed, swinging its arm at Claes.

No one had expected it to move, let alone attack. Claes reacted on reflex, drawing his longsword in a single flowing motion and instantly severing the arm at the elbow joint.

*“Turn Undead!”*

Before the severed arm hit the ground, Laure’s priestly powers enveloped the two rising goblin bodies. With a final powerless screech, they both collapsed once more, this time down for good.

“I take it back. They’re very strong—and hard. Anyone but me might have

been in trouble,” Claes said as he stood, returning his faintly glowing sword to its sheath.

Claes’s gift—*Boost*—could exponentially increase the natural strength of anything, be it a person or item. What’s more, his longsword was that old masterpiece Loren had once seen in a weapon shop. The combination of both factors allowed him to sever a black goblin’s arm like it was nothing, but Claes understood it might well have ended differently if he had lacked either advantage.

“It’s not just black goblins. Looks like they’ve got ghosts too.”

The moment the black goblins fell, their bodies had been possessed by ghosts. Laure had swiftly realized this and used *Turn Undead* to exorcise them, rendering them powerless with minimal effort.

If Laure had been only a second slower on the draw, they would have been stuck fighting two powerful corpses that were no longer inhibited by fear of damaging their bodies.

“I’m surprised you could tell, Laure,” Leila said in praise.

“I’m a priest,” Laure modestly replied. “This is just par for the course.”

Yet Lapis was glaring at her with narrowed eyes. “Mr. Loren. Do you imagine that was directed at me?”

“U-umm, that’s not what I...”

It was possible to take Laure’s statement as criticism of Lapis, who had neither identified the ghosts nor dealt with them. It was plain, however, that the other priest hadn’t meant anything by it.

*And I’m sure Lapis isn’t serious either*, thought Loren. He gave her a pat on the back for reassurance, while Leila eased Laure out of her panic.

“So what do we do from here?”

Ange’s question prompted Loren to look around.

Past the door, the passage extended to the left and right, with no way of knowing which direction would lead them to answers. But Loren understood they needed to move, and fast.

“These two weren’t here just because. Someone must’ve stationed them at this door, and when they notice their guards were taken out, we’ll be in for it. Let’s get moving—not that I know where to go.”

It obviously wasn’t pure coincidence that these ghosts had been hanging around to support the goblins. It was safe to assume someone had intentionally installed all four of them here. It was also possible that their master would be alerted when his goons had been dealt with, and Loren didn’t want to ruminate over the methods this foe might employ to rid himself of intruders.

“How about we pick a random direction and stick to it?” Claes proposed. “It’s not like we have anything to go off of. It’s a total coin flip.”

“Well... Why not.”

This was a little too bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for Loren, but he also knew that for the time being, the best place to be was anywhere but the scene of the crime. There was no time to waffle, and he had to admit there was some sense in Claes’s proposal.

“Then let’s go this way. We’ll pick up the pace too. Look out for traps.”

“Hold up.”

Gula stopped them just as they were about to start running. As Loren looked back at her doubtfully, but Gula’s expression turned grim as she pointed down the opposite corridor.

“Just a hunch, but I think it’s this way.”

“Is this...women’s intuition or something?”

“Yup. But better than nothin’, right?”

“Guess so.”



If Loren demanded an explanation, Gula might let something slip in the presence of people who shouldn't hear it. They couldn't risk divulging her true identity. He needed to make it look like they weren't thinking too deeply on it—that they were just going with the flow. Loren smiled at Gula's stern look and readily changed course.

"Yeah, straight down there. Turn right at the end. Take the second left."

"Loren. Does she know this place?" Claes asked.

That was a fair question. Gula's instructions were both specific and precise.

They didn't know where they were headed, but they were following her directions, nonetheless. And it was clear she wasn't just randomly calling things out on pure whim.

"Can't be. This has to be some ancient ruin, right?"

As long as they passed walls made of manamen, they had to assume they were in a facility that had been used by the ancient kingdom. What's more, it was presumably an undiscovered ruin. It was walking distance from the nearest town, and there was no way that the local beastkind—especially the lord of that town—wouldn't have known about it unless it were hidden.

That didn't account for the possibility of graverobbers, mind you. Even if no one had publicly announced its discovery, that didn't guarantee it had gone untouched.

"Here's a tip for you, Claes," Loren said, keeping his head facing firmly forward so Claes couldn't see his expression. "A ruin's internal structure is generally determined by its purpose. Sure, sometimes you find those incomprehensible mazes, but this, I'd wager, used to be a working facility. Wander through enough ruins, and you can usually tell where you wanna head."

"Has your party explored that many ruins?"

“Nah. I’m not that experienced myself. But Gula’s a pretty accomplished magician. I’m sure she’s seen her share.”

Half of what Loren had just explained was secondhand knowledge from Lapis. The other half consisted of brazen lies. Fortunately, it seemed he’d mixed truth and fiction well enough to sound convincing.

Claes, for one, sounded impressed. “But where exactly is she taking us?”

“That, I can’t tell ya.”

Sure, they could ask Gula, but every time Loren caught a glimpse of her stony face as she called directions, he felt less inclined to do so. Presumably, she was headed to the heart of the ruins, but he had no idea why her expression grew grimmer and grimmer the farther they went.

“Next right. Then go straight... Yeah, I knew I’d find it here.”

Gula’s last words resonated with a cold, dark emotion that made all eyes gather on her back. But she paid them no mind, or perhaps she hadn’t noticed. Her steely gaze was fixed on a single point ahead.

*What’s she thinking?* Loren wondered, his eyes shifting to the double doors at the end of the path.

They were not ornamented in the slightest. They looked simply installed, and they were made of wood, like any other door in this place. There had to be something beyond that warranted Gula’s ire.

“Gula, what’s through those doors?”

“Well, ah, obviously, it’s...”

Loren’s question alerted Gula to the fact that she had become the center of attention. She winced at the realization. A careless answer might expose her, and a shoddy lie could sow discord once she was found out.

Even if she wanted to play this off with nonsense, she had accurately guided them through ruins that were presumably of the ancient kingdom, and it was kind of late to say it had been nothing but instinct. As Gula pondered the

matter, Lapis pressed a hand to her brow and shook her head, knowing it was likely hopeless. Loren prayed Gula could come up with some clever excuse.

“I-it’s probably a core part of the facility. I think. I explored a similar ruin before, see? So I thought this one might have the same layout.”

“You’re an experienced adventurer, then, Ms. Gula. What were you doing before you joined Loren’s party?”

“Um! A-ah, yes, err, I was up...north. Kind of a wandering adventurer of sorts, so I didn’t have a set party.”

“You’re from the north and you dress like that?” Ange exclaimed, looking Gula up and down.

The regions of the continent they all lived on enjoyed all sorts of climates. In some regions, the temperature shifted dramatically depending on place and season, while others saw little change at all. However, the north was known to be consistently and universally colder than the south. With this in mind, Gula’s attire did look a little too skimpy.

“You got me all wrong. It’s *because* I’m from the north. The climate down south’s so unbearable that I have to dress like this. I can’t deal with all your heat.”

This logic was pretty forced, but not wholly unreasonable. Claes’s party seemed to buy it, at least, and didn’t push any further.

Patting her chest in relief, Gula reoriented herself and placed a hand on the door in front. “Should I open it, then?”

“Be careful,” said Loren, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Loren seemed concerned that the others would figure something out from the fact she could open the door period. But Gula could tell he meant something else as well. She patted his hand where it lay on her shoulder and turned back to the door.

“Is this one not locked?” Lapis asked.

Gula's answer came simply enough with a spell: "*Unlock*. There, that should do it."

The door cracked open. Loren peeked through, only to be taken aback by the scene that unfolded beyond it.

It was a large room. A white light stronger than the manamen poured down from the ceiling, filling the entire space with a brilliant radiance.

Several black picture-like devices of unknown function lined one wall, each displaying letters and numbers that Loren couldn't read. At the very center of the room were seven coffins in a circle. Multiple thick pipes emerged from every coffin, connecting them to the black pictures, the walls, or even the ceiling.

Gula took the lead, striding in as the rest of them were left to take in the bizarre sight.

Only after a good while could Leila summon any words. "What *is* this...?"

Of course, Gula was the only one who could answer her, but she was silent. She approached one of the coffins, gritting her teeth as she let her fingers dance over its surface.

"It seems to be some sort of research facility," said Lapis as she slowly circled the room, looking this way and that with deep curiosity. Upon approaching the pictures by the wall, she brought her face up to the letters. "What's more...it looks like this facility is still operational."

