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Tsukikage

Illustration by
Merontomari

The
King of
the **Dead** at the
Dark Palace



"This is an order.

Fight with everything you've got and kill it."

The bear was very powerful. Much more powerful than someone like me. I was frail to begin with—I could try until I was blue in the face and never defeat it.

However, the lord's command was far stronger.

Even the most ferocious, violent magical beasts felt pain. But not me. My right hand forced the halfway-buried billhook out of the bear's carcass. Blood splattered, and the bear gave a loud roar, like a wail.

My vision wavered—maybe my spine had broken, too. That didn't seem to bother me, though. My arm raised the billhook high overhead, and then, at full force as the lord commanded, I swung the blade straight toward the bear's thick neck.



The King of the Dead at the Dark Palace

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New York

Copyright

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TSUKIKAGE

Translation by Andrew Prowse Cover art by Merontomari

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KURAKI KYUDEN NO SHISHA NO OU Vol. 1

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First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo
through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: May 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Tsukikage, author. | Merontomari, illustrator. | Prowse, Andrew (Andrew R.), translator.

Title: The king of the dead at the dark palace / Tsukikage ; illustration by Merontomari ; translation by Andrew Prowse.

Other titles: Kuraki kyuden no shisha no ou. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2021— Identifiers: LCCN 2021003546 | ISBN 9781975317959 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction. | Horror fiction.

Classification: LCC PL876.S853 K8713 2021 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021003546>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531795-9 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1796-6 (ebook)

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Prologue

A Ritual of Resurrection



Prologue

A Ritual of Resurrection

And then, my mind awakened.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

I found myself in a room built of stone. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a bloodred magic circle was drawn on the ground.

My vision was blurry, like I was in a haze. Still, having been an utterly blank slate, able to see nothing, sense nothing, and having no mind of my own until this very moment, the shift felt like I had just awoken from a dream. This, however, was much more vivid.

It was almost like I'd been scooped out of the bottom of hell...

Or like I'd been dragged from repose...

The staggering amount of information coming to me through all five of my senses overloaded my mind.

Amid the thrall of such intense confusion, a hoarse voice spoke to me.

"I see you've awoken... You had the gift, then...flesh-man."

The voice entered my mind, seeming to permeate it. I slowly looked to my side.

That was when I realized I was lying atop a raised platform.

The voice's owner was an old man who wore a black robe that seemed like night itself had taken solid form. His swarthy countenance was creased with innumerable wrinkles, and his eyes were dark and piercing. Strangely enough, he didn't strike me as someone particularly advanced in years; while he had a thin frame, he didn't seem weak.

White hair. A bony physique. An odd mask. His hand gripped a bent, twisted staff etched with a terribly dreadful design.

I didn't understand what was happening. All I could do was watch him suspiciously as he continued—as if he'd already assumed he wouldn't get an answer from me.

“My name is Horos Kamen. A sorcerer, one who devotes himself to the mystic arts—and your lord. Come, flesh-man... *Kneel.*”

The moment those words pricked my eardrums, an odd sensation washed over me.

My body began to move of its own accord.

I sat up on the platform, and with the sluggish movements of a toddling infant, I got to my feet. Then my body twisted, and my knee automatically bent. The next thing I knew, I was facing downward, kneeling before this man who called himself my lord.

The scent of mold. Gray floor tiles. Finally, I realized something.

...Though there was no light, I could see as clearly as if it was daytime.

This wasn't right. And with that sense of wrongness, the puzzle pieces started coming together little by little. My mind began shifting its resources—which until now had been entirely focused on processing external information—to sorting my memories.

Suddenly, I felt a knocking on my skull. There was an impact but no pain.

In fact, I couldn't even feel the *usual* pulsation in my chest, either. Nor that churning, piercing headache that painkillers never abated—nor the sort of pain that made my insides feel like they were rotting away and melting. Without that endless agony, my mind, which had been trying to diffuse that pain for so long, was sharp, like a knife whetted only seconds ago.

It might sound odd, but in that moment, after such a long time, I was normal again.

And in that moment, for the first time... I felt what it was like to be human. The shock of it all left me dumbfounded.

Meanwhile, the sorcerer Horos's voice washed over me. "Flesh-man, O servant of mine. Returner from the netherworld. Unto you, nameless one, I shall bequeath a name."

...Nameless one.



No. I already had a name.

A name given to me by my parents at birth. One nobody had uttered recently.

But I held my tongue just before those objections could escape my lips.

I had a feeling—something in my gut was telling me that I shouldn't say that out loud.

Maybe it was a bad habit from having lived so passively before, barely able to do anything at all.

As I maintained my silence, the lord gave me a name.

"Your name shall be End. The one who has ended. My necromancy has given you temporary life."

Temporary life. Necromancy. Even someone like me, who'd never really received a formal education, knew what that meant.

A sorcerer of horrific darkness, capable of controlling the dead: a necromancer.

Those terms were suddenly in my mind. And then I understood—I understood everything.

Anyone would've readily grasped what had happened to me, given my memories and the words that had just been spoken.

I had died. And now I'd been reawakened by this man's wicked magical powers.

"End, come with me," the lord commanded curtly, leaving the laboratory-like room. I followed him in silence.

My body moved. My hands, my legs—they moved as I willed them to. How many years had it been since I'd walked properly?

It was a strange sensation, having a painless body. It didn't seem real. I felt like I was in a dream.

After leaving the room, the lord abruptly stopped and turned to face me.

His eyes were gray, but they had a glint in them as though there was something burning within.

As those fearsome eyes settled on me, I froze.

“Hmm... You...seem to understand language. It would be a pity if verbal commands didn’t work on you.”

“.....”

Verbal commands...not working?

I couldn’t figure out what he meant by that. But then I remembered how, right after my consciousness had returned, my flesh had moved at the lord’s words rather than my own thoughts.

That was...bad. I had no way of disobeying him, something that I understood instantly despite my confusion in a burst of perilous realization.

I’d heard necromancers could control the living dead, in which case, I was no different from a puppet to this lord of mine.

As I remained silent, he nodded as though satisfied for some reason, then resumed walking. I followed suit.

The hallways weren’t much different from those in the mansion in my memories, where I’d resided during my previous life. But these halls lacked even a single light, which gave them an odd sense of oppressiveness.

To be frank, I had no idea what was happening. Why had I been allowed to—or forced to—come back to life? Where was I? What was he going to make me do? He surely hadn’t wanted just to save me from my agony.

But I did know one thing for sure.

I needed to *not* question the lord right now, nor run away. I needed to get a handle on the situation.

Thankfully, thinking was one thing I was very good at. It had been the only thing permitted to me in those days I spent bedridden and moaning in pain, resisting death. Even now, I couldn’t do much else except think, but given the lack of agony I felt, this body was much more preferable.

After a few minutes of simply following the lord, we descended a set of stone stairs and came to a basement.

The lord opened the large metal doors and entered a room that was bigger than I'd have expected for a basement.

A room without light. A row of stone tables. I nearly cried out but managed to keep it in.

The tables were placed at even intervals, and lying atop them, as if asleep...were corpses.

Unlike me, however, they showed no signs of moving.

It was my first time seeing a dead body. But for whatever reason, even though I was surprised, I didn't feel fear.

The lord's breath came out in white puffs as he turned a cold gaze on me and gave me a short command: "Wait in this room until I give you an order."

The door closed, and the lord's footsteps grew distant. I waited a few moments until they completely disappeared before I got to work.

First, I ascertained how well I could move.

I stretched my arms wide. I tried balancing on one foot.

The agony that had tormented me for so many years was gone without a trace. I could wave my arms, move my head, stretch my back, and even jump short distances. It felt unbelievably pleasant. Like a dream.

I nearly laughed without meaning to, but I caught myself, stopping at just a grin. Being underground, I doubted a little bit of noise would be enough to get the lord's attention, but I understood nothing about the situation I was in. I wanted to be as careful as possible.

This basement room reminded me of a morgue, but it wasn't exactly a morgue—for a necromancer, this would be more of a storage room for raw materials, like a pantry closet. Five honest-to-goodness human corpses had been laid on the tables. Their ages ranged from midteens to thirties, and most were men. They'd been properly dressed, and while their bodies showed no signs of any major wounds, their faces were utterly lifeless.

Upon first entering the room, I'd been surprised, but with time, that feeling faded away. I'd basically been a corpse in my past life anyway, and I'd already (most likely) died once, myself. I even wondered if I knew any of the deceased here, as childish an idea as it was.

The morgue had a simple layout: a single door, and aside from the tables with the corpses on them, the only furniture was a bookshelf by the wall. The walls seemed to be made of stone; lightly tapping on them elicited a hard, solid sensation.

Well, my old room was certainly more livable, I thought before deciding to examine the bookshelf.

For now, I wanted as much information as I could get.

I carefully opened a drawer. It wasn't locked.

It seemed the sorcerer Horos hadn't assumed dead people would be walking about freely in this room.

"....."

The first drawer, which I'd opened excitedly, was empty, as were the second and third. The fourth had several objects inside it—strange-looking fangs—none of which helped explain the situation I found myself in. The fifth drawer was also empty, and the sixth had about a dozen vials filled with liquid. Nothing in the seventh drawer, either. Disappointed, I opened the final drawer, and my eyes widened at its contents.

"Well, what have we here..."

I spoke aloud in spite of myself, my ragged voice echoing through the room of corpses.

Now that I thought about it, it'd been a long time since I'd spoken, too. And once again, it didn't hurt to do so.

How wonderful it was, not having any pain. Feeling cheery enough to hum a song, I took out what I'd found.

Within the last remaining drawer...was a rectangular mirror.

I used my clothing to wipe off the clouded surface, then peered into it.

I saw myself as I was in my memories: slender features, narrow cheekbones, sunken eyes. My pale-white hair, which looked nothing like my relatives', resembled an old man's, but that was my natural color. I recalled a doctor once describing me as lifeless; maybe that doctor had been very skilled, considering I actually ended up dying. Now, however, my hair was properly combed instead of disheveled like I remembered.

Someone must've fixed it up after I died to make me look nice. That was really kind of them.

For a time, I stared at my reflection, awash in emotion before carefully returning the mirror to the drawer.

I'd learned I was still me. It was a shame I couldn't find anything else useful, but that was enough for now.

I turned and observed the corpse-keeping room, then finally headed for the only door.

The lord hadn't locked it when he'd left. That much I was sure of since I'd listened closely to it shutting.

I went for it quietly, not letting my footsteps make a sound.

The mansion's layout was a mystery to me, nor did I understand what was going on, either. But there was just too little information to be gleaned from this room.

I... I knew nothing. But I *wanted* to know things—about this mansion and about the art of necromancy.

And I wanted to know what I had become.

I had a body that could move, unlike in life. Necromancers were evil beings, though. I wasn't exactly keen on trusting this sorcerer, which meant I had to do what I could to survive.

I gripped the metal doorknob, then slowly turned it, careful not to make any noise.

Despite my apprehension, the knob turned easily. I guess it really was unlocked.

Putting my ear to the door, I slowly opened it. Not a sound. Complete silence—I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat or my blood flowing. Relieved, I gently pushed on the door to see what was on the other side.

“.....?”

It wasn't locked. Plus, it was slightly ajar now, if only by a few millimeters. But no matter how hard I pushed, it wouldn't open any farther.

Maybe there was something solid blocking it...? A lock? No, that couldn't be. The door wasn't locked, and I couldn't feel anything holding it in place.

I pressed against the door with my palms, then put my entire body weight into pushing it open. Or tried to.

And that was when I figured it out.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. The energy left my legs, and I slumped down to a sitting position.

The door was metal and probably quite heavy. But no, the weight wasn't the problem.

Once more, I gently laid my hands on the door. Then, with a shudder, I steeled myself and pushed with every last bit of my strength.

...At least, I thought I'd pushed.

My hands hadn't moved at all. No matter how much I strained, they wouldn't go any farther.

The words the lord said upon leaving crossed my mind.

Wait in this room until I give you an order.

Yes. In all likelihood, it wasn't that the door was stuck but that I wasn't actually pushing it in the first place.

My body was prioritizing the lord's orders over my own will.

Just like when, right after waking up, I'd kneeled at his command.

A chill ran down my spine. I couldn't think properly. My hands, trembling, pushed hopelessly against the door, but despite my desperation, my body didn't move.

I thought I'd understood. But I hadn't. Not really.

I opened my eyes wide and shuddered. The feeling rising in my chest was neither fear nor shock.

It was anger. It'd been so long since I'd felt such an intense emotion. For the first time, I realized how people's expressions could twist when they were angry.

I didn't scream. I didn't lose control. The emotion just stayed there in my chest.

I thought I'd gained freedom. I'd acquired a body without any pain, one that could jump and leap. I'd been on the top of the world. I'd thought that, with this functioning body, I could do anything.

But I was wrong. I hadn't changed at all. *Much more preferable* than before? *Please.*

In life, I had been racked with endless pain all over my body. I couldn't even move my hands or legs. All I could do was become absorbed in my own thoughts to distract myself from the agony. Actually, I hadn't even been able to concentrate very well.

At the very least, though...nobody else had stolen control of my body.

I was fine listening to directions. In a way, this lord saved my life. No matter how evil a sorcerer the man was, I was perfectly willing to cooperate.

This, however, I could not forgive.

I didn't know why Lord Horos had resurrected me, but his power over my life and death was one thing I couldn't tolerate. That I felt so passionately about this surprised even me.

Apparently, despite how ready I'd been for it...I hadn't actually wanted to die.

And now I didn't want to give up this second life, which I'd gained through a stroke of luck, for anything.

No matter what I had to do to keep it.

I tried to take a deep breath, only to notice that I wasn't breathing at all. I put a hand to my chest, but I couldn't feel my heart beating.

How foolish could I be? That was when I finally grasped the extent of how deplorable a being I'd become. My body moved without pain—but I wasn't living. I was merely moving.

And come to think of it, when we arrived here, the lord's breath had been white. The array of corpses didn't seem to be rotting, either. Which meant this place...must have been cold. But I didn't feel a chill. One of my senses was gone.

More to the point, even though this room had no windows or light, I could see everything clearly.

I had...changed. Perhaps that was why I didn't feel fear when I looked at the corpses?

The question lingered in my mind for a moment, but I quickly shook my head.

It's fine. I'm fully conscious and aware. I can think. I... I'm here.

I could keep striving for the life that I had so craved.

I'd been a sickly person. Tormented by inexplicable, all-reaching pain and a steadily weakening physical body, I could do nothing except await death—I'd been alive, but dead. Now I was dead, but alive.

In which case... I probably needed to accept it. Even if I had become a being who belonged to darkness, that wasn't important—not compared to my life ending before I could find any meaning for it.

I rose to my feet and stared at the slightly open door, then quietly closed it. This time, that immovable door easily returned to its former position.

I wasn't surprised. The lord's orders, after all.

Perhaps it was a special authority, as the one who had woken the dead, to give me commands that would overrule my own desires.

But there had to be a catch. There *had* to be.

The first thing the lord had said was *It would be a pity if verbal commands didn't work on you*. That meant that, for the dead like me whom he called forth,

there was a chance that the verbal commands he gave *wouldn't* work.

Whatever I had to do...I would survive. I would gather information—the information I would need to somehow wrest myself free from the lord's control.

I was all too ignorant about necromancy, about this mansion, and even about my changed self.

Now was the time to learn more. I would endure patiently, sharpening my fangs. Waiting, like thinking, was something I was good at. And when I considered that would help me going forward, maybe my previous life—one spent waiting patiently and doing nothing—had meaning after all.

I rallied my spirits again, then stood in the spot where the lord had released me and quietly stared straight ahead.

Stopping myself in that place, I began to count in my mind.

I didn't feel drowsy, tired, or hungry. My eyes didn't become dry, even without blinking. All I did, as I stared ahead of me, was dispassionately, emotionlessly count to myself—pretending to be a mere corpse, just like the others around me.

Chapter 1

Living Dead



Chapter 1

Living Dead

By the time the lord returned to the room, I'd counted to a little over twenty thousand.

He was wrapped in a long jet-black robe. He checked that I was more or less the same as when he'd left, then held something out to me.

"Take it."

It was a somewhat large billhook with a blade about a meter long. Blood clung to its wide black surface, and strangely, it appeared to have an odd glow.

I took the blade as instructed. It was heavier than expected, with a terrible weight to it, and I staggered in spite of myself.

When the lord saw me regrip it in both hands, he grunted and said, "We're doing a test run. Come with me."

He didn't seem to think anything was amiss.

I exited the mansion with the lord, and my expression went blank as I was struck dumb by the sight that greeted me.

I'd been bedridden for most of my life from a slowly debilitating mystery illness that tortured me with headaches, stomach cramps, and unceasing pain. The cause was unknown, and there was no available treatment. Not even the most famous doctors or mages could do anything about this incurable disease. I was barely ten when I stopped being able to stand on my own with any degree of steadiness, and for the few years from then until my death, my world consisted wholly of what I could see outside my bedroom window.

I was ignorant and unworldly. Most of my knowledge was gleaned from the books I'd read while sick in bed. It had probably been over five years since I was

last outdoors. But even I could tell that there was nothing normal about the lord's mansion and its environs.

The building was surrounded by an eerie forest so thick with vegetation that it appeared to be black.

