

The

Brilliant Healer's

New Life in the Shadows



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Sakaku Hishikawa

Illustrator

Daburyu

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"I'm an information broker. Stay silent or lie if you want—I can still suss out the truth."

Pista's bold declaration echoed through the casino as she flipped the card on the table.

Zenos

Pista



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Prologue

The slums were littered with dilapidated, abandoned shacks.

These places had been quickly stripped of any valuables, and there was little worth in the remaining ruins, with their rotting pillars and peeling roofs that couldn't even keep out the rain. But with no one to demolish the remnants, they had been left to decay naturally.

One of these abandoned homes had served as a sort of training ground, once upon a time.

"Heal!" a child shouted, extending a hand forward.

Despite a slim frame clad in worn-out, dirty clothes, the child had eyes with a cool, determined sparkle to them, their color matching a mop of unruly deep-indigo hair. A white light gathered at the child's slender fingertips, shimmering and popping.

"Huh. Well done, Velitra," said a man with a scruffy beard from his seat on the stained floor. His eyes shifted under the hood of his coat—so deeply black that it seemed to block out all light—and landed on the other child in the room. "Color me shocked, Zenos. This kid you brought is a natural."

"Told you," Zenos replied proudly, looking at his orphanage companion. "Velitra's smart."

Zenos had often been tasked by orphanage staff to loot the corpses of people who'd dropped dead in the slums. Feeling sorry for them, he'd tried to find a way to bring them back to life, and studied magic on his own. He'd observed the bodies of the fallen from various races, focusing closely on them and visualizing them in his mind, all while practicing and refining his magic until the day he'd felt like he was finally on the cusp of successfully reviving someone.

But just as he'd been about to cast his best spell on a body he'd found, the man in the black cloak who now sat by the wall had scowled, smacked Zenos on the back of the head, and angrily shouted, "Don't ever use that power on the

dead! That's for the living only!" His expression had been one of surprise, but with a tinge of exasperation.

"Can't believe a kid can do this," he'd said. "You're a dangerous one. You need to learn to control your power."

"Control my power?" Zenos echoed.

After that day, the man took shelter in an abandoned shack tucked away in a corner of the slums, and became Zenos's occasional magic instructor. When asked who he was, the man had shot the boy an awkward look and replied simply, "Just a fourth-rate healer."

Zenos sneaked away from his orphanage duties from time to time to visit the shack, evading the staff's watchful eyes. And he didn't go there just for magic lessons; the man's stories of the outside world, too, were fascinating to Zenos.

The man taught him that the Kingdom of Herzeth, where they lived, was just one of many countries in the continent. That this kingdom may be bound by strict social hierarchy, but the world had countless other ways of life and peoples of a myriad of different races. The man spoke of vast oceans stretching on infinitely, of blazing mountains, of bottomless caves. The man also taught the boy basic reading, writing, and history, detailing events such as the war between humans and demons that had occurred three hundred years ago.

For Zenos, whose entire world was the orphanage, it was all an eye-opening experience. One he wanted to share with his friends, though sneaking out of the orphanage with a large group proved difficult.

In the end, he'd shared the lessons only with his closest friend, Velitra.

Velitra and Zenos were part of the same group of children in the orphanage. The indigo-haired child was reserved and gentle, if a bit hardheaded at times. But though their personalities were different, Zenos felt a strange affinity toward the other youth.

"So this is healing magic," Velitra breathed in awe, gazing at the twinkling lights. "Amazing."

"Pulling off a spell on your second lesson is impressive," their mentor noted.

“You’re just a good teacher,” Velitra replied.

The man chuckled lightly. “Flattery won’t get you anywhere, you know. You’re just quick to grasp the theory. Smart kid, that’s all.”

“Right? I keep saying that too,” Zenos boasted.

“And what are *you* acting all proud for?” the man admonished, though he didn’t mind seeing the boy gloat about his friend. He gave Zenos a glance, then sighed before continuing: “You’re the opposite of Velitra—it’s all instinct with you. You show great power once things click, but you’re way too inconsistent. That’s what makes you dangerous.”

“I’m just not good with complicated theory and stuff,” Zenos protested. “You keep saying you’re a healer, gramps. Why don’t you just show me, then? I’ll get it if you do.”

But the man just laughed proudly for some reason. “Ba ha ha! You still have a lot of growing to do before I show you anything, kiddo. Come back in a hundred years.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zenos muttered.

He’d started to wonder if the self-proclaimed healer was a con artist, since he’d never seen the man cast anything, but he *did* have inarguably interesting tales to tell. And since Velitra had actually learned to use magic from the guy’s teachings, the man couldn’t be all hot air.

“Zenos, we should go,” Velitra said.

“Oh. Yeah, let’s get going,” Zenos agreed.

“You two live in an orphanage, right?” the man interjected. “Sounds rough from what you’ve told me. You really have to go back?”

“If we don’t, they’ll punish our friends. Something about ‘collective responsibility.’”

“Huh. All right. Not like it’s my place to interfere,” the man replied. The expression on his face was one Zenos had seen occasionally before—it was like he’d given up on something.

“We’ll be back, though,” Velitra said in a tone that was firmer than usual,

though still mild-mannered. The pair stopped at the door and Velitra turned to ask, “Also, uh, what should we call you?”

The man looked up, seemingly touched by the question. “Hey, Zenos! You hear that? Your friend’s so polite! You, meanwhile, just call me ‘gramps.’”

“I mean, you never told me your name, so...”

It wasn’t as if Zenos hadn’t asked either. But whenever he had, the man’d just refused to answer, stating that he’d abandoned his name long ago. At first, Zenos had called him “healer guy,” but eventually, he’d settled on “gramps.”

“That so? Well, whatever. What would you like to call me? I’m open to ‘cool guy,’ for instance.”

“Ugh, you’re such a pain, gramps.”

“Shut up, Zenos! It’s a fine nickname! Put yourself in my shoes, being called *gramps* at my age!”

“How old even are you, gramps?”

The man chuckled. “How old do I look?”

“You’re *such* a pain!”

“Oh? The day I disavow you as my student draws near, Zenos. How sad for you.”

As the two bickered, Velitra timidly spoke up. “Um... How about ‘master’?”

Their mentor’s expression turned bewildered for a moment. Usually he was quite flippant, but he fell silent for a spell, closing his eyes. With a slow nod, he smiled and continued, “All right. Sounds great. You can call me master.”

A tinge of melancholy colored the nostalgic memory of days gone by.

Chapter 1: The Black Guild's Information Broker

The powerful Kingdom of Herzeth lay at the heart of the continent.

Its people were divided into a strict class system, with royalty at the top, wielding an overwhelming majority of the power. Then came nobles, citizens, and at the very bottom, the poor, also known as the forgotten people.

Separating the dazzling districts where the citizens comprising the majority of the capital's population led a leisure life and the sprawling slums, also known as the capital's shadow, lay a stretch of abandoned residential area once devastated by a plague. Tucked away in this area stood a quiet building that could easily have been mistaken for a ruin. It was an illegal clinic operated secretly by a brilliant healer, born in the slums and without a license.

"All good now," Zenos said, pulling away his hand. "Now you can play all you like."

In the clinic's treatment room, with its simple interior and function-over-form furnishings, sat a demi-human child with a fully healed knee. "Thank you, Dr. Zenos!" the child exclaimed excitedly before happily dashing out of the clinic.

"Phew. That's it for the morning, I think."

"Yeah," agreed an elf girl wearing a handmade nurse's cap as she walked closer, carrying iced tea on a tray. The ice cubes swayed against the glass, making a light clinking sound. "You're doing great."

"Thanks, Lily," Zenos said before downing the iced tea in one gulp, standing from his chair, and opening the window wide. The lively chirping of cicadas filled the room, announcing the arrival of summer. "Looks like it'll be hot today."

Just last month he'd reunited with Liz—a childhood friend from the orphanage he'd grown up in—after several years apart. Much had happened, and an incident involving the place's former director had been resolved. Liz, with dreams of starting her own orphanage, had taken her sister Gina and left

the clinic. There had been no major issues since, and the days that followed had been relatively peaceful.

“It’s been so uneventful lately,” Lily mused.

“Sure has,” Zenos agreed. It’d been one thing after another since the clinic opened. The peace and quiet weren’t so bad.

It was of course Carmilla, the wraith sitting idly on the edge of the bed and swinging her legs, who rained on Zenos’s parade. “It could be the calm before the storm,” she pointed out.

“Don’t jinx it. Is this your wraith’s intuition again?” Zenos was loath to admit it, but Carmilla’s hunches often turned out to be right in the worst possible way.

The woman, who was an undead of the highest rank, shook her head. “Just wishful thinking.”

“That’s even worse!”

She chuckled eerily. “I am always after thrills that make the blood pump and the body shiver.”

“Except you don’t have blood and you don’t have a body.”

“Irrelevant,” Carmilla pointed out before continuing, “Either way, why are you wearing something so stifling in this heat?”

“Hmm? Oh. You’re right,” Zenos said as he glanced at his black cloak. He took it off and hung it on a hook on the wall. “I’m just in the habit of wearing it. It looks warm, but it’s really worn out, so it’s surprisingly breezy.”

“And what is there to be proud about in that?” the wraith asked. “Why not get a new one? You have the means, no?”

“Well... I’m attached to it.”

“Zenos, that was your mentor’s cloak, right?” Lily asked while gazing at the garment on the wall.

The healer nodded. “Yeah. He was a shady old coot, but I owe him a lot.”

“A memento, then,” Carmilla remarked, shifting to sit cross-legged.

“Something like that, yeah,” Zenos replied with a somewhat nostalgic

expression. The dirtied black cloak was the only thing he had left of his mentor, whose identity and past remained a mystery.

However, a letter from Becker of the Royal Institute of Healing—a former friend of his mentor’s—had made Zenos realize that there could still be something else the mysterious man had left behind.

“His notes,” he murmured. His mentor had owned a black leather journal.

The man had once been an elite healer, but he’d abandoned everything and come to the slums because he’d dabbled in the forbidden magic of resurrection. A curse had befallen him for it, and due to that, not even his old friend Becker could remember much about him. Becker’s letter had said that if Zenos wanted to find out more, he should look for the journal.

“A childhood friend of yours might have these notes, is that right?” Carmilla asked.

“It’s just a possibility,” Zenos replied. The childhood friend in question was Velitra, who had trained in healing magic under the same mentor. If anyone other than Zenos had the man’s old journal, it’d have to be his fellow student.

“Do you know where your friend is now, Zenos?” Lily asked.

“Would be easier if I did,” Zenos replied with a shallow sigh. All of his friends from the orphanage had gone their separate ways after the fire. He did want to find them, but the slums and the capital were vast, and locating them through conventional means would be challenging.

Carmilla’s lips curled into a sly grin. “Perhaps luck will be on your side and you shall have your answer this very day,” she said with a chuckle.

Zenos tilted his head. “What are you talking about?”

At that exact moment, the door to the clinic burst open and the three demi-human bosses—Zophia of the lizardmen, Lynga of the werewolves, and Loewe of the orcs—all swarmed in.

“Doc!” Zophia called out. “Are you here?!”

“It’s me! Lynga!”

“Sure is sunny today,” Loewe muttered.

There was no need to ask what had brought those three to the clinic today; they hung around all the time as though they lived there, business or no. Instead, Zenos stated firmly, “It’s almost time for lunch, but *I’m* picking the menu this time.”

Zophia smiled awkwardly. “Aw, come on, doc. It’s like you’re saying we only ever come here for lunch.”

“You’re always here for lunch, though,” Zenos pointed out.

The lizardwoman laughed. “I won’t deny that, but we actually have business here today.”

“Business, you say?”

“We looked into the matter of your childhood friend as best as we could,” Lynga clarified.

Zenos’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

“The three of us came by last month, but you and Lily were on a house call,” Loewe explained. “We chatted with Carmilla, and she told us that your childhood friend might have your mentor’s journal.”

Indeed, Zenos had shared that information with Lily and Carmilla previously. He glanced at the Lich Queen, who shrugged lightly and asked, “Is there a problem? These people practically live here. They would have found out sooner or later.”

“Well, it’s not that I mind, exactly...” Zenos mumbled.

The three demi-humans spoke up all at once.

“We can’t do anything about forbidden magic or curses or anything, but we can definitely help you find someone,” Zophia declared.

“You’re always helping us out, Sir Zenos,” Lynga added. “This is the least we can do!”

“We each spent a month investigating, so we wanted to pool our information,” Loewe explained.

“And you want to do that today,” Zenos concluded. Since the matter of his

mentor and Velitra was personal, he hadn't intended to ask the demi-humans for help, but their network was undoubtedly helpful when it came to finding people in the slums. "I see. Sorry for the trouble."

"What are you talking about?" Zophia asked. "A problem of yours is a problem of ours. Plus, if we'd told you earlier, you'd probably have said you didn't need our help, so... Sorry, but we went ahead and acted on our own."

It sounded like they'd gone and fussed over him for no good reason. With a sigh, Zenos sat down at the table and straightened up slightly. "All right, then," he said. "Let's hear it."

Out of consideration, Lily closed the window, and the chirping of the cicadas faded into the distance. An inexplicable tension hung in the now quiet, still air of the room.

"I'll start. To summarize..." Zophia paused, looking around at the group before continuing. "My men and I, uh, actually found nothing at all. Sorry, doc." She slumped forward dejectedly.

"All that mystery for nothing?" Carmilla complained, glaring at the lizardwoman.

Zophia's shoulders sagged even further. "I'm sorry. I thought we'd be able to sniff something out if we really went at it, but there really was no info whatsoever. I even extended my network past the slums into the city district, but couldn't catch a single whiff of anything." She turned to Loewe as though asking whether the orc had managed to find something out.

Loewe grunted before saying, "You too, then. Truthfully, I couldn't find anything either. I even had my people check with the Black Guild, but nothing came up at all," the orc chief said with obvious disappointment.

As the atmosphere turned heavier, Zenos kept his tone deliberately light. "I see. Well, don't sweat it. I'm grateful you guys went out of your way." He couldn't help feeling slightly deflated, but he hadn't expected this to be easy in the first place.

Zophia and Loewe frowned apologetically. "Sorry, doc," the lizardwoman said.

“If even with all that searching we couldn’t find anything, maybe your friend’s not in the capital anymore.”

“Or—and I hate to say it—maybe your friend’s dead somewhere.”

Lily cast a concerned glance at the healer. “Zenos...”

Carmilla, sipping her honey-sweetened tea, turned to the remaining demi-human. “What about you, Lynga? You have been quiet all this while.”

“I had the same results,” Lynga replied. “I had my guys investigate, but we found nothing. Except...”

“Except...?”

After thinking for a moment, Lynga continued: “The fact we couldn’t find *anything* at all seems off to me. It’s like someone intentionally covered all their tracks.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Zophia and Loewe could be right—maybe Sir Zenos’s friend left the capital or died. But there’s another possibility.” Everyone’s attention was locked on Lynga as she concluded, “Maybe his friend is hiding deep underground.”

Silence swept across the room.

After a moment, Loewe crossed her arms and muttered, “But Lynga, my people have already gone probing underground in the Black Guild.”

“Yeah, but probably only as far as an outsider can reach, right?” the leader of the werewolves pointed out. “The executives of the Black Guild, the top brass especially, rarely show their faces. If Sir Zenos’s old friend has risen to a position like that... Well, then it makes sense we can’t find anything.”

“You think Velitra is a top executive of the Black Guild?” Zenos asked, furrowing his brows as the kind, gentle smile of the child he’d used to know popped up in his mind. Now that he thought about it, Liz *had* mentioned there being someone with exceptional healing skills among the top executives of the guild. “Could it really be...?” he murmured to himself.

Zophia shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. “Makes sense to me. If that’s true, no wonder we didn’t find anything. But it’s gonna be pretty hard to

investigate a top executive of the Black Guild...”

“True, there’s a limit to what an outsider can find out,” Lynga agreed. “But I have an idea.” After getting everyone’s attention once more, Lynga cleared her throat and continued, “We should ask the Black Guild’s information broker.”

“Right,” Zophia murmured in understanding. “The broker.”

“What’s an information broker?” Lily asked, tilting her head.

“People who make a living out of buying and selling information,” Zophia explained. “They have their own information network, and would probably have an easier time getting around than us.”

“There’s one problem, though,” Loewe pointed out. “How do we even find this broker in the first place?”

Lynga puffed out her chest proudly and chuckled. “I know where.”

“You do?”

“Yeah! One of the customers at the werewolves’ gambling den is a broker!”

“Huh. How unusually shrewd of you, Lynga!” Zophia exclaimed, clapping her hands in admiration.

Lynga laughed triumphantly. “Yes! Praise me!” She turned her beast-eared head to Zenos.

“Um, what?” Zenos asked.

“Sir Zenos! I would like some praise! And a headpat!”

“R-Right.” *Well, the information she just gave us could be valuable, I guess.*

As Zenos lightly patted her head, Lynga let out a muffled chuckle. A split second later, another head was thrust in front of the healer’s hand.

“Uh, Loewe? What’s up?”

Loewe glanced up at him, looking a bit miffed. “Damn. My plan to take advantage of the chaos and trick Zenos into patting me didn’t work...”

“What chaos, exactly?”

“Forget it, Loewe,” Lynga said. “Sadly for you, this win is all mine.”

Next to an annoyed Zophia, who was grinding her teeth in frustration, Lily was calmly clearing away the glasses. "When I can't sleep, Zenos pats my head too," she commented.

"What?!" the lizardwoman exclaimed. "Wait, no, that makes sense."

Lynga groaned. "Just once isn't enough for me!"

"I want to live with Zenos too!" Loewe added.

Carmilla chuckled in amusement. "Tea is best served with the ugly squabbles of women."

"Why don't we all just calm down?" Zenos said, holding out his arms.

Zophia collected herself and cleared her throat. "Right, right. We're not here to argue. Anyway, if buying information on the underground from this broker is an option, then we should do it."

"Yep," Lynga agreed. "Last time, when we were looking into Zenos's friend Liz, I bought information from this broker's underlings."

"Huh," Loewe said. "I have high hopes, then."

Lynga crossed her arms, a little hesitant. "Just... The broker's not an easy person to deal with."

Three days later, the eventide shadows of Zenos and his companions stretched long in the back alleys of the slums. The daytime heat had subsided, and a cool breeze brushed against the backs of the group's necks.

"I feel bad that you guys are spending time on dealing with my stuff," Zenos said.

The demi-humans all shook their heads.

"What are you talking about?" Zophia asked. "I told you, a problem of yours is a problem of ours."

"Yeah. You're always helping us out," Loewe agreed.

"It's the opposite, really," Lynga chimed in. "I'm glad I can be of use, for once."

“Really? I owe you guys,” Zenos said in reply.

If Velitra was deeply involved with the Black Guild, trying to suss anything out individually would be difficult. And since Lynga, who herself was a bit of an oddball, had claimed the information broker was difficult to deal with, it suggested this person could be quite eccentric.

Regardless, nothing would change unless they met with the broker. And so, with Lynga leading the way, the group headed to the werewolf-owned gambling den.

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever been to the werewolves’ gambling den,” Zophia mused.

“True. Me neither,” Loewe said.

“It’s a first for me too,” Lily added. “It’s so exciting. Right, Zenos?”

“Yeah, it is,” Zenos agreed.

Visibly tense, Lily clutched an old-fashioned staff with both hands. It was well worn and engraved with intricate patterns.

“Hey, Lily,” Zenos said. “Is Carmilla in that staff?”

Since the sun was still up, the undead Carmilla couldn’t be out and about in her original form. However, as a spirit, she could inhabit objects she had an attachment to. This staff was an old belonging of hers, and so he figured she was currently inside it and had asked Lily to carry her.

“Yeah,” Lily confirmed. “Carmilla insisted on coming along. She said she’d end up a wandering spirit if I didn’t bring her.”

“She’s kind of already a wandering spirit.”

The staff vibrated slightly, and Carmilla’s voice came from within it. “Hee hee hee... I am itching to put my skills to use. ’Tis time to show all of you how lucky I am. The winds of gambling are blowing...”

“The winds of what, now? Also, you can talk while in the staff?”

“Hee hee hee... Where there is a will, there is a way.”

Truly, the longer one spent around undead, the less one understood their

behavior. “Can you just, like, chill for once?” Zenos asked. “Actually, did you even need to be here?”

“Fool! Who else should go if not I, once called the Goddess of Gambling?!”

“What? Really?”

“No.”

“Ugh!”

“We’re here,” Lynga said, interrupting the pointless banter. She gestured at a worn-out house tucked away in the alley.

“This is the place?” Zophia asked, bewildered.

“It looks like an ordinary house,” Loewe pointed out.

“It’s designed to not attract attention from the outside,” Lynga explained as she pushed open the creaky door. “We have a few other dens too, but the broker often comes to this one.”

A musty smell wafted out as the dimly lit interior came into view. The twilight sun filtered in through the open door, illuminating the rotten floorboards and the numerous cobwebs hanging from the ceiling.

“How is *this* a gambling den?” Zophia asked. “It’s just an abandoned house.”

Lynga snorted. “Watch this, Zophia,” she said, rubbing her nose before placing a hand on a bookshelf at the back of the room. The werewolf took hold of a thick book the size of a dictionary and tilted it forward, causing the bookshelf to creak open like a door. Behind it was a staircase leading down into the basement.

Loewe whistled at the sight.

“Follow me,” Lynga said.

The group followed her down a dozen or so steps before being met with a sturdy metal door. Lynga slowly pushed it open with both hands, and a lavish space, unimaginable from the outside, unfolded before them. A wave of heat poured out from the room, pricking at the group’s skin.

“Whoa...!”

Multiple chandeliers hung from the ceiling, bathing the gamblers in a bright spotlight-like glow. Crowds gathered around the card tables and roulette wheels, and the sounds of laughter and conversation could be heard coming from the bar area in the back. The smell of tobacco and alcohol filled the air, and the heated atmosphere permeated every corner of the underground space.

“This is pretty impressive,” Zenos remarked.

Lynga chuckled proudly. “You can praise me all you like, Sir Zenos,” she said, her beast ears twitching atop her gray hair. “Now, pat me again!”

“No way, Lynga!” Zophia protested. “You can’t get headpats just from bringing us to a casino!”

“That’s right!” Loewe agreed. “Zenos’s headpats are reserved for much greater achievements!”

“What are you guys going on about?” Zenos asked.

Carmilla chuckled. “Ah, ugly squabbles.”

Zophia took a step forward, surveying the ample underground space. “So, Lynga, where’s the broker?”

“The broker usually comes around once a month,” Lynga replied. “Unless there was a change in schedule, today should be the day.” Getting on her tiptoes, she scanned their surroundings. “Not here yet, I don’t think.”

“What now, Zenos?” Lily asked, tugging on the healer’s sleeve.

“Well, we’re here anyway. Might as well wait a bit longer,” he replied, taking the elf girl toward the bar area.

Carmilla, who had already slipped out of the staff, was looking around restlessly. “Hee hee hee... Now, what game shall I try first...?”

“You *do* know why we’re here, right?” Zenos asked.

“Hmm? Of course I do.”

“Okay. Just checking.”

“Gambling! Why would anyone come to a gambling den, if not to gamble?!”

“So you have no idea!”

Zenos's quip was drowned out by the lively chatter of the nearby gamblers.

The underground casino run by the werewolf faction was bustling with gamblers of all kinds. There were demi-humans, ordinary humans, and even some mixed-race patrons. Some looked influential, while others were pale and clung to a single chip like their lives depended on it. Cries of joy blended in with groans of despair, contributing to the unique atmosphere of the place, where people pitted luck and money against each other.

"For now, just relax until the broker shows up," Lynga said before calling some of her men over and having them bring drinks to Zenos and the others, now all seated at the bar.

"They call to me... The winds of gambling are calling to meee..." Carmilla said as she floated toward the casino floor, drawn in by the excitement.

"Hey! Stop right there!" Zenos called out. "Look, sorry, but can you just keep a low profile *this* once?"

"Oh..."

"Don't look so disappointed!"

Not everyone here was a regular at the clinic. The guests' attention was focused on gambling so far, but if anyone noticed the presence of a wraith—the most powerful of all undead creatures—it would likely cause a commotion.

Carmilla snorted. "Fine. But surely I can observe quietly, no?"

"I guess," Zenos conceded. "As long as it doesn't cause a stir."

"All right, then. I shall return to the staff. Lily, carry me, if you would." With that, she dissipated into a puff of smoke and was absorbed into the old staff the elf was holding. "Onward! Perhaps I shall start by observing the roulette tables."

"Huh? Oh! Okay!" Lily stammered, gripping the staff nervously with both hands before stepping deeper into the bustling casino.

"Guess I'll go too," Zenos said.

“Sir Zenos, Lily will be fine,” Lynga assured him. “All the employees here work for me, and they’re very familiar with Lily.”

“Well, all right...” He sat back down. Looking closely, Zenos recognized most of the werewolf staff on the casino floor. Indeed, with them around, there was no need to worry about Lily. Several staff members were already approaching her.

“Well, since I’m here, I might as well take a look around,” Loewe said, climbing from her seat. With a relaxed stride, she blended into the crowd of gamblers, leaving Lynga, Zenos, and Zophia at the bar.

“So, Lynga,” Zophia said, crossing her legs, “can we trust this broker?”

Lynga brought a finger to her forehead, looking a bit troubled. “Well, hmm... You could say the broker is trustworthy. And also not.”

“What? Are you sure this is a good idea, then?”

“It’s just, I think the broker does good work. Can’t be buying and selling information underground for years otherwise, you know?”

“That makes sense...” Zenos said, crossing his arms and nodding.

To an information broker, credibility was everything. If this person had been in the business long enough, the information they dealt in, if nothing else, had to be reliable. And a gambling den was a breeding ground for all sorts of shady information—the broker probably stopped by regularly to collect it.

“Anyway, doc, I hope we can find some info on your childhood friend,” Zophia said.

“Your friend has your master’s notes, right?” Lynga asked.

“Can’t know for sure, but it’s likely, yeah,” Zenos confirmed. He hadn’t seen Velitra since the orphanage fire, and that had been a long time ago. Back in the day, just exchanging glances had been enough for him to tell what had been on his friend’s mind, but now he didn’t even know where Velitra was.

As the trio chatted pleasantly about bygone days, a werewolf employee approached and whispered something in Lynga’s ear. She stood up slowly and turned to Zenos. “Sir Zenos, it seems the broker’s here.”

“All right. Let’s go meet ’em, then.”

“I’m coming too,” Zophia said.

Zenos and Zophia followed Lynga toward the casino’s entrance, but the person they were looking for was nowhere to be found. Lynga asked her subordinate at the reception, “Where’s the broker?”

“Oh, sorry, boss,” the werewolf employee said. “The broker was here a second ago, but just went inside.”

Lynga scoffed. “Always impatient, that one.” She turned on her heel and led the way through the casino, but with so many patrons, it was hard to spot their target.

After a bit of a search, Loewe came trudging toward the group from across the room.

“What’s up, Loewe?” Zophia asked. “Why the long face?”

Loewe responded in a tone that implied she’d just seen something terrifying. “L-Listen, Zophia! Something unbelievable just happened!”

“Unbelievable?”

“A gambler approached me, and asked me to play a card-guessing game. And then...” Loewe gulped. “Next thing I knew, all my money was gone.”

“What are you talking about? That’s just gambling, Loewe.”

“Ugh! I would’ve won in a battle of fists!”

“And then it wouldn’t be gambling anymore...”

At that moment, a small cheer arose from a corner of the casino. “What’s going on over there?” Zenos asked.

As he tried to get a closer look, a sudden whisper echoed in his ear. “Simply stellar.”

“Agh! That scared the crap out of me!” Zenos exclaimed, turning to the side to see a translucent woman smirking at him. “Carmilla! Can you stop talking to me while invisible? It freaks me out! Also, what are you going on about?”

The wraith chuckled. “Lily. She just won the roulette jackpot.”

“And why is Lily playing roulette?”

“What a foolish question. Why come to a casino and *not* make use of Lily’s innate luck?”

Indeed, at the night festival in the slums, Lily had displayed unbelievable luck by rolling five sixes. And Carmilla had displayed unbelievable bad luck by rolling five ones.

“Can you, like, not drag an innocent girl into the world of gambling?”

“Oh, do not be silly. We are here, are we not? ’Tis all part of the experience.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re just doing this because *you* want to gamble.”

Carmilla chuckled. “A brief soak in the winds of gambling has whet my appetite somewhat. But I long for a more thrilling bet! Let us double the stakes!”

Is she the type to gamble her life away? Zenos wondered. Come to think of it, his mentor used to drag him along to gamble too. The man had always said everything in life was a learning experience, but...what kind of thing was *that* going to teach a kid?

Lily waved shyly at the group from the roulette table. “Oh! Zenos! I might’ve managed to contribute to our budget a little!” she exclaimed, rushing over to the group, a cup filled with silver chips in her hands.

The next moment, however, a gust of wind swept past the young elf. Suddenly, the chips were gone from her hands.

“Huh? What?”

“Ah ha ha! Look at these chips! Today’s my lucky day, meow,” triumphantly said a small girl standing a little ways away. Her eyes were upturned like a cat’s, and furry ears protruded from her fluffy dark-brown hair—she had to be part of a demi-human race known as the catfolk. The cunning girl had a cup filled with chips in her hand.

“Hey! You!” Loewe called out. “You’re the one who took my money earlier!”

The girl laughed. “Thanks for the cash, lady!” she said, cheekily sticking her tongue out before trying to leave.

“Stop!” Zophia said in a low voice, patting Lily’s shoulder. “Those chips belong to this girl. Give them back.”

The catgirl scratched her head unapologetically. “Where’s your proof, meow? I found these, you know.”

“I knew catfolk were agile, but the sticky fingers are news to me.”

“Do you have evidence?”

“You think a petty pickpocket like you can deceive the eyes of a true thief?”

“Wait, Zophia,” Lynga said, stopping the leader of the lizardmen.

“Don’t try to stop me, Lynga,” Zophia replied, grabbing the catgirl’s collar. “I won’t cause problems for your casino.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Oh? Hey, Lynga! Long time no see, meow!” the catgirl said, beaming as she waved at Lynga.



“That’s her,” Lynga said.

“Huh?”

Sighing, Lynga pointed at the weirdly cheerful catgirl. “The information broker.”

The group was now at the bar area in the back.

“Hi there, meow! I’m Pista, the broker!” the catgirl exclaimed gleefully, bowing her head slightly. She handed the cup with the chips back to Lily. “Here you go. You’ve gotta take better care of it, you know! I hope you learned your lesson!”

“R-Right,” Lily stammered, nodding, a strange look on her face.

Next to the young elf, Zophia spoke up, exasperated. “I don’t know how trustworthy a broker who’s also a petty thief can be.”

“Mya ha ha! It’s just a little joke,” Pista said. “But you saw how quick I am, right? Speedy enough to sneak anywhere and collect info lickety-split?”

“You push all the wrong buttons for me,” Zophia muttered, her gaze shooting small sparks at the catgirl.

Pista just smiled complacently and chuckled. “Aww, what a shame. I really wanted to be friends with Galewind Zophia, meow.”

Zophia’s eyes narrowed slightly. “So you know who I am.”

“I would be a very shoddy information broker if I didn’t, meow. And that lousy gambler over there is Loewe the Mighty, leader of the orc tribe.”

Loewe grunted indignantly, grinding her teeth in frustration. “I’ll have you know I wouldn’t lose to the likes of you in a fistfight!”

Pista sat on the couch, crossed her legs, and gestured at Zenos with her dainty chin. “But the one I’m most curious about is Mr. Handsome over there.”

Lily pouted, grumbling at the catgirl’s comment.

Pista cast a quick side glance at Lily before continuing, “Nice to meet you,

shadow healer from the ruined city.”

After a moment’s silence, Zenos replied, “You even know about me?”

“Don’t underestimate my ability to gather information, meow. Though I admit all I knew about the shadow healer was that he was human, wore a jet-black cloak, and all the demi-humans loved him. I’ve never had the chance to see you in person before, so I’m stoked! I returned the chips earlier as a token of my friendship.”

“You’re a cheeky little thing, aren’t you?” Zophia asked pointedly. “All you did was return what you *stole* from Lily.”