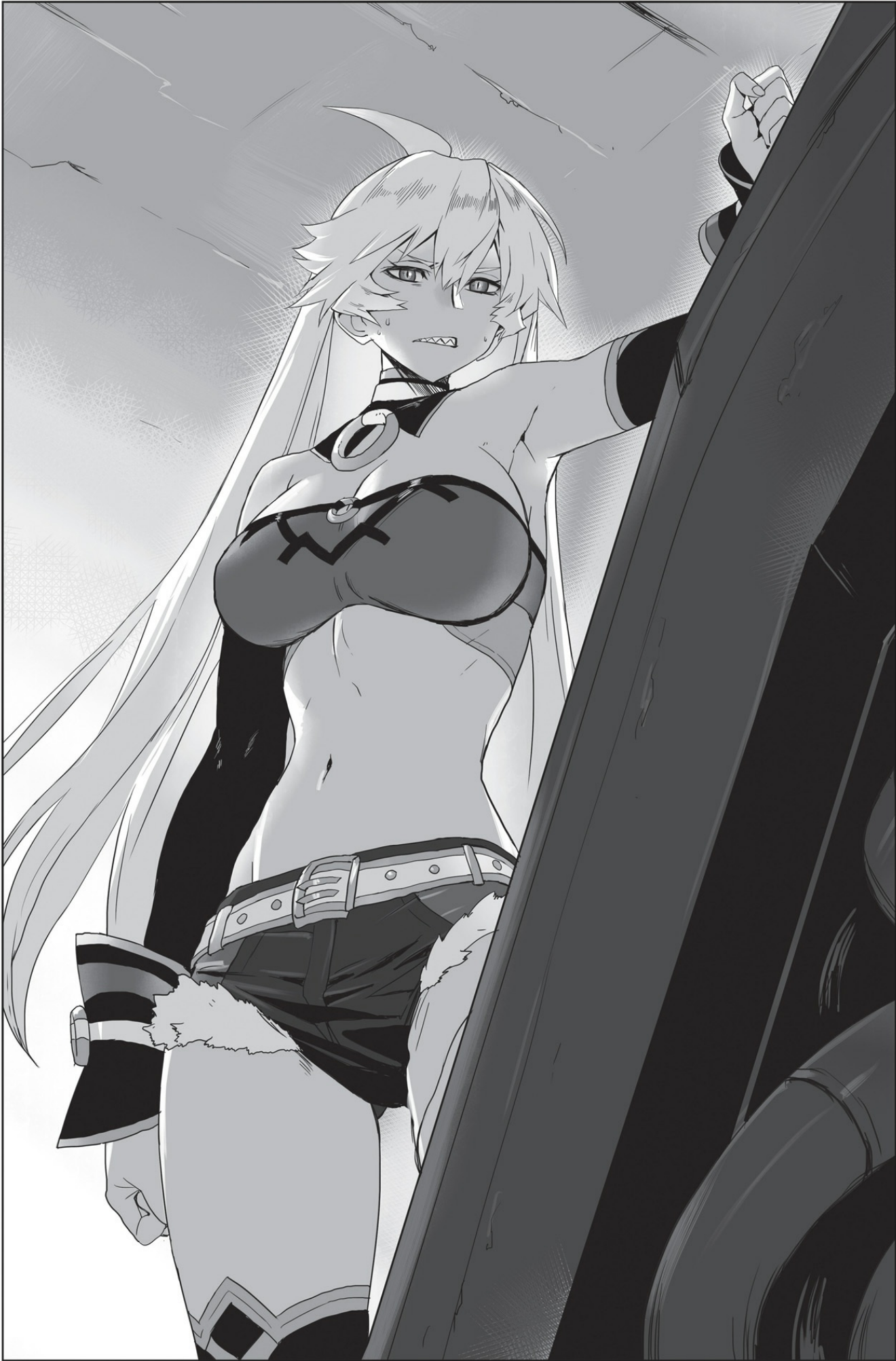
"You can tell?" Laure asked, voice rising with her surprise.

Parting her face from the pictures, Lapis smiled. "Yes. For you see, I am a priest of the god of knowledge."

*Yeah, I don't think your brethren are supposed to be that versatile,* Loren thought.

Regardless, Lapis returned to the pictures and resumed talking, though no one had prompted her. "There's too little information to say what exactly they

were researching here, but given the current state of affairs, I'd say the pollution of the lake likely began when this ruin was reactivated."



“Don’t tell me...” Ange’s face folded into an unpleasant frown.

She seemed to realize where this explanation was going, but Lapis just went on.

“That was probably the output of this facility’s sewage system,” she said plainly.

This earned a disgusted cringe from everyone but Gula—a fair reaction to hearing the water they used to bathe had been tainted with sewage. The girls had only just used that lake for that very purpose.

“I think the water we splashed about in was fine. The terrain and the flow ensured the waste didn’t reach us—which is presumably why the water was still clear.” Lapis did try to cheer them up, but this did little to ease their feelings of disgust. The suspicion that they couldn’t just shrug off skinny dipping in sewage yet lingered.

“Now, the real question is what exactly this place was researching!”

“Hey, wait. That coffin... It looks like it’s moving.”

Ange’s observation brought Lapis crashing back into the moment. She turned to Ange, who was standing in front of one of the seven coffins and pointing at it.

“The surface is glowing for some reason. It’s shaking a bit too.”

“Let’s see.”

Interest piqued, Lapis closed in on the coffin, getting her face right up to it. Just like on the pictures, letters flowed across the surface before fading away. And though minute, when she pressed a hand against them, she detected some faint vibrations.

Further investigation yielded a name plate of sorts beside the coffin, carved with letters that were more permanent than the transient images made of light—although Loren couldn’t make out what it said.

“Can you use that god of knowledge power to read it?” Loren asked as Lapis focused on the plate.

Without glancing at him, she said, “I can read it, for what it’s worth.”

“Whoa... So what’s it say?” Loren struggled to decide which was more impressive: the god of knowledge or the demon race. Regardless, he urged her to elaborate.

Lapis turned to Loren with a terribly conflicted look.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Please don’t be too shocked when you hear this. The nameplate reads ‘Luxuria Luscharity.’”

These words meant nothing to Claes and his party. However, Loren had heard them before. His chest was filled with emotions he would have preferred to forget, and with a grim face, he found his eyes gravitating toward Gula.

This name was not the name of an ordinary human.

Just like Gula, he had lived since ancient times as one of the dark gods. Luxuria Luscharity was the name of the muscular mountain of a man who served as the dark god of lust.

Even with the warning, Loren couldn’t help but be shocked.

“Which means this place is...” Loren hurriedly swallowed the words that were about to escape his throat.

It wasn’t as though saying it would suddenly implicate Gula, but who knew what might let the members of Claes’s party make that connection? He wouldn’t run his mouth when he didn’t have to.

Not that he had long to worry—anything he was about to say was drowned out by the booming voice that burst forth from the same door they’d used to enter the room.

“Step away from those coffins, mongrels. They aren’t things that lowly beings



like you should touch.”

A familiar, arrogant voice. Loren remembered it well, and none of those memories were good.

Claes’s party saw Loren immediately ready his greatsword and determined this would not be a friendly encounter. Each reached for their weapons and stood on guard against this newcomer.

“I was wondering who it might be...but you? Of all people?”

Long, black hair draped over pitch-black armor. Pale skin and sharp features, and a metallic hair clip that kept his bangs out of his face. Hands that gripped an ornamented longsword and a shield.

“What a coincidence. How glad I am to meet you once more.”

“I, for one...could’ve gone without seeing you ever again,” Loren spat, already tired.

There stood the black swordsman Magna, wearing a gallant smile. The man who’d stolen his armor from the demon lords, and had come to blows with Loren because of it.

“Who’s he, Loren? An acquaintance?” Claes asked.

Loren couldn’t deny their association at this point. *Not my first choice of acquaintances,* though, Loren thought as he glared at Magna, who stood boldly in front of the wide-open double doors.

Magna remained there, unmoving, lording over the room. Though he had his sword in hand, he had not taken a fighting stance.

“Ran into him a while back. Be careful. He’s a troublesome bastard.”

“Watch your tongue, lowlife.”

They’d lose, and terribly so, if they underestimated Magna just because he was alone. But Loren’s warning made the man retort as if he’d taken offense.

At last, Magna raised his shield and readied his sword. That alone made clear

that Loren's warning rang true. Tension raced through Claes and his party.

"You've made a...rather troublesome friend," Leila said.

"I'd defend myself," Loren idly replied, "but I get the feeling it won't."

Leila didn't seem to follow what he was getting at. But whether it was coincidence or not, Loren offered his thanks to whatever had brought Magna to confront them here of all places. If he had the right of it, Magna wouldn't be able to fight at full strength in this room.

So first: he'd confirm this theory.

"Where'd you stow that dark elf of yours? She finally grow sick of you? You gotta learn to be more dependable," Loren taunted.

For a brief moment, Magna's eyes flitted to a space behind them.

Having confirmed the direction of his gaze, Loren was convinced of his theory. "In the coffin, eh? You get up to some nasty business. What kind of trash are you?"

"I did not force her into it. Do you imagine I held her neck and thrust her in? She chose to lie in that device of her own accord."

The last time they'd met, Magna had been accompanied by a dark-skinned elf, or rather, a dark elf. The fact that she wasn't anywhere around had led Loren to two possibilities. First, that she was lurking somewhere to surprise them like a proper assassin. Second, that she might be in one of the coffins at the center of the room.

Magna's response indicated that it was likely the latter. That led to another question.

"What are you trying to do, shoving your buddy in a coffin? Don't tell me you want to make sure she croaks before you? Keep following that logic, and your own body's gonna be left out in the cold with no one to bury it."

"Enough prattling. Why do you think I would go out of my way to explain my intentions to such lowly beings?"

“If you’re so high and mighty, I’m sure you’ve got plenty of time to tell us what’s up.”

“Th-that’s right! At least explain yourself, you gloomy bastard!”