It seemed to be nighttime; the sky was dark, and a silver moon, close to being full, shone quietly in the sky.

The estate was encircled by a metal fence, with long stakes on the upper portion so you couldn't climb over it. The only existing gate looked strong and sturdy, and it was tightly shut.

The lord stopped in front of me, frozen in place as I was, and raised a hand slightly.

It was probably a signal, because quiet footsteps began to approach. Without turning in that direction, I sneaked a look out of the corner of my eye. What I saw made me want to cry out, but I managed to restrain myself.

There were three wolves with jet-black fur. They must've been about half my size. With a bit of effort, I could probably ride them.

The wolves fanned out as they approached the lord and gave low cries before stopping in their tracks.

I could instinctively tell that these wolves—they were corpses. Actually, considering the lord's profession, I should have assumed as much from the beginning. Their motions were lithe, and both their fangs and claws were visibly sharp, but upon closer inspection, their eyes were clouded over.

It wasn't strange for a necromancer to handle nonhuman corpses.

Just as I thought... I couldn't run away from the mansion. Even if I'd been able to escape that basement room, I'd never get far enough.

Escaping without a plan would lead to definite capture. In these past few years, I hadn't even walked properly, much less run. And if these wolves were dead like me, then I'd have no chance of outrunning them.

The lord reached into an inside pocket and took out a key, then gave a short order.

“Come, End. Show me your powers.”

Show him...my powers? I don't...have any powers.

The billhook I'd been made to hold was heavy. If I were still alive, I'd have long since been unable to lift my arms.

My silent objections were lost on him. I didn't have the right to choose. The lord went outside, and I followed him without recourse.

That nighttime forest, which I entered for the first time, was even creepier because I could see in the dark. The rustling of the wind, the cries of insects and animals—every part of it was terrifying. But the lord continued onward without hesitation down a path only he seemed to know about.

Attended by the wolves at his sides, he gave off the impression of a king. No—he truly was a king.

A king of the dead, served by the evil undead. And I, following behind, was no more than one of those servants.

The forest showed very few signs of human intervention. Stumbling over the uneven footing, I made a desperate effort to keep up with the lord. Visibility was poor, thanks to the densely overgrown foliage and thickets. I could get stranded if I lost my way.

For once, I was thankful for this body that didn't know fatigue. I felt grateful for this inhuman flesh.

But where was the lord going? What was his aim?

After ten or twenty minutes of following him, I suddenly saw something shine out of the corner of my eye, from behind some bushes. The wolves on either side of the lord gave soft howls.

The lord, sounding annoyed, murmured, “At last, they show up...”

The bushes rustled, and a mass of black fur emerged.

It was a wolf significantly larger than the ones following the lord, probably of the same species. Drooling, the pitch-black wolf directed its glaring eyes toward the lord and me.

My body stiffened. This was, of course, my first time seeing a wolf in the wild. It might not have been a very worthy opponent for the lord, but I couldn't say the same for me, someone with no experience moving his body around properly.

The large black wolf didn't immediately leap at me. Instead, it slowly began circling us, straightening up, never breaking its gaze.

The lord, however, narrowed his eyes, barely reacting to the wild animal before him. After a moment, he said, "So many... Too many."

Those words finally made me realize that we were surrounded.

Many pairs of eyes from all directions were staring at us. Fur black as night that blended in with the darkness; light movements that left no footfalls—it was a wolf pack. I'd forgotten that wolves were pack animals.

If my body had been living, I probably would've collapsed from fright. But I'd already died. Without even registering shock on my face, I slowly took in our surroundings.

Sixteen glowing eyes—meaning there were eight wolves. Over twice the number the lord had brought with him.

However, while the lord's expression was displeased, it was in no way fearful.

The wolves tightened the circle. When the lord saw that, he simply snapped his fingers.

The sorcerer, Horos Kamen, did nothing more. And his three corpse wolves leaped to attack.

It felt like a nightmare. The wolf that had been protecting the lord's right side charged to tackle the closest creature. The one to his left dug its fangs into the throat of another raging wolf, then ripped it apart.

My eyes widened at the gruesome sight. We were outnumbered, but the lord's wolves were stronger. The difference was so stark that even I, who had never been in a fight before, could tell that much.

For one thing, the lord's wolves were smaller than our foes, but the difference in their physical abilities was like night and day. The enemy's movements were

smooth and nimble, but the wolves the lord controlled were like black gusts of wind.

For another, they didn't hesitate to attack. They jumped straight at the wolves in front of them, unconcerned for their own bodies as they tore through and devoured their enemies. It felt as though they'd been programmed this way.

Finally, they never let their movements slow. Even surrounded and slashed by claws, even bitten in the legs or the throat, they never flinched.

In the end, they only stopped moving after killing five of the wolves in the pack, with the other three having fled deeper into the forest.

The wolves gathered around the lord again, as though nothing had happened. Still, the sight didn't inspire anything akin to loyalty within me.

My eyes just bulged from their sockets at the strength—and the horror.

It was said that necromancers were among the most wicked kinds of sorcerers in the world.

I wasn't exactly well versed on the topic, but necromancy, which manipulated and defiled the souls and remains of the dead, was universally taboo. In fairy tales and operas, necromancers were always the crazed antagonists.

That was the extent of my knowledge, but after witnessing the power of necromancy firsthand, I understood exactly why that power was so hated, so cursed.

It was altogether...blasphemous.

I had no particular feelings for the wolves, but anyone would consider their master evil after witnessing the scene that had just unfolded.

And perhaps I, having been resurrected by that very being, had become evil myself.

Could I beat him...? Could I defeat this man, who desecrated the dead and defied the world?

No—I *had* to defeat him. If I didn't, it wouldn't be long before I suffered the same fate as those pitiful wolves.

The lord, inspecting the remains of the wolves his subordinates had killed, murmured, “Hmm... I don’t have enough nightwolves, but...I’ll leave these here. Let’s go.”

Before, the lord had said *At last*. But were the nightwolves not his objective...?

Still, when I thought about it, if the nightwolves had been his aim, he wouldn’t have had a reason to bring me along. He’d equipped me with a billhook but had yet to give any orders. I hadn’t even been commanded to stand in front of him and protect him nor to cut a path through the foliage. All he’d told me to do was come with him.

We started walking through the forest again. There really were no signs of human life. I mulled it over: Maybe there were no people who entered the forest to begin with, but those wolves that appeared had been large. We probably weren’t anywhere near a town.

We saw beasts frequently on our way through the woods. They, too, were hostile to people, and they attacked us. Maybe these were what people referred to as monsters: those creatures the lord had called nightwolves; monkeys twice my size wielding club-like objects; foxes veiled in blue flames; large boars the color of moss. I would’ve been helplessly killed by any of them, had I encountered them alone. The lord’s wolves, however, made quick work of them all.

I simply watched in blank amazement. This was bad. This forest was far more dangerous than I’d imagined. Even if I could sneak past both the controlled wolves and the lord himself, *and* I got over the fence, I wouldn’t be able to get away.

But I did learn a few things from walking along with the lord. My body, for example, obviously couldn’t feel tired, but it never even experienced a shred of pain, either. I couldn’t sense myself running out of stamina, and I didn’t need to breathe. Each of my senses seemed sharper than when I’d been human, too. It wasn’t much trouble to detect the beasts’ presence if I concentrated.

This forest was deep, but there had to be a human settlement not far from it. No matter how talented of a sorcerer the lord was, he couldn’t have created

that mansion using magic. Plus, he would need food and such, too. It was natural to assume at least a few people went in and out. As I organized my thoughts, I frantically followed, trying not to fall behind.

And then the lord stopped once again.

I heard the rustling of foliage before a large figure suddenly jumped out from among the trees.

It was a bear.

The bear was about half my height—maybe it was still a cub—but its developed limbs and long claws were fiendish all the same.

The beasts that had appeared thus far had all been in packs, but this one seemed to be alone. It would be an easy opponent for the lord's wolves.

As I thought that, the lord surprised me and said, "Just one? ...End, fight it."

...Huh?

For a moment, I didn't understand what he'd told me.

Me? Fight?

Given what I knew about necromancers, I should've anticipated this command. The undead are a necromancer's weapons. I'd unconsciously blocked that out of my mind.

I was weak and sickly. I'd never even been in a fight with a person, much less with a beast.

My body wasn't built for combat. I didn't know *how* to fight.

I looked at the billhook hanging from my hand. I couldn't do it. The enemy might have been small, but it was still a bear. There was no way someone who had never gone through any training, someone without any redeeming qualities, could ever win against a bear and all the strength it possessed.

The bear looked ready to rip me to shreds. Even seeing the lord's wolves, stained in the blood of their kills, the creature made no moves to withdraw.

I had a billhook, but the bear had claws. Sure, my body didn't feel pain, but if this bear tore me apart, I wouldn't be able to move. And was a billhook even a

weapon? I couldn't do it. I just couldn't fight this thing.

When the lord saw my indecision as well as me not bringing my billhook to the ready, he said with a dubious expression, "What's the matter? This is an order. *Fight with everything you've got and kill it.*"

The command rattled my mind.

I broke into a run. By the time I was aware of what I was doing, the bear was already close. My body was moving on its own. All my fear and hesitation was cast aside, and in that moment, I became a helpless observer of my own body.

The hand gripping the billhook swung in a wide arc upward, then back down at the bear. In response to my sudden assault, the bear raised its front legs and took the hit.

The blade dug deeply into its left foreleg. It severed flesh, and I felt the sensation of the blade striking bone.

The bear roared, then charged at me headfirst, ignoring its wound.

The impact shot through my whole body. I heard something tear and pop inside me. Lethal noises I'd never heard before. But my hand didn't let go of the billhook, and I didn't feel pain.

My head moved. Without even any time to scream, I leaned forward and bit the bear on the ear.

The tremendous odor of the beast pierced my thoughts, and the feeling of tough flesh and fur between my teeth made me want to vomit.

My teeth shattered, and I heard an awful noise come from my jaw. The bear swung its head and drove me away. A piece of the ear I'd bitten off dropped from my mouth.

The nausea and the odor both vanished from my senses immediately.

In that instant, I had undoubtedly turned into a horror—one from which all would avert their eyes.

My left hand moved without delay, thrusting at the right eye of the bear, which had taken a step back. Without time to feel my fingers penetrating something soft, the bear's left front leg stuck my outstretched arm.

I heard the *crack* of the creature's bones breaking. The fractured leg was now protruding from my left arm. My fingertips, which I had thrust out with all my might, were broken, too. But I still felt no pain. My fingers, which had pierced the bear's eyeballs, continued obeying the lord's command.

The bear was very powerful. Much more powerful than someone like me. I was frail to begin with—I could try until I was blue in the face and never defeat it.

However, the lord's command was far stronger.

Even the most ferocious, violent magical beasts felt pain. But not me. My right hand forced the halfway-buried billhook out of the bear's body. Blood splattered, and the bear gave a loud roar, like a wail.

My vision wavered—maybe my spine had broken, too. That didn't seem to bother me, though. My arm raised the billhook high overhead, and then, at full force as the lord commanded, I swung the blade straight toward the bear's thick neck.

At last, the bear screamed in pain and collapsed. I simply swung the billhook down again as hard as I could.

The blade, its downswing not tempered in the slightest, tore through the bear's dense fur and carved into its flesh. Blood spewed from the creature's wounds, but my hand didn't stop.

My body was acting on its own. I was able to tell that much in my withdrawn state.

The splattering blood covered my face and my eyes. But there was no pain. Actually—if I could still feel pain, I'd have been in excruciating agony right then.

My arms were slender. They'd never held anything heavy, nor had they ever wielded a sword. Were my skinny arms even able to slice through the thick skin and the flesh of a wild beast? Would my jaw, which had never eaten much aside from mush, have been able to bite through a magical beast's flesh, albeit only partway?

Normally, that'd be impossible. Against a bear, I'd lose ten times out of ten. It wasn't worth consideration. Even if I got in a lucky strike, that wouldn't be

enough to kill a bear.

But right now, I was witnessing the exact opposite scene. The bear was still twitching and spasming. The billhook I'd been given had deeply wounded its flesh and even reached the bone. That had clearly been a fatal wound.

How was I able to defeat this brawny beast? I guessed the main reason from the disconcerting impacts and sounds coming each time I swung the billhook down.

"Enough. It is dead. Stop."

My arm, moving like it had been broken, stopped at the lord's command. I wasn't out of breath. No exhaustion or pain, either. No such things existed for the undead.

I looked at my right arm. It was so engorged with blood that I worried it would rot and fall off in mere moments.

As far as I had seen, my right arm hadn't been struck. The damage was likely recoil from slamming the billhook into the bear as hard as I could. If I'd had a sense of pain, I wouldn't have been able to keep up the attack. I wouldn't have been able to put any strength into it, at least. That was the sort of wound this was.

And that wasn't all. The head-butt I'd taken in the gut when we'd first clashed and the swipe of its thick leg on my left arm had been so powerful that, if I'd been alive, they would have neutralized me in one hit.

Bone protruded from my left arm, and my fingers, which had dug through the creature's brain, were broken in unthinkable directions.

I could attack with all my power without having to worry about injury, pain, or fatigue. Most likely, that was the main strength of the undead.

But that didn't mean there had been zero damage. The wounds the lord's wolves had sustained on the way here still remained as well.

My body no longer felt any of the agony that had once tormented it. Personally, that was an even greater shock than when I'd realized I'd been reborn as an undead.

Also...would these wounds heal? My body was, without a doubt, not living. So what was it like to be undead...?

After shooting a quick glance at the bear's remains, the lord scrutinized me from head to toe and frowned.

"So that was all... No, he did all this with a body of one who died from disease. I suppose that makes him exceptional. Even if I cannot use him now, I should make him to be useful for later. It would be premature to ascertain his talents now..."

Such cruel remarks after he'd forced me into combat. The lord sighed, then touched the staff in his hand to my bloodied body.

He muttered a short incantation. It was different from the healing spells holy mages had used on me so many times when I was bedridden.

"Come forth from the abyss and grant your negative power to the one whose time has stopped, to this living dead. **Reverse Force.**"

The tip of his staff glowed with a purple light, and an eerie shiver rushed through my wounds.

The blood congestion in my right arm healed instantly, and my broken left arm snapped back into its former position. The bones inside me squirmed, returning to their rightful forms. My jaw was repaired, and my shattered teeth were intact once again.

I had heard, in the past, that healing magic was a highly difficult type of magic. That you need enormous sums of money to completely heal even broken bones. I wasn't sure if healing magic for the undead was just as difficult, but now I knew that the lord was a superb mage. Magic usage was supposedly extremely exhausting, but the lord wasn't out of breath in the slightest. He definitely didn't strike me as an ordinary person, something I'd already predicted from how he lived so deep in a forest like this one.

After checking that my wounds had healed without issue, he told me with an unamused expression, "We'll search for the next one. End, come with me."

By the time the day was over, I had been forced to fight a total of fifty-four terrifying magical beasts.

After the battles, I hastily washed myself off with water before the lord brought me back to the basement room.

It seemed that, in general, I would be left here.

I guess I was sort of like a sword to a swordfighter. This wasn't a bad thing.

With the lord gone, in that quiet room in the basement, I had a sickening amount of time to think.

I knew my own status fairly well by this point: My body moved. I didn't feel any fatigue or pain. I could see in the dark. I was strong against the cold.

This current body was superior in every way to my body when I was alive, but the one thing I'd have to be careful about was how I didn't feel any pain, since I might not notice physical injuries.

Furthermore, I'd learned that the lord was a formidable sorcerer and that he had several other powerful subordinates aside from me: the nightwolves and the walking human bones I saw on the way back here.

Those must be skeletons—necromancers use them all the time in stories. I'd only caught a glimpse of those beings, but according to the stories I'd heard, necromancers commanded legions of undead. It was safe to assume he controlled other such creatures as well. And I'd have to take the man's combat abilities into account, too.

But the most important thing was the lord's goal, and I didn't know what that was.

Why had he resurrected me, someone who was nothing more than a weak, sickly carcass? If he wanted a bodyguard, he would have had many other, better choices.

And the thing that had me curious above all else was the disparity between the lord's assumptions and my current situation.

I waited awhile after the lord was gone, then began to move again. Without making a sound, I went to the door, then carefully gripped the knob. The door creaked, which surprised me, but the lord showed no signs of returning.

I gently applied more pressure. The door, which at first wouldn't budge even a hair, quietly and easily opened.

My eyes widened as my right hand grabbed the doorframe. And then, slowly, I took a step outside the room.

The sole of my foot touched the floor.

...I knew it.

I could get out. I was powerless when I'd been made to wait here the first time, but now I could escape.

So what was the difference between then and now?

This time, when the lord put me here, he hadn't given me a command. He'd omitted the order not to leave the room that he'd doled out the first time. So right now, I wasn't bound by any orders and could freely exit the room.

It almost felt like my heart pounded, even though my pulse had stopped.

This was the disparity I'd wondered about—the difference between the lord's assumptions and my current situation.

The lord had never assumed there was any chance of me running away. He couldn't possibly have just forgotten to give the command. A sorcerer who controlled the dead wouldn't be that careless.

That first command had, in all likelihood, been an exception.

It hadn't been especially purposeful. He'd probably said those words without much of a reason.

And why hadn't he assumed I might run away?