Pista was unfazed by Zophia’s sharp gaze. She did indeed seem difficult to deal with, as Lynga had warned. “So,” the catgirl continued, “what does the famous shadow healer want from little ol’ me?”

“Oh, right,” Zenos replied. “I want to buy information. What are your rates?”

Licking her lips, Pista crossed her arms placidly. “That depends on the information, meow. What do you need? If you’d like, I can find out anything from the target’s hobbies, preferences, and habits, to how often they use the toilet, meow.”

“I want information on a top executive of the Black Guild.”

“What?” The composed smile vanished from Pista’s face.

“Among the top executives, there should be someone who grew up in the Dalitz Institute named Veli—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Pista interjected, holding out her right hand in front of Zenos. “Don’t be stupid, meow! You can’t say things like that in public!”

“What do you mean?”

“An executive of the Black Guild? And a top one, no less? Probing around for that kind of info is taboo in this industry, meow. You didn’t know that?”

“No.”

“Well, now you do.”

“So what you’re saying is you can’t sell me the info.”

“Of course I can’t, meow! Even nine lives wouldn’t save me if I did.”

Lynga, who stood behind the group, spoke up then. “Hey, Pista. I owe Sir Zenos a lot. Anything you can do for an old friend?”

“You can ask all you like, Lynga, but the answer’s still no. This conversation is over, meow.”

Silence fell over the group at the realization that the Black Guild was far more impenetrable than anyone had anticipated.

As they all tried to figure out what to do next, a whisper echoed right in Pista’s ear. “Hee hee hee... All meows and no bite, this broker.”

“Huh?” Pista’s brows furrowed. “Who just said that?”

“Useless.”

“Hey! Now wait just a minute, meow!” the catgirl snapped angrily at Zenos.

“Hmm?” he replied, lifting his head.

“I’ll have you know I’m *excellent*! You’re just trying to provoke me! If word gets around that I’m useless, my business will be ruined!”

“Uh, I did no such thing, but...does this mean you’ve changed your mind about the sale?”

“Well...” Pista trailed off briefly, hesitating, then smirked. “All right. Fine. Let’s gamble, then. If you win, shadow healer, I’ll give you the info. *However*,” she added dramatically, “if you lose, I’ll own you.”

“What?” Zenos replied.

“Huh?!” Lily exclaimed simultaneously.

“What’s the matter?” Pista taunted. “I’m risking my neck here, so it’s only fair you bet your life too, meow. If I get the chance to have the famous shadow healer in my claws, it’ll be worth it.”

“D-Don’t do it, Zenos!” Lily said in a panic.

“Perfect,” a voice interjected.

Pista grinned wickedly. “You’ve got guts, shadow healer. Let’s settle this over

there, meow.”

“Wh-Why, Zenos?” Lily asked.

“Doc, you sure about this?” Zophia added.

“Uh, that wasn’t me just now,” Zenos said. Someone else had answered for him, and there was only one possible culprit. The healer said into an empty space, “It was you, wasn’t it, Miss Wandering Spirit?”

Carmilla chuckled mischievously. “I simply gave the push you needed. Without the resolve to leap into the flames, you will never obtain what you desire. Such is life.”

“You know, you can say some pretty deep stuff sometimes.”

“I have not been around for three hundred years for nothing.”

“You’re just doing this for fun, though.”

“Ah. Busted?”

“Busted.”

“Carmilla!” Lily spoke up anxiously. “How can you say that? What if Zenos loses?”

Carmilla’s translucent form slowly manifested before the young elf. “Hee hee hee. No need to worry, Lily. Victory is ours, guaranteed!”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?”

“I have a foolproof strategy, of course. Loewe, you just bet against the broker, did you not? You mentioned a card-guessing game.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Loewe confirmed. “We took turns drawing cards and guessing the numbers on them.”

Carmilla proudly brought her index finger to her forehead and chuckled. “Then she is likely to challenge us to the very same game. Against you, her luck prevailed, but I am a spirit. I can become invisible and spy on the opponent’s cards all I like. And then, still invisible, I can whisper the numbers to Zenos and guarantee our victory!”

“W-Wow!” Lily exclaimed, clapping her hands in awe. After a moment,

however, she tilted her head. “Wait, isn’t that cheating?”

“Fool! I am the Lich Queen! I have transcended rules. I may do as I please.”

What incredible self-assurance she had.

Zophia pointed anxiously at the cardroom area where Pista was headed. “But you can’t go there, can you?”

“What?”

The casino was underground, but perhaps for ventilation, that particular area had a part of the ceiling that was grated and open to the surface, and the dusk sunlight streamed in through the gaps. Carmilla couldn’t be exposed to the sun.

The wraith silently gazed at the dim sunlight for a moment. “Lynga, can’t the game be moved to another location?”

“That’s the only area where patrons can gamble against each other,” the werewolf explained. “Moving the game somewhere else would attract suspicion.”

“So, Miss I Have Transcended Rules, what now?” Zenos asked, glaring at the wraith.

Carmilla smiled and gradually faded away.

“Hey! Get back here!” Zenos shouted. After a moment, his shoulders sagged in resignation, and he heaved a long sigh. “Oh well. Gotta jump into the current to go out into the sea, and all that.”

“What does that mean?” Lily asked.

“It’s one of my old mentor’s favorite sayings. His thirteenth most used one.”

If he wanted to suss out anything about Velitra, he had no choice but to do this. Cracking his neck, Zenos slowly made his way toward the cardroom.

The gambling battle between healer and broker was about to begin.

Chapter 2: The Night Healer

"I'm so worried," Lily murmured.

"Doc, you're not used to gambling. Let me do it for you," Zophia suggested.

"No, allow me a rematch!" Loewe exclaimed.

A gambling match had been set between Zenos and the catgirl broker Pista, with the stakes being information on a top executive of the Black Guild. With Carmilla now gone, Lily and the others had hurriedly approached the healer, anxious looks on their faces.

"No, the thing with my mentor and Velitra is a personal issue," Zenos replied. "I can't let anyone else do this for me." It had been Carmilla's provocation that had set the match in stone, but nevertheless, missing this opportunity could mean he'd lose the thread connecting him to his old friend forever.

Zenos walked casually toward the cardroom where Pista was waiting.

"All right," the catgirl said. "We'll do this here. This is my favorite spot, meow." Pista took a seat with her back against the wall and motioned for Zenos to sit across from her. "Patrons can set their own rules and gamble in this area. We pay a fee for the staff to oversee matches so people can't get away with not paying their dues."

"I see," the healer mused.

He and Pista placed their chips at the edge of the table, and Lynga stepped forward to pick them up. "I'll be the overseer," the werewolf said.

Pista hummed, displeased. "But you're his friend, Lynga. Can you really be impartial?"

"Hmph. It may be true Sir Zenos and I are madly in love and sworn to marry, but I don't let personal feelings interfere with my work."

"What's with the blatantly false information you just slipped in there, Lynga?" Zenos asked, wishing she wouldn't try to feed weird lies to the person literally

making a living off of selling information.

Pista narrowed her eyes slightly, then shrugged. “All righty then, meow. In exchange, I get to set the rules. Is that fair, shadow healer?”

“I don’t mind, just keep them simple,” he replied. “I’m bad at remembering complicated stuff.”

“No worries, no worries. This is a number-guessing game. Both parties draw cards from the deck and try to guess the number on the opponent’s card. Guess correctly and you win. Simple, meow.”

Just as Carmilla had predicted, this was the same game Pista had played with Loewe.

Lynga had a brand-new wax-sealed deck of cards her subordinates had brought her. She opened the box in front of the two contestants; they both flipped through the cards and checked the contents. The deck contained four suits—spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs—each with cards numbered one to thirteen.

Pista flipped the stack of cards over and handed it to Zenos. “Shuffle them, meow.”

“I’m not good with handling cards, so I’ll leave it to you,” he replied.

With a nod, Pista cut the deck about ten times and placed the cards face down on the center of the table. “Now, draw one from wherever you like. I’ll guess first.”

As instructed, Zenos picked a card from near the middle of the stack, looked at it, and placed it face down in front of him.

Pista chuckled. “Now, what could it be? The cards are numbered one to thirteen, so the chance of guessing correctly is one in thirteen. It’s all up to chance, meow.” Smirking, she stared at the card Zenos had drawn.

Sensing an interesting match about to unfold, other casino patrons began to gather around, intrigued by the gambling duel.

“Hey, Loewe,” Zophia said a little ways out from the table. “How good is she?”

“When we competed, we both guessed wrong twice, then she guessed

correctly on the third try,” Loewe explained.

“Well, that seems normal.” The lizardwoman seemed a bit reassured by the answer. Considering the probabilities, guessing correctly on the third try was lucky, but not impossible.

“But,” Loewe added, “it felt like she was just messing around the first two times.”

“Huh?”

Back at the table, Pista smirked. “This is a very important match, though, so I’ll be taking it seriously from the get-go.” Her feline eyes narrowed as she looked up at Zenos, observing him closely. “Is this card a six, a seven, or an eight?”

“Do I need to answer that?” Zenos asked. “That wasn’t in the rules, I don’t think.”

“Oh, it’s just idle talk. You don’t have to reply if you don’t want to. Or you could lie, meow.”

“Then I’ll stay silent.”

Pista chuckled. “Suit yourself. Now, maybe it’s a two, or a three, or a four? Did I get it?”

Zenos remained silent.

Staring intently at the healer, Pista repeated similar questions several times. Then, with a confident smile and another chuckle, she continued, “If you think this is a game of pure luck, shadow healer...” She trailed off for a moment, her expression turning triumphant. “Then you’re gonna lose, meow!”

“What?”

“Your card is a three!” she declared boldly before flipping over the card on the table.

It was a three of spades. Surprised murmurs rose from the surrounding crowd at her immediate correct guess.

Waving the card she’d picked, Pista laughed. “Did you forget? I’m an

information broker. Stay silent or lie if you want—I can still suss out the truth from little things like eye movements, facial muscle contractions, changes in breathing patterns... You're trying to stay calm, shadow healer, but your eyes are a little bloodshot. Distress, perhaps? I don't miss anything, meow."

Zenos remained mute.

With a smug smile, the broker continued, "Now then, that's a point for me. If you get the next card wrong, I win, meow." It was now Pista's turn to choose a card; she picked one from the bottom of the stack, looked at the number, then set it on the table face down. "Hee hee. Better guess it, shadow healer, or you're all mine."

Lily, who was anxiously watching the match, exclaimed a troubled, "H-How?!"

Zophia hummed thoughtfully. "So she's using those questions to unsettle him and then reading his subtle reactions? Is that a thing?"

"She did that to me as well," Loewe muttered anxiously. "Makes sense, since she's an info broker and all. If she can really read minds, Zenos is in a bind."

Panicking, Lily fidgeted. "Wh-What should we do? She's going to own him!"

Carmilla chuckled from within the staff in the young elf's hands, making the implement vibrate. "Worry not, Lily. Why panic? Believe in Zenos!"

"Y-Yes, you're right. I'll believe in him!"

"This whole match was your idea in the first place, Carmilla," Zophia said pointedly, and the old staff fell silent.

Having listened with half an ear to the conversation behind him, Zenos addressed the catgirl across the table. "You're pretty good."

Pista chuckled. "I'll take information over praise, meow."

"This is a battle of wits disguised as a game of chance."

"That's right. But just knowing that won't save an amateur."

The corners of Zenos's lips lifted into a knowing grin. "Except I'm not one. I'm pretty good at this kind of game, actually."

"Huh?"

“Your card’s an eight,” he declared loudly before flipping Pista’s card.

It was indeed an eight. Cheers erupted from the crowd behind them.

“H-How did you...?” the catgirl stammered, her feline eyes wide with shock.

Zenos smiled at her. “Let’s continue, yeah?”

“Wow, Zenos is amazing!” Lily exclaimed, jumping up and down.

Carmilla, from within the staff, chuckled and remarked confidently, “I believe this is when I say ‘I told you so.’”

Ugh, how did he do it? Pista wondered, staring at the card in front of her with furrowed brows. The shadow healer had so easily guessed the correct card, despite the one-in-thirteen chance. How? Pure luck, or something else? *No, but...he shouldn’t be able to do what I do.* She subtly glanced behind her, checking that it was indeed just an ordinary wall there, before turning her gaze back to the table. *Ah, well. All I have to do is guess right and I won’t lose, meow.*

Taking a deep breath, Pista quickly surveyed the gamblers watching the match from behind Zenos, among which were a few of her acquaintances. Her ability to guess Zenos’s card had actually been a simple trick; her acquaintances would sneak a look at the card the healer drew and signal the number to her with a secret code. Her job as a broker was to buy and sell information, after all—she was just purchasing the information about Zenos’s card from the people she knew.

Of course, she would never tell anyone about these people, nor would she visibly interact with them inside the casino. They weren’t her friends—merely business associates she traded information with for mutual benefit. Her infrequent visits to the casino, as well as tactics such as guessing Loewe’s cards incorrectly twice, were all to avoid revealing her trick.

But the stakes were high for this match. Dragging it out and giving her opponent the opportunity for a lucky guess would ruin everything. She’d pulled all the stops from the start.

“Now then, it’s your turn to draw, shadow healer,” Pista said. “No information

can escape my gaze. Better be ready, meow.”

Her questions and verbal jabs, of course, were merely a front to conceal the real trick. Making it seem like she could read her opponent’s body language diverted attention from the truth, and such tactics were part of her arsenal as a broker specializing in manipulating information out of people.

Zenos brought a hand to his chin, deep in thought. After a moment, he drew a card from the pile and, without checking it, placed it face down on the table.

“Wha—” Pista exclaimed involuntarily. “You’re not gonna look at the card, meow?”

“I don’t see the problem,” Zenos said. “This is a game where you guess the number on the card, right? Whether or not I know the number doesn’t change the outcome.”

“B-But...” She trailed off, speechless. The healer’s tactic prevented her accomplices from checking his card.

Zenos continued nonchalantly, “If you can read my mind based on my behavior, then it’s better for me not to know the card at all.”

Pista ground her teeth in silent frustration. *Did he figure out my trick?*

The healer’s perpetually nonplussed behavior made him difficult to read. Arguing now, however, would only arouse suspicion. Clenching her fist, Pista reluctantly blurted out a number. “Seven.”

She flipped the card, revealing a four and drawing a long gasp from the audience.

Damn it. I failed. It should’ve been in the rules that her opponent needed to check the card. Usually, these matches were over before the other party grew suspicious, so she’d grown careless. Now it was down to pure probability, and guessing correctly wasn’t so easy anymore. But at least the shadow healer was in the same predicament.

“My turn to guess,” Zenos prompted her calmly. “Please draw a card.”

Does he have a trick of his own, meow? Pista wondered. It seemed unlikely. Behind her was a wall, and no one seemed to be peeking. She’d chosen a seat

where no one could stand behind her precisely to prevent her opponents from using the same trick.

This meant the odds should be the same for both of them. Zenos had guessed correctly on the first try, but that had to have been a fluke. Still, just to be safe, Pista drew a card and copied the healer, placing it face down on the table without checking it.

“Hmm...” Zenos squinted at the back of the card, pressed down on his eyelids a few times, then announced a number in his usual flat tone. “I’ve got it. It’s a nine.”

Not knowing the number on the card herself, Pista swallowed hard. She was sure it couldn’t be guessed so easily, but still felt her pulse quicken. What she had believed to be a certain win had turned into an unexpected situation.

After several deep breaths, she hesitantly turned over the card. It was a nine of hearts.

“H-How come, meow?!”

Pista’s yelp was met with a deafening cheer that shook the underground space. The elven girl and demi-human women all hugged Zenos from behind.

“You’re so cool, Zenos!” Lily exclaimed.

“Good going, doc!” Zophia said.

“Knew you could do it,” Loewe added.

The overseer, Lynga, crossed her arms and nodded approvingly.

From the staff Lily held, Carmilla chuckled. “Just as I planned.”

“You planned nothing,” Zenos interjected.

Ignoring his remark, Carmilla continued, “Either way, Zenos, your eyes are a bit red. Are you *that* moved by your victory?”

“Oh, no, this isn’t—”

When Zenos attempted to deny it, the Lich Queen had a sudden realization, and laughed quietly. “Ah. I see how it is. Hee hee hee... Truly, you never fail to entertain.”

“Huh?” Lily said. “What do you mean, Carmilla?”

“Wait a second, meow!” an agitated Pista interrupted, sitting up abruptly. “H-How did you guess right twice in a row?! That’s not possible! What trick did you use?!”

“I didn’t,” Zenos said, scratching his cheek. “I just focused really hard.”

“What?”

“This is a brand-new deck, right? So you know what order the cards are initially set in. You can pay attention to how it’s shuffled and where the card was drawn from, and guess the number that way.”

“Wait, but how would you be able to see that?” Pista asked, confused, as she picked up the stack of cards.

“It’s possible.” Zenos pointed at his reddened eyes. “I used an enhancement spell to temporarily boost my eyesight and kinetic vision to an extreme level. It puts quite a strain on my eyes, so I could only do it for a short while.”

With her feline eyes wide open, Pista protested, “Wh-What?! That’s not fair, meow!”

“Is it not? All I did was make use of the abilities available to me. Didn’t you do exactly that, reading my body language earlier? Or were *you* cheating?”

Pista grumbled, pursing her lips.

“Well, a match is a match,” Zenos continued calmly. “Now then, I’ll be taking that intel on the top executive.”

With the gazes of Zenos and all of his companions on her, Pista looked to the overseeing Lynga as though seeking help.

The werewolf, arms still crossed, shook her head. “This match was conducted under my supervision. The werewolves’ honor is at stake. You need to pay your dues.”

“Urk...” Pista mumbled something unintelligible, then let her shoulders slump in resignation. “Fine, meow...”

Since the cardroom was too public a space, the group had decided to move to an office behind the casino.

“Now then, Pista, tell us what you know,” Lynga prompted.

Pista glanced around repeatedly before speaking in a defeated tone. “You wanna know if there’s an old friend of yours among the top executives of the Black Guild, right, shadow healer?”

Zenos sat down across from Pista and nodded. “Yeah. Name’s Velitra. Friend of mine from the Dalitz Institute.”

“Do you have any other info, meow?”

“We trained in healing magic under the same mentor. I haven’t seen Velitra since the orphanage fire, so I don’t know anything past that. But I hear that there’s someone among the top executives of the guild that can treat any injury, and Velitra was very smart and talented, so I thought maybe...”

And of course, if the top executive turned out to be someone else, Zenos would know to search elsewhere and stay away from the ominous Black Guild.

After a brief silence, Pista replied, “Well, to start, even I don’t know the names of the top executives. So I can’t tell you if one of them is named Velitra.”

“I see...” Disappointment began to wash over Zenos.

“However,” Pista continued, “there is in fact a top executive who can treat any injury.”

Zenos perked up.

“This is through the grapevine, but people call that executive the ‘Night Healer.’ Supposedly they showed up at the guild a few years back, offering healing for crazy fees. And since most of the people in the guild can’t really show their faces in public, many were willing to pay whatever the asking price was. That allowed this Night Healer to rise to the position of top executive in no time at all.”

The timelines seemed to match, and Zenos felt his pulse quicken slightly. “The Night Healer, huh? Then I just need to go to the Black Guild and meet with ‘em.”

Pista shook her head vigorously. “It’s not that simple, meow. You can’t just meet with a top executive of the guild like that.”

“So I can’t just go and ask?”

“No one even knows where the top executives can be found.”

“What do I do, then?” Zenos asked, scratching his cheek.

Pista raised two fingers. “There are two possible ways to do it, meow.”

“Two?”

“Yep. One is to make waves in the Black Guild and become a top executive yourself. Only top executives can meet with other top executives—that’s the unspoken rule. Word has it that the top executives regularly hold meetings, so by becoming one, you’d be able to meet the others.”

Zenos nodded, bringing a hand to his forehead. “Become a top executive myself, huh...”

“Wait, you’re *actually* considering it, meow? That’s an unrealistic option! Totally impossible. The other way is the only viable one. Though it’s also a tall order...”

“Well, let’s hear it, at least.”

Pista took another look around before continuing. “Become a client of the Night Healer, meow.”

“A client?”

“That’s the Night Healer’s job, right? Healing injuries and illnesses? So if you request those services through the Black Guild...”

“Ah, makes sense,” Zophia chimed in, nodding. “If we pretend to be clients, we’ll get to meet the Night Healer during treatment.”

“Yup. There’s nothing the Black Guild won’t do if you pay them, meow. Which means for the right price, they’ll treat anyone.” Pista’s cat ears, which had been confidently upright, dropped flat. “But the problem is the money. Not only is the asking price crazy, but I hear that since becoming a top executive, the Night Healer doesn’t actually perform treatments very often anymore. So asking for

the top executive directly like that would mean bringing a huge amount of money just to show you can pay for it.” The catgirl let out a long sigh. “Get it now? It’s super hard to meet with a Black Guild top executive, meow.”

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks.”

“So, sad as it is, you should give up while you’re ahead and go home. I told you everything I know, meow, so—”

“We’ll go with the second plan: request healing and specifically ask for Velitra.”

“Huh?” Pista froze in the middle of standing up, doing a double take at Zenos. “D-Did your ears break? I told you, to request treatment from the Night Healer, you’d need an eye-popping amount of money, meow! It’s not that easy—”

“Yep, I heard you. You know, I’ve actually always wanted to say this.” Zenos cleared his throat and stared straight at Pista. “Money’s not a problem.”

Seven days later, on a night when thin layers of gray clouds were spread across the sky, two figures stood at the edge of the ruined city. With only the faint moonlight overhead, the city was immersed in darkness and eerily quiet.

“I’m still surprised you managed to get the money, meow,” said Pista the broker as she crouched-walked next to Zenos.

“I’ve been working hard for a while,” the healer replied in a low whisper. As a shadow healer, he’d saved up a significant amount by ensuring he was fairly compensated for his efforts. Not only that, he rarely spent money in his daily life at the clinic; most of his food came from donations by the demi-humans, and he only spent the bare minimum on the building itself so as to not attract attention.

“You’re so rich, meow. Wanna be my patron?”

“Well, if I ever need more info, I’ll ask you.”

Pista chuckled. “Fine. But I’ll have you know my measurements won’t come cheap.”

“That particular information won’t be necessary.”

“Aww, don’t be such a square, meow. Play along,” she whined in disappointment before glancing behind him. “By the way, why didn’t you bring your friends along?”

“I couldn’t drag them even more into this.” They were, after all, on the way to meet with the enigmatic top executive of the Black Guild known as the Night Healer.

This person *could* be his old friend, Velitra, but they also could not. Lily and the demi-humans had insisted on coming along regardless, but given the possibility this meeting could turn out to be worse than a simple reunion between friends, Zenos had decided to go alone.

“You don’t have to come either, if you’re scared,” he added in conclusion.

“That won’t do, meow. If I don’t take you there, who will?” the broker asked, scoffing. It had been through Pista’s connections that the meeting with the Night Healer had been arranged, after all.

“I could go alone. Just give me directions.”

“This place’s layout is complex and confusing. There are many places where no-gooders hang out, so if you don’t navigate properly, you’ll run into trouble.”

“Didn’t take you for someone with such a strong sense of duty, I admit.”

Zophia had expressed concerns that this could all be a trap laid by Pista. Perhaps the plan could’ve involved getting Zenos to bring a large sum of money with him, only for the catgirl to run off with it. Lynga, however, had dismissed this possibility, saying that to an information broker, reputation was everything. If Pista ever tried to trick a customer like that, she wouldn’t make it far in the underworld.

Still, why would she go so far as to risk coming along?

“This job’s dangerous. My plan was originally to just give you the info and be done with it.” She glanced into the dimness ahead. “But I have ambitions as a broker too. And meeting a top executive of the Black Guild is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, meow.”

Zenos said nothing to that.

“Of course, once we get there, I’m gonna hide. You’ll be on your own.”

“That’s fine with me.”

As they wound through the dimly lit alleys amid the somewhat humid summer night air, their destination finally came into view.

“That’s the meeting spot, meow,” Pista said, pointing at a wide stone ruin. The walls were riddled with cracks, its frameless windows gaping like black maws, as if beckoning in the lost. The building appeared quite old, covered as it was in vines that twined like spiderwebs. “I hear it used to be a pretty big clinic.”

“Huh...” Now that she mentioned it, the building did indeed have a unique air to it. It must have witnessed life and death for many years to emanate such an ethereal aura, filled with the essence of the afterlife.

“The meeting spot is the lobby on the first floor, meow. I’ll be hiding behind a pillar, observing.”

“Got it.” When Zenos turned to her, Pista was already gone. Catfolk were indeed quick.

His footsteps echoed loudly as he entered the building. The roof and walls had mostly collapsed, and dim moonlight filtered in, faintly illuminating the rubble strewn all over.

Zenos stood in the center of the lobby and looked around.

There was still time before the meeting, and the Night Healer was nowhere to be seen just yet. Zenos crossed his arms, exhaling slowly. His fingers brushed against the leather pouch at his waist, filled to the brim with a large amount of gold. Pretending to be in need of treatment to lure out the other healer made him a bit uncomfortable, but as Pista had said, there were few options when it came to meeting with a top executive of the Black Guild.

“Well, I guess this counts as being in need of treatment,” he muttered, looking at his left index finger.

The sharp cut on his fingertip was from when he’d accidentally hurt himself with a knife during dinner prep. Normally, he would’ve healed it instantly, but

since he was going to meet with the Night Healer, he'd left it as it was. Still, it was yet to be seen whether this healer was in fact Velitra.

"If it is..." He trailed off, questions he wanted to ask flashing in his mind. *Been doing okay? What have you been up to, anyway? And do you have our master's notes?*

The dull sound of footsteps approaching from the back of the lobby pulled him from his emotional reverie. Someone was standing in the shadowed area of the room, where the moonlight didn't reach. The figure silently observed Zenos for a moment, then spoke up slowly.

"Are you the client?"

Was I wrong?

Zenos furrowed his brows. It'd been a long time since he'd last seen Velitra, but still, this person's voice didn't match what he remembered. It was somewhat low and hoarse, very unlike his old friend's.

The figure approached, gradually growing larger, and what revealed itself under the moonlight was a thin middle-aged man in an ink-dyed robe, his expression high-strung above his pointy chin. The man narrowed his eyes, looking at Zenos appraisingly.

"Are you the Night Healer?" Zenos asked.

"Indeed. Are you the client?" the man repeated.

"Yeah," Zenos replied with a nod. He let out a sigh of neither disappointment nor relief.

The Night Healer wasn't Velitra, which meant he'd summoned a high-ranking member of the Black Guild over a mere cut on his finger. The man didn't quite seem to be the type who would laugh off the transgression, but still, Zenos figured he'd explain the situation and ask whether Velitra was indeed part of the guild.

"I injured my finger, but I actually—"

"The money first," the man interrupted, extending his right hand.

So he wanted payment upfront.

Zenos threw the leather pouch at his waist to the Night Healer; it arced through the air and landed on the man's hand. The man then shook the heavy pouch two or three times before reaching inside and pulling out several gold coins, holding them up to the moonlight, and sniffing them.

"These are the real deal. All right, then." The man gave a satisfied smile.

Pista had told Zenos that the Night Healer only ever took gold coins for payment. His rates were exorbitant, but Zenos *had* summoned the man here, so he had no choice but to pay.

Zenos took a step closer. "Anyway, sorry to bother, but I wanted to know if someone in the guild is named Veli—"

"I have no more need of you now," the man interrupted again.

"Huh?" Zenos tilted his head in confusion.

The Night Healer set down the pouch on the ground and pulled something silver and shiny from his pocket. "Die."

A thick-bladed knife flew through the air toward Zenos.

"Shadow healer!" came Pista's voice from somewhere nearby.

The knife struck the left side of Zenos's chest, hard. The Night Healer turned his back to the lobby, ready to leave.

"Wait just a second," Zenos called out reflexively. "I'm not sure I'm grasping what's happening here."

"What?" The man, slightly surprised, turned back around. "You're not hurt? I was positive I'd struck your heart. What's going on?"

"I used a protective spell. But never mind that—I'm the one who should be asking what's going on. Why did you attack me? I'm your client, right? Isn't it the Night Healer's job to, you know, be a healer?"

The man ignored his questions, a wary expression settling on his features. "A protective spell? Are you a mage?"

"Well, sort of—"

“Guess I’ll just have to use more force.”

“Hey! Wait!”

Five knives came at Zenos in quick succession this time, sharply striking his forehead, neck, chest, and other vital points one after the other. None of them pierced Zenos’s skin, however; they were all deflected, falling harmlessly to the floor.

“Listen when people are talking!” Zenos protested. “I want to know why you’re attacki—”

“What in the…” Panic clearly flashed across the man’s features. “You’re *still* unharmed? What even are you?!”

“Like I said, I used a protective spell. But that’s not important. What I want to —”

“I’ll just cut you down myself!” the man barked, drawing a longsword from his waist. He pointed its blade, colored a poisonous-looking shade of purple, at Zenos.

“Listen already!”

This time, Zenos didn’t bother with defense. Instead, he used an enhancement spell to momentarily boost his leg strength and closed the distance between himself and the man in an instant. With the force of that momentum, Zenos plunged his right fist into the man’s abdomen—he didn’t even get the chance to move his sword at all.

“Guh!”

“Oh. My bad,” Zenos said, realizing that in his efforts to avoid the man’s wanton aggression, he’d instinctively delivered a massive punch to his stomach. “But it’s your bad too!”

The man hurled, stomach acid spraying from his mouth as he collapsed to his knees. He clutched his abdomen, groaning, then shot Zenos a murderous glare. “Y-You! Do you know who I—”

“Elgen,” came an icy, bone-chilling voice. “Do not act on your own.”

In an instant, the look on the man’s face went from one of burning rage to

fear.

Zenos's gaze shifted to the source of the voice—the end of the corridor leading away from the lobby. Quiet footsteps announced someone was drawing near.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Zenos saw that the newcomer wore a pitch-black robe that blended in with the shadows. A plain black mask prevented him from seeing any changes in the stranger's expression.

"How many times must I tell you not to act on your own?" the stranger asked the kneeling man in an eerily cold tone.

"B-But something trivial like this isn't worthy of your attention! I was merely trying to collect the payment..."

"I said, *do not act on your own*. If you've gone deaf, perhaps you no longer have a need for your ears?"

"M-My sincerest apologies, Master Night Healer!" the man blurted out, shaking like a leaf. He bowed so low to the masked figure that he almost seemed to merge with the ground.

"Night...Healer?" Zenos echoed, looking between the prostrated man and the newly arrived stranger.

The man now groveling and cowering before the masked figure had claimed to be the Night Healer only moments ago, but it seemed the new arrival was the true Night Healer. The other man's name was apparently Elgen—he was presumably the Night Healer's henchman, falsely assuming his master's title.

Not that Zenos cared about any of that. He raised his head and took a step closer, staring intently at the newly arrived masked figure.

That cold tone of voice. That presence. Even with the stranger's face hidden behind a mask and the significant changes in overall demeanor, he still knew. He could tell. They'd shared hardships and joys in equal measure during their time together living in the worst-ever orphanage, studying under the best-ever mentor.

"Long time no see, Velitra."



In the dead of night, the former clinic was enveloped in an almost-oppressive silence. The pair had not seen one another in many years, and their reunion was thick with tension.

The Night Healer gazed at Zenos from behind the impassive mask, speaking in a chilly tone. "I knew this request was odd. So you were the client."

"Yep," Zenos replied simply.

"Master, be careful!" cried out the henchman Elgen, still on the ground. "This man is dangerous!"

"Was I not clear? *Silence*," the Night Healer commanded.

"O-Of course!" Elgen said, pressing his forehead to the ground once more.

The Night Healer's gaze, shrouded in shadow behind the mask and difficult to discern, shifted to Zenos again. "What are you after, Zenos?"

"You know, you don't seem surprised to see me pop up out of nowhere."

"I've been hearing rumors here and there," came the reply, purely matter-of-fact, devoid of joy or surprise. "Information does reach the underground."

"Does it? Then why did you never come see me?"

"Why would I?"

"Do you need a reason? How about just catching up with an old friend over some delicious tea?"