“You suddenly show up acting like you’re better than us, and you don’t even have the decency to introduce yourself! Aren’t you embarrassed?!”

Loren’s provocations earned support from an unexpected chorus. Lapis glanced, with a touch of surprise, at Ange and Laure, who were currently being shielded behind Claes.

Although Magna’s arrogant tone was backed by his overwhelming aura of violence, it seemed that Loren’s attempt to infuriate him had led their own anger to overcome their fear. It helped that their reliable comrades, Claes and Leila, were standing in front of them. Either way, the two girls managed to bark back, and Magna was left looking rather irritated.

“Silence, mongrels. What reason do I have to name myself to the likes of you?”

“Oh, he’s Magna, by the way. Some thief who broke into somebody’s storehouse a while back. Stole some equipment.”

“A *thief*? Please! I took only what was rightfully mine!”

It seemed they’d landed on a label that Magna couldn’t tolerate.

“Whatever—it’s obvious you’re up to something, what with shoving your dark elf pal in that coffin. That means you can’t use your sword’s extra tricks in this room.”

Magna’s sword could fire powerful blasts of light. The speed and power of these troublesome attacks were beyond anything Loren or Claes could deflect. But so long as they were in this confined space, and Magna himself was unwilling to harm the active equipment, he likely wouldn’t use the attack.

“That is, if you had the wits to take that into consideration.”

This time, Magna wasn't caught off guard. He returned with a taunt of his own. "Have you forgotten that you fell short of my swordplay?"

"Thanks to your equipment, yeah," Loren said with a mocking snort.

"It takes skill to master one's equipment."

*Not wrong*, Loren nearly agreed. But if he did, that would be the end of it. It wasn't as though Loren had been dragging the conversation out for no reason. While all eyes were on Magna, Lapis's eyes had reverted to purple.

Using Loren's body as a shield and making sure she didn't lock eyes with Magna as she studied him, she was presumably analyzing and appraising his equipment. Lapis was still behind Loren and staring hard. This seemed to be a time-consuming task, and Loren was buying her that time.

"Right, your precious equipment. I busted up your helmet pretty good, didn't I?" Loren said with a knowing grin.

Magna's face turned dark; Loren could practically feel the faint grinding of Magna's teeth on his own throat.

*He must be nursing quite a grudge over that*, Loren thought as he continued. "How did it feel to see that prized hat melted down? Must've been a fun new feeling, having some no-name mongrel get one over you."

"Silence!"

"Oh? Somebody's getting tetchy. You sound pretty frustrated."

Loren readied himself for an attack, but though Magna's voice was rough, he hadn't lost his ability to think just yet. Though he glared with great reproach, he didn't jump into the fray.

*If we could run, I'd do it in a heartbeat*, thought Loren. But Magna was blocking the only exit.

If it came to blows, Loren wasn't remotely confident he'd be able to best Magna. Magna's power had in fact been greatly boosted by the armor he wore, but even before then, he'd been a serious threat and had to be treated as such.

With all Magna had going for him, Loren didn't think he could face the man and win. So he had to keep buying time on the off-chance Lapis could identify some flaw or weakness in his equipment. But what would he do if she couldn't find one?

"This is bad, Mr. Loren," Lapis whispered behind him.

*Has she finished analyzing?* Loren focused on her without shifting his gaze.

The information she provided was exactly what he didn't want to hear. "The spells on his equipment are so potent that I can't discern anything."

"Seriously...?"

"They're furnished with an incredibly powerful concealment charm. You could present enchantments that powerful to any country on the continent and they'd immediately call them national treasures."

Lapis had only just recovered her true eyes, but they were still the eyes of a demon. Loren understood that the armor had to be quite something if it can escape her. It really would be a national treasure if it got out into the world.

"One-on-one won't work... Maybe if it's three-on-one?"

All on his lonesome, Loren knew he'd be in for a hard fight even if Magna couldn't use his flashes. But a new element had entered the fray since their last battle: Claes's party.

Claes was a swordsman of unique and potent skill, while Leila was a knight who'd been assigned to his protection. You had to imagine she was more than just a pretty face.

That alone ensured they had three capable front-line fighters. On top of that, Loren had only had Lapis and Gula at his back during his last confrontation with Magna. This time, they had Ange the magician and Laure the priest lending their strength.

As long as Loren didn't make a stupid mistake, their fighting force could well tip the scales.

*Looks like we have to do this.* Loren was about to summon his resolve when Ange suddenly cried out.

“Huh? Wait, what’s that?!”

Loren couldn’t take his eyes off Magna, so he couldn’t look at whatever had shocked her.

Instead, he saw Magna’s stern look dissolve, as if this had all been an elaborate ruse. He even cracked a merry smile. “I don’t know what you were plotting, but you wanted time, yes? How fortunate that I wanted the same.”

*What’s he talking about?* Loren wondered. All too late, he realized that Magna had been stalling as well. Hadn’t they all seen him standing there, waiting, unmoving? And there was only one thing he could have been waiting for.

His collaborator, the dark elf Noel, who lay in that coffin, was also waiting. Waiting for *something*.

“We had a touch longer before Noel finally awakened. I didn’t think for a moment that I would lose to you, but if I’m going to fight, I might as well do it on favorable terms.”

An uncontrollable chill shot down Loren’s spine.

*Then the reason Ange cried out...* Loren at last removed his eyes from Magna to gaze at the center of the room. The lid of one of the sealed coffins had opened with a flood of white smoke.

It was too late. He had been naïve. Only now did he realize it.

“Now then, enough chat. Noel, get up and do your job already. We mustn’t allow any intruders to leave our domain alive.”

In response to Magna’s call, an indigo hand emerged from the white smoke to grasp the rim of the coffin and pull up its owner.

## Chapter 8:

### Surprise Attack to Escape

**“Y**OU STAY IN THERE!”

The quickest to move was neither the dark elf in the casket, nor Magna, with all his composure. Nor was it Claes, who tried to take a peek the second he saw the hand belonged to a woman, nor Leila or Laure, who kicked him down. Neither was it Gula, who was glaring daggers at Magna, nor Loren, who had readied his greatsword. It wasn't even Lapis, whose eyes were still narrowed in the hopes she might catch a brief glimpse of the true nature of Magna's equipment.

Ange had been closest to the coffin, and she delivered a swift kick to the lid, shutting it once more.

Had it been completely open, the heavy-looking lid wouldn't have shut from a magician's kick, but it was only halfway there, and so she was able to shut it rather easily.

Unlike the last time it had been shut, however, there was a hand grabbing onto the edge. When the lid was suddenly slammed shut, this hand was sandwiched.







“Harsh...” Loren found himself muttering.

After all, as the sturdy lid crashed into the sturdy coffin, the hand between them emitted a terrible crunch. Blood splattered as it plopped to the ground. At the same time, there was a shrieking sound from within the coffin, but Ange didn’t seem remotely bothered as she jumped on top of the lid to make sure no one could wriggle out.

“If you think I’m just going to wait for you, you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Well done, Ange!” Leila praised her friend, and Laure clambered atop the coffin as well.

The dark elf within tried in vain to lift the lid, clattering and rocking, but it wasn’t such a simple feat, with two whole people weighing it down.

“I’ll go join them for now,” said Lapis.

The fact that Noel was able to jolt the coffin as much as she did meant she possessed considerable physical might. After receiving Loren’s permission, Lapis dashed over and hopped up to join the girls.

With that added weight, the lid could no longer so much as budge.

“Claes! Take care of the guy in black while you have the chance!”

“Give me a minute. Leila’s kick is nothing to sniff at...”

*What are they doing?* Loren thought with a sigh.

At that moment, Gula made the first move.

She’d introduced herself to Claes and crew as a magician, and rushing straight into close combat would make it difficult to explain things later. Loren considered stopping her, but he was overwhelmed by the threatening aura surrounding her and swallowed his words.

“You crafty little—”

Gula had no weapons. Her attacks came directly from her body or through her authority. But perhaps the blood had rushed to her head, for she proceeded to

slam her fist straight into Magna's raised shield.

Under normal circumstances, her fist would have been shattered by such a blow. But not only did she come out fine, she managed to push Magna back a step.

This wasn't strange for Gula, who was also known as a dark god. *But how am I supposed to explain if Claes asks me later?* Loren wondered. Regardless, Gula continued her assault.

As Magna retreated from the impact, she unleashed a kick over his shield, sending him even farther back. Then, instead of closing the distance, she stuck out her finger.

"O shot of red, pierce through my foe, *Fire Bullet*."

An orb of flame burst from Gula's fingertip, smacking into the shield and scattering sparks on impact. But Magna's expression, as he peered from the shadow of his shield, didn't look like that of a cornered man.

"Hmm, you're halfway decent."

"You just had to dig this thing up and turn it on again! Way to piss me off!"

"Again? Well, so be it... I don't know what's got you so worked up. What's wrong with using the resources at my disposal?"

"You're going to regret those words!"

As Gula clenched her fist and charged, Magna revealed himself from behind his shield. He thrust out the weapon in his right hand to intercept her—and to everyone's surprise, it was not a longsword, but a one-handed spear.

"What?!"

Gula had prepared for the sword, and the polearm came as a shock. The attack had unexpected range, and she was late to react. She would be impaled if she kept going.