If I had a working heart, it probably would have been pounding away from nerves.

I thanked my past self.

I'd been fortunate. Incredibly lucky that, when I'd first awoken, I hadn't said anything to the lord.

Thinking back, whenever the lord had spoken, it had sounded like he was talking to himself. Even when he was giving me commands...it never felt like he

was seeking my own desires.

I pulled my foot back in, then gently shut the door and returned to where I'd been standing moments earlier. It'd be far too reckless to walk around the mansion just yet. I needed to at least learn what the lord's daily routine looked like.

If my guess was correct...the lord didn't yet know that I was self-aware.

It was still only an assumption on my part, but I doubted it was that far off the mark, considering how he had to confirm that language worked on me and that he'd never heard me say anything back to him.

After all, if he found out I was self-aware, he was sure to give me a command that he'd meant to give from the start.

I couldn't let him catch on.

I hung my hands at my sides, making myself still as a statue. I'd get myself out of this no matter what it took.

If I decided to turn against the lord, the more cards I had in my hand, the better.

§ § §

And so began my new life.

My role was an aide to Lord Horos. My main job was to protect him when he went outside—and to hunt.

The lord made me hunt magical beasts, then created new undead from their remains.

I got used to it. Battling had been awkward at first, but I became more efficient at defeating enemies the more I did it.

I no longer had to resort to barbaric methods like biting. My body had no pain, no weariness, and to top it all off, the lord provided the perfect backup. Even an amateur wouldn't have lost with the table set so nicely for them.

And through those battles, I learned that the lord excelled in more than just commanding undead and performing healing magic—he also boasted impressive attack magic.

When I would mess up and let a magical beast through, he would destroy it without a care. And without even leaving a trace, at that. Nor did he show any emotion when I made such mistakes.

It was then that I realized once again how terrible magic could be. The lord didn't even consider the magical beasts in this forest to be enemies.

He was clearly stronger than me. When I thought about it logically, he never would have built a mansion in a forest full of monsters he couldn't handle himself, but unconsciously, I'd gotten caught up thinking the elderly sorcerer was poor at combat.

As things stood, however...it wouldn't be possible to kill him by using magical beasts to my advantage.

In fact, at the current stage, I didn't know what would happen to me if I killed him. In fairy tales, the undead who lost their master didn't disappear—they were cursed to wander the world for all eternity. But the truth was a mystery to me.

After a week had passed, I'd become able to defeat nightwolves one-on-one mostly unscathed.

I felt I'd gotten a lot better at using my billhook, too. The trick to landing a mortal wound was to utilize the full force of my body. Now that I knew I wouldn't die very easily, I'd been slowly growing bolder with how I used my body. I could probably do a flip now. Though I wouldn't, at least not without an order.

As I stood before a nightwolf, its head split open and brains splattered across the ground, the lord, his expression puzzled, murmured, "Hmm... I was uneasy at first, but... It seems this corpse is doing quite well..."

"....."

I didn't answer with words. But he was right—there was something out of place.

My arm, which had swung the billhook with all my might, wasn't engorged like when I'd fought the first time. Back then, I'd injured my arm in large part due to using so much force out of fear, uncertainty, and the power of the lord's command. But even taking that into consideration... Was I supposed to be able to kill nightwolves unharmed after a week?

My flesh was frail. I'd been bedridden for years before I'd died, and I thought my whole body had atrophied: my muscles, naturally, but also my bones, skin, organs—everything. No matter how good I'd gotten at wielding such incredible strength thanks to the lord's power, a weak foundation should have meant I'd have limits. I highly doubted I had any hidden warrior talents.

My current body was dead. And if I was dead, I wasn't supposed to be able to grow physically. I was still an adolescent, but I never ate, so my atrophied muscles wouldn't have gone back to normal by now.

However... I had certainly gotten stronger. Not just experientially, but physically. Otherwise, I wouldn't be capable of slaughtering magical beasts like a seasoned warrior in just a week.

The lord watched me for a short time in silence, but then he muttered:

"...Is he close to mutating into a ghoul? No, it's early...too early. But that isn't a bad thing..."

A ghoul... I'd heard of them before. As far as I knew, they were undead who ate human corpses.

But that was the extent of my knowledge. The lord's mutterings were my only sources of information.

Perhaps...it was time to act.

Staring down at the lord's wrinkled forehead, I hardened my resolve.

It would be dangerous, but I doubted that patience was the answer here. In fact, if I really was close to this so-called mutation, I needed to know the details of it before it happened.

I would explore the mansion.

The lord was a sorcerer and a scientist. The room in which he resurrected me—his laboratory—contained several books in addition to those countless strange tools. It was far too dangerous to barge in there, but there had to be something else, somewhere else, that could explain my current situation.

I'd grown used to counting. A clock would've been nice to have at times like these. But even without being aware of the precise hour and minute of the day, I already knew what Lord Horos's daily routine looked like.

Or rather, I knew when he came to this room.

He always visited the morgue after night fell. To date, there had been no exceptions.

If my counting was accurate, he came once a day, no matter what, after the sun went down, and took me into the nighttime forest for hunting. The amount of time we spent hunting varied, but we returned to the mansion before dawn broke, and he put me away in the morgue.

At first, he'd escort me back here, but more recently, he'd simply order me to return—maybe he'd gotten tired of walking me all the way day in and day out.

Aside from hunting time, he never visited.

I knew little regarding the undead, but among the few nuggets of knowledge I had was the fact that they disliked sunlight. That was probably why the lord only took me hunting at night.

I didn't know what the lord did during the daytime. Still, although he was a superior sorcerer, he was also human. He wasn't like me, who didn't require sleep. In all likelihood, while I wasn't in use, he was getting the sleep and food I didn't need—and performing normal bodily functions.

As far as I'd observed, there were only two living beings in this huge mansion, including him. I needed to be cautious around both, but the lord warranted special attention. If he found me, my plans would be ruined.

But he wasn't being cautious with me, which meant that if I moved carefully, I would definitely be able to slip past his watch.

I left the morgue softly and cautiously so as not to make any sounds and looked up the staircase.

Aside from certain rooms, the mansion had almost no lighting whatsoever. What few windows existed were all boarded up with wooden planks that blocked most light from entering, but that didn't pose an issue for my vision.

The mansion had a lot of blind corners, so as long as I proceeded with discretion, I wouldn't have to worry about being found.

That was what I told myself anyway, as I clenched my fists and focused my mind.

It wasn't until I became undead that I learned just how noisy living bodies were. The beating of a heart. The sound of breathing. It may have seemed odd, but my senses in this corpse body, which produced none of that, were far sharper than they had been in my lifetime.

If I focused hard enough, I could probably even hear someone else's breathing.

Then, after taking a deep breath out of old habit and steeling my nerves, I took my first step toward true freedom.

Carefully, I walked through the mansion veiled in darkness.

I was looking for a study or a library—any place that would contain written documents regarding my current state.

Fortunately, I could read. Reading had been my only pleasure after I'd been confined to a bed.

The only language I could read was Latisian, the official language of my home country. But Latisian was used far and wide, and the lord spoke it, so I could get by on that one language alone without issue.

In any event, I just wanted information. I didn't care what it was.

For starters, I decided to check places far from the laboratory-like room the lord was always occupying.

Unlike where I'd lived before my death, this mansion lacked any sort of decor. There were no carpets, nor were there any flowers growing in pots. But that

was enough to give the place a somehow inorganic feel.

There was nothing to absorb sound, so I had to be careful with my footing. But that would hardly be a problem—because my feet weren't the only things making noise.

When I shut my eyes, I could hear the echoes of hard, rhythmic footsteps. Not just one set of footsteps, either. The mansion's only residents were the lord and one servant, but that count didn't include the nonliving. This building had endless security measures, among them corpse guards.

This was Lord Horos's castle, so to speak. A dark castle in which resided the king of the dead.

The corpse guards had a measured quality to their footsteps, and they weren't trying to hide the noise, either, so I could hear them clearly even at a distance. Their footsteps were coming from up ahead and behind. I couldn't run away. I squatted at the edge of the hallway and waited patiently in hiding.

I didn't panic. I simply bided my time, prepared to bolt at any moment.

As I'd predicted, walking bones appeared suddenly from the shadows, their coloring leaden in the darkness. The light armor they wore over only their vital areas and the swords they carried set them apart from normal human bones, as did the fact that they were moving despite having no minds or hearts.

Their armor scraped against their bones, producing a soft clattering. There were two of them, walking down the hallway side by side as if to block it off. The sight of them walking, with no blood, or flesh, or hearts, was both cruelly unnatural and detestable. If I'd run into them while I was still alive, the shock might have stopped my heart.

These were undead creatures the fairy tales called skeletons. But given their armaments—swords, shields, and armor—perhaps skeleton knights was a more accurate term.

I'd been going hunting with the lord for a little over a week, and in that time, I'd met the skeleton knights several times. I'd been made to spar against them once, too. Contrary to their appearance, skeleton knights were nimble and

possessed expert sword skills. I had the edge in strength and weight only; they weren't the kind of opponents I could handle as I was now.

Though I couldn't feel pain, sustaining physical wounds still slowed me down. Each individual skeleton knight was different from the next, so I might have been able to manage against one, but against two at once, they'd cut me apart, and then it would be over. Even if, by some miracle, I defeated two of these skeleton knights, there was no guarantee that no other foes awaited me.

It was nearly impossible to elude the skeleton knights who perpetually patrolled the hallways. Like me, they never got tired or slept. That made them perfect to protect an evil sorcerer's mansion from outside enemies.

But if my idea was correct, there was no need to worry. Either way, I had to figure this out eventually.

The skeleton knights stopped, and their heads swiftly turned to look down at me. I made myself as small as possible and stopped moving. One second felt like ten—no, a hundred.

The skeleton knights continued to stare at me with their vacant eye sockets but soon looked away as though they'd lost interest...and started walking again.

Out of habit, I sighed in relief, then loosened up. I'd figured they wouldn't attack me. That wasn't to say the skeleton knights couldn't see me, though. It was simpler than that—they were my undead comrades, and they had been ordered not to hurt me.

The first skeleton knight I'd ever encountered had tried attacking me out of the blue before the lord commanded it not to. Ever since then, they'd been stubbornly obeying that command.

I couldn't tell whether the skeleton knights were intelligent like me, but from the way they acted, it didn't seem like they had minds of their own. Considering one had assaulted me even though I was with the lord, they must have been essentially puppets, faithfully following everything their lord told them.

One of the advantages I had in the lord's mansion was—ironically enough—that I was an undead. Because of that, his underlings wouldn't attack me. What I had to be careful of were those who definitely had intelligence: the lord

himself and the one other living person here. Running into the former would spell my doom, but not the latter.

If the lord found out that I was walking about on my own, he would realize he hadn't given me enough orders. If that happened, he would doubtlessly either kill me or at the very least give me additional commands to prevent me from wandering around. That was the one thing I absolutely had to avoid.

I'd cleared the first hurdle. Slowly, I stood up and checked once again to make sure I couldn't sense the lord anywhere nearby.

And then, I decided to place my hand on the nearest door.

One by one, I carefully opened the doors, checking inside the rooms.

Fortunately, the doors in this mansion were not generally locked. I knew that the lord locked his laboratory, at least, whenever we went out hunting, but he probably didn't bother with any of the other ones.

Come to think of it, he'd never locked the basement room's door, either.

Most likely because the lord considered himself the absolute ruler of this mansion.

None here would disobey Horos Kamen. Whether living or dead, all those residing in the mansion were his underlings. Necromancers violated taboos and had many enemies, but these skeleton knights would handle any intruders.

I didn't know their exact number, but there must have been dozens of knights patrolling the mansion. Even having them patrol in teams of two seemed a bit excessive.

I didn't have any lock-picking skills. If I came across a locked door, I'd have to think of another way in.

Most of the rooms showed little sign of recent use. They had furniture but no sense of life, and when I tried opening some drawers, I found them empty. They hadn't been cleaned, either; running a finger along the edge lifted off a thin layer of dust. Apparently, that one servant of his wasn't doing any housecleaning. That said, it was probably hard to maintain a mansion this big single-handedly. Maybe this servant only cleaned the rooms that got used.

The undead didn't use them. This was far too big a building for just two people to live in. Even a brief look from outside revealed that this mansion was considerably large.

Suppressing my fretfulness at not finding anything, I continued my search.

I'd already gotten pretty far away from the lord's laboratory.

...Assuming there was something like a library or a study, what was the likelihood of it being near the laboratory?

The sudden idea made me stop.

When I really thought about it, if I was in the lord's position, I'd put the library near my room for convenience's sake.

But wandering near the laboratory ran the risk of getting caught. There was no bed in there. No matter how evil a sorcerer he was, he almost certainly wasn't sleeping on the floor. He'd move to another room for that.

I wondered if I should go back to the laboratory, but it would all be over the moment I coincidentally bumped into him. A single mistake would mean my death—or the loss of my freedom.

I needed to save any risky activities as a last resort.

Just then, I suddenly saw a faint light down the hallway. The pattering of footsteps echoed toward me.

Only a few people in the lord's residence used lights.

It was Lou, the one other living being in this mansion.

Lou was the lord's servant girl—a slave. The magical collar around her neck was proof of her bondage. She took care of the lord's needs and assisted with experiments. I always saw her being yelled at and beaten.

There was no reason to panic. I quietly opened a door next to me, then hid inside the room.



Her meandering footsteps drew near, grew louder, and then immediately began to get more distant. She was not my ally, but neither was she a loyal subject of the lord. Though the slave collar could induce pain when she disobeyed orders, it didn't affect her free will. And even if she did see me walking through the halls, the chances of her reporting it to the lord were low. She would gain nothing from doing that, nor would she even know I wasn't acting on the lord's orders to begin with.

I didn't need to be particularly afraid of her. She wasn't a sorcerer, either. Infinitely harmless.

It must've been day now. Maybe she was doing some cleaning. I made a mental note of it, then waited until there were no more signs of her and resumed my exploration.

After a few minutes of walking, I abruptly spotted a room with bookshelves in it at the end of the hallway.

The room had a grand door. The interior was at least twice as large as the rooms I'd seen thus far, and it was filled with huge bookshelves and the smell of old paper. It was quiet; nobody was inside. The shelves were packed full of thick books, but even they didn't provide enough space, for a few piles of books also lay on the floor.

I ran my finger along a bookshelf. It didn't have the dust accumulation of the rooms I'd visited already. Lou probably came here to clean it regularly. I couldn't stay for long.

I'd always liked books, even in my past life. I hadn't had the time to read right before my death, but for a very long while, books were my only friend.

Getting just a little bit excited, I scanned the spines of the books on the shelves. When I did, I found myself frowning.

Unexpectedly, most of the books here were written in a different language—not Latisian, the one I knew.

Were these some kind of magical grimoires? Or were they encoded in such a way that only a necromancer could understand them? I didn't even know what language the words were written in.

My excitement waned a bit, but I quickly reassured myself. I didn't have enough time to read all the books here to start with. In fact, having too many options might have made this worse.

My eyes flickered over the book spines. Then I spotted one written in Latisian.

It was on old book. The title was *The History and Dangers of the Abominable Undead*.

Struggling, I slid it out from its packed-in location, then flipped to a random page.

The very first thing I saw was this sentence:

"To be undead is to be cursed. The soul of an undead, violated by a necromancer, is the eternal prisoner of agony, its only release the end, induced via holy arts."

The unexpected passage made my lips curl into a smile.

I felt like I'd just heard a dark joke.

Could you blame me? If to be undead was to be cursed, and if my soul was supposed to be a prisoner to agony at this very moment, then what did that make my *life*, which had been far more painful than this?

That pain, that omnipresent agony and suffering—only someone who had experienced it would ever understand it.

Those days when the pain had been so overwhelming I couldn't sleep. The waning number of visitors from one day to the next. The expressions of resignation on the faces of the holy mages charged with healing me—and the sense of powerlessness at knowing that my death was approaching.

The blessed could never understand the pain of the unblessed.

I hadn't despaired over being turned into an undead, but I couldn't stand to have my free will stolen from me. If I'd known in my lifetime that I'd be liberated from my pain upon becoming one, I'd have chosen the option without hesitation.

Naturally, I had no grudge against the lord—against Horos Kamen—even if he was committing all sorts of taboos.

This book won't do me any good.

I closed the tome, then forced it back in between the others on the shelf and decided to look for one that seemed more helpful.

I brought several other tomes back with me safely to my own room. I didn't see Lou on the way back.

After closing the door, careful not to make any noise, I hid all the books except one in the lowest drawer on the shelf.

As far as I knew, nobody ever opened the drawers in this room, so I probably didn't need to worry about anyone finding them. Once I finished reading one, I could just take out the next.

From what I'd witnessed, the library didn't see much use. The farther into the bookshelves you got, the more dust had accumulated, and there were no signs of those books having been removed recently. The room seemed, if anything, to be geared toward storing books after reading.

The one I'd chosen was an old encyclopedia of the undead, which had been in the very back of the rearmost bookshelf.

I needed to learn about myself first.

My knowledge of the undead amounted only to fairy tales and the lord's mutterings. I had to fix that as soon as I could.

Though there was no light, I could read the letters just fine. Flipping the pages slowly, I recalled those days engrossed in fairy tales on my sickbed, which made me deeply emotional.