There was no response.

Zenos shrugged, then pointed to his index finger. "Look, see? I hurt my finger while cooking. Figured I'd get the illustrious Night Healer to fix it for me." Met with continued silence, Zenos scratched his head and continued, "Look, I'm sorry. I know you're busy, and here I am, calling you here over this kinda stuff. But don't be mad, all right? I needed to pull a stunt like this or I'd never get to meet with a top executive of the Black Guild."

"I asked what you're after," the Night Healer finally replied.

“See, I met Liz again recently.”

“Liz...” A slight reaction this time.

“So, we all got separated when the orphanage caught fire, right? I didn’t think I’d ever see anyone again, but then I bumped into Liz, and I started wondering how our other friends were doing. Anyway, I’m glad you’re alive.”

The fact they were both alive and could meet again at all was nothing short of a miracle, given the harsh environment they’d grown up in.

Still, the intentions of the person behind the mask remained unreadable. “Is that all?”

“Sorry, one more thing,” Zenos said, stopping Velitra from turning away. “Do you have our master’s notes?”

Now there was a clear reaction of surprise, unlike before. It faded quickly, however, and the Night Healer replied calmly, “I don’t know anything about that.”

“So you do,” Zenos concluded. “How many years did we spend together? I can tell when you’re lying.”

“I’m not the same person I was back then.”

“Come on. Let me see the notes. Just for a bit—”

“Zenos,” Velitra interrupted coolly. “We’re done here. Your finger’s treatment is complete.”

Zenos looked at his left hand and saw that the tip of his index finger was perfectly healed, as though there had never been a wound in the first place. “Skilled as ever. Why did you—”

Velitra removed the mask, and Zenos trailed off at the sight of familiar ocean-blue eyes and androgynous features. The cool gaze was the exact same as he remembered, but its depths were inscrutable. Darker, even more intense now than with the mask on.

“Zenos, I stand before you as a top executive of the Black Guild,” Velitra remarked.

“So I hear,” Zenos replied. “Look, I don’t know how the guild works, but I figure you made it up the ranks quickly. Good job on that.”

“In the Black Guild, revealing one’s identity is disadvantageous, especially for someone high up the ranks. That’s why I always wear a mask to work.” Velitra put the mask back on. “In other words, having someone around who knows my true identity poses a problem.”

“Velitra...”

Zenos’s childhood friend, now the Night Healer, turned to the prostrated henchman. “Elgen. Clean up this mess. Do it right, and I’ll let your insubordination slide this time.”

“Yes, master! Thank you, master!” Elgen said quickly, springing to his feet.

“Hey! Wait! Velitra, the notes—”

This time, however, Velitra turned around and disappeared down the corridor.

Elgen stood in Zenos’s path, his arms spread wide. “I was a little careless earlier, but this time I’ll finish you off.”

“Sorry, but I’m not done here yet,” Zenos said as he tried to rush past Elgen.

The henchman placed his hand on a recessed part of the wall and laughed. “This is our testing ground. And you’re about to be food for *them*.”

“Them?”

Before Zenos could get an answer, however, a rumbling noise echoed through the lobby, and the ground beneath his feet suddenly began to give way—some sort of hidden mechanism in the building, it seemed. Zenos cast an enhancement spell on his legs to jump up, but before he could, a familiar voice let out a panicked scream behind him, and he turned to see Pista, the information broker, being swallowed by the descending floor.

“Wha—? Ahhhhhh!”

She must’ve been hiding behind a pillar, observing the situation, and ended up being caught in the trap.

“Damn,” he muttered, dashing to Pista’s side. He tried to lift her and jump back up before the floor fell away completely, but a flurry of knives came flying at them. He couldn’t use both the protection spell to shield them from Elgen’s attack and the enhancement spell to jump away, so he reluctantly switched to protection.

“Ahhh! Wa— Ugh!” Pista screamed loudly as the sharp tips of the blades struck them repeatedly. “We’re gonna die, meow!”

“Don’t worry,” Zenos assured her. “I’ve got us covered.”

Thanks to the protection spell, they didn’t take damage, but they were also unable to escape the collapse. The pair dropped with the floor into an underground space, a loud crash reverberating below their feet. It was dark, which made it hard to discern the surrounding area, but their noses were immediately assaulted by the stench of decay; they seemed to be in a garbage dump located down beneath the main clinic building. Zenos considered jumping back up with Pista in his arms, but the first floor was high enough above them that doing so seemed difficult.

Elgen scoffed, his narrow eyes peering down at them from above. “Looks like we got a few stray rats. No matter. You’ll regret summoning a top executive for such a trivial reason. Rot down there. We’ll never meet again.” With a loud laugh, he left.

“Aw man, I messed up,” Pista whined, sinking to her knees in despair. “I should’ve never tried to get close to a top executive, meow... How careless of me... It’s all over...”

“Is it?” Zenos asked.

“It is, meow! Even us catfolk can’t climb somewhere that high, and this place is totally deserted even during the day! No one will hear us scream. We’re just gonna starve to death!” she shouted tearfully, then turned to look at Zenos. “Shadow healer, what’s with that look? You’re not thinking of using me as a food source, right?”

“That sure is a conclusion you just jumped to.”

“Stop! Stop this right meow! Catfolk taste awful, I swear!”

“Okay, let’s just calm down for a second,” Zenos said to the panicked catgirl. He looked up at the wide-open space above them. “Well...it’s not impossible to climb if we try hard enough.”

“Huh? Really?!”

“When morning comes, we’ll be able to see the footholds in the sunlight. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh my, shadow healer, you’re so dependable, meow! I’m falling in love. Can I groom you?”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, exactly, but no thanks.”

Pista let out a high-pitched whine.

“Why are you whimpering like a dog?”

Their lighthearted exchange seemed to have lifted Pista’s spirits a bit, but there was something still bothering Zenos. Elgen had mentioned something about being “food for *them*.” If the plan had been for them to die by starvation, the henchman wouldn’t have worded it like that.

As Zenos took a step back to check the surroundings, the ground beneath them began to glow faintly. Looking down, he saw a complex pattern, like a magic circle, drawn on the ground. A purple light was visible along its edges, seemingly reacting to their presence.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

He glanced around again and noticed that the ground seemed to be bulging in several spots. The soil stirred, and pockets of dirt burst open. Humanoid creatures crawled out from within—hairless, grotesque things with green rotting skin, missing teeth, and eyes hanging from their sockets.

“Eek! W-W-Waaahhh!” Pista shrieked, backing away.

Zombies. Several walking corpses had suddenly surrounded the pair.

“Wh-Where did these zombies come from, meow?!”

“Beats me,” Zenos replied nonchalantly. “Maybe it has something to do with that magic circle from earlier.”

"I-It's over! It's really over," Pista moaned. "Catfolk don't taste good! Shadow healers are much tastier, meow!"

"Did you just casually offer me as a sacrifice?"

"I don't wanna get eaten by zombies, meeeooow!"

"Well, it's fine. Don't worry, Pista." Zenos grabbed the distraught catgirl by both shoulders, trying to help her calm her breathing.

"B-But shadow healer, look behind you!"

"Groooar!"

A zombie tried to lunge at them from behind, but all it took was a single "*Heal*" from Zenos and the creature turned to ash, scattering in the night air.

Pista blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

Zenos shrugged, then turned to face the mass of zombies. "I told you, it's fine. Handling undead is my specialty."

The moon looked distant from the basement of the old clinic. Though it was dark and hard to see, repulsive, foul-smelling breaths echoed from various points in the shadows.

"Handling undead is your specialty?" Pista echoed.

"I'm a healer, remember? Healing magic is effective against undead."

"I-Is it, meow?"

Zenos had thought this was common knowledge, but apparently Pista wasn't aware. Well, it was true that run-ins with the undead were unusual. An easy fact to forget for a man who had a certain top-ranked undead always hovering around him.

"B-But there are so many of them!"

"Can you see around us, Pista?"

"Catfolk have night vision, meow. They're there, and over there, and everywhere!"

Between their ability to see in the dark and their speed, catfolk made excellent information brokers indeed.

“Eek! They’re all coming!”

“Hmm...”

“What’s there to ‘hmm’ about?!”

Zenos gently rotated his wrists, gathering magic power in both hands. Warmth spread across his palms as a white light began to flow from them. Then, with his legs planted firmly into place, he twisted his upper body and released the holy radiance around him. “*High Heal!*”

A wave of heat came crashing forth, and a white tsunami spread in all directions. The zombies’ death cries echoed everywhere, and a moment later, the area was silent and dark once more.

“Huh?” Pista blinked several times. “Th-They’re gone, meow. The whole bunch of them!”

“I told you this is my specialty.”

“W-Wow! Meeeow, shadow healer! Now I *really* want a lick!”

“Never mind that stuff,” Zenos interjected. “There’s something bugging me...”

“*That stuff?* Oh. My feelings...” Pista muttered, slightly aghast.

“How did all these zombies appear out of nowhere?” the healer continued, ignoring her.

“This is an old clinic, so it’s not surprising there’d be that many corpses, meow.”

“Well, true, but...”

This world’s atmosphere was filled with a substance called mana. Magic was activated by causing a reaction between one’s own magical power and the mana in the air. However, in places with a high concentration of negative energy like that caused by death or rage, mana could cause monsters and magical beasts to manifest.

Zenos silently ran a finger over the complex magic circle carved into the rough

ground. “The zombies appeared after this magic circle was activated. It may have something to do with it.”

“Can a magic circle really create zombies, meow?”

“Typically zombies manifest naturally, but...supposedly there’s a particular type of magic user called a necromancer that can create them.” Perhaps that man, Elgen, was a necromancer. “Still, why would there be a circle in a place like this?”

Zenos wasn’t very knowledgeable about magic circles, but one of his old mentor’s hobbies had been to come up with weird patterns. And Velitra, who had greatly admired their mentor, had been the same way. But why would his old friend have a necromancer for a henchman?

Pista, rubbing her arms nervously, spoke hesitantly from behind the healer. “This place scares me. We shouldn’t linger here. Let’s go back, meow.”

“No, I’ll stay a bit longer.”

“Huh?”

“It was the people from the Black Guild who chose this place, right? Which means this might be a facility under their control.” The man named Elgen had called this place a “testing ground,” after all.

“So?”

“So I figure I may as well investigate while we’re here.”

“What? No! Let’s go back! Right meow!”

“You can go on ahead, Pista.”

“By myself? In the middle of the night?! I’d rather stay here with you than be left to my fate...”

“Yeah? That’s fine with me.”

Pista let out a whiny sob. “I’m not gonna groom you anymore, meow...”

Zenos waited for the sky to lighten, then magically enhanced his leg strength, hoisted Pista onto his back, and climbed out of the basement by finding footholds along the wall. Once safe, the pair explored the premises, wading

through the stagnant air that filled the building.

After a thorough sweep, they returned to the clinic in the ruined city just as the sun was fully rising above the horizon.

The healer pushed open the door. "We're home."

"Oh! Welcome back, Zenos!" Lily exclaimed, beaming as she ran up to him.

"Hey, doc," Zophia said.

"I was getting tired of waiting," Lynga muttered.

"Glad you're back in one piece, Zenos," Loewe remarked.

"Why are you three here?" Zenos asked the demi-human leaders, who all sat at the dining table wearing relieved expressions.

"Come now, doc. You went to meet with a top executive of the Black Guild. That's bound to be dangerous. We got antsy, so we came here."

"So I worried you guys," he mused. He'd just been planning to see an old friend, but from the others' perspective, it made sense. "We finished things there quickly, but then we kind of got stuck."

"Stuck?"

Pista huffed lightly as she emerged from behind Zenos, looking gloomy. "We had a really awful time, meow."

Upon seeing the catgirl, Lily, still smiling, fell sideways with a soft whine, out like a light. Panicked, the demi-human women all stood up in unison and rushed to catch her.

"Lily! What's wrong?! Why did you faint?!"

Zophia glared at Pista. "You're the broker, right? Pista, was it? Now you've done it."

"I think it's time to say your goodbyes," Lynga growled.

"How dare you spend the night with Zenos, newcomer!" Loewe protested.

Sensing the seething rage emanating from the three, Zenos spoke up. "Wait. I think you guys are misunderstanding something."

“Yeah! It wasn’t anywhere even close to romantic! All I wanted was to get out of that awful place, but nooo, Mr. Shadow Healer here dragged me around all over, and it was awful, meeeooow!”

After calming a ranting Pista, Zenos explained the situation to the furious demi-human leaders. The high-ranking executive of the Black Guild known as the Night Healer was, indeed, Zenos’s childhood friend Velitra. And though it was highly likely his old friend had their mentor’s notes, Zenos had been unable to confirm this. Also, Velitra’s subordinate, obeying orders, had attacked Zenos and Pista, and somehow zombies had been artificially created to eliminate them. Lastly, upon investigating the old clinic, the pair had found evidence of experiments all over.

“Velitra might be conducting some kind of research there,” Zenos concluded.

“But why target *you*, doc? Weren’t you close?” Zophia asked, tilting her head. She and the others had finally calmed down.

“I thought we were...” Zenos murmured softly, staring into the distance.

Carmilla chuckled from the second floor. “Ah, the old friendship denial trope. How tragic.”

“Seriously? Wait, no, but you might be right...”

Velitra’s unmasked face had been blank, devoid of the smile that had once graced it. And his old friend was now a top executive of the Black Guild. Plus, there was the issue with their mentor’s notes. And the necromancer henchman. A zombie-spawning magic circle. Traces of research. What did all these circumstances surrounding his changed friend indicate?

After pressing his fingers to his temples for a while, Zenos slowly raised his head. “Velitra, could it be that you...?”

In a corner of the old underground sewer in the depths of the slums, amid the ominously echoing sounds of dripping water, a narrow-eyed man knelt and spoke. “Lord Night Healer, I’ve taken care of the miscreants.”

Before him was a figure wearing a black mask, sitting on a throne.

“Well done,” Velitra replied quietly after a short pause.

An oddly high-pitched voice came from somewhere nearby. “Really? I struggle to believe someone like you could take down Zenos.”

Elgen stood up reflexively and pointed angrily at the gray-robed figure who had just spoken. “Big words for an outsider, Conductor!”

The Conductor chuckled. “I may be an outsider, but I am also a collaborator currently.”

“Hmph. I don’t need to acknowledge you or tell you anything, but for your *information*, I made sure those two were buried alive. They’re fodder for the undead by now.”

“And you saw the bodies, of course.”

“How would I manage that? I dropped them into the pit in the middle of the night. There are several necromantic magic circles down there for experiments—there was no need to check.”

The Conductor shrugged in amused exasperation. “Counting your eggs before they hatch, much? Zenos is a healer. Just siccing undead on him won’t do anything.”

“What? He’s a protective magic user.”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Night Healer, you didn’t tell him!” The Conductor turned toward Velitra. “Maybe you kept him in the dark on purpose? Hmm?”

“Mind your busybodying, Conductor,” Velitra replied in a monotone, weary voice from behind the mask. “I have other priorities. Elgen is enough for the likes of Zenos.”

“I can’t agree with that.”

“You seem to hold him in high regard.”

“Well, yes. He *has* outsmarted me time and again. A very intriguing individual.”

“Don’t overestimate him. He’s not that strong.”

“Oh?” The Conductor’s tone shifted. “How harsh you are to him. I thought

you were best buds.”

Velitra ignored the remark and instead glowered at the dark depths, muttering to no one in particular, “If Zenos were a first-rate healer...our master wouldn’t have died.”

Chapter 3: Memories of the Shack

A long time ago, in the slums, there was once a dilapidated shack filled with a musty smell. Within, two voices echoed simultaneously.

“Heal!”

“Heal!”

A cool white wind blew forth from Velitra’s hand, and a warm white light overflowed from Zenos’s outstretched palm. The two lights mixed and twined together until they burst at the same time, sparkling and flickering.

Next to the pair stood a man with a scruffy beard, dressed in a black cloak, with his arms crossed. “Hmm,” he hummed. “You two have come a long way in just one year. Nice work. My judgment was spot on.”

“Really, master?!” Velitra asked.

“Judgment schmudgment,” Zenos protested. “I’m the one who brought Velitra here, gramps.”

“Hey, Zenos!” the man snapped, his voice echoing in the small space. “You address me properly too!”

Zenos and Velitra exchanged smiles at the admonishment.

Their meeting place might be an abandoned shack with wind blowing in through the cracks, a badly leaking roof, and nasty bugs flying about as though they owned the place, but Velitra still liked it. Unlike the orphanage, where they were controlled, oppressed, and restrained, the atmosphere here was serene.

It’d been almost a year since Velitra had begun sneaking away from orphanage duties with Zenos to meet with their mentor. Now, the time they spent practicing healing magic here had become the most enjoyable part of the day.

“You’re quick at grasping the theory,” their mentor said to Velitra. “A solid foundation leads to solid results.”

Velitra let out a proud chuckle.

“Zenos, in contrast, kind of does his own thing with the theory. You’re just all over the place, aren’t you?”

“Urk. You can tell?” Zenos muttered.

“Of course I can,” their mentor retorted. “Your magic is patchy in spots.”

“Knew it. Never any praise for me.”

“Well, on the other hand, getting this far on intuition alone is astounding...”

The two children’s first six months under their mentor’s guidance had been spent on theoretical explanations and basic training, whereas the next six months had involved practical training, including treating the injured and the sick. The poor environment and frequent conflicts of the slums had led to a constant stream of people in need of treatment, some of whom had rare conditions like hag tumors. Thanks to this, they’d gained extensive experience with various medical cases and their respective treatments during this period.

Their mentor rubbed his rough stubble and puffed out his chest a bit as he continued, “But you two listen here. Don’t go thinking you’re hot stuff just because you can heal an injury or two. A healer who just mends wounds is still only third-rate.”

“Yes, master! And a second-rate healer heals people!” Velitra added.

“And a first-rate healer makes the world a better place. I remember,” Zenos finished. “I swear I hear this stuff in my dreams from how often you say it.”

“Y-Yeah?” their mentor asked, taken aback. He nodded with a sigh. “Well, good that you get it, then.”

“But you know, gramps, you keep telling us healers should be this and that, but we’ve never actually seen *you* use healing magic.”

“Ha! You still have a lot of growing to do before I show you anything, kiddo,” he replied, deflecting Zenos’s comment as usual. “Come back in a hundred years.”

It was true—neither pupil had ever seen their mentor use healing magic. The man kept telling them he would do it one of these days, but a year had already

passed. At this point, they suspected the man was just some sort of magic enthusiast; a capable teacher, but unable to walk the walk. And the fact he wouldn't tell them his name suggested he'd possibly gotten in trouble over that somewhere before.

Velitra didn't think it a big deal, however. Even if he couldn't use magic, he was extremely knowledgeable, and his instructions were precise. The pair's healing skills had undeniably improved under their mentor's guidance, and above all, they liked his personality. Unlike the adults at the orphanage, their mentor only ever shouted at the two for a reason, otherwise speaking to them as equals and even sharing laughs with them.

"Master, may I ask a question?" asked Velitra, who sat prim and proper on the floor, with a raised right hand.

"Of course," their master replied. "Ask me anything! Except for my measurements."

"Seriously, gramps?"

"What are you looking at me like that for, Zenos? It's just a bit of humor."

Their mentor's one flaw might've been the occasional difficult-to-respond-to joke.

"Um," Velitra continued, "you often say, 'A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place.' I get what 'mending wounds' means, but I don't really understand what 'healing people' entails, or what 'making the world a better place' has to do with anything."

"Right," their mentor mused, groaning softly. "Well, this might come across as odd, since I'm not even a third-rate healer at this point, but... First off, what I mean by 'making the world a better place' is overturning bad environments and systems."

"Systems?" Velitra echoed, confused.

"You two are still kids. Maybe you think your situation right now is just the way things are, but don't hesitate to change something if it doesn't lead to happiness. Which is easier said than done in this country, I'm afraid. A healer

who can heal the state, the system, society itself... Right now, that's probably just a pipe dream."

Velitra and Zenos exchanged glances, tilting their heads in confusion.

"Well, you'll get it someday," their mentor said with a wry smile. "Now then, the other thing, about healing people... What that means is saving someone, and not just from their injuries either. For example..." The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a black leather journal, then flipped through it. While looking at its contents, he drew a magic circle on the ground.

Coming up with magic circles seemed to be some sort of hobby to their mentor, and recently, he'd taught them a bizarre one that would randomly regrow a finger, but only when several had been lost. He'd told them once that, in his youth, he'd been conflicted over whether to become a healer or a magic circle researcher—though whether or not this was true was unclear.

"You two, try infusing this circle with magic," he said.

Velitra had also gained an interest in studying magic circles. This one seemed quite complex, and at a glance, it was impossible to tell what effect it might have.

The two did as they were told and placed their hands over the circle, infusing it with magic. A translucent image of their mentor's face appeared in the circle, laughing at the pair.

"Whoa!"

Their mentor smugly looked at his own image in the circle. "How's that? This one's a high-complexity circle, incorporating illusion magic. It's a balm for the soul, right? Heal injuries, soothe the soul, and *then*—"

"A balm? This thing's gonna give us nightmares, gramps," Zenos interjected.

"What did you say? Hey, Velitra, you disagree with him, right?"

"Um, well, I..." Velitra stammered.

"Aaall righty then," their mentor said, looking dissatisfied as he flipped through his journal again. "Now *this* next one will surely heal people—"

"That's enough, gramps," Zenos quickly intervened.

“I didn’t know your journal had these weir—I mean, these fascinating magic circles written in it,” Velitra said.

“You were about to call my magic circles ‘weird,’ weren’t you?” their mentor asked, despondent.

“Oh, no, um...” Velitra replied with a hasty wave of hands. “I was just wondering what other kinds there are.”

“Now I’m curious too,” Zenos chimed in. “Can we see the journal, gramps?”

“No,” their master replied in a surprisingly stern tone, much harsher than usual. Noticing that his sharp response had caused the two children to tense up, he quickly softened his expression and slipped the journal back into his pocket. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I just have some embarrassing poems written here,” he explained, now back to his usual attitude. “I would never be able to show my face in public again if anyone saw them.”

Their short-but-fulfilling day of training soon came to an end, and it was time for Velitra and Zenos to return to the Dalitz Institute. Under the light of the evening sun, the two of them ran up the path toward the orphanage gate.

“Poems, huh...” Zenos mused, his tone nonchalant as always. “Now I’m even more curious to read it. How about we sneak a look sometime, Velitra? We can finally read now.”

“Right, yeah...” Velitra’s tone and steps were heavy with reluctance to go back, which was a common occurrence of late.

At the orphanage, everything was a collective responsibility. If anyone didn’t return, their friends would suffer. Because of this, Velitra always finished assigned tasks as soon as possible, went to study healing, then returned to the orphanage by the designated time.

Recently, however, there had been a growing sense of unease within Velitra. A want to focus more on magic training, to be acknowledged. At the orphanage, the kids only ever got yelled at or beaten, never praised. The two children’s mentor, though, always had words of praise for Velitra’s magic.

Velitra silently gazed at Zenos’s profile. The two of them had been studying under their mentor for a year now; Velitra’s results had been better on average,

but Zenos on occasion had shown astonishing skills. And although Velitra had taken an interest in and was studying magic circles, their mentor had told Zenos specifically that *he* didn't need them.

How come? Velitra wondered.

"Is something bothering you, Velitra?" Zenos asked.

"No, nothing," Velitra replied with a head shake.

Since they'd grown up together, Zenos could always pick up any changes in his friend's demeanor, it seemed. Right now, however, Velitra wanted to keep these feelings locked away.

What should I do?

That night, Velitra couldn't stop fretting about it, tossing and turning while wrapped in a paper-thin blanket. There were no answers to be found, of course. Velitra was still a child, and had no money besides.

An instructor's angry shouting could be heard in the next room over, but it was such a common occurrence that the other children, sleeping in a huddle, didn't stir. The issue was something about the neighboring group's monthly share not being enough; the orphanage regularly made the children engage in various illegal activities, exploiting them for money.

This money, however, led to no improvements at all to their situation. Instead, it supposedly all went straight to the orphanage's director, Dalitz.

"That's right!" Velitra whispered, eyes snapping wide open.

There *was* money! The coin the children worked hard to earn was stashed away in the safe in the director's office. The idea struck like a divine revelation.

With that money, I could survive even if I left here. I could buy a nice house for my mentor. And then I could practice even more under him, and become a first-rate healer one day. Then he'll definitely— Oh, be still, my beating heart.

A month later, the day of the plan's execution arrived.

Velitra had studied the behavior patterns of Director Dalitz and discovered a specific time when he was regularly away from the orphanage to indulge in his gambling hobby. The areas designated for adults were always guarded, but Velitra had determined that some of the guards were negligent and would step away from their posts to smoke. Using this opportunity, Velitra managed to reach the door of the director's office while he was away.

Dalitz was cautious and always locked the door in his absence. Velitra, however, had been tasked with breaking into empty homes before and had some experience with lockpicking. Though there were three locks total, thanks to repeated practice, the child somehow managed to open them all before the guard returned.

Velitra slipped into the spacious, elegant room, then locked the door from the inside before checking the safe in the back of the closet. This was the final obstacle. The safe had a combination-dial lock, and so Velitra had spent the past month taking note of any numbers that were meaningful to the director, such as his birthday and the orphanage's founding date.

However, even after several attempts at number combinations, the safe wouldn't open. Velitra tried to modify the numbers slightly, reverse them, and combine them in different ways, but no matter what, the lock didn't release when the button was pressed.

Suddenly, the soft clink of a key made Velitra's heart leap. No other adult would enter this room on their own, so it could only mean one thing. A glance at the wall clock revealed it was already time for Dalitz to return.

Oh crap, oh crap...

Velitra quickly hid inside the closet, and moments later, the door to the room swung open. The monotonous, borderline mechanical footsteps made it clear this was indeed Dalitz coming in. Tension hung heavy in the air as Velitra brought a hand up to conceal shaky breaths, feeling Dalitz's presence grow closer. The idea was to stay hidden until the director left for his next task, but this soon proved to be a mistake; the first thing Dalitz did upon his return was go check on the safe.

The closet door creaked open, and Velitra had begun to brace for the worst

when the voice of one of the instructors came from outside of the office, halting the door's movement.

"Director, may I have a moment?"

"What is it?"

"Mr. Vincent, the slaver, came by in your absence, but said he couldn't pay the designated amount."

"What? We had a deal. Get the money and hand over the brats. Surely I don't need to be there for that."

"Well, he claimed his memory is failing him and that he couldn't remember the asking price, so the deal fell through..."

"Damn that greedy old bastard," Dalitz spat, slamming the closet door shut. "Give me a second—I'll deal with him myself. I'm the king of this place. A king's word is law. I'll show that old codger who calls the shots here."

Dalitz's presence and the sounds of him cursing under his breath faded from the room, and Velitra finally exhaled, climbing out of the closet with trembling legs before returning to the safe. After several deep breaths, Velitra began to slowly turn the dial once more, spinning it clockwise to the number one and counter-clockwise to the number three, making thirteen—a very simple number, and the result of a sudden memory.

Velitra and Zenos's mentor sometimes went gambling and took the two along. He often used cards numbered one to thirteen. Among these, cards number eleven, twelve, and thirteen had special figures assigned to them. Eleven was the jack, twelve was the queen, and thirteen was the king.

"King" Dalitz's safe clicked open. Velitra stuffed the tall piles of gold coins and documents into a burlap sack, then fled the orphanage.

"I did it... I did it!"

Velitra ran at full speed toward the slums, as though on winged feet—alone. To prevent Zenos from suspecting the scheme, Velitra had avoided him over the past month. Upon reaching the dilapidated shack, the indigo-haired child rushed inside.

“Sorry,” Velitra’s mentor said, shaking his head with a stern expression. “I can’t accept that money.”

“But, master—”

“I won’t ask how you got that coin, but I’m sure you didn’t earn it fair and square. I can’t accept such a large sum.”

“B-But with this money, you could get a better house...”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Velitra. And I may be a wretch, but I’m still your master. A master who takes money obtained through dodgy means from a disciple would be worthless indeed,” he said with a grin, placing a hand on his now silent student’s head. “Look, I’ll be honest. Going hungry every day sucks. But I still have *some* pride left. Let me keep it, yeah?”

“Master...” With a nervous lip bite, Velitra looked at the money. The large sum, moments ago, had seemed like it could buy even the future. Now it looked like nothing but a heavy, worthless burden.

“Hey, gramps!” Zenos called out from the entrance, his face covered in painful-looking bruises. “Still kicking? Oh, Velitra! You’re here too, huh?”

Their mentor looked puzzled. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh, they thought I’d robbed the safe, so they gave me one hell of a beating,” the boy explained, holding his cheek. “I can heal this, but I can’t cast anything while the adults are watching. If Liz hadn’t stepped in, I’d probably be dead by now.” Zenos’s gaze shifted to the burlap sack in Velitra’s grasp. “Hey, what’s that?”

Clutching the sack, Velitra bolted out of the house.

“Huh? What was that about?”

“Velitra, wait!” their mentor called out. “Don’t wander around with that thing! Zenos, stay here!”

Velitra could hear Zenos and their mentor shouting, but didn’t stop running, feeling the sting of tears. *I’m such an idiot.*

The money Velitra had stolen with such desperate determination had been refused, and now Zenos had been mistaken for the thief. If their mentor put

two and two together, he might not want Velitra as a disciple at all anymore.

Zenos's abilities were exceptional, even if he didn't realize that. Velitra had suspected this for a while, and worst of all, didn't match up. Where Zenos used instinct and natural talents, Velitra had to make full use of theory, be ingenious, pour heart and soul into getting spells to activate—all that just to barely keep up with the other child. Zenos was brilliant, and to beat him, Velitra needed more time and practice at their mentor's side.

This money had been meant to make that possible, but...

Suddenly, something cold struck Velitra in the back. A blade was protruding from the child's chest. *I've been stabbed...?* A searing pain struck moments later, and Velitra collapsed forward.

"Hey, lad. You got somethin' good there, don'tcha? I can hear it clinkin'," said a man, one of several with hideous faces, as they all looked down at the fallen child.

That was when Velitra realized where the aimless running from before had led to: a particularly dangerous area of the slums, known to be infested with members of the notorious Black Guild.

"Whoa! Gold coins!" one of the men exclaimed excitedly as he opened the discarded burlap sack. "Seriously? Holy crap!"

Immediately, a fight for the coins broke out between the men. Velitra could hear the sounds of angry shouts and blows, but not see anything clearly. That wound needed to be healed quickly, but the pain and difficulty breathing made it impossible to focus. The spell wasn't forming. The chant wasn't coming out. An attempt at a breath resulted in coughing up a clot of blood.

This is bad. One of Velitra's mentor's sayings came to mind: healers should never fight on the front lines.

"Velitraaaa!" someone called out, but the shouts slowly grew more and more faint.

And then there was nothing.

“Ngh...”

As Velitra’s eyes opened, the blue sky came into view, the sun shining vacantly at its center. Slowly, the child sat up. *Have I been lying in an alley?*

Bringing a hand to where there should’ve been a wound, Velitra found nothing and felt no pain. The bloodstained clothing, however, indicated that it hadn’t been just a dream.

The men from before were nowhere to be seen. The money was gone too. But it didn’t matter anymore. What mattered was that Zenos was sitting in a daze nearby, and their mentor lay collapsed face down beside him.

“Master! Zenos!” Velitra called out. “Um...”

“You made it. Good,” Zenos muttered, his eyes vacant.

“Master, I—” Velitra went to their mentor and shook the man’s back, but there was no response. Several more attempts yielded the same result.

“Master? Master... *Master!*”

“Our master’s dead,” Zenos interjected, still staring into the void.

“What?” That made no sense. The word “dead” didn’t register, going in one ear and out the other. “Master? Hey! Master! It’s time for our lesson...”

“Velitra. I’m telling you. Our master is no longer alive,” Zenos repeated, his expression full of anguish.

“Wh-What are you talking about, Zenos?” There were no external injuries, and their mentor’s face wore the same peaceful expression as always. He was just a bit cold and unresponsive.

Velitra still couldn’t mentally process it. However, the two children had treated many people over the past year, and come in contact with both life and death. The feel of their mentor’s skin under Velitra’s fingertips told the child everything.