Loren barely managed to catch up in time. He seized Gula's belt and hurled

her back. In her place, he redirected the spear thrust with the flat of his greatsword.

He'd hoped the parry would throw Magna off balance. However, Magna didn't linger on the spear. He let it fly out of his hand, and then—from nowhere Loren could see—extracted a loaded crossbow, aim locked on Loren's chest.

"Where'd that come from?!"

There was no time for more surprises. Loren used his sword to shield himself from the bolt, but the arrow was something special. It exploded on impact and sent Loren flying back.

The next shot was soon to follow, then the next, and the next. Loren felt each blow shudder through his sword. Then, once Magna was out of arrows, he tossed the crossbow aside. The weapon was swallowed in light and vanished before it hit the ground.

At the same time, Loren fell to one knee, shaken by the force of so many explosions.

"You're sturdy. As expected of a barbarian," Magna exclaimed, amused, as he blocked a surprise strike from Claes with his shield. He went on to charge straight at Claes with his shield thrust out.

Unable to evade, Claes was knocked off his feet by the collision. Leila swooped in to catch him.

"The trash is collecting itself. That makes cleanup easier."

The thing that appeared in Magna's clutched hand was neither a crossbow nor a polearm. This was a javelin—made to be thrown. He threw it, and it didn't look like he'd even put that much strength into it, but in an instant, it had already reached Leila.

"O god of knowledge, safeguard us from those that mean us harm. *Protection from Attack.*"

"Not on my watch!"

Lapis's blessing flew from her place atop the coffin. In addition to this, Loren cut in with his greatsword, trying to cleave through the javelin from the side.

He delivered quite a powerful blow, yet the weapon wasn't even a little damaged. It fell to the ground intact, and after bouncing, faded away just like the crossbow had.

"What sort of trick is this?" Loren was flustered. The weapon in Magna's hand seemed to change time and again.

Although the sword Magna had originally wielded hung from his belt in its scabbard, the spear and crossbow didn't look like they had come from anywhere on his body. In fact, Loren could have sworn they had manifested from thin air.

"Do you have the time for such questions? We're moving on."

Magna held up his right index finger, and a metal ring with a sharpened outer edge manifested around it. It was blatantly a weapon, but its use remained to be seen. Once Magna started spinning it, Loren realized its nature.

"A chakram?! Is it just anything goes now?!"

"A rare weapon, indeed. But you seem quite knowledgeable," Magna said as his unleashed chakram flew at Loren with its curving trajectory.

Loren raised his sword to deflect it, but just before it entered his range, what had been a single chakram suddenly split in two, each cutting its own path through the air.

With a sharp click of his tongue, Loren realized if he dealt with one, he'd have no time to handle the second. He was resigned to suffer that one injury as he brandished his blade. The one he failed to deflect careened toward him.

"Oh, no, you don't!"

A fiery orb shot out of Gula's palm. Her aim was true, and the flames struck the ring before it could dig into Loren's flesh. The chakram was sent flying all the way to the wall, where it shaved through a portion of the surface before

being enveloped by light and disappearing.

“Good grief. To think I’d have to invest so much in a man of so little value,” Magna grumbled. This time, three small, hiltless knives suddenly appeared in his hand. The moment his gaze turned toward Lapis and the other girls on the coffin, the three knives shot off from his hand.

“So that’s your plan!” Loren cursed.

But Claes calmly dodged in front of the blades. “Not going to happen.”

While Loren used his greatsword to block one knife, Claes swiftly swung his sword to smack down the other two.

Though it seemed Magna had intended to open the lid, either by taking the girls out of the picture or forcing them to dodge out of the way, his ploy ended in a failure.

“What a perfect waste of time,” he sighed. His next manifestation was a cavalry lance. This sort of weapon was generally used by those charging on horseback. It was supposed to be quite heavy, but Magna brandished it effortlessly, pointing its tip at Loren.

“You can’t be serious.”

Both the lance’s weight and length made it unsuited for use by an individual on foot. Yet Magna handled it as though it were a twig. It was hard to say how much of his strength came from his equipment, but Loren was certain that as of this moment, Magna was the far stronger between them.

“When he knocked me around with that shield, he was going faster than a man on horseback,” Claes noted.

Magna wielded this weapon in a way he wasn’t meant to, but with the force of his charge, it would be just as effective. It might even be more so. But if they dodged, they would expose the girls behind them to that same danger. And ordering them to get out of the way meant releasing the elf in the coffin.

They were already hard-pressed as it was. If Magna summoned

reinforcements, he would soar to heights far beyond their reach. So Loren wouldn't run. He'd block.

"Are you so eager to be impaled, barbarian?"

"Oh, shut it. This'll leave you wide open, so get charging already."

Loren took a stance with his greatsword held firmly over one shoulder. Meanwhile, Magna lowered his hips, storing power. He aimed the tip of the lance at Loren and stared him down. Once Loren had settled into his stance, Magna kicked off, barreling forward in a ferocious charge.

*I'll aim for the neck*, Loren decided from the start.

Between a lance and a sword, the lance had superior range. However, their means of attack differed—a thrusting lance focused on destroying a single point, while a swung sword left its wake of destruction in a line.

Usually, Loren would resign himself to eating a single strike. Then, as long as it wasn't a lethal blow, he was confident he could conquer something like a lance.

This time was different. This was Magna. Loren couldn't be certain he'd come out on top even if he did survive the blow.

Loren was confident his greatsword could tear through even the thickest plate of ordinary armor on an ordinary foe. But Magna's armor was enchanted. Loren didn't know the nature of those enchantments, but it was entirely possible the armor was several times tougher than it should be. He wasn't sure he could cut it.

Once upon a time, Loren's blade had been the weapon of a demon lord, and it sported more than one charm of its own. But how many of those enchantments only reached their full potential in a demon lord's hands? Loren didn't know how far he could push the sword.

So he would aim for the neck.

Magna's armor obviously protected his neck as well. But like the elbows and knees, and other joints that required mobility, there were inevitably gaps in the

defense. Loren wanted to see what would happen if he hammered his greatsword into one of those points with all his might.

Even if he couldn't cut the armor, the sheer impact of the blow would be devastating, even lethal. If Magna still counted as a living being, he wouldn't walk away unscathed.

But to succeed, Loren needed to meet two conditions.

First: Magna couldn't be aiming at any of his vital parts.

Loren was a living being himself. Sure, striking a single point on a body was generally less lethal than cleaving through it in a line. However, if Loren took the blow to his throat, heart, or head, he was done. Other wounds could still leave him in critical condition, but as long as he didn't die instantly, the two priests would likely be able to bring him back from the edge.

Second: After taking Magna's attack, Loren needed to be able to counter.

If he couldn't endure the pain, or if Magna's lance had some enchantment that prevented counters, he would be impaled, end of story.

If Loren wanted to land a clean hit, these two stars needed to align. As Magna charged, time seemed to stretch into eternity, and Loren stepped out to meet him. And all the while, Loren built his resolve.

*You can smash through my stomach. But I'm taking your life.*

Yet Loren had failed to account for a certain possibility. All the scenarios he played out relied on both parties intending to settle things in this one face-off. If his foe wasn't keen on playing along, it would all crumble apart.

And Magna seemed to have something else in mind.

"You sacrifice yourself, barbarian!"

In the midst of his charge, Magna realized Loren's intentions. His counter, then, would be to aim for a vital point that would cause instant death. However, he instantly understood that he lacked the necessary skills to accomplish this.

Loren was unquestionably very well-trained, and if Magna wanted to end him here and now, his only options were the man's head or throat. The heart was off the table; Magna's eyes were imbued by his armor, and he could tell Loren's jacket was swathed in enchantments itself. Even with an enchanted cavalry lance, that jacket was so sturdy, he wouldn't be able to pierce it.

At this rate, this clash would go just as Loren hoped. Magna would wound him, but in exchange, Loren would land a lethal blow.

Thus, Magna thrust out the cavalry lance—only to release the hilt. Loren had been planted in place, unwilling to dodge, and the tip of this thrown lance rammed straight into him.

The sharp blow caught Loren on the left side of his abdomen, and as Magna anticipated, it failed to pierce his jacket. Loren shoved the lance aside, and though the wind had been knocked out of him, he launched a horizontal slash at Magna's neck.

But by then, having released the lance, Magna had stopped his momentum and leaped back. Through this series of actions, he escaped Loren's range.

The greatsword swung through naught but open air, and after that blow to the chest, Loren's next action was slightly delayed. Having successfully evaded, Magna was free to attack Loren as he pleased.

He swiftly called up his next weapon. It was about to manifest in his hand when Loren's blade stopped mid-swing. His charge froze as well, and Magna was left eyeing him doubtfully.

Perhaps Loren detested the thought of leaving himself open by carrying through with an attack. But by grinding to a halt, he had created a gap that was hardly any different.

*I guess it was inevitable,* Magna thought. He raised his crossbow once more.

There was no need to close the distance and put himself in danger. This weapon would allow him to bombard his foe from a safe distance. With his



finger on the trigger, Magna's eyes met with Loren's.

But as Magna smiled in triumph, Loren held out his sword and roared.

"Ignite! Fiamma Ungia!"

Strength drained from Loren's body as the blade of his sword glowed red. He had been unable to dodge or evade, and Magna had been certain he'd win with a single bolt. But as Magna stared at the red glow, alarm bells screamed in his head. He threw the crossbow aside and hauled his shield in front of him.