I needed strength. Not just physical strength—knowledge was power.

And so my nighttime studies began.

§ § §

The small monkey magical beast, sporting longer arms than one would guess from its height, bounced off the top of a tree to attack me. I cut it down with my billhook, whose use I'd grown very familiar with.

The intense stench of blood flew through the air in every direction, and then the forest was quiet again.

The monkeys that had been observing from atop the tall trees, perhaps realizing they'd picked the wrong opponent, gave strange-sounding cries and disappeared into the woods with astonishing nimbleness.

A body that could move freely. The sensation of disappearing life via my billhook. A strong sense of fulfillment came over me.

When I'd first been resurrected, I'd thought that fulfillment was the rebound from not being able to move in life, but now, I'd learned it wasn't my imagination at all. The living dead killed the living and accumulated "death."

The lord, standing behind me with his arms folded imposingly, briefly inspected the monkey's remains before turning to me.

"End, have you...grown stronger?"

"....."

I stood there without saying a word. I hadn't been ordered to answer him.

Several months had passed since my revival. I'd gotten well accustomed to this freely moving body, and thanks to our daily monster-hunting in the forest, I'd learned how to predict the monsters' movements to an extent.

At the beginning, I'd used so much power that its recoil was enough to destroy my body; now I could hold back and still kill the beasts. The number of times the lord had to heal me had decreased as well. At first, I'd been doing my absolute best to make sure he didn't sense anything out of the ordinary, but battle had truly gotten easier for me, and since I didn't know what the lord would do if he felt like nothing was ever changing, it was tricky to make the adjustment.

I enjoyed moving my body. I enjoyed the running, the jumping, the learning.

And above all... I enjoyed *living*.

I hadn't obtained complete freedom yet. I still had to remain vigilant. But in these few months, I'd gotten used to being an undead and had the room to appreciate the situation.

“Hmm... Still a flesh-man... You’ve already accumulated a considerable number of kills. I would have assumed you’d become a ghoul by now...”

The lord walked over in front of me, then inspected my arms and body with his extremely bony fingers. I tolerated the sensation of it with an impassive expression.

It had been some time since I’d acquired my study materials. I’d learned much more about the undead than I’d known when I was alive.

The lord’s collection contained many books I couldn’t read, but that didn’t keep me from picking up the fundamentals.

I could already comprehend most of what the lord was saying.

Unlike living creatures, the undead did not mature as time passed. However, accumulating the negative energy produced when living creatures died (expressed simply as “the power of death”) strengthened our existence and caused us to mutate. Even those already dead were not living in the prison of stopped time.

Books called it a *rank mutation*.

According to those books, the undead—with a few exceptions—were the result of a curse cast by a necromancer.

I was a moving corpse whom the necromancer had hexed and altered the properties of.

And embedded within that curse was an evolutionary system.

By obeying its master and accumulating negative energy, a flesh-man who had been resurrected by a necromancer’s evil curse would acquire a new ego and become a more powerful undead. Flesh-men were one of the starting points in this evolutionary process.

The reason the lord took me out hunting every day without fail, when he was always so engrossed in his daily research that he never even left his room for food, was to have me accumulate the power of death and make me into a stronger undead.

And it seemed I had a predecessor. That one, who had accumulated death by the lord's hands like I was now, had mutated from a flesh-man into a ghoul. Then, on the lord's orders, it had gone out hunting on its own where it was eaten by a magical beast in the forest and died. That was why the lord always stayed with me.

The lord's eyes had a dull glimmer. He looked up at me with those eyes, so dark as to even rival those of the undead, and tilted his head.

"I see the ego is late to sprout... That is fine. It won't be a problem right now."

Yes. No problem at all. He hadn't found out.

Just a little longer, and I'd be able to worm my way out of this while still in my current state.

The lord was a powerful sorcerer, but he had never seen through my act.

Flesh-men weren't supposed to have egos to begin with. There wasn't a single record of one who retained the memories from when they were alive. I didn't know why I'd kept my ego and memories when other flesh-men hadn't, but since flesh-men weren't supposed to be self-aware, the lord—an expert on the subject—had constant faith in me.

Hunting with the lord was extremely convenient; it allowed me to hone my powers safely.

If he was to realize I had become self-aware, the lord would change his orders. He would at least command me not to hurt him—or something along those lines.

All I needed was to bide my time.

The lord's curse was what kept me moving. But I already knew something: Once cast, the curse of an undead would never disappear, even if its caster died.

"End, bring that monkey's remains back to the mansion."

The same command as always. I picked up the corpse by its still-bleeding arm and followed the lord.

The pungent smells of beasts and blood. The fragrant scent of the corpse. Dark blood dripped from the creature's deep, gaping wounds.

I thought I felt something hot writhing within my body.

Recently, I'd been getting hungry.

My long-lost appetite was difficult to endure, burning within me like a flame.

As always, after obeying orders and being returned to the morgue, I resumed my activities.

It had already been over a month since I'd acquired an appetite.

And that was when I'd realized that my very existence had changed.

Food, sleep, sex—flesh-men had nothing to do with these human desires, but it was a different story for undead of higher ranks.

By that time, I'd already learned a bit about the undead, so I knew immediately these desires were due to a rank mutation.

My appearance hadn't changed much at all, but after taking so many lives, my existence had.

I'd evolved from a flesh-man into a being called a ghoul.

My newly acquired appetite was proof that my very essence had shifted to a higher-order variety.

Unlike flesh-men, ghouls had a degree of self-awareness as well as the intelligence of a human baby. The large quantities of negative energy they had accumulated would strengthen their physical body as well, but intelligence was the biggest thing that set the two apart.

Since I'd had self-awareness and memories from the outset, to me, all I'd gotten was a little bit of extra strength and a special ability. I wasn't sure if it was worth the downside of wanting to eat, but I welcomed the change nonetheless.

An appetite. A human urge.

Being a flesh-man had been convenient, but for me, there was value in gaining such desires in exchange for that convenience.

I'd almost never been able to eat a real meal while I was still alive. I never felt hungry, either. There was no room for that feeling. My appetite was another one of the things I'd lost.

Ghouls fed on meat—the flesh of corpses.

In that sense, the morgue was equivalent to a food pantry in my eyes. Even those stomach-churning dead-body smells were no more than fragrant odors to me. But it wouldn't be good to eat the dead bodies in question.

I felt no greater aversion to eating a corpse than I had when I first killed a magical beast. My more human emotions wanted to avoid it, of course, but I wouldn't hesitate if my life depended on it. But if there were fewer corpses—that is, research specimens—in here, even the lord, who wasn't very cautious of me at this stage, would get suspicious.

The lord didn't know I'd become a ghoul, but he assumed I would soon. And it was widely known that ghouls possessed intelligence and self-awareness.

The sense of starvation was excruciating. If I didn't stay alert, I'd start wanting to nibble on nearby corpses.

I had to find some way to fulfill the urge before my instincts got the better of me.

Keeping the emotions that sprung up at bay along with my empty stomach, I shed my tattered clothes and, quieting my footsteps, exited the morgue. I slipped past the skeleton knights on security patrol and left through the mansion's entrance.

The moment I opened the door, I felt a warm, damp breeze brush my cheek.

Thick clouds of deep indigo obscured the night sky. I saw before me a large courtyard and a gate. Several dozen ferocious flesh-beasts were in the courtyard, on guard against enemies from the outside. Most of them had been born in the forest—pitiful beings, massacred and resurrected by the lord, just like my predecessor and me.

An undead nightwolf caught a whiff of my scent and turned its head toward me. At a glance, it was the same as the nightwolves that lived in the forest, but

its eyes were shockingly vacant. The nightwolf twitched its nose briefly before leaving me alone, realizing I was the flesh-man always with the lord.

It acted exactly how the books had described: like a puppet that only responded to commands. Each time I witnessed such behavior, I reflected on my good fortune to not have ended up like that—and had a powerful reaffirmation of the fact that I absolutely couldn't let that happen to me.

Feeling the night's breeze against my skin, I approached the gate, an iron fence several meters high that encircled the mansion. Not only a physical obstacle, it was apparently enchanted with a magical field, but since I was designated as an ally, it didn't have any effect on me.

The gate was shut with a giant lock and chain, and only the lord had the key for it. I ignored the entrance and walked over to it, grabbed the fence with both hands, and climbed it. I never could have supported my weight with my hands in my lifetime, but it was easy now that I'd gathered so much negative energy.

When I reached the top and its spear-like spikes, I grabbed one of them and flung myself over in a front flip.

My vision spun. I landed on all fours. Letting the stunning impact wash through me, I slowly stood up. My movements weren't hampered—and unlike flesh-men, the bodies of ghouls could regenerate smaller wounds.

At first, I'd been nervous about it, but now I could go out for food as casually as if I was going for a walk.

And so, without faltering, I traveled into the chattering darkness of the deep forest.

I was alone now. Unlike when the lord accompanied me, I could advance at my own pace. Conversely, I didn't have the lord's backup, but the creatures in this forest were no match for me at this point.

I didn't have my billhook, but I didn't need it.

I focused, and a crackling sound came from the fingers on my right hand. My fingertips were producing heat.

All five fingers then extended and sharpened like knives.

This was one of the special abilities I'd gained since becoming a ghoul: a power unpretentiously called Sharpen Nails.

Keeping the now-heated and extended claws hidden in my palm, I dashed through the darkness.

The smell of beasts. The smell of the wind. A powerful hunger that set the back of my mind ablaze. They all sharpened my senses.

I found a target right away: a dark mass, visibly protruding from the tall grasses between two trees.

It was around two meters tall and likely quadrupedal, so if it stood on two legs, I probably would have had to look up at it. However, that giant figure, which was a few sizes larger than even me, looked like nothing but prey.

I lowered my stance and ran at full speed. My starved mind surged with delight from moving my body as freely as I desired.

The wind shifted the shrubs, leaving behind the screeching cries of the insects.

My target, seeming to have noticed my approach, tried to turn to face me, but as large as it was, it couldn't make sudden directional changes in this forest so overgrown with trees and foliage.

And then, using my whole body as a spring, I hurled myself high into the air.

My head was under me, my legs above. The world spun around me. Just below, the dark figure turned around.

Pitch-black fur. Bloodred eyes. Developed muscles, powerful and rippling, clear even at a glance.

A bear-type magical beast: what the lord called a nightbear. Tougher than nightwolves and the type of magical beast I'd fought in my first battle. But this time, it was no child.

That, however, didn't matter. I stretched my arm out as I passed by it, extending my claws. Now several centimeters longer than usual, the nails' tips dealt tiny wounds to the creature's fur-covered skull. Despite the tough pelt and solid bone protecting its brain, the skull split ever so slightly, sending fresh

blood flying. The beast howled. As I landed, I bent over, then slid right up to its huge frame.

I...was no longer a corpse who did nothing but move.

In that moment, I was a beast—one that surpassed nightbears. And I was a beast with intelligence. A demon.

My nails, lengthened via Sharpen Nails, were sharper than average swords. Ghouls used them to tear asunder the flesh of corpses and devour them.

The intense odor of beasts—and the burning appetite it induced. I swung a straight, open hand right into the nightbear's chest. Its armor of fur, its armor of muscle, its bones—a ghoul's titanic strength and bladed nails could easily smash all of it.

The nightbear's massive body spasmed, and its roaring immediately ceased. All that was left was the quiet forest, like an empty void.

The feel and heat of the flesh wrapped around my hand. As I basked in the satisfaction surging through me, I pulled my hand out.

The squelching crack of blood vessels bursting. The source of life, still pulsating in my hand: a giant heart. The overwhelming odor of blood, filling my senses—the stench of death. All of those only whetted my appetite further.

As I ripped it out, I took a few steps back. And then, as though it had been waiting, the magical beast's body collapsed to the ground. It had died. But the heart I'd taken was still beating. I could sense life from its unreliable pulse.

I let out a heavy, hot breath, as though I'd taken ill with fever.

Even though an undead like me would never fall ill. Or require breathing at all.

I held up the heart, which glistened with blood, then ran my tongue over the long-awaited prize. The blood stained my body, but there was no need to worry about it. That was why I'd stripped off my clothing before coming here.

My tongue touched it. That alone sent a shock through my brain. The taste, the smell, the touch—my body desired it all. There was no reason to have any sense of aversion to it. It was a necessity for me.

For I was no longer human. As that fact came to mind once again—a reality I’d keenly felt many times since becoming an undead—I madly began to devour the jewellike heart.

§ § §

Power filled me. How long had it been since I had received this new life?

The more days that passed, the greater the doubt in the lord’s eyes became when he directed his gaze to me.

“Still no mutation... Hmm... I’ve used him so much, and yet...”

We were back in the laboratory. With our daily hunt complete, the lord let out a groan and looked at me, still continuing my mindless puppet act.

Averages existed in all things. As necromancy was a forbidden magic, research on it had not progressed very far, but from the books I’d checked, flesh-men generally mutated to their next form of existence within six months to a year.

Of course, there were individual differences. Rank mutation would never occur if an undead was locked in a room without accumulating any death, and conversely, there were examples of undead created during large-scale wars having an extremely short time before mutation. But in my case, I’d had the lord’s steadfast protection every day and thus had kept on gathering death. It was difficult to imagine this taking longer than average.

I doubted a year had passed since my rebirth. It hadn’t even been that long after I’d started feeling an appetite, either. But it seemed it was more than enough time for him to sense that something was wrong.

The lord touched my arm with his bone-like fingers. He peered into my eyes, then incanted some sort of spell.

I didn’t know what it was for, but it was probably a type of necromancy.

Strength overflowed in my body. My limbs became hot, and an intense sensation shot through me, almost like I was expanding.

But I ignored the pressing impulses and maintained my silence.

“It...isn’t a lack of mana? Is it thought that’s lacking, then?”

He frowned and looked up at me bitterly.

The lord was an excellent sorcerer. That was clear just from the fact that he’d built a mansion so deep in a forest overrun with vicious magical beasts—and easy to imagine given the size of his book collection and the countless corpses he’d gathered. But his deep knowledge of that very necromancy trapped him within the realm of common sense.

To begin with, flesh-men were the lowest rank of undead. The main obstacle to their creation was the requirement of a fresh corpse, but as long as one had that, one could create them with ease. They were puppets of flesh, incredibly weak, doing nothing but following orders. They had no ego and would never lift so much as a finger without a command from their master.

The lord had probably produced many flesh-men in the past. My predecessor must have been average, and its rank mutation had likely been easy to see.

My predecessor suddenly gained intelligence. According to what I’d read, an undead followed one of two main paths after mutating into a ghoul: They would either understand the situation and submit or fail to understand the situation and fiercely resist.

I, on the other hand, hadn’t reacted at all.

It was precisely because the lord had such intimate knowledge of rank mutations that he hadn’t yet grasped what was happening with me. He didn’t know how to determine whether an incredibly talented flesh-man like me had actually mutated.

Even as he recognized that I’d accumulated negative energy and grown more powerful for it, his suspicions never took root.

A big part of it was probably that flesh-men and ghouls didn’t look very different on the outside. Inside, one would definitely change, but he’d apparently forgotten the most efficient way of telling the difference.

If I were him, I would have given me this order, just to be sure:

“Have you mutated? Answer truthfully.”

I was absolutely bound to the lord's commands. That hadn't changed, even after my mutation.

If the lord ever actually asked a question like that, I would be forced to submit, but he didn't. He knew a flesh-man's natural characteristics too well for that.

To him, I was an object—one that would not do anything unexpected.

After patting me down to check my physical condition, he frowned, then called out in a dissatisfied tone, "Lou, bring a knife."

Soft footsteps stopped in front of the laboratory, and after a short moment of silent hesitation, the door creaked open.

Lou entered, fear plain in her expression. She was petite and had black hair. Her clothing was dirty, and her small frame so thin that one might expect her to collapse at any moment. She looked younger than me, probably because she was malnourished, but from things the lord had said, I knew she'd been his slave for many years. Around her neck was a magical black collar—proof of her enslavement. Her eyes were sunken in almost as much as an undead's, and her lips were cracked and parched. If I hadn't known any better, I would have mistaken her for a flesh-man.

This wasn't the first time we'd seen each other. Lou's role involved the more delicate tasks not suited for the undead: helping with research, seeing to the lord's needs, things of that nature. She cleaned the mansion, made food, and kept the books in order. It was incredibly easy to see her coming, since she carried a light with her when she roamed the halls. Unlike the lord, however, she walked around the mansion at random intervals, so I'd accidentally encountered her several times during my explorations. However...neither of us had any interest in the other.

Flesh-men had no will, and the same was true of slaves. It was possible Lou feared the lord considerably more than I did. And there was fear in her eyes when she looked at me, too.

She had a mind but not a will. She only did what the lord ordered.

"The knife."

At the lord's words, Lou, seeming flustered, pulled a knife from her pocket and approached. He took the proffered knife, then casually struck Lou in the head.

"Faster next time, trash."

In contrast to his dismissive tone, the lord's eyes held no anger. He was probably just frustrated. Even if he wasn't, though, he didn't treat her as anything but a slave.

Lou crumpled. The lord cracked the bones in his hand, then stabbed the knife into my right arm.

A very dull pain, maybe one-hundredth of the actual pain of being stabbed, ran through my arm. That, too, was proof that a rank mutation had occurred.