“How... How...?” Maybe their mentor had chased after Velitra and gotten into a scuffle with the men. Maybe he’d been stabbed. Maybe Zenos had arrived later, and healed them both, and Velitra had been lucky and survived, but it had been too late for their mentor. “Ungh... Wah... Ahhh...”

Velitra's strangled sobs echoed in the air, sounding less like crying and more like raspy breaths. *It's my fault. All because I stole that money. All because I dreamed of a brighter future.* Velitra's throat stung painfully, a searing heat burning the child's chest.

"Why, Zenos?!" Velitra's scorching hot emotions ran wild like magma, splattering onto the boy nearby. "Why didn't you save him?! This is why we've been studying healing magic!"

"Velitra, I—"

"I wasn't important! Why him? Why? Why?!"

Velitra and Zenos had always gotten along. They'd never fought, not once. Now Velitra's fists were raised, striking out at Zenos, who simply took the blows without resistance, his expression full of sorrow.

"Waaah! Aaaaaaaaah!"

Velitra stood and ran to the dilapidated shack the two had visited so often. The interior walls were so damaged they were indistinguishable from scrap. The air reeked of mold. The same bugs were still buzzing about as though they owned the place. Nothing had changed in the abandoned shack, except for the fact their mentor was no longer there.

Velitra collapsed to the floor and wailed.

Placed between the upturned floorboards was a black leather journal. Upon noticing it, Velitra crawled forward and picked it up, flipping through the pages and scanning it with blurry, teary eyes. Eventually, Velitra slowly stood up, gaze turned cold as ice.

That night, Velitra set the orphanage on fire and vanished.

Back in the present, in the underground sewers known as the depths of the slums, the Conductor was wearing a gray hood pulled low. Next to the Conductor was Velitra.

"Interesting. What a fascinating tale," the Conductor said in an oddly high-pitched voice.

“Zenos wasn’t that skilled, in the end,” Velitra murmured, gazing into the distance. “I overestimated him.”

The Conductor hummed. “Agree to disagree. So, what did the journal say?”

Velitra remained silent, one leg crossing over the other.

Parts of the journal had been illegible, having been torn or stained, but it had otherwise consisted of simple diary entries and notes giving insights into who Velitra’s mentor had been and why he’d ended up in the slums. What had been particularly interesting, however, was the information on a certain type of magic.

Sensing something, the Conductor said, “See, Night Healer, I know that at one point you were very diligent in your research on magic circles that could create zombies. I wondered if you were trying to switch careers into necromancy, but that was—”

“A mere byproduct of my research,” Velitra interrupted calmly.

The Conductor burst into loud laughter. “Ah, I see how it is. How amusing. What you truly want to do is...” The hooded figure trailed off momentarily, a pair of unusually red lips curling into a grin beneath the hood. “...resurrect your beloved ‘master.’”

Meanwhile, at the clinic in the ruined city, Lily and the others wore somber expressions as Zenos finished his tale.

“So that’s what happened,” Lily mumbled.

“Everyone has baggage,” Zophia pointed out.

“I’m surprised,” Lynga said.

“What are you going to do, though, Zenos?” Loewe asked.

“I have no choice. I need to meet with Velitra again,” Zenos replied slowly, gripping the collar of his black cloak. “I was curious about our mentor’s notes, yeah. But if Velitra’s happy now, then that’s all that matters. However, if what’s on Velitra’s mind is resurrecting our mentor...”

A resurrection spell. The forbidden magic that had cost their mentor everything. Zenos was certain that recreating it would've been the last thing their mentor would've wanted.

The unruly tips of his hair swayed as he lightly scratched his head. "I prefer to stay out of trouble, but I think I'm the only one who can stop this whole resurrection magic plan," Zenos said finally. They were, after all, former best friends. The only two disciples under their mentor. "And there's still something I need to talk to Velitra about."

"B-But there's no way, meow!" Pista interjected fretfully. "The Night Healer's guard will be up after this whole ordeal. There's no way you two can meet again."

"You said there were two ways to meet with a top executive, right? One was to pay a ton of money as a client. The other was to become a top executive myself."

"Yeah, but it doesn't matter how much money you offer, meow. There's no way the Night Healer will accept another request from you."

"So we go with the second option."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"No way..."

Pista, Lily, and the other demi-humans all gaped in astonishment.

Looking at them, Zenos declared, "Guess I'll become a top executive of the Black Guild."

Chapter 4: Black Guild Infiltration

The night was more humid than usual.

The demi-human leaders and Pista had all returned to their own turf, leaving only Zenos, Carmilla, and Lily in the clinic. The latter sat at the dining table, dim lamplight illuminating her glum expression.

“Hey, Zenos,” she muttered worriedly, “are you really gonna become a top executive for the Black Guild?”

“It’s not like I want to,” the healer replied. “I just don’t have a choice.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. I’m not gonna do anything stupid. For now, I’ll give it a go, and if it turns out to be too much, I’ll rethink my strategy.” Zenos gave Lily’s head a gentle pat.

Carmilla, sitting on a chair with her legs crossed, swirled the ice in her cup with a finger as she spoke. “Hee hee hee... Truly this is all very amusing to me, but ‘giving a go’ at becoming a top executive of the Black Guild? Conceited as ever, are you not?”

“Well, my mentor used to say you have to jump into the current if you want to go out into the sea, so...”

The infiltration of the Black Guild was scheduled to begin in the morning. According to Pista, in order to become a member of the guild one had to seek out a receptionist and request a registration. Zophia and the others had offered to help, but Zenos had decided he couldn’t rely on them to that extent. His plan was to infiltrate the Black Guild on his own.

Carmilla floated gracefully in the air. “Do you not need to make any special preparations?”

“Pista said I’ll only need two things,” Zenos explained. One was a black mask over his eyes, which he’d already bought in the black market. After all, if his

identity were to come to light, Velitra's guard would be up, and worse, the clinic could be in danger. Therefore, it was essential that he hid his face. Of course, there was also the fact that Velitra probably thought Elgen had killed Zenos already, which made keeping his identity a secret even more essential. "The other thing I need is an alias."

Hardly anyone at the Black Guild ever revealed their true identities. Hence, a pseudonym was necessary in order to contact individuals or groups, and that had to be submitted to the receptionist as well.

"Oh?" the wraith said. "And what kind of name did you choose?"

"Nothing special," Zenos said, glancing at the envelope sitting at the edge of his desk. "Just something I came up with on the spot." With that, he got up to go to the bathroom.

Carmilla smiled confidently at a frowning Lily. "Worry not, Lily. Whether he wants it or not, Zenos's power is a magnet for trouble. If your plan is to stay with this man, you need to stop fretting over every little thing, or you will not last."

"R-Right," the elf stammered.

"I would be concerned for the members of the Black Guild instead, were I you. Imagine the blow to their egos from having such an extraordinary rookie around."

"I guess, but..."

"Either way, I cannot help but wonder what manner of alias he chose..." Carmilla said, reaching for the envelope.

"Ah! You can't just look without asking, Carmilla!"

"Fool! I am above needing permission!" Without a shred of hesitation, she took the paper out of the envelope and immediately grimaced. "Ugh! This man is as imaginative as a pebble! The 'Physician'? Where's the flair? Where's the wordplay? Twelve points. Out of a thousand!"

"Carmilla!" Lily protested, puffing out her cheeks.

The wraith simply laughed mischievously and disappeared upstairs.

When Zenos returned from the bathroom, he turned to Lily, who now looked anxious for an entirely different reason. “Where’d Carmilla go?”

“Um, she went upstairs, looking very pleased.”

“Well, that’s not reassuring at all. What’s she always so pleased about, anyway?”

“I want to live like that too.”

“Lily, I’m sorry to tell you, but she’s not living anymore.”

And so the eve of the infiltration of the Black Guild went by quietly, like the calm before a storm.

The next day, Zenos headed for the area known as the depths of the slums, where the Black Guild’s base was located. As he got closer to his destination, the alleys became narrower and more convoluted and the cloying stench of blood mixed with filth wafted through the air.

It was an area even the demi-human leaders of the slums couldn’t easily approach—the implicit boundary between the slums and the Black Guild.

Nearby, a catgirl stood, her ears alert.

“Huh? Pista? What are you doing here?” Zenos asked, coming to a stop at the sight of the information broker.

“I kept thinking about it over the past three days, over and over, and I decided I’m coming with you, shadow healer,” Pista replied.

“Really? Last time you said you didn’t want to be around me anymore.”

“Of course I did, meow. Trying to become a top executive in the Black Guild just to reunite with a friend goes beyond ignorance or recklessness. It’s just plain idiocy.”

Well. That was direct. “So why are you here?” Zenos pressed.

“You know, I was just thinking... That guy saw me too, meow. Someone might try and silence me. I shouldn’t have gotten involved with you, but I did anyway, and now I’m in this mess,” Pista explained, letting out a hiss.

“You’re right. Sorry about that.”

Zenos’s earnest apology made a dumbfounded Pista’s raised claws retract. “Well, half of it is my fault for sticking my nose where it didn’t belong, so it is what it is, meow. And all things considered, we have a better chance of getting out of this alive if we work together.”

“Makes sense. I’m not familiar with the Black Guild, so it’ll be a big help,” Zenos agreed. He didn’t want to drag anyone into this, but Pista was already in the middle of it.

“Besides, you becoming a top executive will be good for me. So let’s be the best new faction we can be, boss!”

“Yeah, I mean, I’ll give it my all, but please don’t call me ‘boss.’”

Thus, in a corner of the slums, the smallest faction of the Black Guild was born. A faction that nobody could’ve predicted would go on to make a great leap forward just one month later.

A tangle of countless entwined snakes, or perhaps a massive, inescapable spider’s web—these were the terms in which the underground sewers Zenos and Pista were walking through were occasionally described.

The only light sources were the dim lamps dotting the walls, and despite it being early summer, the air was strangely chilly. The sounds of their footsteps echoed off the stone walls, making it increasingly more difficult to orient themselves. There was a persistent sound of dripping water coming from somewhere, its source impossible to pinpoint.

“The receptionist should be just ahead, meow.”

It was thanks to Pista, the information broker, that the pair had been able to cross the first checkpoint. Three side tunnels later, a faint light came into view, and they slipped on the masks they’d brought before approaching the shabby counter.

“We want to register,” Zenos said.

“Rookies, eh? Welcome to the Black Guild,” replied a woman who sat at the

counter, resting her cheeks on her palms. She had a blasé attitude and tattoos covering half of her face, which somehow gave her a both young and mature look. The woman languidly handed a paper and pen over to the pair. “Can I register you as a duo? Just pick a faction name and write it right here. Or I guess I can do it for you, if you can’t write. Kind of a pain, though.”

“We have it all written down already, so don’t worry.” Zenos handed the woman the envelope he’d prepared the night before. He’d picked the “Physician” as his alias, but it could double as a faction name.

The disinterested woman checked the contents and narrowed her eyes slightly. “Huh. Well, whatever. For requests, talk to any of us receptionists, or go to the lounge in the back. Complete a request and you’ll get the pay. They’re usually first-come, first-serve, but some requests have specific conditions, so make sure you check those. Any questions?” she asked, examining her nails.

“How do I become a top executive?”

The woman’s gaze shifted up from her fingers. “Are you missing a few screws?”

“I don’t think so, but I’ve been told I am.”

“Oh, who cares. Not like anybody coming here is sane, anyway,” replied the woman, louder than before, seemingly a bit more interested now. “When you complete a request, half the pay goes to the top executives’ committee. From what I hear, promotions are determined by the number and quality of completed requests and the total amount you’ve sent their way.”

Taking half of the pay was pretty brutal. It did, however, mean that the higher up one got, the more profits one made.

“How much, exactly, do I need to advance?” Zenos asked.

“What do I know? I’m just a receptionist. Sounds like the top meets regularly to make those decisions.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Zenos and Pista were both wearing masks, yet the receptionist hadn’t commented on their suspicious appearances at all. The healer supposed this

was just that kind of place. The pair walked past the reception desk and further into the guild, where several rough-looking men were lounging around. Pista quickly grabbed Zenos's arm, and the two stepped closer to the wall under the men's rude stares. On it were several requests for things like blackmail, theft, assassination, and revenge.

"This is all pretty fishy stuff," Zenos remarked.

"I mean, yeah, meow," Pista said. "Black Guild and all."

The healer hummed. "I'd rather do something less illegal, though..." Looking up, he spotted a request for a monster hunt. "Oh, maybe this one? Defeat a Death Spider and get its steel web. Big reward too."

"Wh-What are you talking about, meow?! It says it's an A-ranked hunt! It's a super dangerous monster! This request probably ended up here because even the Adventurers' Guild couldn't find any takers!"

"Well, I think I can probably handle an A-rank—" Zenos cut himself off upon inspecting the request closer and seeing a note that said rookies were excluded.

"Yo, masks!" one of the men lounging around called out. "Haven't seen either of y'all 'round here. Ya new?"

"Yeah," Zenos replied. "Nice to meet you."

All the men burst into laughter. "Gah ha ha! Check this guy out, all 'nice to meetcha' and shit. How proper. You know, 'round here, we take our fancy-pants greetings with a side of coin."

Pista let out a low whimper, her ears flattening in fear.

Zenos scratched his head. "Look, money isn't a thing that just falls from the sky like that. You've got to put in the appropriate amount of effort—"

"Whatcha mumblin' about? Hand over the damn coin, or we'll beat it outta ya. Choose."

"Sorry, do you mind moving a bit? I can't see the request board."

"Bastard!" the man snapped, angrily taking a swing at Zenos before immediately grabbing his hand and crouching. "Wh— Owwww!"

Other men also tried to hit the healer and were met with the same fate. Zenos had already cast a protective spell on himself, making harming him barehanded nearly impossible.

Since they persisted in trying to stand in his way, Zenos magically enhanced his strength and brushed the men aside. Though he felt a bit bad about it, he didn't have time to waste on this. The men were sent rolling on the floor, looking up at him in disbelief, gasping for air.

Pista broke into loud laughter. "Mya ha ha! Losers! We're better than you, get it? If you don't wanna die, don't mess with my boss!"

"What's with *that* change of attitude?!"

Deciding to ignore Pista's sudden burst of arrogance, Zenos checked the requests on the wall one by one, and finally found something suitable: a request to heal a small magical beast.

Fragmented clouds drifted across the clear blue sky. Taking deep breaths and inhaling the scent of grass, Zenos and Pista walked side by side through the green meadow.

"Healing a small magical beast..." Pista mused. "Wonder why that request ended up in the Black Guild, meow? Doesn't feel like the kind of thing you'd go to them for."

Zenos hummed thoughtfully. "Well, magical beasts are usually the type of thing other guilds would hunt. They typically wouldn't accept a request to heal one. The Black Guild, on the other hand, will take any request as long as you pay, so that's probably why."

"I see... You're very smart, boss."

"Uh, can you stop calling me that?"

"Nope. You're the boss, boss. Besides, you can hold yourself in a fight, which is reassuring, meow. I'm sticking to you like the scaredy-cat I am! Letting you do all the hard work, and then bragging about it!"

Well, at least she was honest. Zenos was reminded of a certain "little bro"

he'd acquired during his infiltration of the Royal Institute of Healing.

"I'm a little concerned, though, meow." Pista took several deep breaths, pressing both her hands to her belly.

The two were in an idyllic-looking rural area, but it was still within district limits, which meant the client was an ordinary citizen. Being this far from the bustling city likely meant a lower-class citizen, but even those were still far above the poor, which sat at the very bottom of the ladder. The gap between the two in this country may as well have been as vast as the ocean.

Not all citizens were discriminatory, of course, and Zenos had met such people before, but they were generally a minority. Pista was, he figured, anxious about what kind of person the client might be.

"Well, whoever this is went to the trouble of putting in a request, so I don't think they'll treat us that badly," Zenos pondered.

"I sure hope so, meow," Pista murmured.

As they passed through the peaceful scenery, a red-roofed house in the mountains came into view.

"That must be it," Zenos said. In front of the house was a field where a middle-aged man was tilling the soil with a hoe. As he and Pista approached, Zenos called out, "Are you Mr. Denver?"

The man seemed startled. "A demi-human and a human? Wh-What do you want?!"

"We're with the Black Guild."

"The Black Guild? The *Black Guild*!" the man exclaimed, raising his hoe in a panic. "What business do you scoundrels have here?! Get out! We have nothin' worth takin'!"

"Huh? I think there's some sort of mistake," Zenos said. The receptionist had definitely told them that the client was named Denver and lived here.

"S-See?! I told you, meow!"

"Get out! Now!" the man insisted, looking ready to attack with his hoe at any moment. "I'll call the Royal Guard!"

Unsure of what was happening, Zenos briefly considered leaving, but before he could, a small girl with flaxen hair came rushing out of the house toward them.

“Wait, pa!”

“Aisha, what are you doin’?!” the middle-aged man yelled. “Stay back!”

“No, pa, it’s not what you think!” The girl clung to her father’s leg to get him to stop, then looked at Zenos and Pista. “Are you from the Black Guild?”

“We are,” Zenos confirmed with a nod.

The girl seemed a bit bewildered, but happy. “I-I’m Aisha Denver. I sent the request.”

After that, the pair were led to a barn next to the house.

The inside was spacious, littered with many farming tools like hoes and plows. Though worn, the tools were all well-maintained, likely having been passed down through generations. The barn itself was a simple wooden structure, but still appeared much better than most houses in the slums.

“Um, to clarify, I asked my grandpa to make the request,” Aisha, the young girl, explained.

The middle-aged man, who was apparently her father, turned pale. “Your grandpa? Why wouldn’t you ask your pa?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have let me do it...”

“Of course not! Listen, Aisha, the Black Guild is a bunch of no-good criminals, ya got it? They’ll do any dirty work for coin. And they’re almost all poor. Ain’t nothin’ good gonna come from messin’ with the likes of them.”

It was quite the harsh opinion, but not that far from the truth.

“B-But if we don’t do anything, Mii’s gonna die!” Aisha protested tearfully.

“But Aisha—”

“Mii’s a good girl! She eats pests and helps the fields! Grandpa said so!”

“Sure, but these people are scum—”

“Enough, Buzz. I made the request,” said an old man with a towel around his neck as he approached from the back of the barn. His face was wrinkled, but his deep tan and thick, sturdy limbs suggested he was still an active farmer.

Aisha’s father glowered at the old man. “Pa, you can’t just do whatever you want!”

“Listen, I felt sorry for Aisha. Besides, at my age, what’s a scoundrel or two? I care more about my fields.”

“So...” Zenos said, raising his hand and interrupting the family quarrel. “What are we supposed to do, exactly?” He assumed the creature Aisha had referred to as Mii was the magical beast in need of healing, though he wasn’t sure what the family was disagreeing over.

“Please!” Aisha pleaded, earnestly bowing her head. “Save Mii!”

“Don’t lower your head to these people!” her father snapped.

“You shut your mouth, Buzz,” her grandfather interjected.

“This way!” Aisha said, ignoring her elders and leading Zenos and Pista toward a small wooden box at the end of the barn.

Inside the box was a blue-furred, rabbitlike magical beast. It seemed listless, lying limply with its eyes closed. Its back rose and fell slightly with every shallow breath it took.

“I see. A blue rabbit,” Zenos said, crossing his arms.

Aisha’s eyes sparkled. “Yeah! I found her in the woods! You knew just from looking, mister?”

“Yeah. These usually move in herds, banding together and ravaging crops.”

“Huh?” Aisha turned pale, and her alarmed father stared at the blue rabbit.

“Should we really heal it, meow?” Pista asked anxiously.

Zenos replied with a smile. “Well, *normal* blue rabbits ravage crops. But see there, behind its ear, that red patch? This one’s a mutant. Mutations can be good or bad, but this one’s harmless. In some places it’s even considered a

guardian of the fields.”

“I see, meow. So because of this mutation, it turned into a harmless magical beast that eats pests and helps people.”

Years of adventuring with Aston’s group had paid off in an unexpected way, it seemed. Back then it had been hard on Zenos, but it seemed no knowledge gained was ever wasted, indeed.

Aisha’s eyes sparkled anew. “Th-Then it’s okay to heal Mii, right?”

“Yeah. Once Mii’s all better, it can eat the pests in the fields again.”

With that, Aisha looked joyfully at her grandfather. Her father, on the other hand, still glared at Zenos and Pista with a sour look on his face.

“Hmph. Can people from the Black Guild even heal anythin’ right?” he asked scornfully. “All you lot are good for is hittin’ and stealin’ stuff.”

“Well, most of us, yeah, but I happen to specialize in healing,” Zenos said.

“You’re probably just tryin’ to scam us out of coin.”

“Well, that’s not very nice.” Zenos scratched his head. “I’ve never lied about healing in my life.”

The man fell silent.

“*Diagnosis*,” Zenos chanted, and a white light scanned through the small magical beast.

Aisha’s father clicked his tongue, while she held her breath and watched nervously.

“I see. So that’s the problem,” Zenos murmured. He lifted the weakened blue rabbit, manifested a surgical blade into his right hand, and made a vertical incision on the creature’s abdomen.

“Wh-Wh-Wh—” By the time Aisha had finished stammering, however, the wound had already closed perfectly. “H-Huh?”

As Aisha, her father, and grandfather all gaped at the feat, Zenos held out a needlelike object about the length of his middle finger which he’d taken out of the blue rabbit’s belly. “This was stuck in its internal organs,” he explained. “I

made a small cut to pull it out, then closed it with healing magic.”

“Wh-What are you talking about—”

“It’s a venomous bristle, but I enhanced Mii’s natural healing with regenerative magic, so it’ll be fine. Magical beasts are pretty sturdy things,” he said, gently returning the small creature to the box.

The previously listless blue rabbit began to hop about energetically.

“W-Wow, mister! That’s amazing!” Aisha exclaimed.

Pista laughed haughtily, looking down at the impressed girl. “Mya ha ha! How’s that? My boss is the best, isn’t he?!”

Not only did the catgirl seemingly have no intention to stop calling Zenos her boss, she sounded even more bossy than the supposed boss. Great.

At the sight of the creature’s inarguable recovery, Aisha’s father groaned in frustration. “I-I still ain’t acceptin’ you people!”

“That’s fine,” Zenos said. “All I want is the payment.” As usual, he didn’t expect praise, only fair compensation for his work.

After Aisha’s grandfather went to the main house to get the money, Pista picked up the bristle that had been stuck inside the magical beast, tilting her head. “But you know, I wonder how this ended up stuck in its belly, meow?”

Aisha, who was crouched down and petting the blue rabbit, responded, “I think it happened about ten days ago. Mii went to play in the woods, and when she came back, she was sick.”

“Wait, what did you say?” Zenos asked, frowning. He took the bristle from Pista and examined it closely. After a while, his brows furrowed, and he muttered, “Well, this is a problem.”

“What’s wrong, boss?” Pista asked, looking up at him.

With a deep sigh, Zenos looked at everyone, and said, “This is a bristle from a death spider. They’re spiteful things. This one will keep coming for its prey until it finishes the job.”

The silence in the barn was deafening.

“Umm,” Pista mumbled, “I feel like I saw something about a death spider somewhere recently...” She paused for a moment, then clapped her hands together. “That’s right! The A-Rank hunt request in the guild for a super dangerous magical beast, meow!”

“Huh?” Aisha said, shocked.

“What did you say?!” Aisha’s father Buzz exclaimed, equally taken aback.

Zenos closely examined the bristle he’d removed from the blue rabbit. “As the name suggests, it’s a highly venomous and deadly spider,” he explained. “But this is basically peach fuzz, so it’s probably from a young spider.”

“This sharp thing is ‘peach fuzz’?” Pista asked.

“Normally, death spiders don’t come near human settlements, but maybe this one is a stray.” During his time as an adventurer, Zenos had seen a village nearly wiped out by an attack from a death spider. The blue rabbit had probably encountered the spider in the forest, and thanks to its agility and natural luck, had been fortunate enough to escape with just a single bristle stuck in it.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this, meow.” Pista shivered, her cat ears and dark brown hair standing on end. Inside the box, the blue rabbit was also moving around restlessly, sensing something bad approaching. “Boss, we’ve gotta scram.”

“But we haven’t gotten paid yet.” Half of the payment for a request made to the Black Guild was upfront, and the other half was given upon completion. The upfront payment went to the committee, whereas the remainder went to the person who completed the request. And Aisha’s grandfather, who’d gone inside the house to get the second half of the payment, hadn’t returned yet.

“Then let’s hurry and grab the money, then go, meow. The request’s done, so we have no reason to stay here.”

“Well, yeah, but...” Zenos looked at Aisha anxiously holding the blue rabbit, and at her panicking father. “Say, Pista, that request to hunt a death spider had a pretty big reward, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. Even the Adventurers’ Guild would have a hard time getting it done, meow.”

If Zenos remembered correctly, the request was to obtain the steel web spun by a death spider. While there certainly were capable parties affiliated with the Adventurers’ Guild capable of handling the beast, high-ranking parties were typically busy. If the timing was off, or if nobody could locate the magical beast, the request could go unfulfilled for a while. That was likely why it’d ended up with the Black Guild.

“Shadow healer, please tell me you’re not getting any weird ideas,” Pista said suspiciously.

The next second, a scream echoed from outside. The group rushed out of the barn, only to immediately freeze in place.

“Eek!” Aisha shouted.

“Whoa!” her father exclaimed.

Standing outside was a gigantic spider, easily taller than an adult human. Its body was mottled in a black and purple pattern and was covered with needlelike bristles. Blue-black slime dripped from its writhing mouth onto the grass underneath, causing it to wither and decay rapidly. Its ten pitch-black compound eyes, five on each side, stared at the group impassively as the blue rabbit cradled in Aisha’s arms growled and bared its teeth.

“Oh. There it is. The death spider,” Zenos murmured.

“Grandpa!” Aisha screamed, running toward her grandfather, who was on his knees before the giant arachnid. Several bristles were sticking out of his abdomen.

“Wait! Stay away, Aisha!” her grandfather warned.

“But—!”

“Stop, Aisha!” her father commanded. “L-Leave this to your pa!” The man, who had been frightened moments ago, now boldly dashed forward with a cry, determined to protect his daughter.

The death spider remained still, its eerie eyes focused not on the approaching

human, but the blue rabbit in Aisha's grasp—the prey that had escaped its grasp earlier.

“Huh,” Zenos said, looking at Pista beside him as the catgirl intently watched Aisha's father throw himself into danger for his daughter. “Guess Aisha's dad has guts when it counts.”

Pista's expression was tense, her fists were clenched tightly, and she was completely silent.

“Hey, Pista?”

“Huh? What, meow?”

“Sorry, but I'm gonna do something about that.”

“What? You can't be serious, meow! We should get out of here! That hunt request excluded rookies anyway! We'll be risking our lives for nothing!”

“Well, we completed the request to heal the magical beast just now, so we're not rookies anymore.”

“Th-That's a stupid argument that— Wait, no, it might actually work with the Black Guild, meow.”

“I'm not trying to be a hero or anything. Just, if this family gets wiped out, we won't get paid.”

“Y-You have a point, meow, but—”

“And I've had enough of watching people die.”

“Shadow healer...?”

With that, Zenos dashed toward Aisha, and gently took the blue rabbit she was holding, lifting it by the scruff of its neck. “Sorry, just gonna borrow this for a second.”

“Huh? Mister, what—”

“Hey! Big spider!” Zenos shouted, provoking the magical beast. “Over here!”

Aisha's grandfather was on his knees, panting heavily, while her father stood trembling in front of her with a raised hoe.

The death spider took a step toward Zenos. "All right!" the healer yelled. "Come get me!"

"Hey! Boss, why are you running?!" Pista shouted behind him as Zenos ran at full speed off to the side, holding the blue rabbit. The giant spider fiercely gave chase, its eight pillar-like legs moving in perfect sync. "Wait, no. He's acting as a decoy, meow?"

He was indeed. The death spider's original target was the blue rabbit it had failed to kill, after all. Zenos had anticipated that, by running away with the small magical beast, he could get the spider to follow him.

"Sorry to use you as bait," he told the rabbit. "I'm trying to protect that girl. Help me out, all right?"

The rabbit squeaked in his arms as though in agreement.

Zenos practically flew across the meadow, but even with his leg strength magically enhanced, the spider was gradually closing in on him. Once he'd put enough distance between the spider and the family, Zenos stopped. He steadied his breath and stared evenly at the menacing form of the death spider as it drew closer.

"'A healer should never fight on the front lines,' he said," Zenos muttered, remembering one of his mentor's sayings.

It was true that, if a healer got injured, the pain disrupted their concentration, reduced the accuracy of their spells, and ultimately put the party at risk. This was something he'd experienced firsthand before. It was why, after parting ways with his mentor, he'd learned both protective and enhancing spells as an extension of healing magic, since they all operated around similar principles of boosting bodily functions.

That meant he could fight.

"Watch me, master," Zenos murmured. He placed the blue rabbit on the ground and manifested a scalpel in his right hand. Infusing it with additional mana, he grew it to the size of a longsword.

The death spider shot out its venomous bristles, but Zenos parried them, knocking them down with his glowing white blade. Protective spells were strong

against broad strikes, but could be slightly pierced by pointed objects such as the needlelike bristles. If he were to be poisoned, his movements would slow, so he had no choice but to deflect everything.

Venomous fluids. Venomous bristles. Venomous steel web. Zenos dodged, knocked down, and slashed through the barrage of deadly attacks; the surrounding greenery, splashed with venom, withered and decayed in the blink of an eye. Alternating between enhancing his leg strength, dynamic vision, and arm strength, Zenos closed the distance and cut off one of the death spider's legs.

"Groooar!" The beast lashed out wildly at Zenos with its remaining seven legs.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he exclaimed, somehow managing to dodge and cut off another leg.

His plan had been to follow up with more attacks if the death spider continued to attack in its rage, but instead it kept its distance, watching Zenos warily. It was an A-Rank beast for a reason, after all.

Zenos had encountered death spiders several times during his days as an adventurer, and every time their eight legs, each of which could move independently, were more trouble than their venom or steel web. That was why, typically, multiple people were required to deal with the beast by gradually incapacitating its legs.

"Doing this alone is no joke... I'll just have to chip away at it." Zenos took a deep breath, lowering his stance slightly.

Suddenly, the blue rabbit dashed forward and lunged at the death spider, and the larger beast's many compound eyes all simultaneously focused on the smaller creature. Although initially startled, Zenos instinctively reacted, growing the longsword in his hand into a greatsword.

With a loud cry, he swung the sword from right to left, severing the spider's remaining legs and cleaving its body in two. An agonizing shriek echoed through the air as the death spider collapsed, its movements coming to a stop.

Sighing, Zenos picked up the blue rabbit. "Appreciate the distraction. Managed to finish it off sooner than I thought, all thanks to you."

The rabbit squeaked proudly.

“Mya ha ha! See that?!” Pista exclaimed, already boasting as she returned to the front of the house. “Even A-Rank beasts go down in one hit from my boss!”

Zenos then went to Aisha’s grandfather, removed the venomous bristles, and healed him. He’d precast a regenerative spell on the man before engaging the death spider, so he figured after this, just a bit of rest would be sufficient to finish the treatment.

Which, of course, he charged extra for.

“Thank you, mister!” Aisha chirped after her grandfather was laid down on a bed.

“You’re really somethin’,” her grandfather said. “Thank you.”

Only the girl’s father remained sullen, with his arms crossed. Zenos was used to people behaving that way, so it didn’t bother him much. It wasn’t uncommon for ordinary citizens in this country to be hostile to the poor.

After collecting the payment, Zenos was on his way out of the house when a voice called out from behind him. “Hey.” Turning around, Zenos saw Aisha’s father pursing his lips tightly. The man then slowly bowed his head. “Thanks. For savin’ us.”

“No problem,” Zenos replied. “Let me know if anything else happens.” He raised a hand, smiling, and left the location of his “faction’s” first request.

As they walked down the peaceful rural path, heading back toward the slums, a moved Pista clasped her hands behind her head. “It’s the first time an ordinary citizen has thanked me, meow.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t happen often.”

“You’re so amazing, shadow healer. I really wanna groom you, meow.”

“You keep saying that. What does it even mean?”