This action saved Magna's life.

Loren's strength continued to leave his body, but he endured, barely holding the sword aloft as it erupted in crimson flame. It swept over everything before him, be it the floor, ceiling, or walls.

"Augh?!"

Had Magna's shield or his armor been forged of ordinary metal, that would have been game, set, match. The heat made this abundantly clear. But even when Magna was swallowed in blazing flames, his powerful armor protected him. Although not without cost.

Just as the demon lord's greatsword Fiamma Ungia drained Loren's mana and life force to produce searing flames, Magna's black shield and armor derived their defensive strength from the energy they received from Magna.

Magna staggered, assailed by the fatigue.

Had there been a follow-up attack at that moment, Loren's victory would have been certain, but both combatants were driven into a corner. The power required by the blade was great, and Loren barely managed to stay conscious. He fell to one knee.

In a one-on-one fight, practical incapacitation on both sides would have meant a draw. However, while Magna had no allies, Loren did.

"Now, Mr. Claes! Cut him down!" Lapis called out from atop the coffin.

Heeding these words, Claes cast *Boost* on himself. He had somewhat lost his nerve when fire started pouring from Loren's sword, but now he recovered and swiped at Magna.

"To be pushed so far by mere barbarians... How feeble I am."

Magna was staggering, looking like he would collapse at any moment. Yet with nothing but his left hand, Magna caught Claes's empowered slash.

But a single caught blow didn't stop Claes. He yanked the blade back and lashed out with another strike. After this one was blocked too, he slashed again. As this combo carried on, he gradually built speed.

Yet each and every blow was blocked, until Magna landed what seemed like a light kick in Claes's flank.

It was quite a nimble kick for someone wearing plate armor, and once it made contact, it sent Claes flying—

"Whoa?!"

"Eep!"

And he flew in the worst direction imaginable. Claes hurtled straight at Lapis, Ange, and Laure, who were pinning down the coffin lid.

Lapis casually dodged out of the way and escaped Claes's trajectory. But Ange and Laure weren't so nimble, and he took them both out. Magna recovered enough strength to charge at Lapis—the only one left.

"Now *move!*"

"This doesn't look great," Lapis said, though she didn't act that frightened as she prepared for this clash. Magna charged at her with his shield held out, but before he ever reached Lapis, Gula collided into him with a body blow from the side.

"You again!"

"*Enough!* Did you know what that thing does when you stuffed your sidekick

into it?!”

“What manner of idiot uses a device without knowing its function?”

With a swing of his arm, Magna tossed Gula aside and sneered as she glared at him, pure hatred in her eyes.

“This device can transform even the likes of you into someone worthy of serving me. A magnificent machine, left to me by my great ancestors. How dare you *sit on it!*” Magna scowled at Lapis, who was still square on top of the coffin. “You menial peasants—it can bestow value upon your lives, even if only the slightest bit. You should worship its very existence!”

“What nonsense!” Leila snapped as she slashed at him.

Magna blocked it with his shield without even drawing the sword at his hip, then used the shield to knock her straight to the floor. He was about to step on her when Gula struck him.

“It’s all because of people like you!” she snarled. “Do you have any idea what I had to live through because of people like *you?*!”

“You... Don’t tell me...” The doubt on Magna’s face gave way to epiphany.

“What *worth* is there in this stupid power?!”

Unseen fangs latched onto Magna’s shield. His eyes couldn’t perceive them, but something was evidently exerting so much force that it nearly crushed his arm. Magna’s expression melted away into a glare of pure hatred.

“*You!* You’re Gluttony!”

Gula faltered the moment he unmasked her. “Y...you know me?”

Magna kicked her aside and shook off whatever was biting down on his arm. “If you cretins had just done what you were told, none of this would be happening!”

“What?!”

Magna’s unarmed right hand stretched toward Gula. To her surprise, it was as

though she couldn't move. He wrapped his fingers around her throat.

"Here and now, I correct the mistake of my ancestors!"

"Gah?! Wh...who are you...?" Gula asked as he strangled her, breath pained.

Magna wouldn't answer. He tightened his grip.

Under such pressure, the neck of an ordinary human would have instantly snapped. But Gula held on. As she let out a groan, he squeezed even harder. But his hand loosened when he noticed Loren teetering to his feet.

"What do you think...you're doing to my pal there..."

"You can still move? You don't know when to give up."

"I don't know what beef you've got with her...but I'm going to end this!"

Loren forced strength into his powerless arms and charged forward. Somewhere in the back of his head, he heard something click into place.

Even if Loren stacked his self-strengthening sequence and berserk mode, on top of one another, he couldn't beat Magna. Loren knew this all too well.

It didn't matter if Magna's strength came from himself or his armor. From where Loren was standing, it was all the same.

Even if Loren asked Scena to share some of her mana, thereby increasing the potency of his strengthening, he doubted he could overcome the black swordsman. So, before he allowed his berserker rage to overtake him, he'd asked Claes for a helping hand.

Claes had been largely unable to move after taking that last blow, but he had managed to crawl to Loren and engage his ability.

In short, Loren had activated self-strengthening, entered his berserker state, and added Claes's valuable *Boost* gift to both of those. He had no idea how these three differing enhancements would interact, but he had no other options. Without pausing to consider the consequences, Loren summoned as much speed as physically possible and surged toward Magna.

At first, Magna reacted with total calm. But this trio of augmentations added up to a greater sum than he'd anticipated—he couldn't have expected such a feat from someone who had expended the majority of their mana and stamina. Regardless, he swiftly realized that the shield wouldn't withstand this blow.

Magna let Gula fall from his hand and tried to draw his longsword.

But Gula didn't let him. The moment his grip on her throat loosened, she seized his wrist.

“Wench!”

“Don't worry about me, Loren! Cut him down!”

As long as Magna didn't have a weapon, Loren had the sure advantage. Thus Gula chose to keep his arm busy and urged Loren to strike even if she was caught in the crossfire.

But Loren couldn't hurt her. He wouldn't.

And there were plenty of other ways to take this bastard down.

When Magna failed to shake off Gula, he gave up and jammed his knee into her exposed flank.

“Gah?!”

There was the sound of something breaking as Gula's body crumpled, but she held her ground and maintained her grip as best she could. That's when the next knee came. This one, she couldn't bear. She cried out in pain, spitting up a mouthful of blood as she collapsed.

Finally Magna reached for his sword. That was his mistake.

Magna had the means to manifest weapons in his hand—he didn't need to be so fixated on his sword. Had he simply summoned yet another weapon, he might have been able to counter Loren's attack. But his mind was caught up with freeing his hand for this purpose, so he wasted his time in reaching for the blade at his waist.

In the end, he took Loren's slash head-on.

That said, Loren was in a terrible state. He was keeping himself afloat with pure willpower, and he was unable to take careful aim. He didn't really care where his slash hit. So perhaps he misjudged, or perhaps it was a coincidence, but it landed square on Magna's right shoulder.

"Curse you!"

As Magna cried out, Loren poured his remaining stamina into his greatsword.

That blade—the same blade that had surged with flame—once again let off a crimson glow. It was weak—so weak it couldn't compare to its first flare. But the strike was clean, and Magna's black armor began to redden in turn. Like a hot knife through butter, the blade slid through it, smooth and straight.

The simultaneous slash and burn meant that Loren's greatsword cauterized the wound. There was hardly any blood, even though he had severed Magna's right arm at the shoulder. Thoroughly detached, the arm fell to the floor with a thud, armor and all.

Having suddenly lost the weight of one arm, Magna's stance teetered to the left. Loren had put his all into that one strike, and he fell forward.

"We can't be having that," Lapis said as she deftly jumped down from her perch atop the coffin.

At the same time, with her weight gone, the coffin finally burst open. Lapis paid it no mind as she dashed over to Magna and delivered a kick to his front while he tried to recover his balance.

This kick was delivered with captivating form. Lapis's boot struck Magna's abdomen, blasting his body backward. However, the indigo figure that lunged in from the side caught Magna's body in her arms.

"My liege! You must hold on!"

Though Noel had by no means slathered herself in oil, her dark, indigo skin was imbued with a slick luster, and she exposed all of it as she caught Magna.

She was free.

Either due to the loss of his arm or the damage Lapis had just inflicted, Magna was unable to utter a single word. Noel shot a murderous look at Loren, who lay on the floor, and at Lapis, who was carefully picking him up.







“How dare you harm Lord Magna!”

“I believe you’ve inflicted more damage to our side,” Lapis said, returning that glare with icy calm. She seemed unmoved. She hoisted Loren over his back and took a sweeping survey of the room around. “Your casualties end at Mr. Magna, a single individual. Meanwhile, among my companions, everyone apart from myself has suffered at least some damage. It should be clear who’s suffered the greater loss.”

“Lord Magna means far more than the rest of you combined!”

“Ah, a fundamental difference in values. This discrepancy is the cause of many conflicts. What a sad world we live in,” Lapis said as she stared straight back at Noel, who seemed even angrier. “If you intend on deploying lust’s authority, I’d advise against it. Everyone you might have captivated is already incapacitated—and you’ll find you hold no sway over me.”

No one could say how much power Noel possessed mere minutes after her awakening. But Lapis doubted she was stronger than Luxuria, the dark god of lust they’d met before.