To be undead was a curse. Once nothing more than a moving corpse, I was drawing closer to a more blasphemous, more accursed existence. And that would bring with it more than just advantages.

A walking dead would regain their desires, their intelligence, and their pain. And they would acquire immense power.

It was crueler than my time as a flesh-man, when I hadn't felt any pain, but it was still nothing compared to when I'd been alive.

Almost no blood flowed from the wound. It probably wasn't circulating yet.

But according to the books, stronger undead shed blood like humans.

The lord twisted the knife in the wound as if to confirm that fact. I rode out the continuous pain without letting it show on my face.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts—it doesn't hurt. It...doesn't hurt.

The lord slowly removed the knife. His eyes were still on me as he gave Lou, who was on the floor, a forceful command.

"...Still just a flesh-man... You! If his wound changes, report it to me."

"Ah... Ugh..."

"Answer me!"

"Ghh..."

The sounds of violence dominated my surroundings.

Sorcerers were said to make their bodies stronger using mana. The lord's body looked like just skin and bones, but it seemed to have quite a bit of strength to it regardless. Lou, kicked in the solar plexus, bounded across the floor like a toy ball.

I simply watched, not feeling any emotion in particular.

The knife wound that the lord had stabbed me with ached.

Whenever I was injured in the forest, the lord always healed me with magic. Flesh-men didn't have regenerative abilities, so if he wanted to use one for long periods of time, he would have to do the healing himself.

As for the progression of wounds, one of the big differences between flesh-men and ghouls was the presence of a regenerative ability. The lord seemed to be trying to determine if I had mutated by looking at factors other than my self-awareness.

I had figured this moment would come at some point.

But...he was sloppy. Whatever kind of method he wanted to use to figure it out, saying it in front of me rendered it meaningless.

After being returned to the morgue as usual, I got to work.

I rolled up my sleeve and inspected the wound. A ghoul's regenerative abilities were higher than those of humans, and my wound had already begun to mend itself. It wouldn't immediately heal as it did with healing magic, but one of this degree would heal in less than a day.

Shifting into higher undead forms apparently strengthened the regenerative ability as well. It was fortuitous that I was still only at the ghoul stage. Lifting my left hand, I slowly changed the tips of my nails into blades. Their tips were no less sharp than the knife the lord had used to gouge a hole in me.

To reinforce the wound that had remained there, I stabbed my nails into my arm.

Pain gradually radiated from the wound, causing my pulse to skyrocket.

This certainly wasn't any more painful than being stabbed with a knife earlier.

Inflicting harm on myself, however...was a first for me. Since I'd lacked a properly working body for as long as I could remember, I'd never fathomed being capable of intentionally injuring myself.

Though I could shed no physical tears, my very spirit wept.

I felt an intense ache in the back of my mind, but I smothered it.

This was...necessary.

I would kill any who bound me. Horos Kamen, who held authority over me, was someone I needed to kill one day. He was a terrible man. I didn't know his objective, but he probably didn't think of me as anything but a lesser class of slave.

Now was when I had to bide my time. I'd do anything to create an opportunity.

The lord was strong, and he had absolute control over me. I couldn't defeat him just yet—but that didn't mean no undead had ever succeeded in turning on their lord.

According to the books I'd read, there were several records of undead rebelling against their masters.

The lord still hadn't put any more than minimal restrictions on me. If this situation continued, and if I became an even stronger undead... It was a long shot, but I had a chance at victory.

He was absolute, but he was not omnipotent.

I scraped my nails through the wound as if to underscore my determination. The wound's shape would be somewhat different than when the knife had gouged it, but he wouldn't notice the slight variation.

After confirming the wound had gotten larger, I removed my nails from it and put them in my mouth. Moving my tongue, I licked the blood and flesh off. I felt nothing from my own flesh and blood, not even any taste, even though I now considered the hearts of magical beasts delicious.

But it would be an issue if he noticed my fingers were dirty. As I was licking the stains from them, I suddenly heard a noise.

I looked in front of me. When did she enter? I hadn't noticed at all.

Lou was there, in the corner of the room, watching me in shock.

She had bruises around her eyes, and her lips were red and swollen. The life in her face was very faint, but her gaze was doubtlessly on my fingers, which were still in my mouth.

Our eyes met. Before I could say anything, Lou scrambled out like a frightened rabbit.

I'd messed up. I'd been seen. Even a slave like her could tell that my actions had been unnatural.

I nearly broke out in a run but stopped myself just in time. I couldn't chase her—then the lord would certainly notice. What would I have done upon catching her anyway? Persuade her? Did I really think I could manage that?

I was an undead. An undead created by the sorcerer Horos Kamen. She would never, ever trust me. I definitely wouldn't if I were in her position.

Which meant...I didn't need to chase her. The worst thing that could happen was the lord catching sight of me as I pursued her.

After all, he had never given me any orders to do so.

I steadied my breath. Not a drop of blood remained on my fingertips.

§ § §

There was a flash of light followed by a cry like ripping cloth that echoed through the mansion.

Lou flew across the room, ramming into one of the corpses on the stone tables. She'd been hit with offensive magic.

That was the first time I'd ever seen someone get knocked off their feet.

The lord's expression was the same as always. His eyebrows hadn't moved, nor had his cheeks drawn back—but behind his cunning eyes smoldered a definite anger.

“Lou, you...deceived me? I thought I told you to tell me if his wound changed.”

“...!”

Lou couldn't answer him because of the impact of her fall. The lord stepped on her sprawled hand as she lay limp on the ground.

“I don't recall telling you to lie.”

She had reported me. But of the two of us, it appeared the lord had chosen to trust me instead.

And that made sense. He was confident in his own necromancy. The words of a slave—one who was considered to have almost no actual value—weren't even worth consideration. Especially not when they sounded this ridiculous.

I'd known that. That was why I'd let her escape.

I watched them carefully. This wasn't the first time I'd seen the lord treating Lou like this.

Lou may have dreamed that reporting my strange behavior faithfully would loosen the lord up and improve his treatment of her. Perhaps she hadn't foreseen this outcome—or she hadn't expected it.

If I were her, I definitely never would have done what she had. If she was willing to gamble on such an incredibly tiny hope, her despair wasn't nearly deep enough.

Slaves weren't ever allowed to object. After kicking Lou several times, the lord hoisted her up by the back of her neck and brought her over to me. I remained completely motionless.

A small drop of darkened red blood fell from Lou's lips—maybe the inside of her mouth had been cut. I felt my expression nearly light up for an instant at the fragrance coming off that drop, but I quickly endeavored to remain impassive. Fortunately, it didn't seem like the lord had noticed, since he appeared to be concentrating on punishing his slave.

“You, trash—what was it that changed about End? Say it again.”

“Ah...uh...”

The lord's eyes, and Lou's empty gaze, turned to my wound. It was the very same wound as the one the lord had inflicted on me. To be precise, it had changed, but the lord wasn't looking at it that carefully.

"End. Raise your arm—so that we can both see the wound clearly."

I lifted my arm as ordered. My wound was laid bare in the dim darkness, under the light of only a few candles.

The wound, which would have healed had I been a ghoul, evidently remained.

"Lou, I'll ask again. His wound—what did you say happened to it?"

"Ghh... Mas...ter... He...," came the inarticulate voice.

The lord dramatically looked back at me.

"You see, End... She says you dug out your own wound. Heh-heh-heh. Is that... the truth?"

Yes. The answer is yes. But I didn't respond.

I had to properly follow orders. If he wanted me to respond, then he needed to command me to answer. He hadn't. Thus, I had no duty to do so.

That was the loophole I was allowed to exploit in the absolute ruler, because I possessed intelligence.

The lord watched me for a few seconds, but he seemed to have come to his own conclusion already. His eyes turned quickly back to Lou. Her shoulders gave a start. Blanching, she argued, spittle flying:

"M-Master... This man, he's...lying..."

"Heh-heh-heh. I don't believe I told you this, Lou, slave that you are...but the undead are unconditionally obedient to their casters!!"

The lord gave a shrill laugh as he threw Lou to the floor.

I watched with my arm still raised. After all, he hadn't ordered me to lower it. For a loyal flesh-man who could do nothing but follow orders, it was only natural.

"Hmm? Did you think I'd treat you better if you reported an abnormality? You thought, with your unlearned, useless mind, that you could *deceive* me?"

A poor, loyal slave who reported an abnormality to her master—only to find that her master didn't trust her.

Actions spoke louder than words. Or perhaps that depended on the master's personality as well.

If only she'd stayed silent, she wouldn't have been punished...but I had no intention of pitying her. She could've robbed me of my freedom.

Was the reason I lacked even a shred of compassion—was it because I was a cruel person?

"Ah... Uh... He... Before, the books... And—that's right! The food, too—"

"Silence! You are trash, lower even than a corpse!"

It was true that I'd allowed Lou to see me acting strange on several occasions. But it had been a mistake for her to speak up about them. If something had been out of the ordinary, she had to mention it immediately, or there was no way she would be believed.

The lord was right—Lou's mind was nothing if not useless.

For a few minutes, the only sounds being produced were those of punches and cries. Eventually, tired of executing the beating, the lord spat his next words to Lou as she lay on the ground facedown, unmoving:

"You are mere fodder. But the next time you report a lie, I will scatter your living flesh and send your soul into eternal suffering."

His voice had weight behind it. The sound of truth.

A necromancer.

At the words of this soul-defiling sorcerer hated by all, Lou, who lay on the ground like a corpse, twitched.

Finally, the lord looked in my direction.

"End, you may lower your arm."

You *may* lower it. It wasn't a command, so I didn't have a duty to obey. But I was a loyal flesh-man, so I lowered my arm. The lord watched me do so, then snorted, dissatisfied somehow, and healed my wound.

He'd probably figured that since he'd left it for a day, and it hadn't changed, it was pointless. I'd been able to endure it, but the pain had had me at my wit's end, so I was relieved, though I didn't show it. *Thanks to you, Lou.*

"Lou, put this room back in order. The corpses in here are worth more than a mere slave I purchased for a single gold coin."

One gold coin? I wonder how much I cost him.

I'd never heard of anyone buying up corpses, but I'd probably been more than a gold coin. The lord had chosen me from many others, after all, to serve as his protector.

The lord exited the morgue. Only Lou remained.

She still lay facedown and showed no signs of getting up. But it didn't look like she was dead. I could clearly hear faint breathing. Had the lord held back?

But it was worrying. She was on my side—our positions were different, but she was almost like a colleague. And fallen colleagues needed to be helped.

The lord hadn't ordered me not to move, so I gave a big stretch and knelt by Lou's side, remaining cautious in case the lord changed his mind and came back.

This incident was due to my lack of attentiveness. I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Lou lifted her face. Her unfocused eyes followed me.

I ran a finger through Lou's drops of blood on the floor, then theatrically put my finger into my mouth and licked it.

That was when I learned just how demonic a person looked when truly surprised.

But it made no difference. *The lord doesn't seem very trusting to begin with, but he'll never, ever listen to you.*

I was in a much better position with my newfound mutation, even if I ran the risk of being found out and losing my freedom as a result.

However, I felt that I was drawing closer to the time I would *need* to revolt.

Once the lord had doubts, they would continue to grow stronger, little by little. The lord had declared Lou's accusation a lie, but deep down, her words would be pricking him like little thorns.

What I needed to do was seize the most opportune moment.

I decided to stop going to the library for books night after night. I doubted Lord Horos would listen to anything the slave said right now, and Lou wouldn't change, but I figured the more possibilities I squashed, the better.

I already had the minimum requisite knowledge. There was no doubt that, to Lou, I was just as troubling to have around as the lord.

The lord began taking me on longer hunts, and when he brought me into the forest, he commanded me to hunt much stronger magical beasts.

That command was convenient for me, too. In the unlikely event that I sustained any injuries from sneaking out for food that didn't fully regenerate, the lord would know something was off, but during the day, I could have the lord heal me. I would one day need to defeat the tyrant, but at the same time, he was an irreplaceably heartening companion.

My designs bore fruit, and I grew more powerful by the day, but I simultaneously felt an unease welling within me.

I couldn't see through the lord entirely. He had no openings. I didn't know what he could and couldn't do. It did unsettle me that I didn't know the reason he lived in this kind of forest, too, but his magic was completely outside my knowledge. I couldn't read his spells, and I hadn't obtained any detailed information from the books, either.

To ensure my safety, I wanted to attain even more power and only challenge him when I was sure I'd be able to win...but apparently it took years for a ghoul to reach the next rank mutation. Regardless of anything else, waiting for that wouldn't be realistic.

And besides, no matter how strong I became, the lord still had absolute power to command me.

One order not to attack him, and it would all be over. The only way I'd ever win against him would be to strike, bringing him into a situation in which he

wasn't able to command me.

Undead were strong. I was far more physically capable than an adult man at this point, and I had regenerative abilities, too. The lord hadn't ordered me not to harm him, so I could even attack him from behind.

I doubted even the most powerful sorcerer would emerge unscathed from my nails, which could slash through the sturdy neck bones of magical beasts.

Failure, however, was not an option. If I didn't kill him in one strike, he would bind me with a command, and then my second life would be crushed like the first. That was more difficult for me to accept even than being confined to a bed.

What I needed was patience. Strength. Repeating that to myself, I suppressed my anxiety and waited for my chance.

I spent night after night obeying the wicked sorcerer's commands to hunt, eluding the slave, and searching for a vulnerability in the lord.

At first, having obtained a body that could move properly had been enough to satisfy me, but learning that it was a false freedom only made me desire true freedom even more. People probably called this greed.

Freedom—that simple word was even sweeter than the flesh of the beasts I tore through.

And it was at a time like that when a guest of the lord's brought new information that would cause the situation to evolve.

Lou and the lord were the only ones who lived in this mansion, but the lord had other acquaintances.

It must have been difficult for even a wicked necromancer to live fully isolated from human society.

The man, who came once or twice a month accompanied by bodyguards, said his name was Hak. He was of short stature and wore a ten-gallon hat that was always slightly dirty. Just to myself, I'd been calling him Corpse-Bringer Hak.

As the moniker would imply, he would cross here through the forest with a coffin. The lord's skeletons wouldn't attack him when he visited—he was their

sole exception.

I didn't know the details of their relationship, but Hak's role was to supply necessities and corpses. After providing the lord with food and other items, as well as fresh corpses he dug out from who knew where, he received money and skeletons in payment. From their conversations, I'd only gleaned that he was apparently buying the skeletons to serve as combat personnel. Not just any skeletons, either—he was very selective in his choices, and he only picked the powerful ones who had collected much death. It was taboo to make use of the undead. There was little doubt the man was not a good person.

Usually, I wasn't present for their dealings, but unusually, the lord had summoned me here this time.

In the seldom-used reception room were Hak, his expression a mixture of mild cunning and amiability, and his bodyguards, who were all fully armed and looked to be very good at violent things.

Hak's eyes widened. His expression very curious, he said, "Oh... So it *did* survive. As one who died of disease, I thought it would have died right away."

"The corpses of nobility truly are different somehow," the lord replied, staring straight at me.

Whatever he was thinking, it was likely wrong. I'd survived this long out of my intense thirst for life and nothing more.

And that thirst, which had dominated me immediately upon regaining consciousness, had never waned in the slightest, despite how I'd gained a degree of strength. In fact, I could swear it had only gotten stronger.

It was like...an impulse, setting my soul ablaze, if I had to put it into words. A deep, fierce emotion I'd never had the chance to feel back in my previous life, which I'd spent waiting to die.

That must have been the one big difference between the other undead and me.

Without letting any of that show on my face, however, I just looked down at the lord quietly.

The lord's clouded eyes seemed to be gauging my intelligence. But it was probably only an illusion. If he really believed I was intelligent, he'd have given me a concrete order.

"Are there any more corpses of nobles I could acquire?" he asked the corpse bringer.

"Please, sir. They may be dead, but you won't find many people eccentric enough to try to sell the bodies of their own kin."

"Still, I acquired one. The corpse of End came from—"

Hak's face twisted at the lord's short words. In an almost criticizing tone, he said, "We promised never to discuss where the corpses come from. Someone coincidentally wanted to sell the remains of a family member. I brought the idea to you, Lord Horos, and you made the decision to buy it yourself. That was our transaction."

"...I know. He was bedridden...but I suppose that's irrelevant. And he showed no signs of physical training."



The lord's eyes crawled over my body.

I'd spent so long confined to a bed. All my muscles had atrophied, and I survived on the healing magic from the holy mages who visited me regularly. The hard labor I did now—running around all the time hunting magical beasts—was unthinkable considering my former situation. Even now, I was thin and scrawny.

I'd always longed for a healthy body ever since my past life (of course, just one without the pain racking my entire body was something I was extremely grateful for). The books claimed that the more mutations I went through and the more monstrous I became, the more physical changes I experienced, so I very much wanted to live that long, no matter what it took.

Still, though... They sold my corpse, did they?

That was new information, but it wasn't really enough to shock me.

I never held any particularly strong feelings toward my family. In life, I'd had my hands full just enduring the agony; I'd had no time to show any other emotion.

I didn't exactly...*resent* them, either. My family had never come to visit in the last few years, but the regular holy mages' "nursing" must have cost a fortune, and it was true that their life-extending treatments *had* been slightly effective.