“Grooming one another with our tongues is an affectionate gesture between catfolk, meow. You should be honored.”

“Now I really don’t want it.”

“Just a little lick!” Pista exclaimed, pouncing on him unexpectedly.

“Hey! Cut that out!” Zenos protested. It happened too quickly for him to dodge, and the pair rolled down an embankment. Catfolk really were quick. Pista landed on Zenos’s stomach and gave his forehead a little lick. “Really?” he muttered.

Pista giggled. “Now we’re buddies, meow!” Her giddiness faded, however, and her eyes grew sorrowful. “You know, compared to you, I’m pretty awful. Ever since I became an information broker, all I think about is how to get ahead.”

“Well, that’s kind of understandable if you’re gonna survive in the Black Guild.”

“But in the end, it’s just...” Pista trailed off, contemplative.

Zenos bit back the urge to tell her to get off him. “Say, Pista, how did you become a broker in the first place?”

“That was...” She hesitated for a moment, then continued, “Well, all my life I’ve never trusted people, meow. But now that I’ve groomed you, we’re friends! So I can tell you.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Bit late for that. Now I *want* to tell you.”

“Uh. All right.”

After a brief silence, Pista, still sitting atop him, spoke quietly. “Like you, shadow healer, I wanna meet a *certain* top executive.”

“A *certain* top executive?” he echoed.

“Yeah. The guy tore my family apart. I can’t forgive that.” Pista’s voice was much colder than Zenos had ever heard it. “He goes by Beast King. I became a broker so I could gather information on him.”

Upon Zenos and Pista’s return to the underground waterway to report their results, the woman at the reception desk—who had a tattoo covering half of

her face—smiled in amusement.

“Huh. Look at you go,” she said, looking over the pair’s report. It included the completion of the request to heal the small magical beast plus the delivery of the death spider’s steel web as per the hunt request. “By the way, the death spider request excluded rookies,” the woman added.

“We completed the healing request first, so we’re not rookies anymore,” Zenos countered.

The receptionist laughed. “I guess so, huh? All right, then.”

Seemed like Zenos’s lousy argument had worked. The Adventurers’ Guild would never have been this lenient.

“Yay! We have our reward, meow!” Pista exclaimed, reverting back to her old self as she rubbed her cheek against the fingerprint-smudged gold coins.

As she idly watched Pista shower the coins with affection, the amused receptionist said, “You know, for a group with such a weird name, you guys sure can get things done.”

“Really?” Zenos was certain he’d written down the name “Physician,” which should’ve doubled as their faction name. It didn’t seem that weird.

“I mean, look at this nonsense. What even is this name?” the receptionist continued, holding back laughter as she waved the paper with their faction name.

Written in large letters was “Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions.”

Pista blinked. “Um... What is this, meow?”

“Wait... Huh?” Zenos muttered. The handwriting was different from his. Most glaringly, considering the name, there could only have been one culprit. “That floaty snake! She switched the papers!”

The healer’s shouts echoed throughout the underground space, but alas, it was far too late. The name had already been registered everywhere, and could no longer be changed.

“Keep at it, Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions!” the receptionist said with a wink.

Zenos's shoulders slumped as he walked away.

Two weeks later, beneath the early summer sun, the pleasant symphony of cicadas once again filled the air. In the clinic's examination room, Lily placed a glass of honey-sweetened iced tea on the desk.

"Are you okay, Zenos? Aren't you working too hard?" she asked.

"Thanks, Lily," Zenos said, rubbing his shoulders. "I'm pushing myself a bit, but I don't have a choice." He picked up the glass and drank it all in one gulp, letting the cold sweetness wash over him.

Lately, his life had involved completing as many requests from the Black Guild as possible and returning to the clinic in between to see his patients. His achievements in the guild were steadily piling up, but truthfully, they weren't at a level that would allow him to reach the top. He'd been avoiding requests involving assassinations, blackmail, theft, and the like, as they would weigh on his conscience. Instead, he'd focused on requests for healing or those that had found their way down from the Adventurers' Guild. Occasionally, he landed a high-paying request like the one for the death spider, but with his faction consisting of just himself and Pista, they were limited in how they could make money.

They couldn't afford to take too long either—they didn't know how much time Velitra had already spent working on preparations for the resurrection spell.

"Doc, why don't we help you out?" Zophia suggested.

"If us three and our men all join your faction, it'd instantly become the largest one," Lynga added.

"We could split our efforts, complete more requests, and get a lot more results," Loewe noted.

The three demi-human leaders who, as usual, were gathered around the dinner table, looked concerned as they made their suggestions.

"Hmm, but..." Zenos mumbled. He was hesitant to involve the demi-humans

in his personal problems, since they didn't have anything to do with his situation. Not only that, if a large number of people suddenly joined his faction, it would attract attention from above. "You've already helped me plenty. Thanks for that."

The demi-humans had, after all, been covertly putting in requests for Zenos's faction, discreetly enough to avoid attracting attention from the guild's management. These requests were contributing to his faction's achievements.

An eerie chuckle echoed through the air. "How go the activities of Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions?"

"I think you've meddled enough," Zenos said with a grunt as he glared sideways at an amused Carmilla, who sat with her legs crossed on the edge of the bed.

He sighed. Because of that floaty snake's prank, he'd ended up with an odd faction name, which made them stick out like a sore thumb. A very weird sore thumb.

"Please. 'Tis much more sensible of a name than something like the 'Physicians,'" she said dismissively.

"Oh, so you're the sensible one all of a sudden?"

"Besides, if your faction name was something *that* painfully on the nose, your old acquaintance might catch on."

"Well, that *is* a fair point..."

Carmilla chuckled again. "In a guild as laden with conspiracy as that one, not being taken seriously is a boon. With this name, none shall see you as a threat. 'Tis all part of my elaborate scheme."

"Which is all a load of crap, because you picked the name on a whim, didn't you?"

Just as the wraith disappeared into the second floor with a coy giggle, the clinic's door swung open, revealing the catgirl information broker.

"Do we have a new request, Pista?" Zenos asked. The pair didn't just wait for official requests to be posted; they also used Pista's connections as a broker to

secure various jobs.

The catgirl shook her head and said, “Shadow healer, great news! Lots of people want to join our faction, meow!”

“...You’re kidding.”

Zenos and Pista returned to the underground waterway, and the pair navigated the mazelike corridors to their base.

Once a faction achieved decent enough results, they were given their own room. Though their faction’s space was still cramped, barely enough to place a desk and chair, it was packed with rough-looking men. There was even a line extending outside, since not everyone had managed to fit within.

The healer put on his mask and stood before the men. “Um... What’s going on here?”

“Hey. I’m the Demolisher. Zui’s my name. You the boss here?” said the man at the front in a deep voice, his face covered in countless scars.

“Uh, yeah, technically.”

“So, uh, let us join Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions.”

“Can you not use that name?”

“Why?! We wanna join Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions!”

“I said, stop repeating that name!!!” After some back-and-forth, Zenos, panting, turned to Pista standing next to him. “Okay. *What* is happening?”

“Well, this sort of thing happens a lot in the Black Guild, actually,” Pista said, rubbing her nose proudly.

Those who joined the Black Guild upon losing their place in society, dreaming of striking it rich, were often met with the harsh reality that individuals and small factions struggled to land lucrative requests. Joining a major faction as a common henchman, meanwhile, meant getting only a tiny fraction of the payout. People stuck in such situations for years often wanted to join newer, rising factions. More people meant more requests, and fewer people than

major factions meant a bigger share of the reward.

“I see,” Zenos mused. It made sense. The people here were quite the bunch, however—a quick glance around revealed nothing but cartoonishly evil faces. And on closer inspection, some of the guys who’d picked a fight with Zenos and Pista on their first day were there too. “I...dunno how I feel about this.”

He didn’t intend to stay in the Black Guild forever, after all. Once he met with Velitra, he’d achieve his goal. Plus, these guys would be in a pinch if the faction they’d only just joined immediately disbanded.

“Oh, no worries, meow,” Pista assured him. “If you make it to the top, your early members get a lot of status. It’ll be a win-win. We shouldn’t miss this opportunity! Leave this to me!”

“You sure about that?” Zenos asked.

“Seeing you in action makes me realize there’s more to life than being a crafty cat, meow.” Pista stepped forward, speaking authoritatively from behind her mask. “Listen up, you guys! I’m the number two around here! You wanna join? You listen to what I say, meow!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“If you wanna be part of this faction, you gotta do one good deed a day! Altruists only!”

“Altruists?” one of the men asked.

“The heck’s an altruist?”

“I dunno. Never heard of that.”

As the men muttered to each other, Pista crossed her arms. “An altruist does nice things out of the goodness of their hearts for others, meow! No evil deeds are allowed here.”

“S-Seriously?!”

“I don’t get it. Bad stuff’s all I’ve ever done.”

“What’s there to do in the Black Guild other than bad things?”

“You’ve got eyes, don’t you? Use them and you’ll find requests for help,

meow!” Pista pointed out. “Don’t like it, take a hike.”

“Ugh...”

It wasn’t as though these men had anywhere else to go; they wouldn’t have been here otherwise. Pista knew this, of course, so she’d taken the correct approach—which was crafty, granted, but still, Zenos decided not to interfere.

“You get it, meow?”

“Y-Yeah...” The men collectively gave a reluctant nod.

“What was that? I didn’t catch it, meow.”

“Yes!”

“Again!”

“Yes!!!”

“Agaaain!”

“Yeees!!!”

Pista let out a pleased huff of laughter. “This feels amaaazing!”

“Sorry, did you just say something about this feeling ‘amazing’?” Zenos asked.

“Nope, didn’t say a thing, meow,” the catgirl replied, avoiding his gaze. She thrust her right hand up high. “All righty! Here we go, Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions! Chaaarge!”

“Yaaaah!!!” the men cheered. “Hooray for Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions!!!”

“Stop shouting that damn naaame!!!” Zenos yelled.

Two weeks after their initial infiltration of the Black Guild, Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions significantly expanded their ranks and made great strides forward.

Ten more days had passed.

A figure clad in a pitch-black robe that blended into the surrounding shadows walked briskly down a corridor in the dim underground waterway, followed by

another figure wearing a gray hood.

“Nice work, Night Healer. That fight was nothing short of bloody, but you healed everyone in no time at all,” said the Conductor in a cheerful tone.

“Hey,” snapped Elgen, one of the Night Healer’s henchmen. “How much longer are you gonna stick around?”

Velitra didn’t trust the gray-hooded Conductor either, but couldn’t deny the jack-of-all-trades was useful. The plan was to make use of the odd figure as long as there was something to be gained in it. Whether or not the Conductor knew of that was unclear.

“Aw, what’s the matter?” came the lighthearted reply. “The Night Healer and I are associates at the moment.”

Elgen scoffed bitterly.

Ignoring him, the Conductor addressed Velitra. “By the way, have you heard of this faction with a strange name that’s been piling up results lately?”

“No,” Velitra replied curtly.

“They’ve gathered a lot of members, and it hasn’t even been a month since their formation. People have even been saying they could be candidates for future executives.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh? Not interested? That’s not good, you know. Curiosity helps keep a youthful mind. Want me to tell you more?”

“I don’t care who rises to the top anymore,” said Velitra, walking at a slightly slower pace. “What I want you to tell me is whether your preparations are complete.”

“Almost. What about yours?”

“I’ve gathered all the necessary materials, and the special item is ready as well.” Velitra, wearing an entranced expression, clutched a black leather journal underneath the dark robe. “It’s almost time for us to meet again, master.”

Chapter 5: Father and Daughter

Exactly one month had passed since Zenos joined the Black Guild.

“Why, how capable you are,” Carmilla remarked.

“I’m a little nervous,” Lily said.

“Nice job getting a place this big already,” Zophia noted.

“I’d expect no less from Zenos,” Lynga pointed out.

“I’m not surprised either,” Loewe agreed.

The usual crowd was gathered in a particular spot within the underground waterway. Carmilla had suddenly expressed a desire to visit the Black Guild, and Lily and the demi-human leaders had decided to accompany the wraith. Given the many dangers underground, Zenos hadn’t wanted them to get involved, but Carmilla had been adamant, and he’d reluctantly agreed, stressing that it had to be just a tour of the place.

“Why the sudden urge to check out the place, anyway?” Zenos asked Carmilla.

The well-worn staff where the wraith was hiding from the other faction members vibrated. “Foolish question. I came to see how my minions are doing. I am this faction’s true boss, lest you forget.”

“In name only,” the healer retorted.

This was the base of the newcomer faction known as Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions. Zenos had expected the members to ask about the faction’s bizarre name, but no one had. Perhaps it was so incomprehensible that they’d simply accepted it as fact, though that wasn’t any better.

“Ah, my minions fare splendidly,” Carmilla said. “This is like looking at a reference book for villainous faces, ha ha ha!”

“You can see around you even while in that staff?” Zenos asked.

“Where there is a will, there is a way. I can even do *this*,” the wraith replied, her translucent head popping out from the tip of the staff.

“Yikes! Let’s *not* freak people out!”

With a defiant, eerie laugh, her head retracted, and the staff vibrated again. “Either way, this place is bigger than the clinic, no?”

“Yeah, at least it’s roomy here.”

The faction’s mounting achievements had earned them a larger room from the guild’s management; its area was several times that of their previous base, and the ceiling was higher too. No sunlight came in, however, and it was damp all the time, making the place a poor environment to be in for prolonged periods of time.

Since Zenos went back to the clinic and Pista to her place at night, they didn’t spend much time here, but this was where most of their faction’s members slept. Despite the place’s shortcomings, they claimed it was better than curling up in a corner of the waterway.

“This won’t do, Zenos,” Lily stated firmly as she looked around the room.

“No good, huh?” Zenos mused.

“It’s dusty! Moldy! Unsanitary!”

“You’re absolutely right.” Zenos had noticed it too, but completing requests took priority.

Lily puffed out her chest proudly. “Leave it to me!”

The young elf had brought an array of cleaning tools, from dust cloths and brooms to dusters. She immediately set about wiping the cracked stone floors with a damp cloth. Curious, the faction members watched her.

“Don’t just stand there watching!” Pista admonished them. “The boss’s friend just started cleaning! Help her out!”

“Cleanin’?” one man echoed.

“How...do ya do that?” another asked.

The staff in Zenos’s hands vibrated. “What is this? A gathering of uncivilized

brutes?”

“I can’t deny that,” Zenos muttered. It was true that many of these men lacked general knowledge, but having grown up in the unique environment of an orphanage in the slums, Zenos could understand them. If not for Liz and his mentor, who knew what might’ve become of him.

Point was, no one had taught these guys the things that, to everyone else, were common sense. At first, being forbidden from doing evil deeds and told to only take requests that helped people had left the men at a loss. More recently, however, they’d started expressing sentiments such as “Feels good when people are grateful,” and “A kid thanked me and I cried.”

Pista tossed cleaning cloths to the men. “You guys gonna let a little girl do all the work?” she reprimanded them. “One good deed a day! If you have time to stand around talking, you have time to put in that elbow grease, meow!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” the men said, standing up and getting to work.

The catgirl crossed her arms arrogantly, lying back with her legs outstretched.

“I didn’t know Pista was like this,” Lynga said with a wry smile.

“I guess she’s the type to let power get to her head,” Loewe concurred, mirroring Lynga’s awkward expression.

“Well, since we’re here, we may as well get to helping too,” Zophia interjected.

At Zophia’s suggestion, Zenos and the demi-humans joined in, and a major cleaning session began. With that many people working together, the base was noticeably cleaner in a few hours.



“Whoa, check this place out,” one of the faction members said.

“Man, this feels nice,” another added.

“You know, I think I like cleanin’,” a third remarked, moved.

Next to him, Loewe took out a large pot and various foodstuffs from a cart.
“About time to eat.”

The men let out excited shouts as Lily, working alongside the demi-humans with her sleeves rolled up, began preparations to serve everyone a hearty stew. Though it was early summer, the underground was always chilly due to lack of sunlight.

“Th-This is crazy good!” a man exclaimed.

“Dude, are you cryin’?” another asked.

“Sh-Shut yer trap! I haven’t eaten somethin’ this nice an’ warm in a while, all right?!”

“I mean, I get it. In my old faction they wouldn’t let us grunts even eat the scraps.”

The faction members seemed thrilled with the food. Watching them, Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly. “You all did end up helping me, huh...”

An eerie chuckle came from the staff in his hands as it began to vibrate. “You should be grateful,” Carmilla said. “I was the one who brought them here.”

“And you haven’t lifted a finger, incidentally.”

“Preposterous. My presence alone is priceless.”

She sure had high self-esteem.

Zenos smiled at the staff. “Thanks, Carmilla.”

“F-For what?”

“Lily and the others were probably worried about me, but they couldn’t interfere with my personal matters. That’s why you insisted they all come along, right?” Seeing where Zenos was and what he’d been up to had no doubt put their minds at ease. His intention had been not to get anyone involved, but he’d

just ended up worrying them instead.

After a moment of silence, the staff quivered slightly. “Hmph. You simply have a habit of trying to do everything alone.”

“Sorry about that.”

“But you know, now that I am here, I cannot help but notice this place has a scent to it.”

“We did just clean it up.”

“That is not what I mean.”

Zenos tilted his head. “Huh?”

Before the staff-residing wraith could continue, Lynga addressed Pista. “Hey Pista, just wondering, but you haven’t been doing anything weird to Sir Zenos, right?”

“What do you mean, ‘weird,’ meow?” Pista replied.

“It was just you two here before the other faction members joined, right? Don’t think I’ll just let you get cozy with Sir Zenos.”

“Oh, Lynga, I’m wounded, meow! The shadow healer and I are friends and business partners. Nothing else happened, you know.” Then, the catgirl nonchalantly added, “I just gave him a little lick.”

“Ohhh...” Lily murmured.

“Doc! Lily passed out!” Zophia shouted.

“Lily!” Zenos called out. “It’s not what you think!”

“I’ll teach you a lesson, Pista!” Lynga snapped.

“Wait, Lynga!” Zophia called out. “Don’t fight here!”

“Put your claws away, Lynga,” Pista said. “Catfolk express affection through licking—”

“Then I’m gonna give Sir Zenos a lick too!” Lynga interjected.

“Me too!” Loewe declared. “A lick! As a token of affection!”

“Lynga! Loewe! Both of you pipe down!” Zenos yelled.

“Same old, same old...” Carmilla mused.

After the commotion settled down, the faction’s men saw the demi-humans and Lily off and they returned to the clinic, taking Carmilla’s staff with them. The faction members then all scattered to take care of their own tasks, leaving only Zenos and Pista in the now clean underground room.

Feeling oddly fatigued, Zenos sat down. The catgirl sat beside him.

“You know, shadow healer, you’re really something, meow,” Pista said.

“I haven’t done anything,” Zenos replied.

“But you have! An ordinary citizen thanked us, which I’d never seen before, mind you, and just now you had demi-humans and a bunch of dudes from the Black Guild all interacting like it was the most natural thing in the world. Normally that wouldn’t happen, meow. You don’t just heal wounds, you bring people together too.”

“I bring people together, huh?” Zenos echoed pensively.

“A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place,” his mentor had used to say.

Pista rested her chin on her knees, gazing into the distance. “Maybe you could even help me with my...”

“What was that?” Zenos asked.

“Huh? Oh! Nothing, meow.” Pista shook her head, then continued cheerfully, “Anyway, you’re gonna be a top executive and meet with your friend. And then I’ll get info from you on the Beast King. We just need to keep working on our respective goals.”

“Right, yeah.”

Still seated, the two exchanged a high five. Their faction had grown and made significant progress. Zenos still had quite a way to go before reaching top executive, but they had a plan.

“I think it’s about time, meow,” Pista murmured.

Just then, a woman appeared at the entrance to the room.

“Heyooo! How’s it going?” asked the receptionist, whose flashy nail polish and hairstyle changed every time they saw her. She looked around the room, eyes widening. “Wow, this place is spotless! What happened here?”

“We cleaned it up,” Zenos explained.

“Seriously? That’s sooo funny,” she said, clapping her hands and laughing. What exactly was so amusing was unclear.

Zenos stood up with a sigh. “Are you here about a request?”

“Oh, right! Rejoice, everybody! You’ve been specially selected by a big, huge, humongous shot!”

“A big, huge, humongous shot,” Zenos echoed.

“Yep! A top executive!”

“Oh!”

“Meeow! That’s even better than I expected!” Pista exclaimed.

Zenos and Pista exchanged glances and nodded. They’d discussed this strategy before, knowing that no matter how many small requests they completed, they wouldn’t ever reach the top. They could, however, build a reputation: Pista, using her information network, had spread the word everywhere about a rising new faction. The idea was that, if they received a direct request from a big shot who’d heard the rumors, they could get exceptional rewards and recognition.

They hadn’t quite anticipated that they’d be personally requested by a top executive so suddenly, however. Perhaps luck was smiling upon them.

“What kind of person is the executive who made the request?” Zenos asked.

“This one’s been around a long while,” the receptionist answered nonchalantly. “He goes by Beast King. I don’t know much more than that, but he wants you to drop by his base as soon as possible. Tomorrow, even.”

“Huh...?” Pista, who’d been delighted until moments ago, was at a loss for words. “The Beast King. That’s...” The one she was looking for.

The receptionist cast Pista a curious glance before waving a hand. “Anyway,

good luck! I happen to really like you guys, so don't get yourselves killed, okay?"

"Don't say stuff like that," Zenos protested.

"I mean, the guy *is* a top exec. Mess up and..." She stuck out her tongue and gestured as though slitting her throat before sauntering away.

The grim warning aside, it sounded like they'd lucked into one of their objectives. Zenos turned to Pista and said, "Hey, good for you."

"I wasn't expecting it, but...finally," Pista muttered quietly, clenching her fists.

"So, is the Beast King an enemy of your family?" Zenos asked, recalling that Pista had previously said her family had been torn apart by the man.

"An enemy *and* my family. Either way, I hate him."

Zenos tilted his head at the statement.

After a moment's hesitation, Pista continued, "Truth is, the Beast King is my father, meow."

The dreary sounds of dripping water echoed endlessly along the stone passage.

Zenos and Pista, making their way through the vast underground waterway, headed toward the location where they were to meet the Beast King, a top executive of the Black Guild. They'd been requested to come in a small group, and so their other faction members couldn't accompany them.

"Uh, is it this way?" Zenos asked.

"I think so, meow," Pista replied.

At each checkpoint in the waterway, the pair would show a receptionist the request from the top executive and be directed toward the next checkpoint. The corridors were so intricately intertwined, however, that if the two weren't careful they could easily lose track of where they were. Supposedly, due to multiple expansions of the space over time, no one was fully certain of the waterway's layout anymore.

"You know, I wasn't expecting you to be the daughter of a top executive,"

Zenos said.

“Sorry for keeping quiet, meow,” Pista mumbled, her face an indescribable mix of anxiety and anger. “I didn’t mean to trick you. We’ve severed all ties, so he’s my father by blood, but I have nothing to do with him anymore.”

Pista had told Zenos before that the Beast King had torn her family apart. “What was that about, by the way?” the healer asked.

“I meant what I said, meow. My father said my mom and I weren’t fit for a top executive like him and threw us out. It’s been one thing after another since. My mom’s health deteriorated, and things got pretty bad, so I decided to become an information broker once I was old enough.” Her objective had been to meet the father who had cast them aside.

Seeing Pista clench her fists, Zenos was reminded of the situation with the death spider. When Aisha’s father had jumped in front of the beast to protect his child, Pista had stared intently at the man’s back. One father had protected his daughter, and the other had abandoned his daughter. He wondered how the contrast had made Pista feel.

“So basically, you became a broker because of a grudge against your father,” Zenos surmised.

“And? I don’t want any lectures about how revenge won’t solve anything, meow,” Pista said warily.

“No, I mean, it can be pretty satisfying, so I’d recommend it on occasion. I felt great after delivering a knuckle sandwich to an old party leader who treated me like garbage.”

Pista seemed taken aback. “O-Oh, really? I, um, wasn’t expecting you to encourage me, meow.”

Zenos looked his partner straight in the eye. “But we *are* about to go hear the guy’s request. In other words, we’re about to go help him with something. Are you okay with that?”

“Well, I...” Pista trailed off for a moment before continuing. “I have no plans to forgive my father. But this is a great opportunity to push you to the top quickly. You’re my friend. And I groomed you! I can’t let you go alone, meow.”

“So you don’t want to help your father, but you do want to help me. You kinda can’t have both, though.”

“I-I know, meow...”

The sudden opportunity to get close to her target had left Pista without time to sort out her feelings, so Zenos decided not to press her further. They did, however, need to decide on a course of action before accepting the request.

After passing through several more checkpoints, they finally arrived at the Beast King’s base. An imposing iron door was embedded into the wall, its appearance alone exuding a chilling, intimidating air. Top executives had multiple bases and often changed locations to prepare for attacks; this was simply the Beast King’s current location.

Zenos, wearing his mask, looked back at the equally masked Pista, then knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” came a low voice from within.

“I came to fulfill a request from your boss,” Zenos replied, taking the paper with the request from his pocket and slipping it through a gap in the door.

After a brief pause, a metallic sound rang out, and the heavy door slowly opened. Standing there were about a dozen men who seemed to be guards, their demeanor and aura a far cry from the members of Zenos’s faction.

A bald man at the front, holding the paper in one hand, spoke up. “You two with Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions?”

“Unfortunately,” Zenos replied.

“Follow me.”

The inside was far more expansive than he’d imagined, with a web of intertwined corridors and stairs and rooms lined up one after another. It was easy to get lost here.

“Pista, do you know where we are?” Zenos whispered.

“This place’s different from what I remember from my childhood, so no, meow,” Pista whispered back, looking around the place. Zenos seemed to have given up quickly, but she was still trying to memorize the corridors to plot an

escape route if necessary. A perfect job for one who collected information.

Zenos's role, meanwhile, was to stay focused and steel his resolve.

After meandering around the base for a while, they finally arrived at the innermost room—the Beast King's chambers. The sound of a bestial roar echoed from within, shaking them to their core.

"You two be respectful," the guard warned matter-of-factly before knocking on the door. "Make the Beast King angry and you won't live to regret it." It wasn't a threat, just the truth. "Lord Beast King, they're here."

"Come in," rasped an oddly intense voice from within.

The pair followed the bald man inside. A bed was in the back of the room, a large shadow moving atop it. At first glance, the Beast King looked like a gigantic lion. He was probably of the catfolk race, but his features were much more beastlike than Pista's. His entire body was covered in fur, and his dark brown mane conveyed both dignity and wildness. Even only half-raised from the bed, he was taller than Zenos; if he stood up, he'd easily be twice the healer's height.

Zenos could hear Pista grinding her teeth behind him.

The Beast King narrowed his bloodred eyes, looking Zenos up and down. "You're here. Were you not afraid of me?" he asked.

"It's a job," Zenos replied simply. "Fear isn't part of the equation."

"Fwa ha ha! Well said," the Beast King remarked, his laughter sending forth a gust that made Zenos's cloak flutter. "By the way, what's with the ridiculous faction name? Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions? Are you mocking the Black Guild?"

The Beast King's barbed words made the bald man frown worriedly.

Zenos, however, replied calmly. "Not at all. This wasn't my choice, actually. I fully agree the name is ridiculous, and I'd change it if I could. Maybe you could lend me a paw with that?"

"Hey!" snapped the bald man, aggressively stepping forward. "Show some damn respect to Lord Beast King!"

The Beast King stopped his guard. "It's fine," he said with a laugh. "Aren't you the interesting one?"

"So, I hear you have an urgent request," Zenos remarked.

"Any idea what it is?"

"Healing, I'm guessing. Kinda hard not to notice." After all, the Beast King was sitting in a bed, a blanket draped over his shoulders. Even just the fact the meeting took place in the man's private chambers had been enough of a hint.

"My body's been acting up here and there for a while now, but the past few weeks have been really rough. Even breathing is difficult now. I hear you can treat people."

"I can, but I do have one simple question."

"Let's hear it."

"Why didn't you ask your fellow top executive? I hear one of you is called the Night Healer."

The Beast King laughed heartily, then broke into a violent coughing fit, blood spraying from his lips onto the floor. A number of his men tried to approach, but he waved them off before continuing, "You're new here, so maybe you don't know, but this place is like a den of hellish snakes. Rivals stabbing each other in the back is a daily thing. Asking someone in my line of work for healing would be basically the equivalent of flashing 'em a weakness and going, 'Hey, come kill me, why don'tcha?'"

The Beast King had probably instructed Zenos and Pista to come in a small group to prevent news of his weakened state from spreading. The Black Guild was a lot more cutthroat than Zenos had anticipated, it seemed.

"That aside," the Beast King continued, "surface healers are too scared to come near me."

"That's why you asked for me?" Zenos asked. "Am I not in your line of work?"

The Beast King laughed. "Hard to believe, I know, but your faction prohibits evil deeds. I figured I'd take my chances with the faction's boss."

"You sure know a lot."

“I’m a top executive of this place. I don’t even need to get out of bed for information to reach me. Granted, some top executives don’t really care about what goes on below them.”

Zenos scratched his head. That made sense. And it sounded like their reputation for good deeds had actually worked in their favor.

“By the way,” the healer said, “how do I know you won’t kill me to keep me quiet after I heal you?”

“You’ll just have to trust me,” the Beast King replied. “I’m a man of honor and duty.”

“T-Trust *you*? Why, I—” Pista raised her voice, but was quickly silenced when Zenos placed a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. The two of them were wearing masks, so the Beast King didn’t know his daughter was standing before him.

“Sorry, my assistant’s a bit nervous,” the healer said, composing himself and nodding firmly. “Very well. I’ll accept your request.”

“You know what happens if you fail, right?” one of the Beast King’s men asked, pointing a sharp knife at Zenos.

“You all are in the way of treatment,” the healer retorted. “Leave the room.”

“What did you say?!”

“Your boss is suffering from a disease called lung rot. Lung illnesses impair breathing, which means they affect life itself. A delicate surgery is required, and having others in the room is distracting.”

From the bed, the Beast King gave Zenos a skeptical look. “You can tell without examining me?”

“I’ve already examined you. Your breath smells distinctly putrid. It’s a rare illness, but in all likelihood, that’s what it is.”

The Beast King laughed heartily once more. “Fascinating! What a guy.”

After being ordered by their boss to leave the room, the men glared at Zenos and reluctantly obeyed.

The patient, meanwhile, seemed to be in good spirits, rubbing his chest. “That could be a bluff, but you’ve got guts. I like that. Wanna join my faction, boy? I’ll make you an executive.”

“Make me a top executive, and we’ll talk,” Zenos replied.

“Ga ha ha ha ha!”

Zenos then turned to a masked Pista and whispered, “What are *you* gonna do?”

“I...” Pista began.

“Not that you have a choice. You’re my partner, right? I need your help.”

“...Huh? I-I can’t help with this, meow! If I’d known the request was for healing—”

“Your relationship with your father is your business. I’ll stay out of it. But I’m a shadow healer—if my patient pays, I’ll treat them. Everything else comes after.”

“B-But...!”

“Like I said earlier, it’s a difficult procedure. There’s a chance it won’t go well. Are you sure you don’t want to be here for it?”

Pista silently turned to face the Beast King.

“What are you two whispering about?” the man asked.

“Oh, uh, we’re just discussing your treatment plan,” Zenos said, turning to face the Beast King once more and casually rolling up his sleeves. “Anyway, let’s begin the surgery.”

Fresh sheets had been laid over the Beast King’s bed, which would act as an operating table.

Zenos produced a sleeping pill from his pocket—one he’d gotten from Becker of the Royal Institute of Healing—and held it out. “The surgery involves removal of the rotten part of your lungs and regenerating the unaffected parts as much as possible. If you’re anxious, I can give you a sleeping pill.”

The Beast King, lying on the bed, glanced at the pill and dismissed it with a

hearty laugh. “I don’t need that. I want to see what’s being done to my body with my own eyes.”

“Thought you’d say that.”

As Zenos put away the sleeping pill, Pista poked him in the back. “What’s the plan, meow?” she asked, her confusion evident even behind her mask. “I can’t help with a surgery.”