Noel bit her lip, frustrated.

“As for Mr. Magna, his wound was closed by the heat, so he hasn’t lost much blood, and he may seem to be doing fine. But he *has* lost an arm, you know. If you want to treat him, you should hurry.”

Noel growled as her eyes lowered to Magna. Even if he wasn’t bleeding out, he was still racked by the pain of his missing arm. Lapis had also kicked him with all her might, rendering his breathing erratic, even then panting. He wasn’t going to suddenly up and die, but he was in no state to be left to his own devices.

“If you’re going to run, we won’t chase you. We’ve suffered too many wounds.”

Loren had used up the last of his strength. Gula had been choked and taken

significant damage to her abdomen. Leila was fully down, while Claes, Ange, and Laure had suffered injuries to varying degrees.

Lapis would have loved nothing more than to finish Magna off. She wanted to treat her companions as soon as possible, after all. But even if Noel had just woken up, she had presumably claimed the powers of a dark god, and this wasn't a battle Lapis wanted to fight.

"You will regret this," said Noel.

"Don't worry about me. Next time, Mr. Loren will deal with your Mr. Magna properly."

Noel gritted her teeth. After a final harsh glare, she picked up Magna's body, collected his severed arm, and made her swift retreat.

Did she think she couldn't beat Lapis head-on? Or did she want to heal Magna as soon as she could? Lapis couldn't be sure which it was, but once Noel was leaving, she left no parting words, nor did she turn.

*Running without a second thought is commendable in its own way*, Lapis thought. "That saves us a lot of trouble. We're in quite a dreadful state here."

The most serious case was probably Loren.

His external wounds consisted of only the blunt blow from the cavalry lance, but the sword had drained a great deal of power from him, and the power he'd poured into severing Magna's arm had struck him with a profound recoil that was even now eating away at his body.

After that was Leila, an ordinary human, who had been terribly injured when Magna threw her. Everyone else was sporting light injuries by comparison. Lapis was also concerned for Gula, but as expected of a dark god, her healing abilities had kicked in and she had already mostly recovered. She'd be right as rain after a moment or two.

"Now then, Mr. Claes..." Lapis turned to Claes as she hefted Loren on her back. Claes was collecting his breath, his hands on the floor. "I believe you've

seen and heard a few things on this little venture.”

“Well...I have, I won’t deny it.”

Claes simply admitted it. Lapis had intended to get a little rough if he intended to play dumb, but she met Claes’s sincere reply with a relieved breath.

“Then would you mind listening to a request of mine?”

“It’s not going to be something like, ‘You can do whatever you like. Just please, keep this a secret...’ is it...?” Claes started out with a somewhat joking tone, but when he noticed Lapis’s cold eyes, he shied back. By the time he finished, he was barely audible.

Putting aside whether he was serious, Lapis had expected something like that. Her cold look persisted, and she let out a fed-up sigh. “I could silence everyone here, if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“Kidding, kidding.” Claes sat on the floor, raising both his hands in submission. “I swear to never reveal anything I saw in this place, and I’ll convince the others to do the same. Does that work?”

*How far can I take his guarantee?* Lapis wondered. She stared at him for a good while but concluded it was probably all right. Closing her eyes, she said, “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Claes.”

“Don’t sweat it. Oh, and could you tell Loren something once he wakes up? Tell him that whenever he needs a hand, I’ll be there to lend it. I’ll keep it cheap too, so don’t hesitate. I know how I look, but my name gets around in some pretty high places. I think it could be helpful.”

*So he’ll make it cheap, but not free,* Lapis thought with a wry smile.

At present, Loren owed an eye-popping debt to a certain demon lord, and it was a bit dubious as to whether he had the funds to pay Claes even at a discount. But there was nothing wrong with having options.

“All that’s left is to investigate these ruins. Either we stop them or break them, and that should be the end of the job.”

They'd gone on a vacation but been put through the wringer instead. Lapis cursed her ill fate as she breathed a deep sigh. There was much to do. After all, she was the only one who could still move.

## Epilogue:

### From Spinning to Complaining

**A** BLACK SPIDER expelled its thread before Loren's eyes.

This thread was wound round and round, just tight enough that it didn't feel cramped as Loren's body was fixed in place. He found himself wondering whether this was the last thing spider food saw before it died.

He was in a hospital room. The spider Neg seemed to have understood when the doctor said Loren needed "complete bed rest." It also seemed that he'd concluded it would be best to bind Loren with his thread. When Loren first woke, he'd found Neg trying to bind not only him but the bed—he'd put a stop to that.

After that incident, they'd fled, and apparently they'd gone all the way back to Kaffa. This "apparently" derived from the fact that Loren didn't remember any of this. Lapis had been behooved to explain it once he regained consciousness. According to her, after the battle with Magna, she had been the only one left who could move freely, so she'd been left to investigate the coffin room on her own.

The result of her investigation: "I have absolutely no idea what any of this does."

That was it.

According to Lapis, the ruins were crammed with some of the most advanced technology she'd ever seen, and even with the knowledge of demonkind, she had been unable to decipher it.

"Then how about you get some scholars to look into it? I'm sure they'd be glad to," Claes had proposed. He had still been able to limp along with her.

Lapis had shaken her head. "I'd agree if these were more ordinary ruins. But

you saw it too, Mr. Claes. These ruins were made to reforge humans as something else entirely. I rather think they shouldn't exist."

"You think so...? Well, you might be right."

"I'll take that as your endorsement. Now let's get to destroying it."

"O-okay?"

What had happened after that was unclear. Even after asking Claes, Loren still didn't know what he'd seen. The long and short of it was that Lapis had gone on an absolute rampage through those ruins with Claes's assistance, and by the end, the ruins had completely ceased functioning.

"He read the room and played along, so it was a lovely way to relieve a bit of stress."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you know. Ms. Gula..."

Gula, the one most closely linked to the ruins, hadn't said much. However, she had confessed that she hadn't become a dark god of her own volition. And that the dark gods had been created by the ancient kingdom as a means of combating outside forces that threatened the nation's prosperity.

In the midst of battle, the power that kept them subordinate to the kingdom had been somehow dispelled, and the dark gods had all turned traitor. This had triggered the events that led to the kingdom's fall. By the end, after all their achievements in battle, these people had been worshipped as gods by the so-called barbarians who had been at war with the ancient kingdom.

"Well, it's old," Gula said. "So old, it's all rotted away. Might as well be dirt. Not too interestin' right? I don't like talkin' about it either."

"No, I get the feeling I just heard something absolutely absurd," said Lapis. "Especially this explanation as to why the ancient kingdom fell."

As far as Loren understood, this definitely didn't sound like a well-known story. But if he ever wanted to spread it, he'd have to reveal the existence of

Gula and her brethren in the process.

“It would have been fine to say something if we’d done it before all that...such what and so forth,” said Lapis.

If the names of the dark gods and word of their abilities were to spread, so too would rumor of a number of incriminating incidents. At that point, bounties would almost certainly be put on their heads, and they’d be hunted down by adventurers and nations alike.

“Silly me.”

“That wasn’t very cute of you, Ms. Gula.”

Loren watched this exchange with a sigh. The girls had been coming to visit him every day.

The job hadn’t turned out to be particularly profitable. They’d originally gone to Karlovy for vacation, so he felt it was kind of strange that he was still concerned about work. It just felt bad to finish a job and receive no reward.

At least the spirit of the lake had gladly paid them.

Once the ruin was non-functional, it no longer expelled the tainted sewage. Now the spring ran with its original, clean, transparent water, and the spirit had rejoiced to see this obvious improvement. Apart from the gemstone they’d received in advance, she’d also handed over the handful of pocket money she’d gotten from “who knew where.” And that was the end of that. Apparently.

Again, Loren hadn’t been exactly present at the time. Lapis and Claes had taken care of it.

Incidentally, all the impaired—conscious or not—had been bound in Neg’s threads and dragged out of the ruin. It was an incredible pain to move unconscious people when their limbs were free to flop about, and Lapis had been wondering how to manage them when Neg jumped down from Loren’s shoulder and swiftly wrapped them all into tidy human parcels.

They were much easier to carry after that. But if Gula—who had still been

conscious, but hadn't recovered much mobility—had her say, she never wanted to feel like excess baggage ever again.

After this, Lapis found herself feeling rather woeful that they had traveled to the lake on foot. Though she garnered numerous curious looks in town, she stowed the human cocoons somewhere safe. Claes headed out to prepare the carriage for the journey back to Kaffa, while Lapis went to the lord to report their findings.

However, she believed it would be rather bothersome if she were too honest. She said only that there had been a decaying ruin upstream, and that the dirty water had been coming from it.

Lapis hadn't searched thoroughly and so didn't know if the ruin had any other entrances, but Magna's goblins had attempted to assault them at the lakeside campsite, so there was likely another way in.

The lord seemed delighted. But seeing as this was a job they'd taken on a whim, and that Lapis had already received a reward from the spirit of the lake, she told the lord they needed no further recompense. The lord tried to protest, but Lapis shook her off somewhat forcefully. Then she leaped straight into the carriage she'd told Claes to bring outside the lord's estate and they made a beeline straight for Kaffa without looking back.