The important thing in battle was reach. I was scrawny, but you could call it a stroke of good luck that I hadn't died before growing to the brink of adulthood.

Even if the nursing hadn't been done out of consideration for me, it had still definitely benefited me.

And regarding how they sold my corpse to Hak—there was nothing to say about that, either.

Suddenly, I recalled a piece of basic knowledge about the undead I'd gotten from a book.

The undead were said to act based on their regrets. But what drove me was probably not the kind of grudge toward the living that regular undead had, but rather, a survival instinct.

Even agonized by endless suffering, death hadn't been the only thing I'd thought about. I didn't think it had been, at least.

I hadn't wanted to die. I'd wanted to live, even through death. I'd wanted to hold on to myself. Maybe that raw emotion had granted me the memories of my past life that flesh-men could never have.

No matter how I wrapped my head around it, Lord Horos had saved me, and I owed him a debt. I was truly thankful.

But I couldn't let him do as he pleased—not when he had his special privilege over me.

In fact, I had one trump card to play. The kind that I'd never be able to use a second time.

It wouldn't give me a surefire victory, but depending on the timing, it could be enough to defeat the lord.

The more life I took, the more death I accumulated, the more I stalled for time—the more powerful I became. The more the success rate of a surprise attack increased.

I'd said it over and over again, but the timing would be crucial. I'd gather information. The lord's combat capabilities were an unknown. I couldn't assume anything from his appearance and age—he was a powerful sorcerer. Sure, I was best in close combat, but there was no being too careful with a knavish magician who had lived to be this age even after breaking a taboo and turning the world against him.

As I secretly kindled my dark urges, Hak suddenly scowled. "Come to think of it... It seems the Ender Knights will be coming to Enge in the near future."

"What...? ...This isn't a mistake on your part, is it?"

"Of course not. Everyone I deal with is quite tight-lipped, I assure you. Their sense of smell is something else, though. Just to be safe, I may not want to come here for a while after this."

The term sent a difficult-to-describe shock through me.

The Ender Knights. They were the world's most powerful military force, which put an end to the ceaseless darkness.

They'd been in books I'd read in my lifetime, as well as in the lord's own collection.

They often appeared as heroes in fairy tales, and every child idolized how they cut down any threat or hardship with their swords of light. Even I'd dreamed of becoming one before I was bedridden.

Necromancers—creators of the undead who toyed with souls—were the ultimate enemies of the Ender Knights.

A long time ago, when I was still a child, a good portion of the picture books I read were filled with battles between necromancers and the Knights. It went without saying who won.

Judging by the lord's face, which was twisted with anger, their murderous relationship wasn't just a thing of stories.

And...those Ender Knights were my enemy as well, since I was a living dead not meant to exist.

Considering how relentless they were, even when depicted in children's books, they would never tolerate my existence.

"Have they followed me...? I hadn't done any research for years... Damned hunting dogs. I'll kill them and make them my eternal slaves."

"And I'd rather not be caught in a battle between you and the Knights. I think I'll withdraw for a time."

"...Wait, Hak. Before you run away, I have a request. End, go back to your morgue."

What did he intend to ask of the man? ...It made me curious, but I couldn't disobey his command.

With the most sluggish motions I could muster, I left the room. I ended up not hearing what they discussed afterward.

...Which was fine. What I *did* hear had made my skin crawl, but it was better than proceeding in ignorance.

I was running out of time. What did I have to do to survive?

After returning to the morgue, I rested my back against the wall, folded my arms, and began thinking.

The first thing I needed was a good sense of our combat powers—mine, Horos's, and the Ender Knights'. I was doubtlessly the weakest of the three.

The entire reason I'd been able to fight the forest's magical beasts was because I had the lord's backup. After gaining experience and going through a rank mutation, I'd grown a little, but my physical body's toughness hadn't changed much at all since back then.

Typically, when a civilian who had never known combat turned into one of the lowest ranks of undead—the famous zombie—it was said that their combat abilities increased. That, too, was due to the undead having no limiters placed on them.

Normal human brains had limiters. If a human body tried to use its full strength, the recoil would apparently damage it. Limiters were a safety mechanism that existed to prevent that, and humans lived out peaceful lives because of that function; but at the same time, humans were made in such a way that they couldn't output their total power.

On the other hand, those turned into undead had no such safety mechanisms, nor did they have a sense of pain. A person changed into a zombie would exhibit levels of superhuman might in complete contrast to when they'd lived, without a care for the damage they'd sustain, and would never stop until they were utterly destroyed. They didn't need their internal organs to survive, so they could keep going even if their heart was stabbed through and their limbs blown off, moving and devouring solely on their residual grudges.

I was a flesh-man rather than a zombie, so there were some differences, but being an undead was one of the reasons I was able to fell magical beasts in the forest with a frail body immediately after my resurrection. The other reason, incidentally, was the lord slowing them down with magic and taking charge of healing me. Without that, there was a high chance I would have died before getting accustomed to battle.

Now, as a step up from that—a ghoul—I possessed even stronger abilities than back then, but if asked if I could stand up to the Ender Knights, the answer was no. One-on-one, I'd lose with certainty. Even if there were five or six of me, they would kill me with the same ease as one cuts weeds.

I'd heard the Knights were the best of the best, having gone through severe training and experiences. Their armaments apparently varied from member to member, but each was as strong as a thousand men, and to make it worse, they were used to dealing with undead like me. Our fighting techniques were on different levels. Our physical abilities were on different levels. And if I was inferior in terms of experience, too, there wasn't even a slim chance I would win.

They were the light. If necromancers were dominators of the dark, they were the exact opposite. And not in the sense that their societal positions were high—or anything like that.

The Ender Knights controlled the opposite energy from necromancers.

I didn't understand the precise mechanisms behind it, but according to the books, the energy in this world could be broadly categorized into two groups: positive and negative.

You could call it light and dark, or life and death, but all those who lived and were alive possessed positive energy, without exception. And when that was reduced to zero, the living would die and part from this world forever.

On the other hand, there was a type of sorcery that broke that rule—and that was necromancy.

Their curses repurposed corpses to operate on negative energy.

Horos's magic had done the same to me and turned me into a puppet. The reason my body could move even though my heart wasn't beating was because he'd altered the power source driving my continued existence.

I'd been changed to operate on negative energy instead of the positive energy generated by a beating heart. And unlike positive energy, its negative counterpart didn't naturally decay.

That was why the undead had no lifespan—and why they were called *undead*.

But that didn't mean they were without weaknesses. My physical body was not invincible. I could move because the lord's powers had altered me somewhat. If my body was severely damaged and unable to hold its connection to my soul, I'd probably die. And if, for some reason, my energy was reduced to zero, I'd die in that case, too.

That much was fairly simple. Anything further was a little more complex and beyond my own understanding—including the reason the undead were at such a massive disadvantage to the Ender Knights.

For convenience's sake, I've been describing energy in terms of positive and negative, but that isn't quite accurate.

The positive was energy, but my power source, the negative, was not—it was more like a "state."

What the Knights controlled (technically, what all normal creatures controlled) was the power of light: positive energy.

They boasted unparalleled martial prowess, but up against the undead, they did not destroy—instead, with extreme efficiency, they *purified*. Rather than toiling away to destroy my body, they would add light energy to it, thereby altering my state from a negative to a zero state. The lord's powers had granted me a functioning body, but the moment this body entered a zero state, I would cease to operate. It would be my second death. This was the biggest weakness that I—no—all undead had.

Meanwhile, we undead couldn't use the same method against them.

Negative energy wasn't *energy*, per se (this had confused me quite a bit, too), so we couldn't amass a beam of negative energy and fire it, for example, to reduce them to zero.

The fundamental principles of the world made it impossible to remove this weakness.

It was truly cruel to think about, especially since I couldn't win in a straight fight. Of course, even if I hadn't had this weakness, I wouldn't stand a chance against the Knights given their overwhelming power...but I digress.

I was now stronger than ever before. It may seem strange to relate my past life as the epitome of weakness, but since I'd changed into a ghoul, I was better than a human in so many ways: mightier, tougher, and capable of healing my wounds. I'd also gained the ability to transform part of my nails with Sharpen Nails and sharpen my fangs with Hone Fangs.

In undead terms, I was a second-year. Unlike flesh-men, ghouls had to eat corpses to keep up their strength, but for reasons such as the absence of anything limiting their extreme might, they were unimaginably powerful.

In the rank system, ghouls were typically described as undead who could defeat one or two of the lowest-class mercenaries, but I was a little smarter than the typical specimen. I was confident I could take down three or four.

But that wouldn't be enough to defeat the heroic Ender Knights.

The simplest option would be to run away. I held no grudge against the Knights like the lord did, and I didn't particularly want to fight them. The lord, however, would get in the way of that with his privilege over me.

That privilege was a strong one. And in reality, it wasn't just how he could make me obey any order. I hadn't found much reading material regarding magic, but even from what I'd researched, I learned the lord had two other facets of authority aside from his absolute commands.

Those were the authority to know the general location of any undead he created and the authority to cast specific spells on them remotely.

No matter how much physical distance I put between us, we were linked via magical means. It was a kind of safety that wouldn't go away unless the lord died, and through it, the lord could freely cast magic on me. To put it simply, he could revert me to a corpse whenever he wanted.

It wasn't possible to remove that external authority. Actually, there might have been a way to, but it was too far out of the question. I didn't have time, either. Even if I wanted to flee, I'd have to kill the lord at any cost.

To be honest, I couldn't decide which would be harder: using the lord to defeat the Knights or killing the lord and running away.

I was cornered. Both options seemed nothing short of impossible, but I had to choose one.

The day after Hak left, before those worries had any hope of being resolved, I was placed into an even worse predicament. The lord had dispatched countless guards to keep watch over his residence: innumerable owls that silently patrolled the mansion and conveyed every last thing they heard to their master.

I couldn't sneak out during the night anymore, which meant that I, a ghoul, could no longer satisfy my appetite for food.

§ § §

I'd underestimated how careful the lord could be. Actually, you could say that I had only known a sliver of this world.

My sole source of information had been those books, and none of them had mentioned anything about surveillance magic.

Still, regardless of whether I could have done anything about it even if I had known, I should've at least predicted this. The spell the lord used clearly hadn't been necromancy, but I'd already known he could utilize other things.

The swarm of owls that appeared from the strange magic circle he'd drawn were let loose out the window. They scattered into the night forest. Fortunately, he didn't leave any of the owls inside the mansion. But if I couldn't get out, then I couldn't sate my hunger.

The lord called Lou to him, then commanded the limp, downcast slave in a sharp voice:

"Lou, when they return, feed them. They are familiars—my eyes and ears. Servants who are much more useful and loyal than you."

"Y-yes, of course, Master... I, ah... Th-that is... What should I...give them?"

"Meat. Bloody, fresh, and raw. No need to do anything with it."

Lou was frightened, but I didn't have time to empathize.

His eyes and ears. This was the worst thing that could have possibly happened. I didn't have the skill to slip past the eyes of the lord's familiars to enjoy a night walk.

The skeleton knights patrolling the mansion were excellent guardsmen who lacked any concept of exhaustion, but they didn't have the intelligence to report on the movements of their allies. They lacked vocal cords, too. But those owls were different. If the lord considered them his eyes and ears, then they'd probably convey anything they saw or heard to him immediately.

Going out to hunt at night...would be impossible. It was far too risky.

And the lord was already on high alert as it was.

My nighttime hunts meant two things to me: accumulating strength to accelerate my rank mutation—and food. The latter was the issue right now.

Undead rank mutations weren't purely increases in strength. They came with new shortcomings, too.

The advantages and disadvantages balanced each other out. Ghouls had higher physical abilities than flesh-men, and while they were better than flesh-men in almost every way, unlike flesh-men, they needed food to survive.

Food wasn't optional; it was a requirement, one that only ghouls had—a very powerful hunger. A hunger more intense than I'd ever felt it in my lifetime, a hunger that could completely take over your logical mind.

That was likely the biggest reason ghouls attacked people.

What I'd experienced at first, after mutating, had been hell. My mind had been on fire, and impulses shook my instincts. The words *I want to eat* dominated my thoughts, and everything—the lord, Lou, corpses, the other undead—looked like food to me. I had managed to repress that provocation and acquire food only because I had been lucky.

My desire to survive was just a tiny bit stronger than my appetite. That was how I desperately held the impulse down and was able to sneak out to the mansion's food stores before attacking the corpses or the lord. One wrong move, and I'd have transformed into a demon controlled by his appetite, and my desire to survive would never have overridden my hunger again.

A ghou's hunger wasn't something you could endure through willpower alone. My already tight schedule had just disappeared almost entirely. In my experience, if I didn't eat anything, my ghouish hunger would reach its limit in about three days.

After that, it would be a battle against reason. I'd held it together for half a day last time. That would probably be how long I'd last this time, too.

But I was defeated the moment I found myself in this state.

A ghou's strength was inversely proportional to its hunger. My power rapidly decreased the closer to empty my stomach got.

I didn't know how far down it would go, but I probably didn't have much time to waste. But with Lou doubting me, I couldn't sneak into the food stores like I did the first time.

I went hunting with the lord as he commanded.

Even though I didn't have the energy for it, I was accustomed to hunting the magical beasts, and they posed no real threat. And I had backup.

Shoving down my hunger, which smoldered within me like embers, I simply focused on impassively following orders. I killed a hunk of living meat in front of me, then another, then another. I was hungry. Blood splattered, and a warm corpse fell. But I couldn't lay a hand on them. If the lord knew I'd mutated into a ghou with intelligence, he'd shackle me. It was no more than good fortune that he hadn't placed strong shackles on me already.

What should I do...? The lord was constantly on his guard by now. I highly doubted a surprise attack would work.

Blocking a pebble flung like an arrow with my billhook, I cut a monkey that had been hiding atop the trees diagonally from its shoulder.

My only ray of hope...was a rank mutation. If it happened, and I ceased to be a ghou, I wouldn't have to be tormented by this hunger anymore. It wouldn't solve the underlying problem, and it would give me other big issues, but it would at least buy some time.

Was it possible? It had been around three months since I'd mutated into a ghoul, a far shorter time than the usual period for a flesh-man to achieve a rank mutation, which was anywhere from six months to a year. But the next mutation was supposed to take *years*.

A miracle—I needed a miracle. I forcibly deflected my thoughts away from my empty stomach and mowed down a pack of surrounding nightwolves with my billhook in a bloodbath. And then, suddenly, the lord said suspiciously, "...End, your movements seem sluggish."

"..."

"Has something happened? You...don't appear to be wounded."

"..."

The lord's clouded eyes inspected me as an artist would analyze their own work. A brief chill passed over me, but after I stood silently for a few moments, he decided it was his imagination and commanded me to seek out the next prey.

...How had he sensed something was wrong?

For an instant, I felt an indescribable irritation, but I was fighting while resisting my empty stomach with everything I had. It wasn't the least bit strange for the lord, who had always been close at hand watching me fight, to feel as though something was out of place. I'd been trying to behave the same way as always, but I couldn't help feeling rushed.

Mindlessly, I swung my weapon. And swung. And swung. Blood sprayed, and by coincidence, a droplet went into my mouth.

I'd never tasted wine before, but perhaps my current state was comparable to that of a drunken man. An incredible heat rose from the pit of my stomach, ran up my esophagus, and rattled my thoughts.

It wasn't enough. Just blood wasn't enough. My swelling hunger pounded against my sense of reason, and I nearly stumbled.

"What's wrong?! End, what happened?"

The movement had clearly lacked vitality. The lord shouted at me, voice sharp.

That single drop of blood had done absolutely nothing for my starvation.

I couldn't. Not yet. I couldn't let him know. I needed to survive. I didn't have a goal or a reason. I just—wanted to live. Even if I had to sacrifice everything to do so.

Without letting my emotions show on my face, I focused on a point near my navel and overwrote the intractable hunger with rational thought. I endured the frustration that was slowly consuming me like smoldering flames.

With that, I managed to get through the day's hunt without being suspected.

I returned to the mansion with the lord.

Lou, who never came to welcome us back, was waiting inside.

In the darkness, her face, illuminated by the candlestick she held, was exhausted and lifeless, but there was a strange glow in her eyes I'd never seen before.

I had a bad feeling about this. The lord folded his arms and looked down at her like someone would view trash. Then, in a hoarse voice, Lou said:

"Mas...ter... I... I...found proof that I...was telling the truth..."

My hunger clashed with my desire to survive. I was sure I didn't have any body heat, but I felt like I was burning up from within.

I had no time to be bothering with Lou right now, but she was clearly determined to accuse me, someone who had never harmed her before.

Lou led us—the lord silently furious, and me enduring my hunger—to the underground room where I spent most of my time.

What was it that she said she'd found? There were no traces of me having moved around in the morgue. The floor was stone, and I'd been extremely careful not to leave any evidence that I had done anything in here. The room was virtually empty; its sole furnishings were the shelves and the stone beds on which the corpses lay. And since the corpses belonged to the lord, I'd been absolutely careful not to touch them.

“O-over here, Master...”

When we reached the basement room, Lou shuddered, then strode over to the shelves.

And I finally realized what Lou had found.

My face stiffened. For just a moment, I forgot all about the hunger.

Lou grabbed the second drawer from the bottom. It had originally been empty—but now it contained a dust-covered encyclopedia on the undead from the lord’s library.