“If you can wipe off excess blood, hold down his body, and follow my instructions, that’ll be plenty. I’m not asking you to do anything too difficult.” Zenos paused for a moment, then continued, “Besides, the patient is weakened. If you want your revenge, now’s your chance.”

Pista, still confused, stared at him silently for a moment before replying, “Shadow healer, are you trying to heal him or make it so I can take my revenge? Which is it, meow?”

“Healing him and your revenge are entirely separate things. I’m a healer. Treating his illness is what I do. Revenge is *your* business, so you get to decide.”

Pista’s eyes, hidden behind her mask, shifted toward the father that had abandoned her, and she quietly clenched her fists. “All right...”

Zenos chanted a Diagnosis spell and a white light passed through the Beast King’s massive frame, making the man stir slightly. “What was that just now?” he asked.

“I examined your insides,” Zenos explained. “As I thought, both of your lungs are growing necrotic, releasing gas and fluids in the process. It’s a classic case of lung rot. Honestly, it’s amazing you’re alive at all in this condition.”

“I’ve survived out of pure stubbornness.”

“I can’t treat both of your lungs at once or you won’t be able to breathe, so I’ll do one at a time. It’ll be a while.”

“Can’t say I get it, but I’m deferring to your judgment.” The Beast King’s voice, despite being raspy, had a strange intensity to it.

Zenos turned the patient on his side, getting Pista to support him from behind. He gave the catgirl a glance as she held up her father’s back, then cast

Scalpel and cut open part of the man's chest. Immediately, the stench of decay grew intense.

"It's progressed quite a bit," Zenos mused.

He used regeneration magic to suppress pain locally and defensive magic to protect the circulatory system. Carefully, Zenos began to excise the decayed parts, keeping a close eye on the patient's trachea and blood vessels. The surgery was extremely delicate, so he focused as best as he could as he removed a fully blackened portion of the decayed organ.

"Is that my breathing bag?" the Beast King asked.

"Breathing bag?" Zenos echoed. "Oh, you mean your lung. Yeah, it is."

"Looks like crap."

"Worse than I thought," the healer agreed.

Though the Beast King could still speak since the lung that wasn't being operated on was functional, his breathing was shallow. The situation was far more dire than Zenos had anticipated.

Pista was silent throughout, her gaze fixed on an axe casually lying in the corner of the room.

"Beast King," Zenos called out to the massive patient as the man struggled to breathe. "Is there anything you want to say before we continue?"

"What was that?" the Beast King asked, his tone of voice shifting. "You don't mean—"

"Don't get me wrong," Zenos interrupted. "It's just in case. I'll do my best to heal you, of course. But it's not just your lungs that look bad; your liver, kidneys, heart—they're all in terrible condition. You've pushed yourself and lived a rough life. At your age and with all the damage done to your body, your cells' natural regeneration process is significantly impaired."

Healing magic worked by amplifying and supporting the natural regeneration ability of the body's cells. If the cells lost that ability, the effect of healing magic dropped drastically in turn.

"There's always a chance something might go wrong."

The Beast King's bloodred eyes stared at Zenos intently. Slowly, the tension in the atmosphere began to dissipate. "You know, it's strange," the Beast King said. "If anyone else had asked me for my last words, I'd have dragged them down with me. But you're weirdly convincing, kid. You've probably faced life and death head-on more times than you can count, huh?"

"Despite being third rate, yeah."

"I have some regrets, but dying like this, under the ground, is probably a fitting end for someone like me. Even if the surgery goes wrong, I'll make sure you and your team get your pay and go home safe. Let that be my last will. Call in my men, if you want."

"I appreciate the thought, but isn't there anything more pressing than that? You just said you have some regrets."

The Beast King closed his mouth, gazing blankly at the ceiling. After a while, he slowly turned his head to look at Pista behind him. "You there, the assistant. You're catfolk too, aren't you? I can't see your face under that mask, but I can tell by your ears."

Pista nodded silently.

"See, I had...a wife. A daughter. Not for long, though, before I drove them away..." The Beast King turned his hazy gaze toward Zenos. "If you ever meet my wife or daughter... Tell them I'm sorry. That's my last wish."

"Now you want to apologize?!" Pista snapped loudly.

"Huh?" the Beast King asked, puzzled.

"Oh, um..." Pista stammered. "I think... It's too late for apologies, meow."

"You're not wrong," the Beast King replied. He attempted a laugh, but coughed violently instead.

Zenos waited for the fit to subside. As he continued the procedure, he asked, "By the way, why did you drive your family away?"

"Because they were a hindrance, of course."

Out of the corner of his eye, Zenos saw Pista's fur bristle. He calmly continued, "I mean the *real* reason."

Pista lifted her head. “Huh?”

“Beast King,” Zenos pressed when the massive man remained silent. “These might be your last words. There’s no need to act tough.”

The Beast King stared vacantly ahead, and a thunderous rumble rose in his throat. “It’s not a lie. They were a hindrance.”

“You—”

“They were precious to me,” he continued. “When I saw that newborn, so innocent, I cried. I’d never thought I could have something so precious. That someone like me, who’d lived my whole life wrong, could still feel so much love for someone.” His words hung heavy in the air, mixed in with the stench of decay. “But as my daughter grew, I became anxious. I’m a top executive of the Black Guild. I have as many enemies as there are stars. A lot of people hate me. And those who wanted my head would always target my weak spots. I couldn’t keep my family close anymore.”

“That’s what you meant by ‘hindrance,’” Zenos concluded.

“You get it.”

“A top executive has multiple bases, right? This is just one of them, but it has such strict security, and the structure’s really complex too. It’s plain to see how much of a target you are. I can imagine why you would distance yourself from your wife and child.”

“I was worried that, because of my position, my daughter would end up paying for my sins. I talked to my wife, and decided to sever ties with her and the girl. I wanted to make arrangements to send them coin regularly, but my wife refused, saying any sort of connection would’ve put our daughter in danger. She was a stubborn woman, see. Still, I covertly sent some of my men to watch over them for a bit...and because of that, my wife and daughter were discovered and had to go into hiding. I can get any information I want from the underground, but even I can’t keep track of everything that goes on aboveground. In the end, that was the last I heard of them.”

The Beast King coughed up a large amount of blood.

“Fwa ha ha! Life sure is harsh, huh? Guess these really are my last words,” he

concluded.

Zenos increased the output of his mana; the Beast King's cells were indeed very weak. "No giving up just yet. If you give up, then that's it. As long as you're still fighting, I'll do whatever it takes."

"Hah! Tall order..." The Beast King laughed weakly, his voice now as faint as a whisper.

The healer further intensified his output, and a storm of white light swirled around the room. Death nevertheless clung tight to the patient, refusing to leave the man's side.

"Important question, Beast King. Do you want to see your daughter?" Zenos asked.

"What...are you talking about? My daughter and I...are already..."

"You're at death's door. Forget your position. Forget your circumstances. Tell me what you're really feeling."

With eyes half lidded, the Beast King whispered. "I... Of course I do."

"Pista!" Zenos snapped, making the catgirl flinch. "This is it. You need to decide. Are you gonna fulfill your wish or not?"

"Is that why you made me be here, shadow healer?" Pista mumbled. She took a deep breath, then slowly removed her mask.

The Beast King's eyes, nearly shut at that point, snapped wide open. "P-Peschka...?"

"I got rid of that name when we parted ways, meow," the catgirl said. "Now I'm Pista, the information broker."

His expression indescribable, the Beast King's lips trembled. "It's... It's really you...? Why...?"

"I hated you. You abandoned my mom and me. I came close to the Black Guild because I wanted revenge. I went through so much, and finally, I got my chance." With her brows furrowed, her fists clenched, Pista took a deep breath, then shouted angrily, "You're an idiot, dad! What do you think you're doing, giving up just like that?! You're a top executive! Live, damn you!"

The Beast King stared at her, alarmed.

Zenos grinned, turning his attention to the bedridden patient. "You heard her. Now what?"

"Grr...rrr..." The massive man's voice rumbled deep in his throat, erupting into a bellow. "Grroaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!!!"

The air swirled violently with the tremendous force of his roar, making the stone-built walls of the base shake up and down. The Beast King's men came rushing in to see what was happening, and were immediately sent back out by his booming command, "Get the hells out! I'm in the middle of treatment!"

"B-But—"

"I'm gonna make it! You lot stay out of this!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"That's the spirit, Beast King," Zenos said, pouring all of his magic into regenerating the man's decaying lungs. "You leave the rest to me."

Sometimes, the will to survive could invigorate one's cells; Zenos could definitely feel the Beast King's body responding now. A warm white glow flooded the room, the pulsating light raining down like healing rain. The healer removed the decayed portions of lung, minimized bleeding, and strengthened what few remaining healthy parts remained, until finally, the surgery was complete.

The Beast King, still lying on his side, took a deep breath. "Thank you, doctor. I have no words to express my gratitude."

"I'm glad too," Zenos replied. "I get to leave here alive."

"Heh." The Beast King's gaze then turned to his estranged daughter. "Peschka... No, Pista, was it?"

"Wait," Pista said. "Now that your treatment is over, there's something I need to do before we talk, meow."

"What?"

The catgirl walked briskly to her puzzled father's bedside and raised her right

hand high. “You’re an idiot, dad! Do you have any idea how much I suffered because of your selfish crap?! Meowww!”

A sharp slap echoed through the underground chamber. A stunned Beast King held his slapped cheek, and a dumbfounded Zenos spoke up. “Um, Pista?”

“I see,” she mumbled between heavy breaths. “You were right, shadow healer.”

Tears streamed down Pista’s face as she turned to face him with a smile.

“Giving him a good smacking felt great.”



“I’ve put you through a lot, haven’t I?” an apologetic Beast King asked, his massive frame slumping. After the successful completion of the surgery, he’d been listening to Pista talk about the life she and her mother had led after leaving the underground. “Where is she now?”

“Mom’s somewhere growing vegetables,” Pista replied. “I’m not telling, meow. She’s settled now and she’s living a peaceful life, so you should leave her be.”

“I see. I’m happy enough to know she’s alive.” The Beast King looked into the distance for a moment before turning to Zenos. “Now then, for the matter at hand. I owe you my life. Name your reward, and it’s yours. Anything.”

“In that case, I want to be a top executive,” a now unmasked Zenos replied plainly.

The Beast King’s eyes narrowed. “You mentioned this before the surgery. You weren’t joking, then. Tell me your reasons.”

“Sure. There’s someone I need to see.” Zenos went on to briefly explain the situation.

“I see. So that’s what it is,” the Beast King said with a groan, crossing his arms. “I’ve met the Night Healer during the meetings with the top executive committee. Always wearing a mask. Creepy, if you ask me. An acquaintance of yours, huh? It’s impressive how good you both are for your age.”

Zenos looked the Beast King straight in the eye. “The Night Healer’s up to something. I need this meeting to take place before anything happens. I’d be grateful if you could help.”

“To become a top executive, you need the approval of a majority of the others. I can’t make this call on my own, especially with how close to retirement I am.”

“I see...”

“But...” the Beast King said, slowly pushing to his feet. He brought his lionlike face closer to Zenos’s and...licked him.

“Wh-Whoa,” Zenos exclaimed as the sensation of the man’s rough tongue brushed across his forehead.

The Beast King laughed heartily. “It’s a gesture of affection. I owe you, but with that lick, we’re friends now too. A man must honor a request from a friend, especially one he has a debt of gratitude to.”

“The apple didn’t fall far from the tree,” Zenos noted, rubbing his forehead with a chuckle.

Pista, standing next to the Beast King, stuck out her tongue and let out a playful “Mya ha ha.”

“My name is Diam, by the way,” the massive man said, extending a hand.

“I’m Zenos. Zenos the shadow healer,” the younger man replied, extending his own hand and feeling the Beast King’s thick pads envelop it.

The massive catfolk purred, then sat back down on the bed. “First, to become a candidate for top executive, you need to contribute a huge amount of money to the guild and have a significant number of achievements to boot. I could give you all my wealth as the reward for this job, but even if that covers the financial part, it won’t do for achievements. You need to consistently produce results over several years, which you can’t do with a faction you formed just a month ago.”

“I see.” The criteria for becoming a top executive weren’t known to the lower ranks, and the bar was evidently very high. Somehow, the desire to resurrect their lost mentor had pushed Velitra past that bar.

The Beast King grinned. “But there is one other way to the top.”

“There is?”

“A referral. A current top executive can recommend a candidate to the committee. If you get the majority’s approval, you’ll officially become one of us. This rarely happens because it just creates competition.”

“Getting the majority’s approval sounds difficult.”

“And it is. But your goal is to reunite with the Night Healer, right? Well, if you get a referral, you can attend the next committee meeting as a special

participant. Whether or not the majority approves of you, you'll still be able to speak with the Night Healer there."

"Oh, that'd be more than enough, then. Thank you."

"Fwa ha ha! No problem at all."

The committee of top executives usually met every two to three months, and the next meeting was scheduled for a week from now. After deciding on a meeting place, the two concluded their discussion.

"What are you going to do, Pista?" Zenos asked. The catgirl had achieved her goal of reuniting with her father, so he figured there was a possibility she'd choose to remain at his side.

"Well, duh," she replied as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, "I'm coming back with you, meow. I'm the number two of Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions, after all. I'm staying until you've achieved your objective, boss."

The Beast King laughed at this. "Sounds reasonable to me. Do so."

"Don't start acting like my father all of a sudden," Pista admonished him.

"Urk..."

"But maybe I'll visit sometimes. If I feel like it."

"Y-Yeah? Wait, no, but that's dangerous—"

"Don't patronize me, meow. I may not look it, but I've been working underground as an information broker for years. I'm not a weak little thing that needs protection anymore."

"I...see. Indeed, you are not." The Beast King smiled from atop the bed, his expression tinged with both sorrow and happiness.

As they were about to leave, Zenos decided to ask something that had been nagging at him. "By the way, will the guild's boss be at the meeting?"

The boss of the Black Guild was shrouded in mystery. A meeting between the top executives seemed like the perfect place to meet this figure.

However, the Beast King shook his head. "The boss won't be there."

“Your boss doesn’t come to the committee meetings?”

“No. The boss has been missing for years now.”

Zenos tilted his head quizzically.

The Beast King lowered his voice, staring at the ground. “Not many of the current top executives know this, but the Black Guild was originally just a playground. The boss made it when we were kids for the outcasts of society. We started doing odd jobs to survive, but back then, we stuck to a strict code of honor. It only turned into an anything-goes illegal organization after the boss disappeared. Honestly, I can’t keep up with the newer guys’ methods, which is why I’m mostly inactive.” He let out a hollow laugh, clenching his furred fist. “Still, I remained at the top to watch over this place until the boss returned. Sometimes I wander the waterway, looking for a sign, a shadow, anything. But I’ve grown old...”

He’d mentioned having regrets during the surgery. One had to be his wife and daughter, and perhaps another was related to his boss.

The Beast King then seemed to pull himself together and scratched his mane. “Well, my personal matters aren’t important. Right now, I’ll focus on doing what I can to help you with your goal.”

“Yeah, I appreciate it,” Zenos said.

After a month of being undercover in the Black Guild, he’d finally found a foothold toward becoming a top executive.

Seven days remained until the committee meeting.

Meanwhile, in another base within the underground waterway, the Conductor and the Night Healer stood face-to-face.

“My preparations are done. Wasn’t easy, you know,” the Conductor said. “We can start as soon as you give the signal.”

“Good,” the Night Healer—Velitra—replied in a cold tone that contrasted with the Conductor’s overly cheery one. “I’ll make sure you’re rewarded.”

“Money doesn’t matter much to me, you know. I’m more excited to see the

results of your grand experiment and all the human drama that will unfold. *That's* why I helped you."

"You're as odd as ever," came the monotone reply. Velitra's gaze, hidden behind the jet-black mask, shifted to the side. "Elgen. Have the materials been transported to the designated location yet?"

"They have," Velitra's henchman confirmed. "All that's left is your arrival, Lord Night Healer."

Clutching the concealed black leather journal, Velitra nodded in satisfaction. "We'll proceed a week from now and activate the resurrection spell on the day of the committee meeting."

Chapter 6: The Committee Meeting

Zenos had a dream that night.

He, Velitra, and their mentor were in the open field behind the usual abandoned shack in the slums, practicing healing magic. Zenos approached his mentor, who was sitting in the grass wearing a gloomy expression.

“Hey, gramps. What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh. Nothing,” the older man replied. “I was just wondering if this is really fine.”

“This being what?”

“I don’t know, it’s like...things are so peaceful. It makes me nervous.”

“Huh?”

“I always thought my judgment was terrible, but as it turns out, it was better than I realized. I never thought I’d have such excellent students who admire me, or that I’d live like this.”

“I don’t really admire you that much.”

“You could, you know, pretend to. Take a page from Velitra’s book.”

“Although, well, thanks to you, my days are never boring.”

“Yeah? Guess that’s something.”

Zenos looked up at his mentor’s face. The man was squinting against the pale evening sunlight to the sound of insects chirping in the distance. A cool breeze brushed past them, ruffling his mentor’s hair.

“Hey, gramps?” Zenos began. “I...”

“Hmm?” his mentor replied.

“No... It’s nothing.”

Thank you, he’d meant to say. For teaching him magic. For teaching him

about the world outside of the orphanage. For teaching him that it was possible to have quiet, peaceful times in a world like this. The words were stuck in his throat, but he swallowed them back, somewhat embarrassed.

“Hey, Zenos,” his mentor called out.

“What?”

“Healers aren’t the main characters, you know.”

“Huh?”

“The main characters are the ones fighting for something. The ones who invariably get hurt fighting for something. Healers exist for their sake.”

Zenos gazed at his mentor’s profile. “You know, gramps, you always say cool stuff, but you can’t use healing magic, can you?”

“Ha ha! You got me there,” his mentor said, scratching his head awkwardly.

Velitra, who had been practicing magic in the middle of the open field, called out, “Um, master? I have a question about unleashing mana.”

“Ah, yes! Velitra, the one who actually admires me, unlike some people! I’ll teach you anything you like.”

“You’re more spiteful than I thought,” Zenos remarked.

His mentor laughed. “That’s not a bad thing. It just means I have a great memory for people.” With that nonsense, the man stood up and walked to Velitra.

Zenos watched absentmindedly as their mentor gently guided Velitra, who nodded enthusiastically in turn. He casually shifted his gaze up at the sky, noticing the long, thin clouds stretched across the twilight hues.

“Is it evening already?” Zenos muttered, squinting as he sat up from the bed. The sky outside his bedroom window was painted the same dusky colors as that day.

He got up and headed toward the examination room, and Lily greeted him with a smile. “You’re awake,” she said, handing him a cup of tea.

A faint sweetness washed through his body as he sipped. “Sorry, I overslept a bit.”

“Not your fault, doc. Big day today,” Zophia said.

“Yeah. I think it’s for the best that you slept a lot,” Lynga added.

“Agreed. You need to have your strength when it counts,” Loewe concluded.

The three demi-human leaders had also gathered this evening; it was the day of the meeting between the Black Guild’s top executives. Zenos had meant to take a short nap in preparation for a potentially long day, but ended up sleeping more than he’d planned. It was almost time to head to the meeting site.

After some light preparations, the healer donned the black cloak hanging on the wall—the heirloom from his mentor. It was almost like a part of his own skin after so many years wearing it.

“All right,” he said. “I’m off.”

“Okay. Be careful,” Lily said, seeing him off with a smile.

“You’re up against a top executive of the Black Guild. Keep your guard up, doc,” Zophia cautioned.

“Honestly, we wanted to come with you, but...” Lynga trailed off.

“We’re outsiders anyway. It’s not like we could participate in the meeting,” Loewe pointed out. “We wish you the best of luck, Zenos.”

“Thanks, everyone.” With that, Zenos reached for the door handle, but stopped, noticing one person was conspicuously absent. “Where’s Carmilla, by the way?”

Lily’s brows furrowed at the question. “She said she had something to do and would be staying upstairs today.”

“Hmm. I see.”

“Also, she asked me to give you this as a good-luck charm,” the elf continued, handing Zenos a tarnished silver bracelet. It looked quite old.

“Is it safe for me to wear this? It’s not gonna curse me, right?”

“She said it’s a charm to ward off evil.”

“Oh. All right, then.” Zenos slipped the bracelet onto his left wrist, then left the clinic. He waved to Lily and the others with a smile and headed for the depths of the slums.

On his way there, he ran into a catgirl with her arms crossed.

“I’ve been waiting, boss.”

“Today’s the last day you’ll call me that, huh?” Their faction would disband after the committee meeting tonight, after all. The rest of the members had already been informed.

“Everyone was sad, but they said they’ll keep doing good deeds, meow,” Pista explained.

“That’s good to hear,” Zenos said with a nod, instinctively gripping his cloak.

He lifted his head and took a step forward.

“Time to settle this, Velitra.”

As Zenos made his way along the underground waterway, a shadow practically the size of a small mountain moved sluggishly to greet him.

“I’ve been waiting, Zenos,” greeted the Beast King, standing with his arms crossed next to his bald-headed subordinate.

“Sorry about all this, Beast King,” Zenos said.

“Oh, please. It’s a small favor in the face of all you’ve done for me. If not for you, I wouldn’t be here.”

They proceeded along the waterway together, water trickling noisily nearby. Today, the highest-ranked of the Black Guild’s executives would gather, and the closer the group got to the meeting site, the more the air seemed to grow cold and prickly.

“Violence is strictly forbidden at the committee meeting, but still, try not to ruffle any feathers,” the Beast King warned.

“Got it.” Zenos didn’t want any unnecessary conflict either—all he wanted was to speak with Velitra one more time. He was aware that it was a possibility,

however, that simple conversation wouldn't solve things.

Behind her father, Pista asked earnestly, "How do you enforce a no-conflict rule in a meeting of a bunch of criminal lords?"

"Fwa ha ha! It's not that they care about enforcing rules," the Beast King explained, "it's just that following this one is for their own benefit. If two top executives went at it, things would get ugly fast. And with both of them weakened, the others would just gobble them right up."

What a harsh world this was.

"I see," Pista replied. "By the way, how many top executives are there?"

"The number changes over time, but currently, nine."

As their conversation went on, the group eventually arrived at the cave-like entrance of the site of the committee meeting. A group of individuals, presumably the meeting's organizers, were waiting for them.

"Lord Beast King is here," announced one of them before guiding the group to the waiting room. Within was a door leading further inside. "Only top executives are allowed past this point."

Each top executive could bring up to three aides along, but those were only permitted as far as the waiting room; the actual meeting site was reserved for the executives only. On top of that, each faction got their own waiting room, likely to prevent unnecessary conflict arising due to members of different factions being stuck together.

"I'm bringing this man with me," the Beast King said, gripping the masked Zenos's shoulder.

"He's the nominee for top executive, correct?" the organizer asked. "I'm told he's the boss of a rising faction named Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions."

"That's right," Zenos mumbled, rather embarrassed to hear his faction's name being said with such a perfectly straight face.

"It's unusual to nominate someone who's not already an executive, but we're aware of the situation. Please proceed."

"All right. Well then, I'm off," Zenos said to Pista and the Beast King's aide as

he left the waiting room. No point worrying at this stage, he figured.

Hugging the damp stone walls, they passed through a narrow corridor and finally arrived at the meeting site. It was a bit chilly, perhaps due to a draft coming from somewhere, and other than a round stone table in the center of the space, there were no decorations. A dim light source hung from the ceiling.

“I imagined something grander, but this is a pretty dreary room,” Zenos mused.

“They try not to have anything around that could be used as a weapon,” the Beast King explained. Further proof that this was a harsh world indeed.

Five people were already seated around the table. Even at a glance one could tell they each had a unique aura, and a strange tension filled the room. Among the five was a mean-looking man with a large snake around his neck.

“What the—?” he said. “You came, Beast King? And here I thought you were on your deathbed.”

The Beast King laughed heartily. “Who told you that? Baseless gossip. As you can see, I’m as hale and hearty as it gets. Glad to see you are too, Snake Demon.”

In response, the Snake Demon gave an unamused click of his tongue.

The others had various reactions: Some exchanged simple greetings with the Beast King, while others remained silent. Some openly stared at Zenos, who stood behind the Beast King, and others just ignored him entirely.

Eventually, eight of the nine seats were filled, but there was still no sign of Zenos’s childhood friend.

Where are you, Velitra? the healer wondered, watching the empty seat from behind the massive catfolk.

“Now where the shit is the fucking Night Healer?” the Snake Demon cursed. “Isn’t it time already?”

One of the organizers quickly excused themselves, saying they’d check.

The Snake Demon laughed mockingly. “Not that it matters to me anyway.”

In stark contrast, the Beast King let out a worried groan and folded his arms.

“What’s wrong?” Zenos asked in a hushed whisper.

“Something’s not right,” the Beast King replied.

“Not right?”

“Attending these meetings is the only duty the top executives have. Anyone who doesn’t make it is either dead or badly injured. And in any case, not coming means forfeiting your position. Obviously, those trying to make it to the top will try to interfere with our attendance, so making it to these meetings is a show of strength.”

Zenos furrowed his brows, tapping a finger to his chin silently. Velitra’s absence would mean forfeiture of the top executive position. And there was no way his childhood friend would’ve been unaware of that. Had something happened?

“No,” he murmured, covering his mouth as he realized another possibility: Velitra might no longer need the position.

At that moment, the organizer who’d left the room earlier came running back, holding a black envelope. “This morning, someone in a gray robe claiming to be associated with the Night Healer handed a letter to the head organizer,” they explained. “The letter was to be opened when the meeting started.”

“What cheap ploy is this?” the Snake Demon asked, raising an eyebrow.

Another top executive, clad head-to-toe in armor, spoke in a quiet voice. “Best not to open it carelessly—there might be a magic circle on the envelope set to activate upon someone doing so. The Night Healer is the most unpredictable and dangerous of us all.”

“I don’t know what’s up with this, but I do know you’re just as bad, Oathbreaker,” the Snake Demon pointed out.

The organizer stepped in between the two top executives. “Um, as a precaution, we’ve already opened it elsewhere. There was no magic circle, but we couldn’t quite understand the envelope’s contents...”

Looking troubled, the organizer straightened up and began to read the letter

aloud.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I could've simply disappeared without notice, but after all these years of meetings, I wanted to offer you some parting words as the Night Healer.

Today, my greatest desire will be fulfilled. Play your final roles as offerings with grace.

Farewell.

“Offerings?” one of the top executives echoed.

As the others’ expressions shifted to puzzlement, the Beast King said, ears twitching, “Hmm? Wait. I hear something.”

Just as the catfolk said, sounds echoed in the distance, though it wasn’t immediately identifiable what they were. Gradually they grew closer, and soon it became apparent they were voices: a cacophony of groans, growls, and what seemed to be screams.

Shortly after, another organizer practically stumbled into the room. “We’re in trouble!” they yelled, pale-faced and stumbling over their words. “U-Undead! A huge number of them, all over the waterway!”

As the room erupted into an astonished commotion, Zenos whispered behind his mask, “Velitra...”

Somewhere in the intricate underground waterway was a place where countless tributaries of water converged and flowed down into a wide-open space—a natural limestone cave.

There, a figure in a gray robe stood. “Night Healer. I handed them the letter as planned.”

Velitra’s gaze turned to the Conductor. “Good work. What of the barrier?”

“It’s active,” the Conductor replied. “A magical wall has been erected at all

exits leading to the surface. No one will be able to get out for a while, but this many barriers won't hold for long. At most half a day."

"That's plenty," Velitra remarked, arms crossed.

"You know, this is quite a sight," the Conductor mused. On the ground below, two large magic circles had been drawn. At the center of one of them was Velitra's henchman, Elgen, chanting a spell and making hand symbols. From there, zombies, ghouls, and other undead creatures were pouring out, groaning as they flooded the waterway. "You've thought this out. You can make a lot of undead here."

"Indeed," Velitra confirmed. "This is one of the waterway's endpoints. The bodies of those who drop dead underground or are defeated in battle and fall into the waterway eventually end up here. There are countless corpses in these depths. No shortage of materials for undead."

"Well, what *I'm* curious about is what comes next. What are you hoping to achieve by filling the waterway with undead?" the Conductor asked, peeking at Velitra from under the gray hood. "I've been good and cooperative, no? Isn't it about time you told me how resurrection magic works?"

After a moment of silence, Velitra replied, "In my master's journal were records of his research on resurrection. Some parts were torn and some crucial sections had been erased, so I didn't have a full picture, but I spent a long time deciphering it."

"Which is why you took that necromancer as your henchman."

Velitra gave a small nod. Necromancy involved reanimating the bodies of the dead as they were at present; resurrection involved bringing back the dead as they were while alive. Though different in nature, both types of magic worked with the dead, so they were within the same sphere. To research resurrection magic, knowledge of necromancy was a must. And thus, in order to secure funds for research and to make underground connections, such as with necromancers, Velitra had joined the Black Guild.

"And the result of your research is the other circle?" the Conductor asked. Beyond the circle generating undead was another much larger circle, its dizzyingly complex pattern emitting a faint pale-white light.

“No,” Velitra replied. “That one is my master’s creation.”

“Hmm?”

Having read the journal many times, Velitra had noticed that there were a number of conspicuously blank pages in its latter half. Following a gut feeling that this was due to the usage of invisible ink, Velitra had applied heat to the pages, thus revealing the patterns for the circle. They were difficult to fully decipher, with numerous regeneration formulas incorporated in nonstandard ways. It could only have been the resurrection magic circle that Velitra’s mentor had been researching.

“I see. Even I can’t read this,” the Conductor remarked. “Your master must’ve been quite the skilled individual. I wish I could’ve met him.”

“You can. Soon.”

“Heh. I can’t wait.” As a large number of undead passed below them, the Conductor continued excitedly, “So what does a mass undead outbreak have to do with the magic circle?”

“From the research I did trying to fill in the missing parts of my master’s journal, I concluded that the circle on its own wasn’t enough. In order to activate a resurrection spell, certain components are necessary.”

“What components would those be?”

“Things that make up the human body, like water, carbon, and phosphorus. Those, and a part of the target deceased’s body.”

“So your master’s corpse? I don’t see it anywhere.”

“His body’s gone. It was cremated,” Velitra explained through gritted teeth.

Velitra’s fellow pupil Zenos had been the one to do it, honoring their master’s wish that if something were to happen to him, he should be cremated to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Velitra hadn’t been able to do it, but Zenos hadn’t hesitated.

“So you couldn’t get any parts of his body, then?” the Conductor asked.

“I found some of his hair at the shack where we used to meet. I’m using that.”

“I see. So the preparations are complete, then?”

“No. There’s something else.” Things of value were needed as offerings as well. “One thing I settled on was gold. It’s rare, unique, and universally valued.” Indeed, near the center of the resurrection circle were piles of bags filled with a large amount of gold coins.

“Oh!” The Conductor’s hands clapped together. “*That’s* why you only ever took payment in gold coins!”

Joining the Black Guild and becoming a top executive hadn’t been just to secure research funds and underground connections; it had also been the quickest way to gather large amounts of gold from the poor inhabitants of the slums.

“I get it now,” the Conductor continued. “You really are an interesting person, aren’t you? So, what other offerings are there?”

Whether or not Velitra’s mentor had succeeded in resurrection magic hadn’t been recorded in the journal. But if he had actually failed, Velitra believed this had been why—he’d been missing this particular part of the cost.

“A great many lives,” came the calm response.

“Huh...” The Conductor’s lips curled into a smile. “Even more interesting, then. To bring one person back, you need to sacrifice many. Fascinating. Now I see why you started an undead outbreak and had me block off the exits.”

Elgen, the necromancer, had been instructed to give simple commands to the starving undead. One: attack the people trapped underground indiscriminately. Some would die, and others would be seriously injured. While the lives of the dead couldn’t be used, those barely clinging to life would become offerings for the resurrection spell. Two: bring back the severely injured to the resurrection circle. The magic would activate by absorbing the life force of the numerous dying.

The Conductor let out a high-pitched laugh. “Wonderful, wonderful! You would sacrifice countless lives without hesitation to save just one! I love your twisted sense of morality!”

“Don’t lump me in with you,” Velitra snapped. “I *know* this is wrong. I just also

know that everyone in the Black Guild is irredeemable, worthless scum. My master's life is more important than tens of thousands of pieces of garbage."