"What had you in such a hurry to leave? The baths were fixed. Couldn't we have stayed and enjoyed our vacation?" Gula asked curiously.

Lapis's face fell into a deep frown. "We had to leave that town as soon as possible."

"Did we do something?" Gula didn't remember doing much of anything to the town itself.

Lapis looked at her like a teacher at a wanting pupil. "The water pouring out of that spout was clear, was it not? But the town's hot spring is supposed to be milky white."



“What about it?”

“In short, I believe that ruin expelled clouded water even before it was reactivated. It mixed with the transparent lake, which in turn led to the baths that the town knew and loved. But we put the kibosh on that business.”

This meant that what had once been a cloudy white bath would become plain and transparent. But Lapis seemed to believe it wouldn't end there.

“That transparent water provides no benefits whatsoever. Meaning most of the effects from the hot springs likely came from that filtration system.”

Sensing what Lapis was about to say, Loren quietly said. “Now that it's gone...”

“There's a high likelihood it will be just like any ordinary bath.”

*Won't that be a death blow for their hot spring industry?* Loren wondered. But it was likely that there had been no rescuing it from the moment the ruins were reactivated. That, at least, wasn't their fault. *If you're going to hate anyone, hate Magna*, thought Loren. But these thoughts weren't going to reach the lord of Karlovy.

“As to the rest of what we've gained from this experience... Well, we learned the names of all the dark gods, but that's about it.”

Lapis had made note of the nameplates by each of the coffins in that room. According to Gula, the ancient kingdom hadn't forged any dark gods apart from her cohort. There were only seven in total. They'd already come across Gluttony, Sloth, Lust, and Greed. That left three as yet undiscovered.

“Wrath is Wraith Satania, envy is Envy Bridgeguard, and pride is Superbia Hyperide. That's all of them.”

“It's a girl, a girl, and a guy in that order,” Gula said, as if proud to provide additional details. “That one's no Luxuria, don't you worry.”

“Shouldn't Gula have already known their names?” Loren asked.

Gula waved her hands awkwardly. “I just remembered when I heard the

names. I'm serious!"

"Well, whatever."

Gula seemed to have her own long-term agenda. They were working together for now, but there was no telling how long that would last. As long as there was a chance they would go their separate ways, she was entitled to keep a secret or two. Loren wouldn't pursue the matter any further.

There was, however, something in there that sounded pretty important. He couldn't really put his finger on it, so he put it on hold for the time being and pushed it from his mind. He prodded Neg, prompting the spider to stop spinning its web, and entrusted his back to the hospital bed.

"How bad did it get for Loren anyways?"

"Well, his only physical injury was a broken rib, but...in order to engage the sword's higher functions, he expended a good deal of mana, among other things. It was quite serious."

In his battle with Magna, Loren had made the greatsword expel flames on two separate occasions. The first alone had devoured most of the strength in his body.

"It is my mother's weapon, I suppose. It's amazing you used it even the once."

"I'd rather not be hospitalized every time I do."

"There are no safety mechanisms, alas. If you don't contain its draw, it will happily suck you dry."

If misused, the blade could easily kill its wielder. *Perhaps that's what I ought to expect from a demon lord's weapon*, Loren thought, as a fresh wave of fatigue washed over his body. That was that, then. He'd only summon the flames when he had no other option.

As Loren closed his eyes, he heard Gula say, "So, you know, Loren. Umm...if I'm with you two, you might run into that Magna guy again. So, I was thinking, well, I'd like to stick around a bit longer, but..."

“Whatever you want. I’m not gonna kick you out.”

As of this incident, it seemed Gula and Magna regarded each other as enemies. That would likely lead to more trouble down the line, and she seemed to fear they would cast her aside to avoid dealing with it.

But—and Loren had already had a vague inkling of this the moment he found himself working on vacation—it seemed that trouble kicked down his door regardless of his circumstances. It might not even have anything to do with the company he kept. If so, there was no need to drive her away, and it was useless worrying about it either.

After he explained this, he felt a palpable delight from the direction he suspected Gula was standing in.

The same could be said for Lapis, whose voice bounced as she said, “Well, that’s that. What shall we do next?”

“Please let me rest...”

“But your vacation just ended.”

“Can you really call that a vacation?” Loren grumbled, but he knew they couldn’t just head out for a redo. Even if they could, he foresaw it ending just like their last attempt. He just knew nothing good would come of it. “I thought I became an adventurer to make a living...”

Despite all the troublesome things that he kept having to deal with, his earnings were close to zero.

*I’ve strayed pretty far from my initial objective,* he thought.

Neg returned to his usual spot on Loren’s shoulder, patting him as if to offer consolation.

**Bonus Story:**  
**From the Notes of a Certain Priest**

**W**ORD ON THE WIND is that a demon lord's castle fell to ruin. That's wrong, obviously, and I'm personally astounded by just how wrong it is.

First off, it was not a demon *lord's* castle. Secondly, the damages weren't nearly so great as to warrant saying the castle "fell to ruin." Admittedly, from what I heard, the explosion was so flashy that a normal human might have safely assumed that nothing remained in its wake.

But in all honesty, only the maids' changing room and a bit of the surrounding wing were blown away. The damages amounted to a few rooms and some clothes.

Although the cost of repair was exorbitant, the domicile of our great and mighty king lives was not so fragile as to be "ruined" by such paltry damage.

Well, with that said, only a handful of people in the world would be able to correct that intelligence. It does us no harm if the humans spread false information among themselves, so I'm going to ignore it. However, I can imagine our glorious leader might have a good laugh upon hearing it.

That aside.

This time, we planned to forget about work and take some much-deserved vacation. Perhaps hard work is to be valued, but working nonstop is no good for either humans or demons. That holds especially true for Mr. Loren—considering the trials his body endures, he needs some proper rest now and then.

That's why I made this proposal—but of all people, that redheaded womanizer Mr. Claes had to get himself involved.

Apparently, he had found himself in a rather dubious situation and wanted some company. Usually, I'd have turned him down, but I thought I might be

able to look the other way if Mr. Claes agreed to cover the travel costs out of his own pocket. I ultimately entrusted the decision to Mr. Loren.

That meant our destination was locked in: Karlovy, the town of food and baths.

Along the way, a few pitying looks came our way, which made me curious. It seemed we were headed toward trouble. Just as I wondered if we'd picked the wrong place, we arrived. And as we indulged in our first meal, so came the inevitable street thugs, picking fights.

I could understand why they were irritated. After all, we had been joined by Mr. Claes's three tagalongs, as well as Ms. Gula, who is somewhat good to look at. Everyone—especially me—was a beauty. And with all the girls, and especially me, being so beautiful (important things must be repeated!) and there only being two gentlemen in the party, I find it perfectly understandable that they wanted to mess with us.

Mr. Claes went to deal with them on his own, but he was tragically taken out. Perhaps I should praise him for fighting without his gift, but I'll have to deduct points for the ultimate outcome. That said, beastkind are known to have greater natural physical abilities than humankind, and it is somewhat impressive that he managed to hold his ground against multiple beastkind opponents.

As for those beastkind gentlemen, they were anticlimactically dispatched as soon as Mr. Loren went to clean up Mr. Claes's mess.

The event made clear just how abnormal Mr. Loren's brute strength is compared to the general population. But I'd expect nothing less of my Mr. Loren. (Although this is also important, it's embarrassing, so I will *not* be repeating myself.)

Incidentally, Mr. Loren mentioned that people who act without thinking have the advantage in brawls, and this is true as far as I can tell. The demons are a wee bit blunter about it: They say, "Stupidity equals strength." All too often,

one loses their edge when they think about the consequences!

Now then, if only that had been the end of that. But at that moment, the lord of town suddenly made her entrance. Her name was Ms. Menuett, and she was of catkind—from an origin clan, by the look of it.

The beastkind is a mysterious race. To have a near-human appearance is a sign of blood thinned over many generations. The origin clans, who've kept their blood strong, look exactly like walking animals. This presumably has something to do with the origin of beastkind, but I am none too knowledgeable on that.

Perhaps I'll hear something interesting if I ask Mother, but the topic doesn't particularly interest me. The beastkind themselves don't really range out beyond their own territories, and neither do I feel especially motivated to look into them.

In any case, Ms. Menuett said she knew we were the victims in this incident, but that she couldn't release those involved without a round of questioning. With little say in the matter, we headed to the rendezvous she designated, but for some reason, it was not the lord's manor. Instead, it was located in a district I would have preferred Mr. Loren steer clear of, if possible.

What was the good lord thinking, inviting us out there? But as it turned out, the questioning had only been an excuse. The lord had a direct request to make.

Apparently, the hot springs in Karlovy had become unusable, and the lord wanted us to look into it. A bath town with no baths! That did explain all the pitying looks we'd received.

Not that I had any intentions of working on this outing. Mr. Loren didn't seem on board either. Unfortunately, Mr. Claes jumped at the chance.

Honestly... Mr. Claes. He is, to all appearances, an ordinary human, but he exhibited obvious interest in Ms. Menuett, who is, to all appearances, thoroughly feline. Does he really pursue anyone, regardless of appearance or

race, as long as they can be classified as women?

It's almost respectable.

Mr. Loren couldn't just abandon Mr. Claes to it. What's more, he decided to tag along in part because he failed to stop Mr. Claes from agreeing, even though he was sitting right next to him. I think that makes Mr. Loren a terribly nice person.