It was one I’d brought here before Lou’s first accusation—and one of my favorites.

As far as I knew, neither the lord nor Lou ever touched the shelf in the basement, so I’d grown careless.

She’d known I’d been reading books—I should’ve hidden the evidence right then and there.

Lou had probably been searching for concrete proof that I’d been moving around ever since the lord had rebuffed her first accusation. To think such an exhausted girl would go that far to deceive me—human malice knew no bounds.

As the lord watched in dubiousness, Lou theatrically lifted the undead encyclopedia to him.

Both Lou and I were the lord’s underlings. We were the same in that regard. Why was she trying so hard to make me suffer?

My fingertips twitched. But I couldn’t move. Not now.

“L-look, Master. There shouldn’t be...any books...in here. This man, this undead, he brought this book from the library!! Master, this man has—”

Lou made her accusation in a trembling voice. The lord took the book she held out to him, thought in silence for a moment, and then spoke in a low voice that seemed to echo from the pits of hell.

“...And where is the proof that you did not bring this book here yourself?”

“.....Huh?”

I’d won. It seemed the lord’s trust in Lou had bottomed out.

The lord tossed the encyclopedia to the floor. It had been a dusty thing from the back of the library to begin with, so it probably didn’t have much worth to him.

Lou looked up at him, her expression baffled.

The lord continued quietly in a voice lacking emotion, concealing his serious anger.

“Irredeemable girl... I thought I told you that the next time you reported a falsehood...you wouldn’t get off easy. And you went so far as to use this—to return my favor with ingratitude.”

“B-but that’s... I—”

“I’ve always thought about how *defective* the spell for binding slaves is. That I should have forced you into absolute submission like when I control the undead...”

Lou fell to the floor on her rear end, white as a sheet. The lord took a wand from his waist with his right hand, stroked it with his left as though to check it, and then took a step closer. An eerie green light shone from its tip.

I’d seen him use this light many times before—the one produced from undead creation magic.

Regret and terror flooded into Lou’s expression. The strength fled her limbs completely, and she could do nothing but gaze up at the lord and beg for mercy.

“F-forgive me—”

“Say nothing, Lou. You will be reborn faithful. Though your memories will disappear...”

Without listening to her pleas, the lord raised the wand high over his head. The green light illuminated his face and all the wrinkles and anger engraved on it. Lou was so beside herself with fright that she couldn’t even run away.

A lukewarm liquid spread around her crotch area—she must have wet herself.

I thanked her silently.

This was it. The time had come.

The lord had his back to me. He was fully focused on Lou.

I quashed my hunger and gritted my teeth. Before I was conscious of it, the nails on both my hands quietly extended. It was like my body was demanding that I devour my prey.

I was certain: Now was my only chance.

I would kill the lord, my savior, my fated foe. My power wasn't at its peak, but it was enough to slay a soft human.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If I let it slip, I'd never have another shot.

I didn't breathe. My heart didn't beat. I was a dead man. Silence was one of a dead man's strong points.

My body remembered how to kill a living being. My lord had taught me from the very beginning.

The lord focused his mind and murmured two or three magic words. His wand came down at the wretched slave whom nobody believed.

Without wasting a fraction of an instant, I swiped my nails at the back of the lord's defenseless head with all my might.

I put everything I had into it.

My nails easily pierced the lord's skull. Lou's eyes widened in shock at my sudden violent act. But it was too late.

There was no excitement. Only a dark pleasure. Perhaps that was proof I'd become a monster after all.

I dislodged my nails from his soft skull. Warm blood sprayed, and a smile naturally crossed my face.

I'd killed him. Now I was free. I would get out of this forest immediately and then escape to wherever I wanted.

I didn't intend to fight the Ender Knights. I could just live slaying monsters in some other forest like this one. Until I was bored of my new life anyway.

And then, suddenly, there was a loud cracking noise.

"What—? What...is the meaning of this?"

"?!"

A voice I couldn't possibly have heard struck my ears.

I didn't understand. After a few moments, all the hair on my body stood on end.

I was sure my nails had pierced his head. He hadn't dodged it or blocked it or anything.

The voice had come from in front of me. The lord, to whom I'd dealt a lethal blow, didn't change his posture whatsoever and spoke calmly. I'd shoved my nails into his skull as far as they would go—and yet there was no trace of any wound.



No—that was impossible. The lord wasn't undead. As a ghoul, I could clearly tell he was a living human being.

At some point, the blood that had stuck to my nails, and the bloodstains spattered around, had disappeared.

No, no, no—that's impossible.

I killed him—I know I did. He should be dead!

“To think that, already, you truly possess...intelligence. No—you've had it for a while yet... Fascinating.”

“!!”

Not yet. It wasn't over yet.

With a cry, I thrust my arm out with every last bit of strength. I aimed not for his head. This time, I aimed for his heart.

All five nails easily pierced the lord's frail back, through the robe, opening a huge hole in his body. I felt the sensation of warm blood on my palm, and there was the dull, gloppy sound of blood flowing.

And then, once again, I heard the startlingly uncanny noise.

From the lord, whose trunk had been pierced right before my eyes, came a voice—sounding wholly absent of anger, sounding actually impressed.

“Piercing my head...was not the reason...I did not die. Still, that was clever. Very clever. I don't know how long you have had intelligence for—but you were waiting patiently even after achieving your rank mutation, weren't you? Vigilantly awaiting a chance to take my life? Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I hadn't expected much, but you seem to have been...a more wonderful specimen than I predicted... I'll have to...give my thanks to Hak.”

He was a monster. Even a ghoul like me would react after having its heart pierced.

This couldn't be happening. Was this...a true necromancer?

I'd known I stood no chance in a fair fight. That was why I'd attacked now, when the timing couldn't have been better.

My heart felt on the verge of breaking, supported only by my hunger and desire to live.

I pulled my arm out. The moment it exited, all that flesh and blood I *knew* had stuck to my arm vanished like mist.

For a fraction of an instant, my thoughts were racing.

What now? How do I kill a creature who could survive skull and heart injuries?

Actually...wait. It wasn't that he was living in spite of a fatal wound. It wasn't an extreme recovery ability or anything like that. It was almost like he'd done something to somehow...make things seem as though the attack had never happened...?

I couldn't flee. I couldn't even defend myself. I made the decision instantly: I'd keep trying until I *could* kill him.

For the first time, before the lord, I roared.

"Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

I swiped upward with my nails. But right before the sharpened tips sliced his robe, I heard Lord Horos's voice cut through my roar.

"Stop."

The command penetrated me like a bolt of lightning. My arm spasmed, and the sudden stopping hit it hard. With crackling, spurting noises, my arm's composition burst, and a dull pain assailed me. For all the loyalty with which my body had been moving, for all the freedom my flesh had displayed, no matter how hard I willed it, I couldn't move any farther.

It was over—I couldn't win no matter what. The man before me... He was a monster. Someone as lowly as me couldn't even compare.

As I stood there without taking a step, as ordered, the lord slowly turned around.

There was no rage in his expression. But there *was* a dark sense of pleasure spread across it. It was a vivid indication of the difference in our strength. For him, for the man in front of me who had been enraged by Lou's false reports

(which had actually been the truth), a rebellion launched during a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity wasn't even enough to be angry about.

If there'd been any threat to his life, the lord's face would have changed a little.

My one-in-a-million chance, my one-in-a-*billion* chance at a revolt had failed.

Then, as if to torment me, the lord revealed his secret.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh... End, you may be smart...but you know nothing of sorcery. You failed because you believed that I had...heh-heh...just *one* life. Ah yes, I grant you permission to speak."

"What...is going on?" I asked.

I'd been trying to attack him the entire time, but my body wouldn't move. It was locked in place like it was a boulder. A wide grin spread across the lord's face as he slowly took a round silver stone from inside his robe.

The stone had a mysterious sheen to it; I'd never seen anything like it before. It had probably been a smooth sphere in the past, but now it had a large crack.

"Heh-heh-heh... You see, I have split my life into one hundred and twenty lives. What you killed amounted to naught more than two of those. For a subordinate like you to kill me, you would have needed to deal one hundred and twenty fatal blows in the span of an instant. That much is typical for first-rate necromancers."

The crack widened, and then the silver orb in the lord's hand shattered. But I didn't have time to watch it.

One hundred and twenty lives...?! That couldn't be true. No such concepts had been in any of the fairy tales I'd read during my lifetime. It was foul play, saying such a thing—but at the same time, the lord's calm demeanor spoke to the truth of the matter.

If his words were true...then I would never, ever beat him.

I could kill him once or twice with a surprise attack, but killing all 120 of his lives wouldn't be possible.

My rebellion had been doomed from the outset.

A powerful sense of regret washed over me. But I couldn't have done anything. I hadn't had any other option. I could've only chosen to do it slightly earlier or later. The important part...would happen now.

What would become of me after this? How would the man before me judge this ghoul guilty of mutiny?

As I glared at him, the lord smiled, then made his command.

"However... I cannot tolerate continued attempts on my life. End, from this point on, I hereby forbid you to engage in all offensive activity toward me, as well as anything that may be disadvantageous for me."

I knew it—this is what it's come to.

But those words, which just a few minutes ago I would have rather died than listen to, came as a relief. They showed that, for the time being, he had no intention of killing me.

And that reassuring reality caused me intractable despair.

I had several new questions, but I discarded them for the moment.

I couldn't let myself get discouraged. What I needed right now...was an unbreakable will and deep, dark conviction.

Horos Kamen. I will kill you. I will, no matter what it takes. Compared to the inescapable death I felt pressing down on me in life, you are but a triviality. I don't care what I have to do or how many years or decades it takes—I will win back my freedom.

"Heh-heh-heh... Such incredible determination. A will as black as night, unwaning even after sensing the unscalable difference in our power. The intelligence to hide it all, even after a rank mutation and attaining sentience. You are the true king of the dead I have so desired. My long-held wish stands poised to come true. The immortal killers, the Ender Knights, are at my doorstep, but... Heh-heh-heh, ha-ha-ha-ha..."

The lord's gaze shifted, and he cackled uproariously. His eyes shone brightly in the darkness. I could see Lou, who had been discarded just before being turned into an undead, curled up on the floor and trembling.

“You will serve me, End—unconditionally, in spite of your wishes.”

“Give me my freedom. I’ll obey your commands.” My rebellion was already out in the open. False submission would get me nowhere. And it was probably what the lord wanted, too.

As I stared him down, he laughed with amusement, as I’d predicted. “Heh-heh-heh... For one who I heard died from illness, you are a ferocious man indeed! Well...fine, then. End, I give you permission to move.”

“...Command me again.”

“? I permit you to move.”

My body, which had been frozen in place for some minutes now, immediately got its freedom back as soon as I heard those words.

Without wasting a moment, I turned around and ran for the door as fast as I could. Without paying attention to the dull pain in my arm, I kicked off the floor with all my might, dashing up the stairs. From behind me came a frantic shout.

“End, do not run!”

“...”

I hadn’t thought that would work. I knew it was doomed to fail from the beginning. But I still had to try.

As I came to a stop, the lord sighed, approaching me.

“So attentive, so guarded. But those are the proper qualities that a king of the dead *should* have.”

And so, starting the next day, my life in captivity began—a life no different on the surface but one that bound my entire body with invisible chains.

Chapter 2

Desire to Survive



Chapter 2

Desire to Survive

The lord and I had gone out for our nightly hunt.

Now that I didn't need to hide my true ability anymore, the magical beasts in the forest were no match for me.

I'd already gotten used to the physical abilities of a ghoul during my own hunts every night. Between the billhook and my nails, higher physical capacity than a flesh-man, and the lord's backup on top of all that, I was unmatched.

I mowed down an entire pack of nightwolves, which had been such terrifying creatures before, and fed on their flesh.

The meat was raw, but a sweet-flavored heat the likes of which I had no memory of from life slid down my throat and burned within me.

I used to take off my clothes for my nightly hunts because I couldn't let them get dirty, and I'd had to be extremely careful not to get any blood on myself, but none of that mattered now.

I devoured the corpses while covered in blood as the lord murmured, sounding impressed, "To mutate into a ghoul in only three months... Such incredible talent. And...to have thoroughly concealed the mutation for so long..."

"How many months did the last one take to become a ghoul?"

"Ten. But that was by no means a long time. You... You are too fast. There are certainly individual differences, but nonetheless... It must be your noble blood."

Sure, I'd been the son of a small-time noble, one who had governed a region. But it wasn't a large house, not like the ones the nobles in the stories were part of, and no one in my family had accomplished anything of note. We simply had

more money than average people, and while I was grateful to let them try to extend my lifespan after I'd been ravaged by the incurable disease, my noble blood had never felt special to me.

As I dug my sharpened fangs into the bones of the nightwolves, with all the meat sticking to them, I glared at the lord.

"...Nobles, commoners—they all end up as corpses," I said.

".....You're not wrong. Ah well. You will likely mutate into a darkstalker before too long. As for the reason...I will leave that for you to ponder."

The lord sounded partially like he was talking to himself.

All my desperate resolution and rebellion had earned me were a few tiny bits of information.

And the most crucial among them...was that I couldn't hope to do anything to the lord in my current state.

I was helpless, now that he'd forbidden me from attacking him or doing anything that would cause him harm. But even if he hadn't, it wouldn't have been possible to cleave through all 120 of his lives before receiving an absolute order. My surprise attack had managed to shave off two, but even if the lord hadn't stopped my actions using a command, I probably couldn't have killed him anyway.

The lord had magic. And against that, I had no recourse.

I had figured it wouldn't matter if I killed him in a surprise attack, but I'd gravely underestimated sorcerers.

A darkstalker. A demon who lurked in the shadows—and the next thing I would mutate into after ghoul.

According to the encyclopedia, there were very few of them among the undead, but I doubted I'd be able to match the lord even if I mutated into one.

"...If I become a darkstalker, will I be able to defeat the Ender Knights?"

"No, of course not. Don't overthink things. Loath though I am to speak of it, they are specialists at hunting the denizens of the dark. Even against a third-rank knight, in a fair fight, you would never win. For the living dead to attain

victory over them would require...an abyss that even their power could not easily fill in... One would need to be at least a vampire.”

The lord uttered the name of the most famous of all undead, far higher than what I was on the chain of mutation.

After becoming a ghoul, I thought I’d gained a considerable amount of power. But apparently, once again, that had been pure arrogance.

The Ender Knights were supposedly human. They weren’t like the undead, who grew massively stronger by killing living creatures as I did.

How did humans acquire so much power for themselves? The lord, a necromancer, was more powerful than the fairy tales implied, and it seemed the Ender Knights had the strength to oppose him.

It was hard for me to believe, from my perspective—having been someone whose only possession had been a body merely awaiting its death.

And that only made it more important that I not let people like them kill me. If they were going to kill me...then I’d kill them first. Anyone who tried to kill me was an enemy, regardless of whether I’d idolized them long ago.

“Rest assured,” the lord said darkly, “they have spread watches in this forest. For the present, those are your enemies. You may have the makings of the king of the dead, but as you are now, you are weak. Our interests align. I will not allow you to be defeated so easily.” He snorted.

I silently clicked my tongue in annoyance. Then I finished my meal and stood up to search for new prey.

The lord was my enemy. My greatest enemy.

His absolute control over me made him significantly more troublesome than even the Ender Knights. At least I could run away from them.

As always, after being returned to the basement room, I was ordered not to leave it. The only thing given to me was that encyclopedia of the undead that I’d read cover to cover—the book that had led to Lou accusing me.

If I’d been in the lord’s position, I would’ve given the same command.

His unbreakable authority over me was powerful but not invincible. At the very least, having an undead subordinate who hated him and also had intelligence was doubtlessly inconvenient for him. Nearly every book in his library contained magic spells, so giving one to an undead who could read was too dangerous (even though I couldn't actually read the language they were written in).

But no matter how much I understood the logic behind it, I couldn't tolerate this state of affairs. My freedom was much more restricted than before, when I could sneak outside—*too* restricted. It felt suffocating.

Of course...it was far better than being killed.

In the basement room, filled with only corpses I was forbidden from eating, thinking and exercising were about all I was allowed to do.

The one good thing about my situation was that the lord had convinced himself that I'd acquired my intelligence through my rank mutation.

The worst of it was not that the lord had stopped my rebellion. It was that the lord was overwhelmingly powerful.

He was too strong. How was I supposed to beat someone with 120 lives?

He wouldn't die in an accident, and even death by old age...didn't seem promising.

Most importantly, I didn't know what the lord's goal was.

Why was he still bringing me on nightly hunts, even after finding out about my rebelliousness, and trying to raise me? Besides that, why wasn't he seeking to give me any of the knowledge I'd need to be strong? And what in the world was this king of the dead? What was he attempting to do in this forest? I'd tried asking him that one, but he always evaded the question.

He was a necromancer. There was little doubt he was plotting wicked things, and by restricting my freedom, he showed he didn't have any intention to try to get along with me.

The lord's eyes when he looked at me were incredibly unimpassioned. It wasn't the gaze a father would bestow on a well-brought-up son—it was one

someone might give to a successful experiment of their own creation.

Did he plan on strengthening me as an underling and using me as a powerful pawn? Even though I'd defied him?

That wasn't possible. The lord didn't trust me.