"I like that about you."

"I don't think we're on the same page here."

Undeterred, the Conductor suddenly asked, "But you're a top executive, aren't you? You could've just gathered a bunch of underlings in your faction and used them instead of needing to rely on the undead. Why didn't you? I've always wondered why your faction had so few members despite how high up the chain you got."

"Simple. Humans betray. They can't be trusted."

"Heh heh. I think we are very much on the same page." The Conductor let out an amused laugh. "And oh, how thorough you are! You chose the day of the committee meeting for a reason too!"

The other top executives would've been the biggest obstacle to using the undead to sacrifice this many people; they could've organized their sizable factions and interfered with the plan. On this day, however, the top executives and their trusted right-hand men had all left their bases and gathered in one place. Thanks to that, the command structure of their respective factions was basically nonfunctional. In the ensuing chaos, the residents of the underground would be helpless against the horde of undead.

"A brilliant plan indeed, save for one caveat," the Conductor mused. "There might be factions willing to unite and fight the undead even in the absence of their bosses."

An expressionless Velitra promptly dismissed the Conductor's concerns. "The Black Guild is full of self-serving bastards. No faction would do something like that."

Meanwhile, in a corner of the undead-ridden underground waterway, a united group stood their ground.

"Holy shit! What's happening?!"

“Do I look like I know?!”

“Looks like the guys from the other factions are all rushing to the exits.”

“Wait, but I heard there’s a wall or something blocking the exits!”

“Oh quit your yammerin’!” Zui, the man with a scarred face, yelled. “The boss said our faction’s gonna disband after the committee meeting, but until we get official word, we’re still Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions! And what do we do?”

“Good deeds!” the others all shouted in unison.

“That’s right!” Zui exclaimed. “So form groups of three to take on the zombies! The corridors here are narrow and they ain’t all gonna attack at once!”

“All right! We’re gonna go look for any injured and carry them all to one place. Our boss will figure somethin’ out!” another man said.

“I’m gonna go talk to the other factions, see if I can’t get them to help,” a third added.

Their spirits high, the men all raised their voices. “We’re gonna show ‘em what’s what! Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions, onwaaard!”

Chaos still reigned back at the meeting site. The top executives had quickly repelled the first wave of undead, but more just kept coming. Pista and the Beast King’s right-hand had both run in from the waiting room as well, fleeing from the pursuing creatures.

“What’s going on?!” the Beast King shouted.

“This is probably Velitra—I mean, the Night Healer’s doing,” Zenos said. He and Pista had also been attacked at the former clinic after his first meeting with his childhood friend, and there they’d found traces of necromancy research. And although Zenos had thought it best not to mention this without evidence, he suspected that the Beast King’s lung rot had likely been caused due to a combination of inhaling undead ashes and the man’s own weakened immune system. Velitra might’ve been researching necromancy within the underground

waterway as well.

Undead kept coming one after another. Unless the source was eliminated, there would be no end to it.

“Is there a place in the waterway where a large number of bodies might be buried?” Zenos asked quickly.

Pista’s ears perked up. “I’ve heard about this! Places where all the water flows to, meow. Supposedly a lot of bodies wash up there.”

“I know of a few spots like that,” the Beast King chimed in. “I can’t say which of them might be the one you’re looking for, though.” He folded his arms and groaned.

It might be necessary to search each location one by one, but the places were all very far apart, and wrong guesses would cost them a significant amount of time.

As they pondered their next move, a voice said from out of nowhere, “My time to shine.”

“Whoa!” Zenos exclaimed. “What the—”

A semitransparent woman draped in black garments emerged from the bracelet Lily had given to Zenos and floated midair.

“Carmilla...?”

“Eek! I-It’s a wraith, meow!” Pista blurted out, dropping to the ground in shock.

“Oh right, you haven’t met her, have you?” Zenos said. “Pista, this is Carmilla. She lives with us at the clinic. She’s not a bad wraith, mostly, so don’t worry.”

“What do you mean, ‘mostly’?” Carmilla protested, glaring at Zenos.

“A-A good wraith? No way, meow!”

In contrast with his daughter, the Beast King was unfazed, laughing loudly. “Living with a wraith? You’ve got serious grit, Zenos!”

With the ongoing chaos, the others hadn’t seemed to notice Carmilla at all.

“Why are you here?” Zenos asked.

Carmilla chuckled eerily. “I told you, I can possess things I have an attachment to. That bracelet you are wearing is an old item of mine. Granted, it does not afford me as much freedom as the staff.”

“Oh, so that’s what this was. I thought you’d sent me a cursed bracelet.”

“What kind of fiend do you take me for?”

“So, why are you here?”

“To snoop, evidently.”

“I knew it!” This was awful. The situation was already terrible, and now an even greater nuisance had arrived.

A thought briefly crossed Zenos’s mind: perhaps the wraith’s presence had been responsible for attracting the massive number of undead, like what had happened back at the graveyard near the Royal Institute? However, Carmilla had only been underground for a short while, so that alone couldn’t explain it. His gut told him Velitra definitely had something to do with it.

Carmilla grinned triumphantly. “Hee hee hee... This turned out to be more fun than I expected.”

“Fun. Really?” Zenos deadpanned.

“Remember when I said this place had a scent to it last time I was here?”

“Come to think of it, yeah...”

“Now I understand. That was the scent of death that the undead emit. An outrageous number of them are being created as we speak.”

“Wait a second. You can tell where the undead are coming from based on their smell?”

“Naturally! Just follow the smell to where it is strongest. ’Tis a simple matter for someone such as I!”

“Ohhh, impressive... Wait. Did you come with me because you were worried?”

Carmilla suddenly froze in place. “Preposterous.”

“Thanks. Guess you’re actually not that bad.”

“Do not misunderstand, Zenos! I am risking my life for the entertainment value, nothing more!”

Technically, she didn’t have a life to risk, but Zenos decided not to bring that up.

“I-I’ve never seen a wraith talking to people. Maybe she’s actually not a bad one, meow,” Pista remarked as she slowly got up. Given the surrounding horde, perhaps she’d figured that there was no point in fretting about a wraith.

In any case, thanks to one supreme undead life-form, the path was now clear.

“Shadow healer, I’ll find a way out and take everyone there, meow. People are saying the exits are blocked, but I’m an information broker, so I know lots of hidden passages.”

“You,” the Beast King said to his bald henchman. “Help Pesch—I mean, help Pista.”

“Sir, yessir!” the man replied. “But...what about you?”

“I’ll try to convince the other top executives to work together. They’re not the easiest bunch to deal with, but this is an emergency. I might be able to get some of them to listen.”

“Do you really think that’s possible, meow?” Pista asked.

The Beast King grinned at his daughter. “This shadow healer over here managed to bring me and my daughter—whom I’d thought I’d never cross paths with again—back together. So I need to at least *try* to talk some sense into my fellows. What kind of man would I be otherwise, eh? I was thinking of retiring, but as the most senior member here, maybe there’s still something I can do.”

“Aaah! They’re back!” The group of organizers—which had been desperately trying to hold the door shut—was shoved aside, and a horde of zombies burst in.

The top executives in the room took battle stances, but before they could do anything—

“*High Heal!*” Zenos chanted, holding out his right palm. A white light

emanated from it, washing over the horde like a tidal wave. With faint cries of agony, the undead turned to dust and vanished.

“Huh,” the Snake Demon remarked from behind the healer. “Aren’t *you* a curious one.”

Zenos began to dash down the cleared path. “I’m off!”

“You’ve got this, boss!” Pista yelled.

“Indeed! Go get ’em, shadow healer!” the Beast King added.

Pista was searching for a way out, the Beast King was trying to rally the other top executives, and the members of Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions were probably out there fighting bravely too. Zenos wanted to join them, but his priority was to stop the source of the problem.

“Lead me to where the undead are coming from,” he told Carmilla, who was floating after him as he ran. “Velitra will be there.”

“Hmph. Relegating me to a mere guide,” the wraith complained. “I never knew you to be given to riding high horses.”

“Please? I’ll arrange for some fine booze for you when we’re back in one piece.”

“You think one or two bottles will appease me?”

“How about ten?”

Carmilla chuckled. “You have yourself a deal.”

With the wraith in tow, the shadow healer ran straight toward his old friend.

At the clinic in the ruined city, the demi-humans were idly gathered around the dinner table. Outside the window, night had completely fallen.

Lily stood up. “Oh, it’s so late already. I was thinking of making dinner. Will you all stay and eat?” she asked, starting toward the kitchen.

A concerned Zophia replied, “Lily, you’re worried about the doc, aren’t you? You don’t need to pretend to be fine, you know.”

The young elf stopped and shook her head. “No. I’m okay. All I can do is wait here for Zenos, as always.”

Zophia propped her chin on her hand with a smile. “Well, then. You’re a strong one, Lily.”

“I’m not, though. If I were, I could’ve gone to help Zenos directly like Carmilla did...”

Everyone knew Carmilla had secretly tagged along with the healer by hiding inside the bracelet and, thanks to that, they’d all been somewhat reassured.

“I disagree. I think you’re strong,” Lynga interjected. “I would be pacing like crazy.”

“Indeed,” Loewe agreed. “I feel like you may be ahead of me a bit in terms of womanly maturity. Just a tiny bit, though.”

Lily chuckled softly and rolled up her sleeves in the kitchen. “Hey, since we’re all here, why don’t we all make something to share?”

“Good plan,” Zophia replied. “Let’s make something so good everyone down there will wish they were here.”

“Agreed,” Lynga said. “I’m pretty hungry anyway.”

“Yes,” Loewe chimed in. “Let us have a little celebration in advance of Zenos’s victory, just the four of us.”

The women’s lively laughter echoed across the moonlit night.

In a dimly lit stone passage of the underground waterway, a black cloak fluttered in the darkness as though blending into it.

“I smell them. Take a left,” Carmilla instructed.

“Got it,” Zenos replied, sprinting at full speed. Along the way, zombies and ghouls swarmed them in droves, but his healing magic easily dispatched the creatures. Clearing out the undead as they advanced helped minimize the damage they would be able to do as well.

“Careful with that,” the wraith warned. “Do not hit me with your spells.”

“Yeah, I’m being careful. With this many enemies, though, I might just mess up and accidentally exorcise you. Sorry if that happens.”

“‘Sorry’ is hardly enough!”

“Ha ha ha! I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

“That did not sound like a jest.”

Zenos felt like they’d gone quite deep into the waterway. By this point, he could sense the concentrated aura of death rising from the depths.

“Halt,” Carmilla commanded, and Zenos stopped. “Something is amiss. A creature unlike the ones we’ve encountered so far draws near.”

Indeed, Zenos’s fingertips were tingling, and he could sense something unpleasant coming their way. The stench of rot and decay grew stronger.

Then, with a dull thud, one of the walls burst open. From the dark depths of the newly opened hole, a pair of sunken pitch-black eyes peered out. The creature’s skin, illuminated by the dim light, was peeling off. Dark blue-black slime dripped from various spots in its body. And, most notably, it was *massive*—even in a crouched position, its hulking form nearly filled the waterway.

In the blink of an eye, the flowing water nearby turned murky and foul.

“That’s...” Carmilla murmured.

“A zombie lord,” Zenos concluded. Zombie lords were ranked even higher than the zombie king he’d encountered at the cemetery near the Royal Institute.

“Hmph. *This* is the highest-ranking of all zombies? Cocky little thing,” Carmilla said derisively.

“Ack! Where’s it going?” Zenos asked.

The zombie lord, seemingly uninterested in bothering with just one prey, began to dart up the waterway with surprising speed, breaking through walls and ceilings along the way. Left alone, it would cause immense damage.

Zenos moved to give chase, but Carmilla stopped him. “Wait, Zenos. I shall go. You head to the bottom; your destination is close by.”

“Well, maybe, but—”

“Your true challenge is yet to come. Fighting that thing will be a waste of your time and mana.”

“Are you sure about this?”

Carmilla gracefully floated up, her black robe’s sleeves fluttering in the air. “Hmph. Do not make the mistake of thinking this is for your sake. Or that this is for the underground dwellers’ sake, for that matter. I am a wraith, and to me, human lives are but nourishment. However...”

The Lich Queen narrowed her eyes, glaring in the direction the zombie lord had disappeared off to.

“That giant fool dared to ignore me.”

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the underground waterway, Velitra’s subordinate, Elgen, was still creating zombies.

“Elgen, can you keep going?” Velitra asked.

Though he was sweating and breathing heavily, Elgen smiled. “Of course I can, Lord Night Healer. Full resurrection magic is the ultimate goal of necromancers like myself. I’m fortunate to be able to savor this moment.”

Ultimate goal, he says... Velitra mused, standing at the center of the enormous resurrection circle—much larger than the already quite large necromancy circle—and idly watched Elgen’s back as the man produced countless undead. Honestly, the necromancer’s ultimate goal was irrelevant. Resurrection magic was merely the means to an end Velitra had poured heart and soul into. *My only objective is to see you again, master.*

Several hours had passed since the horde had begun to pour into the waterway. The first wave of undead should soon start bringing in the critically injured victims. Velitra would then offer up a multitude of lives and a vast amount of wealth, and in exchange for that priceless sacrifice, the magic circle would activate. All for the sake of this reunion.

“Soon,” the Night Healer murmured, looking down at the piece of paper on

the ground, wrapped around a tuft of hair.

Velitra looked at the narrow passage connected to the waterway, flooded with undead seeking out the scent of life. All of a sudden, a white light shone at the end of the path.

“Huh?” Had the first wave of undead finally returned with the injured? No... “That’s...”

For a moment, the horde stood still, like a wall of corpses. The next second, the undead turned to dust and vanished, revealing a single man dressed in a cloak black as night. The same man who had once studied healing magic with Velitra under the same master.

“Zenos...”

Zenos tossed his mask aside and spoke with the same nonchalant expression as always. “Hey, Velitra. I figured I’d come over. Talk about the good old days.”

“Y-You! You’re alive?!” Elgen demanded in disbelief. He drew his sword and charged forward.

The shadow healer, however, effortlessly dodged the blade and struck Elgen’s throat with the side of his palm. With a low groan, Elgen collapsed to his knees.

“Sorry,” Zenos said. “I don’t have time to deal with you right now.”

“Why are you here?” Velitra asked, taking slow steps forward.

Zenos, adopting the same leisurely pace, stepped forward as well. “Finding you was a huge hassle, you know. I was told only top executives got to meet with other top executives, so I busted ass to rise through the ranks.”

“You did...?”

“And then I finally made it to the committee meeting, and were you there? No,” he said matter-of-factly. “Man, it’s rough underground, isn’t it? You’ve been struggling all by yourself this whole time.”

Velitra didn’t respond.

“So, like, after the orphanage burned down, I became an adventurer. That was a pretty terrible time, actually, but looking back I think it was good

experience. I got to see some of that vast world our master used to tell us about.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing in particular. I’m just reminiscing. I haven’t seen you in a while, so it makes sense to catch up, right?”

“State your purpose!”

“I told you. I’m just here to talk about the good old days.” Zenos’s expression remained relatively calm as he continued, “Velitra. Resurrection magic is dangerous. You should stop.”

“Mind your own business.”

“No can do. You’re my best friend.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” A miasmal aura rose from Velitra’s whole body. “Don’t get cocky with me just because you knocked Elgen down. I was saving my mana for the resurrection spell, but I’ll have you know my research has made me quite capable at necromancy too!”

A vast amount of mana poured into the necromancy circle, drawing forth countless corpses from the damp black soil.

“Damn, good going, Velitra,” Zenos remarked. “I didn’t know this at first either, but it’s pretty tough to master two different types of magic. Impressive.”

“Silence!”

Don’t you dare, Velitra thought. Don’t you stand before me, wearing our master’s cloak, looking at me with our master’s clear gaze, saying our master’s words!

“You couldn’t save him! What do you even know about me?!” Velitra demanded.

“You’re not wrong. I failed back then,” Zenos admitted. He stopped, gripped his cloak with his right hand, and said, “That’s why I’ll succeed this time. I’m going to save you.”

In the depths of the earth, ruled by death and darkness, the two disciples now

stood, reunited at last.

Somewhere in the underground waterway, the members of Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions sat covered in wounds.

"Hey. You good?"

"Still hangin' in there somehow."

"Looks like we're all still breathin'..."

"That was close..."

They'd all banded together to fight back against the undead, but eventually found themselves at the limit of their strength; there'd been nothing to do but wait for death. As time passed, however, the undead had slowly begun to thin out. Thanks to that, they'd managed to survive, though they lacked the ability to even stand.

As they sat there, breathing heavily, several dark shadows approached from the stone passageway.

"Oh, crap. More of 'em?" one of them said between gasps.

"N-No way, man. We're done for..." another replied.

Try as they might, none of them could move. But just as they resigned themselves to their fate as undead dinner, a human-sounding voice came from the approaching shadows. "Hey, you folks. Still alive?"

The men slowly lifted their heads to see a man with a figure like that of a massive lion standing at the head of the group of shadows. "Wh-Who are you?" one asked.

"I go by Beast King," the large figure replied.

"What? Beast King? Wait..." The men all froze in union. "Beast...King. Beast King. Like, the top executive? *That* Beast King? No way, right?"

"Yes, the top executive. *That* Beast King."

The men shrieked in unison. A top executive was practically a legend in the Black Guild.

Looking at the trembling men, the Beast King scratched his mane awkwardly. “You folks are with the shadow healer’s faction, right? Glad to see you’re well enough to scream.”

“Huh? Wh-Why?”

“Well, I’m in your boss’s debt. I’ve been looking for you while fighting the undead. The shadow healer headed further underground and killed many of them along the way, and thanks to that and the help of four other top executives, we managed to fend most of them off,” the Beast King explained, his throat rumbling.

“Are you all okay, meow?!” Pista called out as she came running, nearly out of breath, from the opposite passageway.

“Ma’am!” the men said in recognition.

“I finally found a secret exit that’s not blocked off, meow. We can escape that way!” Pista told the other faction members in an encouraging tone. She explained that on her way to their current location she’d been guiding others she ran into toward the exit, which had delayed her a bit.

The Beast King smiled proudly. “Fwa ha ha! Look at you go!”

“Oh, please—I’m an information broker! I’m in and out of this place all the time! This is nothing, meow.”

“H-Hmph,” the Beast King grunted.

Seeing Pista casually silence a top executive like that made the other members look at her with respect. “Damn, ma’am, you stood up to him just like that...”

“But since I’m feeling generous, we’re taking the Beast King with us, meow. Follow me!”

“A-All right!” the Beast King replied, his face brightening instantly.

The other members of Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions were in awe that their number two could wrap a top executive around her finger so easily.

The Beast King turned to his followers. “Once we’ve confirmed the exit’s location, you all split up and go tell the other folks underground. Save as many

as you can. The factions of the Oathbreaker, the Blue Shadow, the Many Faces, and the Scorpion Princess will all be cooperating with us until the crisis is averted.”

“U-Um, pardon me, Mr. Beast King, sir, but why is a top executive doing this...?” one of Zenos’s men asked.

The Beast King turned his feline gaze to the confused men. “I’m under no obligation to help, but I happened to meet a man who came close to becoming a top executive by aiding people in the den of snakes that is the Black Guild, so...” He laughed heartily and took a step forward.

Immediately, a loud rumbling sound echoed through the waterway, shaking the passage up and down.

“Wh-Whoaaa!” the men cried out.

“M-Me-Meowww!” Pista exclaimed.

The Beast King grunted. “What is—”

As the group shouted in confusion, part of the waterway burst open and water gushed forth. A powerful stench of decay wafted forth from the dark, gaping hole and an enormous decaying face peeked out, wriggling as the creature squeezed through to the stone passage. The vibrations caused by the movement of its huge body caused cracks to run in all directions across the stone walls.

“Aaaaaargh! It’s a giant zombieeee!!!” a man screamed.

“We’re dead! We’re so dead!!!” another shrieked in panic.

“Hmph. A zombie lord, is it?” the Beast King asked. “Tough fight for a guy on the mend.” He took on a combat stance, his expression grim.

Like an avatar of despair, the zombie approached. Its expression was that of a predator having finally found something worth eating—its mouth was wide open, and its yellow teeth were poised to clamp down on its prey. Mucus spewed from the corners of its gaping jaws, burning the stone floor underneath.

“Hold it right there, you enormous brute!” came a sudden voice. Next thing everyone knew, a woman was floating in the air before them. “*Must* you thrash

about like that? Following you was quite the task, I would have you know!” the woman exclaimed, rotating her shoulders.

The floating woman looked human, but had only a faint presence. Her body was half-transparent, and a chilling aura emanated from her. The sheer force of her chilling presence made the zombie lord stop moving.

“Aaaaaargh! A wraith! It’s a wraaaith!!!”

“Now we’re dead for sure!!!”

Between a zombie raid, the sudden arrival of a top executive, a zombie lord attacking, and a wraith’s sudden appearance, the men had practically been stuck in the middle of a monster parade. They were all certain they would die.

Pista blinked. “Huh? Wait, aren’t you the wraith from the shadow healer’s clinic?”

The wraith in black slowly turned around. “Hmm? Oh, might you be the catgirl from before? Does that mean these men are with Zenos’s faction?”

“They are, meow.”

“Damn,” one of the faction’s men said in awe. “She’s talking to a wraith too!”

“Wait. Since when can undead talk?”

“Th-This ain’t no ordinary wraith...”

“Oh?” the wraith said, glaring at the terrified man. “And why, pray tell, are you lot sitting there twiddling your thumbs?”

“Huh...?”

“Are you not members of *my* faction? Show me the proper reverence!”

“What? Wait, but—”

“I am Mistress Carmilla! How dare you not bow your heads before the true boss of this faction?! Kneel, you fools!”

“Y-Yes, ma’aaam!!!”

Though they had no idea what was happening, the men were nevertheless overwhelmed by the command from the highest of all undead. They did as told

and bowed their heads.

A fairly satisfied smile curled the wraith's lips and she turned back to the still-growling zombie lord. "Now then, I must show my underlings 'what's what,' as they say. My apologies for keeping you waiting, damned soul of hell."

With that, Carmilla gracefully descended, her pale feet touching the ground.

"Pitiful creature, forcefully awoken from your long slumber," she continued. "You must be quite agitated."

The zombie lord growled, spewing more corrosive fluids from its mouth. It sluggishly moved forward, seemingly having recognized the translucent woman before it as an enemy. A foul battle rage began to course through its entire body.

"I generally refrain from interfering in the affairs of the living," Carmilla remarked, "but living you are not. You and I belong on the same side. And besides..." She brought her hands together to form a symbol as the zombie lord charged. "You may be a powerful zombie, but you are still less than gravel beneath my feet! How dare you ignore Carmilla, the Lich Queen!"



An illusory distortion rippled through the space around the zombie lord, crushing its giant body as though an invisible weight had borne down upon it. A violent groan shook the air, and a sudden gust of wind roared across the waterway like a storm. The massive undead lay flattened, flailing until its movements ceased.

“Back to sleep you go, innocent one,” Carmilla said softly to the zombie lord, whose remains were now fine dust drifting down the waterway. She floated back up, then past the bowing men and the stunned Beast King and Pista. “Hmph. I have done you a *favor*, Zenos. Hurry and do your part so you can repay me in kind.”

Zenos’s chant echoed through the depths of the limestone cave. “*Heal!*”

A pure-white wind swept over the zombies crawling out from the necromantic circle where Velitra stood, turning them to ash. Without pause, however, more sprang forth, rushing toward the shadow healer.

“Man, this is exhausting,” he complained, casting another healing spell. “Come on, Velitra. Cut it out already.”

“Shut up!” Zenos’s former friend hissed, paying no mind to his words and continuing to pour mana into the circle. The many nameless dead who had ended up here over the decades continued to rise and attack Zenos.

A sacrifice was necessary to activate the resurrection spell. Velitra had no choice but to eliminate Zenos to achieve this, but Elgen was still unconscious, and the Conductor had disappeared at some point to places unknown—perhaps the strange figure was watching from somewhere. Nevertheless, the Night Healer had no intention to ask for help.

Velitra had to settle things with Zenos personally, sever all ties with the past, and breathe new life into the pair’s old mentor. The Night Healer glanced at the small path behind Zenos leading to the underground waterway. The undead from earlier hadn’t brought back any injured for sacrifices yet. What in the world was happening?

“Something behind me bothering you?” Zenos asked, sweat beading on his

forehead. “Look, I kinda get what you’re trying to do. But out there, my faction, the top executives, and a mysterious floating entity are all hard at work. Things probably didn’t go the way you planned.”

“You ‘get it’? Preposterous,” Velitra spat.

“I do, actually. Have you forgotten how long we were together?”

“If you get it, then—” *Why stand in my way?* Velitra wanted to ask, but the words refused to come out.

Deep down, Velitra knew, truly knew, that it wasn’t Zenos’s fault alone that their mentor had died. It had been the Night Healer’s own actions—stealing money from the orphanage, chasing foolish dreams—that had invited the tragedy.

“You must understand how much I want to see him again. How much I regret what happened back then!” Velitra finally managed.

“Yeah,” Zenos said. “I do.”

“Then don’t stand in my way!” the Night Healer demanded, unleashing even more mana into the circle.

Typically, the older the corpse used and the stronger the person had been in life, the more powerful the resulting undead was. The upper layers of corpses had already been exhausted, and undeath was now being bestowed upon the older corpses buried deeper underground. Though major entities like the zombie lord didn’t appear frequently, higher-ranked types such as ghouls and zombie kings had begun to crawl out one after another, roaring as they rushed Zenos.

“I swear, it’s like an undead exhibit,” the shadow healer grumbled, holding out both of his hands and lowering his stance slightly. The light emanating from his palms intensified further still, swirls of white engulfing and consuming the undead.

The ominous purple mana rising from the necromantic circle clashed with the warm white light flowing from Zenos’s hands, leaving intense waves in their wake that shook the underground space.

“Sorry, but I can’t let any more undead go into the waterway,” the shadow healer said. “I’m stopping them all here.”

“Damn it, Zenos!” Velitra cursed.

“Do you remember our master’s sayings, Velitra?”

Of course I do, the Night Healer thought. *I remember every single one of his sayings, from the most to the least frequent.*

Zenos wiped the sweat from his brow. “Gramps didn’t teach us magic so we could use the undead to attack people.”

“Shut up!” Velitra knew that a hundred times over. Their master wouldn’t be happy about this. Of course he wouldn’t! *I don’t care if he gets angry. I don’t care if he smacks me, or if he calls me a complete moron and beats me.*

“Dabbling in forbidden magic will have severe consequences.”

“You think I don’t know that?!” A raging storm of purple waves whipped forth, sweeping away the white wind. As long as their mentor came back, Velitra didn’t care about facing the consequences. *I’ve long been prepared for them.*

“No, you don’t get it,” Zenos insisted, a rare look of displeasure gracing his usually expressionless features. “You don’t get it at all. You’re just being selfish.”

“What...?”

“You think you’re the only one who’s sad? I lost our master too.”

Velitra fell silent as the white waves coming from Zenos began to shine brightly, forming a thick wall and gradually pushing back the purple mana and the countless undead.

My mana... Velitra thought in a daze, limbs growing numb.

Despite being at its strongest yet, the Night Healer’s mana output wasn’t enough to contain the white wall’s advance as it turned the zombies to dust. Zenos had to have dealt with countless undead on the way here, and still the healing wind continued to sweep through the underground.

“So do you really think,” Zenos continued, his healing power growing to an unprecedented level as his voice rose to an angry shout, “I’m just gonna sit here and lose my best friend too?!”

Velitra groaned as the white tempest raged, engulfing the whole cavern, scattering everything to its fierce warm winds—undead, bloodlust, malice, hope, despair. Unable to stand anymore, the Night Healer dropped to the floor, limbs unmoving.

Panting heavily, Velitra glared up at Zenos. Without a drop of mana remaining, the Night Healer could no longer cast the spell—not that the required sacrifices had ever arrived either. Years endeavoring for a precious goal single-handedly had been turned to dust at the hands of Velitra’s childhood friend.

“You monster,” the Night Healer gasped. “Our master only ever cared for you. I hate you.”

“Unfortunately,” Zenos began, lowering his hands, the sounds of his heavy breaths mixing with those of his once close friend, “your feelings are one-sided.”

“If you’re this strong, why couldn’t you save him?”

“Velitra, you’re misunderstanding something.”

“What?”

Zenos took a deep breath and sat down cross-legged. “I figured you wouldn’t listen to me if I just tried to talk, so my plan was to stay here until you were ready to listen. Guess it’s time.”

“Huh?”

“Listen to me, Velitra. Our master saved our lives.”

“What? What do you—” Something cold pierced through Velitra’s back then, and a venomous-looking blade protruded from the Night Healer’s chest. *It’s just like that day*, came a sudden thought, as though this were happening to someone else.

“Velitra!” Zenos cried out, his voice sounding distant.

Collapsing, Velitra turned to see Elgen standing there, back on his feet, his face twisted into an angry scowl after throwing his sword at his former boss.

“If the resurrection spell had succeeded, I could’ve become insanely wealthy,” the Night Healer’s longtime right-hand man spat. “That was why I followed you. But now that it’s failed, you’re useless to me.” He grabbed the bags of gold from the resurrection circle, then ran toward the path leading to the waterway.

“Damn it! Hey! Stop!” Zenos called out, staggering to his feet despite his considerable exhaustion.

“Forget it, Zenos,” Velitra murmured hoarsely. “Just...don’t bother. I’m too far gone. Leave me.”

“Velitra...”

Without the resurrection spell, it was all over. Their master would never come back. Velitra had no reason to keep living.

But Zenos wasn’t having it.

“Zenos...” Velitra murmured weakly, glaring at the approaching shadow healer, breaths shallow and body engulfed in a white light. “Wh-Why...?”

“Sorry, but I’m just gonna have to save you,” Zenos replied. “I still haven’t told you what you misunderstood.”

“You...should be out of mana...too...”

“Oh, shut it. I’m trying to gather the last bits of it. Don’t interrupt my focus,” said the shadow healer of the ruined city, smiling fondly like their mentor once had. “I told you I was gonna save you.”

So warm, Velitra thought of Zenos’s mana.

It was comfortable, like being wrapped in feathers. Like being a baby cradled in its mother’s arms. The cold pain turned to warmth, leaving death with no choice but to return another day.

“Ngh.” With severely weakened limbs and nearly depleted mana reserves, the Night Healer struggled to get up. *I get it now. I finally get it,* Velitra thought. *It’s*

the first time I've felt this mana flowing through me. "I...see now."

"About time you realized," Zenos murmured, exhausted, his right hand still raised.

When the pair were children, Velitra had been robbed of the money stolen from the orphanage, been stabbed in the back, and waited for death. But death had never come. Velitra had woken up to Zenos sitting tiredly nearby and their mentor lying fallen on the ground; Velitra had assumed their mentor had also been stabbed while giving chase and Zenos had healed them both. Thus, Velitra had survived, but their mentor had not.

That's what I thought this whole time, but... Velitra turned belly up and groaned, "The...magic that saved me back then. That wasn't yours." Tears stung the Night Healer's eyes as they welled up. "It was...our master's."

"Yeah," Zenos confirmed. "He saved me too."

Zenos's magic flowed deep within his old friend's body, their memories mingling together.

That fateful day, at that fateful time, in that fateful place...

"Velitra!" Zenos called out. He'd reflexively chased after his friend, who'd just bolted from their mentor's house carrying a burlap sack.

"Zenos, wait!" their mentor chastised him, running after the pair. "I'll go! Wait here, I said!"

Zenos, however, didn't stop. Something was wrong with Velitra's behavior. The boy was still hurting from the beating he'd taken for the suspected theft, but he didn't so much as think about healing his bruises as he pursued his friend. He was confident he could run faster than their mentor; he was used to physical labor, after all.

"Ah!" he exclaimed after turning a few corners, spotting Velitra lying face down, surrounded by rough-looking thugs locked in a scuffle, back stained red. Zenos's blood boiled, and he couldn't help but shout, "What are you guys doing?!"

“Shit! C’mon, let’s scram!” one of the men said.

Zenos didn’t know what had happened, or why the men had scattered, but he knew now was not the time to chase after them. He knelt down next to his fallen friend. “Velitra!” he called out. “Are you all right?!”