Our target was not the canal that drew water from the spring but the hot lake that lay beyond it. As those of beastkind tend to be a touch sloppy with detail work, they are unsuited to such investigations. The human adventurers Ms. Menuett had previously hired hadn't returned—which sounded rather fishy—but I was sure we'd manage.

We soon arrived at the hot lake. I'd never seen an entire lake filled with hot spring water before.

There are several locations in demon territory that a human mind couldn't even begin to imagine, but as demons go, I'm still quite young. I was reminded of my own inexperience.

Though first encounters do come with a certain excitement...the lake was incredibly dirty. The smell was so rank it was no wonder Karlovy couldn't entice its customers to bathe in the water drawn from it.

I was just thinking how much I'd hate to take a dip when Mr. Loren surprised me by sticking his finger straight in. He instantly realized the danger and retracted it, so he wasn't hurt too seriously. But it left me wondering what had happened to his survival instinct.

As a result, we learned that the water was incredibly hazardous. Testing was the right course of action, but what would Mr. Loren have done if the lake was chock full of a poison so potent it could kill at a touch...? Ah, I get the feeling he would have picked up on that sort of thing right from the word go. Surely he wouldn't have touched it in that case.

This may be an indelicate way to put it, but it's difficult to draw a wild beast with poisoned bait.

We searched the area for more answers, at which point we found a portion of the lake that ran transparent. As the water drawn by the town was milky white, this was also a mystery. Though I was sure we'd figure it out eventually.

The clear water seemed harmless enough and we set up camp nearby. That was when Mr. Claes's comrade Ms. Ange blurted out something about using the lake before us as a bathtub.

A bit careless, I know. But it was beyond me to resist the temptations of a good bath. A demon I may be, but I am still a woman. I cannot ignore the urge to bathe, and an open-air bath was quite an enticing notion.

My concerns were as follows: first, we would be defenseless while bathing; second, Mr. Claes. But neither would be an issue as long as Mr. Loren was around.

I did consider the possibility that Mr. Loren might peep, but that thought immediately left my head. I mean, this is Mr. Loren we're talking about. I can't even imagine him peeping from the shadows.

If I must say, it was far easier to picture him *accidentally* catching a glance, only to immediately turn away with a red face. That feels far more natural to me. Hm, if he really wants a peek that badly, I could give it some serious consideration...

What am I even writing?

Anyways, Mr. Claes was tied up, and a rope hung with cloth was used to section off an impromptu bathing area. All that was left was to dive in.

"Don't do it. Definitely don't do it," I teased Mr. Loren. But if that was enough to get him peeping, I wouldn't have so many troubles.

The bath was splendid, by the way. The luxury of taking in the great outdoors at my leisure as I submerged in hot water! A rare experience.



Mr. Claes's companions raised a ruckus over all things, big and small. The way I see it, quite bluntly, as long as a product fulfills the demand of the target demographic, its size is not an issue. Even if you attract the eyes of all the men in the world, what's the point if you can't satisfy the one person you have in mind?

In the midst of these philosophical ponderings, we were rudely interrupted.

Even I was a tad panicked at the time, and I found myself running as fast as my legs would take me. So the way I managed to properly wrap one of the partitioning cloths around myself as I leapt into Mr. Loren's arms was, well... I suppose that's just Lapis for you.

Meanwhile, Ms. Ange and company fell short of ladylike. They'll doubtless look back on their behavior with faces red in shame. I don't know how they'll look Mr. Loren in the eye again.

In short, Ms. Leila was left sprawled out with everything on display. My mercy is bountiful, so I'll forget the sight. In any case, something more important was afoot.

At first, I thought it was a creepy, hairy fish of some variety, but upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a mermaid with wavy, water-blue hair. Quite pretty, all things considered.

Although I was initially concerned that a mermaid would be boiled to death in the heat of the lake, it seemed she was in fact a spirit that had a mermaid-esque form.

Said spirit told us that the pollution of the lake water was about to kill everything living within it. She needed our help.

I guess even an inhospitably hot lake still houses some forms of life. It was no time to be impressed by nature though, and I insisted that every job necessitates a proper reward. In response, the spirit presented a jewel containing something I was technically supposed to be searching for: a part of myself.

This had become a request we couldn't turn down.

The spirit had observed large, black goblins near the lake; both their strength and appearance suggested we'd be facing foes I would have preferred not to meet.

On top of all that, Ms. Gula was acting somewhat curious. She didn't seem particularly motivated to do anything at all, but I was sure we'd find out why soon enough.

To the point, the part I reclaimed this time was my eyes. Both of them. In regaining more of my power, I felt I should be better able to assist Mr. Loren.

Purple eyes are the mark of a demon. It's a shame I can't show them off in public, as I really am proud to bear them. I was slightly sad when Mr. Loren seemed taken aback by their hue, but he did apologize. Then he stared straight into my eyes and gazed, entranced as I changed them back and forth. All is forgiven.

The grace of the spirit of the lake made us immune to the effects of the water. Under her guidance, we headed to the location where the contaminants were being expelled—the source of the pollution.

Owing to her grace, we were unharmed by the hazardous brown water. Spirits are ever so convenient. Isn't there a way I can capture one or two for personal use? I do get the feeling I could find and nab one if I really tried, but that can wait.

After proceeding a while, we came across what seemed to be ruins from the time of the ancient kingdom. Is it just me, or does it seem like a majority of the unpleasantness in the world can be traced back to that ancient kingdom? It must have been quite a horrible country.

For some reason, Ms. Gula behaved as if she recognized the ruins. But she was created by the ancient kingdom, so it wasn't strange to see her so familiar. More surprising to me was that Mr. Loren remembered a lecture I'd given him once before. Back then, I'd just said it as a bit of miscellaneous trivia. To think

he would remember it and even put it to good use! How delightful.

Meanwhile, Ms. Gula seemed to have completely forgotten what she wrote down when we registered her at the guild. Quite troubling. It had always been clear they would suspect something if she said she came from the north, dressed like that. Even if they didn't say it aloud.

But, well, this was Claes's party we were dealing with. Perhaps they weren't too bothered.

Waiting for us in the depths of the ruins—as we should have known, I suppose—was Mr. Magna, the swordsman in black with the awfully arrogant eyes.

The moment we heard about those goblins, I'd just known we were going to run into him. Once we actually met, though, I found him far more irritating than I remembered.

However, to be perfectly honest, the facilities in these ruins were more of a problem than Mr. Magna. These facilities seemed to consume and process individuals, reforging them into entities like Ms. Gula. In that light, it's understandable why Ms. Gula was so reluctant to set foot in there. The individual undergoing the process at present just happened to be Mr. Magna's dark elf attendant.

I believe she's called "Ms. Noel"—or something. Ms. Noel was trying to remake herself as a dark god. Worse yet, she had entered the coffin of Mr. Luxuria, dark god of lust.

Being both a dark elf *and* a dark god of lust? Wouldn't that be complicating her backstory a bit much? Characters like that should be relegated to the novels one keeps out of the hands of children.

Also, Mr. Magna's equipment is annoyingly powerful. As far as adventurers go, our party was incredibly competent, but even my eyes couldn't see past his enchantments. Just how unfair is he going to be?

Now, you might say I have no right to say such things, seeing as my party includes both a demon and a dark god. But please, just ignore this inconsequential detail.

By the end of it, Mr. Loren was out of commission, as he'd once again used too much of his strength. Ms. Gula was also down, after the damage inflicted on her. It went without saying that Mr. Claes's party was heavily injured as well.

All this in exchange for a single one of Mr. Magna's arms. It just doesn't add up.

However, no one on our side was at any risk of just up and dying. Meanwhile, that might well have been the end of Mr. Magna if he wasn't swiftly treated.

I proposed we end it at a draw, and thankfully, Ms. Noel, dark god of lust, agreed.

If I were unconcerned with the prospect of collateral damage, I could probably have killed Mr. Magna, but I think I'll leave that to Mr. Loren. I would rather not jeopardize my supporting role as a priest.

Oh, yes, I didn't forget to put a gag order on Mr. Claes. Even if I got the feeling he wouldn't go spreading any unnecessary information, I had to be sure.

The ruins have been properly destroyed. A device that transforms humans into who knows what is better off being obliterated for the sake of the world.

I made quite a mess of things—an object lesson to anyone who plans on making an enemy of me. Somewhere along the way, Mr. Claes started to make a rather amusing expression. It left an impression.

Finally, I turned down the reward from the lord of Karlovy. Destroying the ruins had likely changed the nature of the water flowing into town, and it is entirely possible that they won't be able to advertise their hot springs after this.

Before anyone could find out, we fled back to Kaffa. I've been too scared to look into what happened in Karlovy. I can only hope they manage to keep their customer base with their food, and I pray that they work out some way to make

a business of baths that produce perfectly ordinary hot water.

To wit, if they want someone to resent, they should direct their complaints to the ancient kingdom that started all this—or Magna, who messed it all up.

Still, this was supposed to be a vacation. Not only did we get no rest, we have even more troubles to worry over. Is there nowhere in the human domain that will let us pass our time in peace?

This was the sort of thing I wondered as I watched Mr. Loren, bedridden yet again.

And thus, the curtain closes once more.



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