Velitra had been stabbed in the back and was unresponsive with vacant eyes, barely breathing.

Hurriedly, Zenos began to cast a healing spell, but then he noticed the burlap sack Velitra had been carrying, fallen nearby. He instinctively reached for it, and immediately a sharp pain shot through his back.

“Hey!” a rough voice snapped behind him as the sack was forcefully yanked away. “Give that here!”

“Ngh...” *No. Oh no.*

He, too, had been stabbed from behind. Zenos had been too focused on Velitra’s injuries to notice that a thug was still around. He attempted to chant a healing spell, but the pain and shortness of breath disrupted his focus, making it impossible to gather his mana. With his hand still on his back, Zenos collapsed next to Velitra, his vision so blurry he could barely make out his friend’s face next to him.

The end just comes this easily, huh? he thought hazily as his eyelids began to flutter shut.

“Velitra! Zenos!” a familiar voice called out then, pulling his consciousness back from the brink.

“G-Gramps,” Zenos rasped, the world around him becoming slightly clearer at the sound of that voice.

Their black-cloaked mentor came running like a man possessed. “What happened?” he asked in shock, sweat rolling down his forehead. “Did you get stabbed?!”

Zenos tried to respond, but the words wouldn’t come out, muffled against the warm blood gushing from his mouth.

“You’re both still breathing,” their mentor said. “Good. That’s good.”

Good? Zenos thought in the back of his dazed mind, the embers of his life fading quickly. *What's good about this?*

"Hold on. I'll save you," their mentor continued, ignoring Zenos's confusion. He gently placed his hands on each of the children's wounds, as if about to use magic.

But Zenos knew that this man, though he called himself a healer and drew magic circles for fun, had never once cast a single healing spell in the past year. And yet, somehow—

"High Heal!" the man chanted smoothly, sending a wave of mana flowing from his palms as they pressed against the children's backs.

Huh? A refreshing feeling, like a clear stream, surged through Zenos, washing over his body and soul. The pain quickly receded, and his vision began to focus once more. Slowly, Zenos lifted his right hand, holding it up before his eyes.

It was moving. He could see. He was alive.

"Thank goodness," their mentor said. "I made it just in time."

"Gramps, you..." Zenos mumbled, repeatedly curling and uncurling his fingers. He should've been on the brink of death, yet here he was, undeniably alive. Pushing his palm against the ground, he managed to lift himself up.

Velitra still lay beside him, eyes closed, but the once faint breaths had now steadied.

Zenos grabbed their mentor's shoulders as the man sighed in relief. The fact his fatal wound had vanished in an instant could've only meant one thing. "You can use healing magic?!"

Their mentor nodded as though Zenos had just asked a stupid question. "I've been telling you this entire time I'm a healer."

"What the heck?! Then why didn't you do this sooner—"

"Zenos, listen to me," their mentor cut in, his voice suddenly turning serious. "I'm asking you because I know you'll do it. I've said this before many times, but when I die, you *need* to cremate me. Otherwise I could become a breeding ground for something terrible."

Zenos frowned at the sudden request. “Huh?”

“And...uh, you be good to Velitra, all right?”

“Wait, why are you—”

“Ah, man. Now that it matters, all I can think of is cliché crap. I’m glad I prepared for this beforehand. Well, somewhat.”

“Prepared?” Zenos echoed, letting go of their mentor’s collar. “Hey, gramps...?”

Blood was dripping from the corner of the man’s lips. “You know, Zenos,” he said, wiping at the red trickle with his right hand. “I really shouldn’t be teaching you kids.”

“What do you—”

“Remember this: Great power takes great sacrifice. Before I came here, I committed a terrible sin. Now I’m paying for it.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? Hey!” A sense of foreboding washed over Zenos, making his heart race.

Their master, however, seemed calm, a bright smile on his lips. “I have no regrets, though. I didn’t fail this time.” He ruffled the hair of both Zenos and the prone Velitra. “I’m glad I met you kids.”

With the usual smile, he slowly slumped to the ground.

“Gramps?” Zenos murmured, slowly shaking their mentor’s body.

There was no response.

“Hey, this isn’t funny!” The boy shook their mentor’s body repeatedly, but the man’s eyes remained closed.

Fearfully, Zenos checked for a pulse. Nothing. No, he probably just hadn’t checked correctly. He tried again, calmer this time. Nothing. Over and over, the result was the same: no heartbeat.

“Hey, come on... Why...why is this happening?” He wouldn’t accept this. He couldn’t accept this. Didn’t want to.

But their mentor was definitely not breathing.

“Come on, gramps, quit messing around! I haven’t even...” Zenos trailed off. *I haven’t even thanked you yet...*

Gripping his mentor’s black cloak tightly, Zenos began to scream, his pained cries echoing emptily under the endless blue sky.

“Oh...” Back in the present, underground, Velitra stared blankly into space, pressing down on where the stab wound had been. That pain was gone thanks to Zenos’s magic, but another remained deeper within. “That’s what happened...”

“It’s not true that our master only cared about me,” Zenos pointed out. “He cared about me, yeah, but he cared about you too.” That was why he’d laid down his life to save them both.

Velitra understood now. Perhaps that had been the price their mentor had paid for using resurrection magic. Despite knowing this, he hadn’t hesitated at all to cast a spell to save them.

“He saved us, Velitra,” Zenos added.

“Yeah...”

“You think it doesn’t matter what happens to you, as long as he comes back? Don’t you get it? How he felt when he saved us? You dumbass. Think about all the lives you were about to sacrifice too.” Zenos lightly smacked his friend’s forehead.

Clasping a hand over where Zenos’s slap had landed, Velitra pouted slightly. “It wasn’t like I was going to take the lives of good people. I targeted Black Guild scum.”

“We’re healers,” Zenos said. “Our job is to save lives, not take them.”

Velitra said nothing to that.

“Granted, that might sound like sugary nonsense in reality.”

Still, their mentor had held fast to his ideals until the very end. His sayings had surely come from those ideals, born of the knowledge of the harsh realities of the world. He’d wanted to convey them to his two apprentices, who had still

been learning healing magic.

“The ideal healer...” Velitra murmured with a distant look.

Zenos had followed their mentor’s last wishes and cremated the man’s body. Then the orphanage had burned down, leaving him with nowhere to go. He’d been terribly exhausted, and Velitra had vanished; Zenos hadn’t had the chance to talk to his friend about their mentor’s final moments.

All that had remained to him was their mentor’s well-worn black cloak. Having lost his place in the world, Zenos had been sitting on the roadside with the cloak draped over his shoulders when Aston—leader of the Golden Phoenix—spoke to him. This had marked the beginning of the second chapter of his life, when he became an adventurer, for better or worse. But that was a whole other story.

Anguished, Velitra said softly, “It’s all my fault, Zenos.”

“What do you mean?” the shadow healer asked.

“I wanted to leave the orphanage and study more under our master. I didn’t want to lose to you. So I took the money from Dalitz’s safe.”

“You’re kidding,” Zenos said. “*You* stole the money? They nearly killed me thinking I was the thief.”

“I was also the one who set fire to the orphanage.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.”

“You can hate me if you want. It was all my fault. I stole that money. If I hadn’t, our master wouldn’t have died,” Velitra said, biting a lip.

Zenos took a deep breath. “It doesn’t matter anymore. No one could’ve predicted what happened to our master. And the orphanage, well, it was for the best that it was gone.”

“Zenos...” Velitra sat up, grabbing Zenos’s black cloak with both hands. “I... I’m sorry...” It was the first time since they parted ways that Zenos had seen his friend be so sincere. Velitra looked like a child again, eyes filled with tears while clutching the worn-out cloak. “Still, I miss our master. I wanted to see him again, no matter the cost.”

The shadow healer pursed his lips, staring over his old friend's shoulder. Beyond the necromantic circle lay another magic circle, even bigger. Velitra had to have drawn it. "That magic circle is really complex. Did you come up with it?"

"No," Velitra admitted. "That was hidden in our master's notes. I studied the subject to an extent, but never to that level of completion. I'm using it practically as it was."

Velitra had holed up underground to research necromancy, hidden documents, and fragments of their mentor's notes. These studies had uncovered that in order to activate a resurrection spell, several things were needed: a large-scale magic circle, valuable sacrifices, immense amounts of mana, and a special chant. But precious little existed on the magic circle itself, so Velitra had used the one from the journal nearly unchanged.

"Well, maybe..." Zenos began, slowly pushing to his feet and putting a hand on a puzzled Velitra's shoulder. "Maybe we *can* see gramps again."

"We can...?" Velitra echoed, indigo eyes blinking in confusion. "What do you mean? The offerings are gone, so we can't activate the resurrection spell anymore."

"No, I mean, think about it. Is this really a resurrection magic circle?" Zenos interrupted.

"Well, I can't fully decipher this, but there's a complex regeneration spell intricately incorporated into the circle. I've never seen anything like it, so it's reasonable to assume..." Velitra pulled out the black leather journal and showed Zenos the part with the magic circle.

After examining it for a moment, Zenos stepped toward the circle. "Gramps regretted messing with resurrection magic in the first place. I know that's his journal, but would he really have left something so dangerous there? Wouldn't he have burned any evidence of something that dangerous long ago?"

Velitra staggered after Zenos. "This circle was drawn with invisible ink. It was deliberately hidden."

"Maybe it was hidden for a different reason," Zenos ventured.

"Huh?"

“When he was saying his goodbyes, he said he couldn’t think of the right words to say right then. He mentioned he was glad he’d prepared beforehand.” At the time, Zenos had been confused too, not fully understanding what their mentor had meant. But maybe...

Zenos moved to the center of the resurrection magic circle, and Velitra moved to stand next to him, puzzled. “It’s useless, Zenos. I’ve tried many times, but simply infusing the circle with mana won’t activate it.”

“Looks like it, yeah. I just tried, but it didn’t react at all.”

“Yes. It needs some other sort of input.”

“Something of value, you said before.”

“That’s what I thought.” Materials that constituted the human body, large sums of money, and numerous lives.

Zenos folded his arms, staring intently at the magic circle. “True resurrection magic might need such things, yes, but this circle might have different activation conditions.”

“What do you mean?”

“It didn’t work because you did it all by yourself, I think.”

Velitra’s indigo eyes widened.

“Do you remember when gramps showed us a weird magic circle that made his face pop out and laugh? Remember what we had to do to activate that one?”

After a moment’s silence, Velitra said, a bit unsure, “Use both of our mana?”

“That’s right. Do you still have any mana left?”

“I rested a little, so I think I’ve recovered some...”

The pair crouched down and placed their palms in the center of the circle. “Here goes nothing,” Zenos said.

Hesitantly, Velitra nodded.

When they poured their mana—polished from years of practice—into the circle, its outline began to glow faintly. A high-pitched ringing noise filled the

air, and the entire circle flickered in the colors of the rainbow.

“I-It worked!” Velitra exclaimed.

“Something’s coming out!”

The air around them began to swirl as though being sucked into the circle. The wind grew stronger, and the two had to brace themselves to avoid being blown away. Bits of dirt whipped through the air, making it impossible to keep their eyes open.

Finally, the wind subsided, and a man with a scruffy beard and a somewhat relaxed demeanor stood before them, clad in a jet-black cloak. “Hey, Zenos, Velitra. You two doing good?” he asked.

“Master!”

“Gramps...”

As the pair rose to their feet in awe, their mentor cleared his throat. “Okay, so... I wanted to leave a record in case something happened to me,” he explained. “This circle’s made with both illusion magic and regeneration magic, and is one of my masterpieces. I drew it in invisible ink to keep it hidden, but I figured you two would find it. I set it to activate once you guys’ mana reached a certain level of proficiency.”

So this was a recording from the past. Velitra and Zenos exchanged glances, then turned back toward the figure of their mentor.

“I tried to tell you everything I wanted to during our time together, but there were things I couldn’t say. But I thought once you were fully-fledged healers, you had the right to know the kind of man your magic teacher was. So I decided to leave you this.” Their mentor went silent for a moment before continuing. “I was originally an elite healer working for the Royal Institute of Healing. Which means I was actually way more important than either of you knew. So show me some respect! You especially, Zenos.”

Despite being a recording, the illusion of their mentor pointed accurately at Zenos.

“There were hardly any injuries I couldn’t heal, and I think people at the

Institute liked me well enough. Back then, there was this brazen kid in my neighborhood who often badgered me, saying he wanted to study under me. I kept brushing him off, saying ‘some other time,’ but being an elite healer meant I had to deal with royalty and nobility, so I was honestly very busy. Eventually, he stopped coming to my house.”

Their mentor looked into the distance.

“One winter day, I learned that the kid had a complicated family situation. Not that I should be telling either of you this, but he lived alone with his grandmother, who had trouble walking. She hobbled over to me with her cane in hand and said the kid had died. I couldn’t believe my ears,” he explained, his voice echoing softly in the silent underground space.

“The grandmother didn’t seem to know what I did for a living, only knowing me as the kind neighborhood man who played with her grandson, so she’d come to tell me out of courtesy. From her, I learned that the kid had been severely ill for a long time. That was when I understood—he’d wanted to study healing magic under me to cure himself. They couldn’t afford treatment, and he didn’t want to be a burden on the grandmother, what with her mobility issues and all.”

Their mentor smiled sadly.

“It was a somewhat rare illness, granted, but I never noticed at all. I was doing cutting-edge research on healing magic and circles day and night to better treat the patients at the Royal Institute, and still I didn’t notice. In short, I wasn’t paying proper attention to that kid. I would puff up my chest at the gratitude I received from the upper-class citizens, nobles, and royalty, but...I couldn’t notice a kid right in front of me was sick.”

A long silence befell the underground chamber before their mentor let out a deep, regretful sigh. He’d witnessed life and death many times over, but this one death he’d never been able to move past. He went on to explain that the kid’s death had sparked his obsession with resurrection magic.

“I don’t want you to follow in my footsteps, so I won’t go into details. But after spending a lot of time on it, I perfected the theory—or so I thought—and I attempted to bring back that kid using resurrection magic. However...” He

paused momentarily, then continued, “Next thing I knew, the magic circle had vanished and half a day had passed. It hit me then, hard, that a number of terrifying curses had befallen me.”

The word “curses” echoed heavily in the air.

“I won’t claim to understand the logic behind them, but one of the curses was that everyone who knew my name would eventually forget about me. The other was that I needed to follow two rules, or I would die. One rule was that I couldn’t tell anyone about the resurrection magic or the curses. The other was that I could never cast healing magic again.”

Velitra and Zenos silently stared at their mentor’s face.

“Well, I *am* telling you two about the curses through this magic circle, but by the time you see this, I’ll probably already be long gone, so it’s fine. You must think I’m an idiot, brooding over some kid and losing everything because of it. In the end, I had nothing left and nowhere to go, so I went to the slums.”

He went on to explain that, while the uniform of the healers at the Royal Institute of Healing was a pure white, he’d donned a jet-black cloak—the complete opposite—as punishment for his sins.

“My plan was to just die somewhere, but to my shock, what did I see but a kid trying to cast resurrection magic without even needing a magic circle! I panicked and smacked him in the head. That was you, Zenos.”

“Gramps...”

The illusion crossed his arms in an exasperated manner. “I didn’t want you to make the same dumb mistakes I had, so I decided to at least teach you how to control your power. But then you went and brought a friend—Velitra. And the both of you turned out to be so talented that I found myself enjoying being your teacher. So much for my plans to just go and die somewhere, eh?” His tone was resentful, but his gaze was wholly warm. “But I’m a cursed man. Anything could happen to me at any moment. So I decided to leave you this message.”

With a dramatic sigh, he continued, “Zenos. Velitra. Thanks for calling a man like me your master. You two were the best students, and the best sons, I

could've asked for."

Their mentor's last words as he lay dying, having broken one of the curse's rules and used healing magic on the pair, echoed in Zenos's mind. *"I have no regrets, though. I didn't fail this time."* This man, who at his peak had failed to save someone close to him and lost everything for it, had perhaps found salvation in the end.

With a flickering light, the illusion of their mentor began to fade.

As Velitra sobbed beside him, Zenos said the words he'd always meant to say, that somehow he'd been too embarrassed to, once upon a time. "Thank you, master."

Although the illusion shouldn't have been able to hear him, Zenos still felt as though their mentor, wrapped in a faint light, nodded and smiled at him one last time.

The pair sat there for a while after the light had completely faded.

"That was just like gramps, wasn't it?" Zenos said finally, breaking the silence.

"Yeah..."

"Though he was kinda missing something important there, huh? I always thought he was perceptive, but he didn't know you—"

"He sure didn't," muttered Velitra in annoyance, cheeks streaked with tears. "What did he mean, 'the best sons'? I'm a woman!"

Zenos chuckled, and Velitra broke into a laughing fit. The sounds of the two former best friends' laughter filled the air, bright as a memorial flame that could never be extinguished.



Epilogue (I)

“That useless piece of garbage!” Elgen snapped. Velitra’s former right-hand man ran along the waterway, carrying bags full of coins.

Now that the resurrection spell—which he’d been counting on to grow filthy rich—had failed, Elgen no longer had a use for his old boss. He’d taken advantage of Velitra’s moment of vulnerability, inflicted a fatal wound, and stolen as much gold as his arms could carry. Both Velitra and the other man he’d left behind were healers, but they probably didn’t have enough mana left to do anything. It was unlikely his former superior would recover.

I could start a new research project with this money, he thought. Or maybe—

Elgen’s plans for the future were suddenly interrupted when he spotted a figure at the end of the dim passageway, clad from head to toe in a gray robe.

“You’re...the Conductor?”

“Hey there,” said the figure in a strange high-pitched tone, raising a hand. “I understand your disappointment—I was looking forward to the resurrection spell too. Sad that Zenos got in the way of my fun again, but it was an interesting little spectacle nonetheless. What a fascinating thing, mourning.”

“What do you want?”

“I know I said I didn’t care that much about money, but I *did* help make quite a bit of this coin, so I figured I’d at least take some for my future activities. And besides...” The Conductor approached Elgen soundlessly. “I hate leaving trash unattended.”

“Perfect. I never liked you anyway,” Elgen scoffed, throwing the bags to the ground and pulling out a sharp knife from his pocket. “Stupid of you to come here. Now die!”

Looking down at the silent husk as it tumbled into the waterway, the

Conductor's eyes gleamed darkly.

“Now, then...” the Conductor whispered with a light sigh, hands clapping together as if dusting each other off. “Humans are weak. I’ve always wondered how, three hundred years ago, the almighty demon lord lost to such pitiable creatures. After conducting all sorts of behavioral experiments to understand them, I have come to the realization that they are indeed very weak. But very strong at the same time.”

Leaning down, the Conductor picked up the bags of gold.

“See you next time, Zenos. Until that day comes, I’ll be continuing my research.”

The hem of the gray robe fluttered in the air, leaving only darkness in its wake.

Epilogue (II)

On a sunny day when the clinic in the ruined city was bathed in bright sunlight, a certain catgirl broker dropped by.

“So, Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions have been assimilated into the Beast King’s faction, meow,” Pista reported. “They seemed happy about it.”

Zenos let out a relieved sigh. “Glad to hear that.”

Though the mass undead outbreak in the Black Guild had been resolved, there was still lingering confusion in the aftermath. Those who had escaped to the surface with Pista’s guidance were so terrified that they refused to return to the underground waterway, rendering the guild practically nonfunctional. Some factions were on the verge of disbanding, and others had relocated their headquarters.

Zenos had been concerned about the fates of his faction members, so hearing that the Beast King had taken them in was a relief.

“The Beast King was nearly retired, but it sounds like he’s decided to keep going a while longer, meow. He said his faction will be doing odd jobs to help people.”

“A top executive of the Black Guild helping people... Huh.”

“He said that since he was given another chance at life, he wants to spend the rest of his days doing good.”

“Ah,” Zenos said with a smile and a nod. “What about you, Pista? What will you do?”

“I got what I wanted, so I’m going to go stay with my mom for a while. But...” She rubbed her cat ears. “I’ll stop by and help the Beast King every so often, meow.”

“I’m sure he’ll be ecstatic.”

“You really helped me out, shadow healer. Thank you.” Pista stood up slowly,

grinned, and closed the distance between them in a second. Without giving Zenos time to react, she licked his cheek.

“Whoa! I’d forgotten about that...”

“Mya ha ha! The Beast King said he’d like to lick you again too.”

“Let him know I appreciate the sentiment.” Zenos stood up with an awkward smile. “*Only* the sentiment.”

After he saw Pista off, a spirit fluttered down beside him. “I have something I must tell you, Zenos,” she said.

“You got your booze already.”

“Not that. Something far more important.”

“What is it, then?”

“Lily collapsed by the kitchen.”

“What?” Zenos rushed back inside and found Lily face down just as Carmilla had said. “Huh? Hey, Lily! Are you all right?!” He hurriedly made his way to the young girl and examined her. Lily’s pulse was normal, and her breaths were steady. She was simply unconscious. “Why...?”

Carmilla replied with an exasperated expression, “Why, seeing the man she adores partake in such passionate kissing would naturally result in a fainting spell. Henceforth, your new title shall be the ‘clueless idiot healer.’”

“That’s just an insult!”

“You simply cannot appreciate my exquisite naming senses.”

“You don’t have an ounce of sense in you, naming or otherwise!”

As Zenos and Carmilla argued, Lily slowly stirred awake. “Huh?” she mumbled. “What happened to me?”

“Listen, Lily,” Zenos said. “What happened just now wasn’t my decision, and it’s just a thing catfolk do to show affection. Nothing more—”

“Um... What are you talking about?”

It seemed the shock had not only made her faint, but also forget what she’d

seen. Zenos let out a relieved sigh, and the clinic's door swung open to reveal the usual gang.

"Hey, doc. We just passed by the broker on the way here," Zophia said.

"She seemed weirdly cheery, so I demanded an explanation," Lynga noted.

"And what does she tell us? That she licked you! Unfair that only the catgirl gets to do it. I, too, want to lick you!"

"You three keep your mouths shut about that!" Zenos snapped.

Carmilla chuckled. "Back to our usual at last."

The wraith's laughter and Zenos's flustered yelling mixed in with the loud buzzing of cicadas, carrying off into the blue sky.

A lone figure stood at a distance, watching the clinic.

"Thank you, Zenos," murmured Velitra, now clad in a pure-white robe, tucking a lock of her wind-tousled indigo hair behind her ear.

She'd learned that, thanks to the efforts of Zenos and his faction as well as the Beast King's call for cooperation among some of the top executives, there had been no significant casualties in the underground waterway. Although she couldn't achieve her long-sought goal, her heart, once heavy, was now as light as the breeze.

She'd gotten to see her mentor again—even if it had been just an illusory projection.

"I'm leaving the capital. My plan is to go to other lands and see what I can do for the people there."

There was no need for farewells. She and Zenos had already spoken plenty in the underground depths.

As she gazed upon the clinic in the ruined city, Velitra recalled her mentor's favorite saying. *"A third-rate healer just mends wounds. A second-rate healer heals people. A first-rate healer makes the world a better place."*

According to the Conductor, Zenos had put an end to the conflict between the demi-humans of the slums and driven out the darkness from the Royal Institute

of Healing. Not only that, he'd rendered the Black Guild effectively nonfunctional *and* set some of the remaining factions on the path to do good.

"A healer who not only mends wounds, but also saves people and changes society itself, huh..." A healer who could treat everything in the world, like something out of a fantasy. Surely that had been the idea, the wish, and the hope that their mentor had entrusted to the future.

Quietly, Velitra turned on her heel. The Kingdom of Herzeth, also known as the Kingdom of the Sun, was one of the continent's greatest nations. As a former top executive of the Black Guild, she'd gotten to interact with those close to the heart of the country. Light and darkness were two sides of the same coin, she knew, and the stronger the light, the darker the shadow it cast.

"The darkness in this country is deep. But..." Velitra looked back at the clinic once more and smiled. "You just might be the one to change that someday, Zenos."

Side Story: The Man of Legend and the Information Broker

A group of rough-looking men came to a house near the deep woods at the edge of the royal capital.

“Are you the information broker?” one of them asked.

“What do you want, meow? This is no place for thugs,” said a catgirl as she lounged in a chair with her arms crossed.

The man scoffed, and the group emitted an aura of menace as he spoke. “Don’t play dumb. We know the catgirl broker is here. Don’t try to deny it.”

Pista scratched her cheek nonchalantly. “I’m not playing dumb. I’m just no longer a broker, meow.”

“What?”

“I don’t need to do that kinda work anymore. Now I just do it occasionally, as a hobby.”

“What do you mean, ‘hobby’?”

“Mya ha ha! I thought about quitting entirely, but it turns out I kinda enjoy it. Go ahead, let me know what you want. Maybe it’s interesting enough that I’ll help you out.”

The men exchanged glances, and their leader took a step closer. “Fine. We want to buy information from you.”

“I’m about to eat lunch, so could you losers wait?”

“Mind your damn tongue, cat!”

Pista sighed, shrugging. “I’ll have you know we catfolk only lick people we care about. You sort have no need to worry.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing, meow. If you ask me, the Skull Gang should disband and start making an honest living.”

“You know about us?” the leader asked as the group stared at her, surprised.

“Yeah, I’ve heard stories about some boring bunch going around extorting and thieving lately.”

“Hmph. So your skills as an information broker are still sharp. Now hurry up and give us what we want,” the leader said, reaching into his pocket.

Pista sighed wearily. “Hasty, hasty. What do you want to know, meow?”

“About the legendary guy in the Black Guild.”

“What ‘legendary guy’?”

“You’re a broker and you don’t know? I mean the guy who made it to the top in that hell of a place in just a month. He was the leader of the legendary Mistress Carmilla’s Merry Minions.”

“Pfft!”

“What’s so funny, woman?!”

“Nothing, nothing, meow. You just said that with such a serious face, I couldn’t help but want to laugh.” Pista cleared her throat. “So, why do you want to know about him?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He made it to the top among the worst of the worst in record time. Dude’s got that evil charm going. We want to join him so we can rise in the underworld quickly too.”

“Evil charm? Pfft!”

“What’s so funny, damn you?!” Veins were throbbing on the men’s foreheads.

Smiling wryly, Pista propped her elbow onto the desk and plopped her chin on her hand. “I heard that man’s faction disbanded right after the massive undead outbreak in the sewers.”

“We know that! And we heard he was always masked, so nobody knows who he is. We tried to find the former members of his faction, but they all joined up

with some monstrous dude named Beast King. And now for whatever reason that faction's become a bunch of goody-two-shoes doing odd jobs. But they're all way too intimidating for us to talk to 'em."

"Sounds like you're in a pickle."

"That's why we came to you."

"Sadly, I don't know anything either, meow," Pista said with a yawn.

The leader pulled a knife from his pocket and pressed it to her neck.

"What are you doing, meow?"

"We heard stories, see, while we were looking into this man of legend. Apparently, the number two in Mistress Carmilla's Merry Minions was a catgirl."

Pista's gaze traveled from the tip of the knife to the man's face. "And you think that's me?"

"I can't be sure, but catfolk are rare. Find and threaten enough of 'em and we'll eventually get the right one."

"I see, meow. For a moron you're pretty smart."

"You little—"

As the men grew agitated, Pista stood up casually. "Don't underestimate me."

"What was that?"

"Even if I knew anything, you think threatening me with a knife would make me talk?" Pista's voice dropped. "You're taking me a little too lightly, meow."

Some of the men took a step back.

"I ain't scared of her!" one said.

"I dunno man, maybe she's not just an ordinary catgirl," another pointed out.

"Sh-She must be the number two," a third stammered.

"Stand your ground!" the leader yelled, gripping the knife with both hands. "We've got her outnumbered!"

Pista narrowed her feline eyes at the leader. "And haven't you heard, meow? Seeking out information on this 'legendary guy' is taboo in this line of work.

Those who try tend to run into great misfortune.”

“W-We did hear about it, but that’s gotta be a bluff!”

“Is it, meow? Why don’t we ask the great misfortune to join us?”

“Huh?”

Pista pulled back the curtain behind her, revealing a giant lion. The man’s figure was as intimidating as it was massive, and the air felt heavy, as though it were about to ignite.

“Wha—”

“Wh-Who is this monster?!”

“N-N-N-No way!”

“Groooar!”

That single roar from the Beast King was enough to make the men foam at the mouth and pass out on the spot. “Aw, what? They fainted from just a roar! Bunch of spineless fools. How disappointing. I’ll have to drag them into my faction and toughen them up,” he grouched, running a hand through his mane in exasperation.

Pista sighed, casting a sidelong glance at her father. “And what kind of weirdo could remain unfazed after being intimidated like that by a former top executive of the Black Guild?”

“Zenos was fine.”

“Yeah, but you can’t compare people to him, meow.”

“True, true.” The Beast King chuckled slightly and looked at his daughter. “So it was you who spread the rumor that great misfortune would befall those who sought information about the man of legend, huh?”

“Mya ha ha. It was just a token of thanks. I don’t want the shadow healer to run into any unnecessary trouble.” Pista glared at the unconscious men. “Hmph. Even an information broker wouldn’t stoop so low as to sell info on a friend.”

“Friend, you say.”

“Wh-What, meow?”

“I heard from Percia that after the undead incident you licked Zenos’s cheek. Licking the forehead is a sign of affection, but licking the cheek is—”

“Dammit, mom! You and your big mouth!”

“Fwa ha ha! Seems like even now he’s still out there doing remarkable things. I’d be thrilled to have him as my son-in-law.”

“Stop it, meow! Don’t just show up randomly and say weird stuff!” Pista shouted, kicking her father over and over.

“Sorry, sorry!” the former top executive said, bringing his hands together in profuse apology.

Amid the sound of the wind rustling through the trees, a voice from further inside the house called them over for lunch.

Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you for picking up a copy of the fourth volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

I can hardly believe it, but it's been two years since I first started posting *Brilliant Healer* online. I'm so grateful to everyone who's been following the story of Zenos and his companions up to this point!

On a different note, I'm very into buying books based solely on their covers.

When I was a child, we didn't have review websites like we do now. I lived in a fairly rural area, so not much information made it there. With few forms of entertainment available, I always wanted to read books, but, without much money to spend, I couldn't afford to buy that many each month. As a result, I clutched my pitiful pocket money and spent a lot of time at the store picking out just one book.

Since the books were wrapped in plastic, I couldn't look inside. I'd practically burn a hole into the covers from how hard I stared, read the blurbs on the back, and try to sense the faint aura emanating from the books. I'd rely on my intuition to decide whether a book was up my alley, and carefully check every book on the display tables and shelves to make sure I didn't miss any hidden gems. I'd often spend two, three hours at the bookstore.

Sometimes, despite my efforts, I'd leave empty-handed, thinking maybe it just wasn't the right day and I should try again. Other times, I'd find a book that hit the mark perfectly. And on occasion, I'd pick something that ended up not resonating with me at all. Nowadays, with the inevitable exposure to reviews and ratings, I look back on those times with a sense of nostalgia.

Now then, on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work in the publication of this

book.

Thank you to Daburyu-sensei, the illustrator, who always amazes me by drawing the characters exactly as I imagined them—and sometimes better!—despite my vague instructions.

Thank you to Ten Junnoichi-sensei, the artist behind the manga adaptation! I look forward to seeing the vibrant world of *Brilliant Healer* in manga form. Thanks to your hard work, the first volume of the manga sold out immediately and went into reprint! I hope everyone who didn't get to buy it takes this opportunity to check it out!

Yet another thank you to the readers of the web version of *Brilliant Healer*. Your feedback is very encouraging.

And, of course, my deepest thanks to all the readers who have purchased this book!

I hope to see you again soon!

The

Brilliant Healer's

New Life in the Shadows



4

Sakaku Hishikawa

Illustrator

Daburyu

Sakaku Hishikawa
Illustrator
Daburyu



The
Brilliant Healer's
New Life in the Shadows **4**



"I'm an information broker. Stay silent or lie if you want—I can still suss out the truth."

Pista's bold declaration echoed through the casino as she flipped the card on the table.

Zenos

Pista



**"Do you really think
I'm just gonna sit here and
lose my best friend too?!"**

Velitra



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by Sakaku Hishikawa

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