I looked at his owl familiar in one corner of the room. Its glittering, inorganic eyes were locked on me.

The Ender Knights were approaching. I had to kill the lord at any cost.

He had 120 lives—no, I took two, so 118. I was still bound to his commands, and I needed to get away from him somehow.

Hugging my knees, I sat in a corner and lowered my face. I scratched madly at my head, then opened my eyes and sank into thought.

I endured the intense impatience and pondered. But in the end, I didn't come up with any ideas that stood out.

However, a few days into my experience of this cramped lifestyle, the fateful hour arrived.

The opportunity came from the lord himself after a hunt:

"End. You will go with Lou, as her bodyguard, to the nearby town—to Enge."

My eyes widened at the unexpected order. I even forgot my unhappiness over my current lack of freedom.

As my expression changed, the lord furrowed his brow and stroked his staff.

"The town is dangerous—but I cannot go. I've prepared an item that will hide the scent of death from the Knights. Proceed with caution, and all will be well. I'm sure someone who deceived me so fully will have no issue."

I had no right to refuse. And I didn't intend to.

It was possible that I would find something in the town that I needed to change this state of affairs.

I constructed a frown, not letting my thoughts reach the surface. The lord watched me with keen eyes.

And that was where I would first see the heroes, the natural enemy of necromancers and the undead—a group of warriors lauded since times of yore as the strongest in the world for their overwhelming advantage over the darkness.

§ § §

It had been a long time indeed since I'd gone into town.

About five or six years had passed since I'd become bedridden.

The sunlight stung my skin. We always went out hunting at night, so I hadn't been out during the day for quite some time, either.

Sunlight was poison to all undead. It radiated positive energy, albeit weakly; thus, most undead were only active at night.

But that didn't mean we *couldn't* be active during the day.

The most famous of the undead, for whom sunlight was said to be their weakness, were vampires, who would turn to ash from exposure alone. However, that wasn't because their abyss was completely filled up with the sunlight's positive energy—it was due to the effects of the curse itself. In exchange for their restriction preventing them from being active in the sunlight, they wielded immense powers at night.

When it came to the curses on the undead, as a general rule, the more weaknesses they had, the stronger they became.

Like how a ghoul gained several levels of power in exchange for needing food and feeling a tiny bit of pain. And according to the lord, ghouls—one of the lowest of the undead ranks—weren't subject to the influence of the sunlight.

The curse on pre-mutation flesh-men had zero restrictions regarding sunlight, but they possessed little negative energy. Even the tiny amount of positive energy the sunlight contained was a major burden for them. The undead with the best balance overall, which could also be active under the sun, was apparently the ghoul.

The lord had lent me two things for our errand in town: the Cloak of Perpetual Night, which lessened the sunlight's effects, and the Amulet of Shadow, which hid my negative presence from the Ender Knights.

Because of the jet-black cloak, moving around wasn't much different for me even in daylight. It was almost enough to make me forget I was an undead. But my next mutation, the darkstalker, would apparently be heavily affected by the sunlight, so this might be the last chance I ever had to walk around in the daytime normally.

Lou, who had been assigned to the errand with me, walked in front without speaking a word. What little of her skin was exposed was about as white and sickly as mine—an undead—and with her spindly arms and legs, she looked even more deathly than I did. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and her hair was only nominally brushed. Her clothing was cleaner than usual, but that was because the lord had made her wear things that wouldn't make her stand out when she traveled.

In the end, the lord's attitude toward Lou, who had risked her life to accuse me, hadn't changed in the slightest.

She'd avoided being turned into an undead, but that was it. I didn't know her background, nor did I have much interest in it, but she must not have been worth very much to the lord at all.

I didn't have any interest in her, but I did feel a certain amount of sympathy. She was only a tad better to be around than the lord, but her enslavement reminded me of when I was confined to a bed in my past life.

If I ever managed to safely kill the lord, I might find it in myself to release her.

The mission the lord had given us was to receive an item in town that he'd requested from Hak.

Lou smoothly led us out of the forest and into town. Monsters had attacked us on the way, but I'd already reached a level where I could make it through the forest while protecting someone. I wasn't given the billhook I always used since it had a chance of coming off as suspicious, but even handicapped with Lou, my nails were more than enough.

Enge was about an hour's walk from the forest. I'd thought we were in a pretty secluded area, considering Hak regularly brought coffins to the mansion, but it was closer than I'd thought. The forest the mansion was in was vast, and it would probably be difficult to find if you didn't know where it was, but if you knew what direction to go in, you could possibly even get there just by walking straight.

With that in mind, it seemed natural that Hak had stopped coming into the forest once he'd caught wind of the visitation of our sworn enemies, the Knights.

The town of Enge was fairly prosperous. It wasn't a big city, but it wasn't small enough to be called a village, either. The gates were sturdy, the ground had been packed down underfoot, and several large carriages were traveling this way and that.

It had the hustle and bustle I'd craved so long ago.

We entered the town using the identification the lord had prepared for us. There was no sign that anyone suspected I was an undead.

Despite being an undead, though, my appearance was fairly close to human. My face lacked color, but plenty of people had the same issue. If I showed the kind of intelligence the undead usually didn't possess, most of the odd factor would go away.

Vampires were especially feared, the reason being that they had higher intelligence than the average undead and could infiltrate communities of people. I was a ghoul, but I could speak and even be out in the sunlight. In terms of blending in, it was quite possibly the best form of undead—even better than vampires, who could only move around during the night.

With just a tiny bit of anticipation, I looked at the throngs of people. The place was filled with sounds, colors, and smells.

"Lou, could I look around town a little?"

"....."

I didn't mind the lord's darkness-veiled mansion, but the scenery here was wonderful. We were only given enough money for the item, so I couldn't spend

any, but I doubted we'd be punished for the smallest amount of sightseeing.

As I stood with my eyes wide, trying to burn the bright imagery into my mind, Lou answered curtly, "We were...ordered...by the master...to finish our business...and return at once."

"But he didn't tell us to finish our business swiftly without taking any detours. As long as we tell the same story, we won't have a problem."

".....Your...duty...is to...protect me."

"We've been living in such darkness this whole time," I said in persuasion, voice lowered, chasing after the quickly walking Lou. "We deserve a little fun."

Lou had been serving the lord for far longer than I had. She must've had that many more complaints about him.

"The lord can't see us or hear us right now. He'll never know. And it isn't like we'd be disobeying orders. He told us to hurry, but he didn't give us a time limit."

"....."

"The restrictions on you are a lot lighter than the ones on me. If I could do it, you'd have to be able to."

Slaves were few in number, but they were fairly commonplace. Even I knew a little bit about the restrictions on them.

A slave collar had a spell cast on it to prevent the wearer from disobeying orders. However, unlike the unrestricted, absolute commands one could give the undead, this spell was quite loose.

The restriction placed upon slaves...was pain.

My body would follow commands on its own, but if a slave disobeyed orders, they would feel intense pain as punishment.

The number of restrictions differed, too. A slave collar could have only three at one time. Two of them were always to prevent self-harm and to forbid any indirect or direct attacks against their master, so only one remained for whatever command was right for the job. The command had to be strict. If it was too broad in its scope, an accidental breach of that command could

possibly kill the slave with the pain, and conversely, it left the door open for exploitation.

There were several loopholes when it came to slave commands—and that was why I'd been told to accompany Lou.

I knew exactly what the lord had ordered her to do since he'd given it right in front of me. Lou had just said it was to *finish our business...and return at once*. The lord had also explained to her in detail how if I somehow died during the errand, she would be subjected to extensive torture and then killed.

The commands he'd given me were to protect Lou and obey her instructions as much as possible, and that if things got out of hand, I would abandon Lou and flee back to the mansion on my own. There was no limit to the number of commands he could give me, so the earlier prohibitions against taking any action that would harm the lord as well as running away still remained. But at the very least, the commands given to Lou and me weren't in conflict.

When she thought about that nice idea I had, Lou's eyes changed for the first time.

With a gaze filled with fear and a tiny bit of anger, she looked up at me and, in a trembling voice, said, "D-don't...tempt me...you monster. I will report...everything you've...told me...to the master...later..."

So much for negotiations, then... Lou's tone was more mature and stubborn than her appearance would suggest.

I couldn't blame her. She'd already been punished once because of me. Strictly speaking, I was not the reason—it was her own fault for stepping out of line—but she probably didn't think of it that way.

With Lou acting courageous to hide the fear she felt within, I smiled at her. "It won't work. Surely you've realized by now... Even if you made that report, he won't ever treat you any differently, until the day you die. The lord already knows that I *was* saying and doing all those things."

That was why the lord had avoided sending me to town alone. Part of it might have been that I didn't know the way, but he could have given me a map or something, and I would have managed. I was sure he'd put me with Lou

because we weren't allies. I should have expected as much from a cunning sorcerer—everything he thought was insidious.

Lou's purple lips shut tightly, and her face stiffened.

She did not have a taboo existence like I did, but she seemed to fear and distrust everything.

And I'd just gone into town for the first time in so long...and was feeling so refreshed, too.

How wonderful would it have been if I could freely buy things, eat, and sightsee?

"Here's an idea. If you go along with my proposal...then once something kills the lord, and you become free, I'll bring you safely to town."

For a moment, Lou looked baffled at my offer, but her face quickly fell. Her eyes opened wide as she clenched her skinny hands and broke out into a shiver. The voice that emerged had more feeling in it than before.

"The master...would never die. He's invincible. The master...is a fearsome person. I've seen him fight off and kill...many people before now. You and I...would be the first ones to die."

She practically sounded like she was shrieking.

I didn't feel any deep emotion. No pity. All I felt when I heard her say that was disappointment.

I'd predicted this from how she had been in the past, but when actually presented with it, that particular emotion still got through.

Lou's heart was already in pieces. In fact, that was probably why she could continue serving as a slave under an evil necromancer for so long. Her shackles were loose, but nevertheless, she'd kept on living, letting herself be pulled along by the current. Perhaps her fear of the lord was out of her knowledge that, when it came to necromancers, death did not mean salvation.

I wouldn't be able to persuade her. I'd thought that she'd be a powerful ally if I could go about this skillfully enough, but she was too weak to be my

collaborator. If I wanted her help, even for something small, I'd have to come up with a good way to persuade her.

"I see...," I replied. "That's, well...scary."

"....."

Lou started off walking again at my inoffensive comment, hanging her head a little and not saying anything, as though she were a puppet. I breathed a short sigh, then decided to go along with her as I'd been commanded.

The reception of the requested item went smoothly, and carrying it, we headed for the town's exit.

When Hak saw Lou and me coming, he'd just opened his eyes wide—he didn't say anything. He was the type not to intrude on his clients' affairs, probably because of the shady nature of his business. I liked the man.

The item the lord had prepared was bundled up in a thick cloth.

It was close to a meter long, with a slender tip and a thicker base. It was a strange shape if it was a weapon, and it was too heavy for Lou to lift. I didn't know what the item was, but it was important enough for the crafty lord to risk the danger of sending me to town. Hak hadn't said anything he hadn't needed to, so I couldn't guess as to what was inside, but maybe it was a secret weapon for the lord.

In the end, I didn't get to do any sightseeing. Still, if I kept surviving like this, I'd get another chance or two eventually. Feeling dragged away against my will, I followed Lou and headed out of town.

And then I encountered a living embodiment of the sun.

They were near the gate leading out.

Just seeing them made my mind go blank for a moment. The energy left my body, and the lord's item fell from my arms. My knees buckled in dizziness, as though I'd stood up too quickly, but I frantically rallied my nerves and got back up. Lou turned around to face me, wondering what was happening.

It was a group of several people clad in armor polished to an immaculate white, and a variety of weapons hung from their hips and backs. At a glance,

they looked like any old knights. But what made them so different from other people was...the positive energy they held inside them.

An undead such as myself could somewhat sense the positive energy the humans we ate had.

The energy around this group was far beyond any human's I'd seen thus far. They were still a hundred meters away, but they were so radiant I couldn't look at them directly.

Not because they were physically glowing. Nobody else had their eyes on them.

But I knew. And *despair* was too tepid a term.

If I had to compare them to anything, it would be to light, to the moon, to the sun—to miracles.

My arms and legs trembled, and though I'd stopped needing to breathe long ago, my breathing grew ragged.

I was so insignificant compared to them that just getting too close would probably be enough to wipe me from existence.

My mind, my instincts, were sounding alarm bells at full blast. I wanted to run away, but my legs wouldn't move at all.

The curse operating my body was saying that if I got near them, I'd disappear—and that even if I didn't, the mere act of opposing them would spell my demise.

They were the natural predators of all undead. Heroes. Champions. Disciples of light. The ones who killed necromancers.

...The Ender Knights.

I had always wondered if there was truly anything the lord, with his life split into 120, would fear.

My faith wasn't as strong as Lou's, but I'd never doubted the lord would win. But now, having seen them for real, I understood down to my very soul why he would view the Ender Knights as such mortal enemies.

I'd known they were heroes. I'd looked up to them once, too. But I'd never truly believed in their existence.

Against them...I couldn't win. I would never—not as I was now.

I was a demon whose only skills were in eating corpses. How would I be able to beat those who could unleash a light stronger than the sun itself?

"...What's wrong? Quick... Pick up...the item."

"R-right..."

Lou's words snapped me out of it. Burning the sight into my eyes, I slowly squatted and picked up the item that had fallen to the ground. I bit my lip hard. As I moved, I resolved myself.

I needed to beat them. If they attacked me, I had to devour the light in order to live. I had to win. The lord called the Ender Knights our fated enemies, but he never ran away. The crafty old necromancer would have to know all about them, and he must have had a way to defeat them.

Rallying strength into my entire body, I brushed aside the light threatening to overtake me even at this distance.

It was fine. They'd never find me. I was too far away, and I'd borrowed protective charms from the lord to deal with them.

The amulet with a large black gemstone—the Amulet of Shadow—concealed the negative energy all the undead gave off and that the Ender Knights could sense, preventing it from leaking out.

I tightened my hand around the amulet in my pocket, then walked toward the gate slowly, gathering information.

Thanks to having endured the shock once already, as long as I used all the strength I had, I could move without succumbing to the pressure.

I counted six Ender Knights—a mix of old and young, male and female.

Among them were three large men who looked very knightly and one blond-haired woman. Their weapons included a mace, a staff, a sword and shield, and a bow. All in all, they gave off a far stronger light than normal people did.

It was said that there were three ranks in the Ender Knights. They were probably the ones called third-rank knights. Like the lord said, I definitely didn't have any chance of beating them.

Nonetheless—they were still the better choice.

There was one woman with a beautiful, silvery, jeweled sword and short silver hair. She was younger than the first four, but the light clinging to her—there was far more of it than they had. I didn't have much to go off, but my gut told me she was more than twice or even three times as powerful.

She didn't even seem human. Her features were incredible, and I'd never seen such a person before, but her existence itself was something else. If I fought her, I'd be killed without even having any time to attack.

She was like the moon. Supernatural and powerful but wrapped in a quietly glowing light—a disciple of the moon.

And the problem was why I had assumed those first four were third rank. The reason I was forced to put this transcendental silver-haired woman down as second rank. Unbelievably, there was one who stood even higher.

His soul, his flesh, his existence—all of it was radiant.

Even the combined light of all five of the others would not reach this one person.

He was an older man, tall. Old, like the lord, but unlike the lord, he stood as straight as a pin and had an exceptionally muscular physique. His hair was white, all of it brushed back, and though wrinkles scarred his features, his eyes shone with a warm glow.

That man was like the sun itself. Just getting close to him would burn my entire existence to nothingness—a disciple of the sun.

Just a glance revealed the difference. He was an invincible hero. His poise was overwhelming; I'd never be able to beat him, not with a hundred years of training.

If he wasn't a first-rank knight, then I didn't know who was.

Any disciple of the dark would have fled upon seeing him. I was sure every god that existed had given him their blessing.

Ah, what cruelty! That there were men like me, ravaged by strange illnesses, confined to bed, destined to die in agony, and yet there were also old men like him who possessed that much positive energy.

...This world...was so unjust.

After the initial shock, what burned in the back of my mind was not fear. It was anger. Envy.

My goal was to survive. To survive and gain my freedom. If I could accomplish that, I would never even think of taking on the Ender Knights.

But that aside, I couldn't allow a man like him to exist. Even if I didn't fight him, I would never bend my knee. It enraged me simply thinking about blessed beings like him coming to kill a miserable thing like me.

I maintained an impassive look and quieted my heart. *No—I need to endure it. I can't beat them. At least...not yet anyway.*

I was good at biding my time. That was the only privilege, the only strength of the weak. I overcame the anger by thinking. I followed Lou, who was watching me dubiously.

But how did the lord plan on handling the Ender Knights? Did he have any chance of winning? Even without me, the lord had countless underlings. But to the Knights, they were all rabble. The skeleton knights were certainly strong, but even they probably wouldn't beat third-rank knights. There was far too large a difference in their base power.

Dammit... I just don't know.

The lord was powerful. But the Ender Knights were so powerful, it nearly defied reason.

It was almost like a battle that would take place in the heavens—a war between light and dark. I didn't know how the lord intended to make use of me in that battle, but if I had to confront them...I'd die. And the second life I'd been nurturing would end before I could do anything with it.

My head was pounding, like I'd gone back to being human. My gait wavered as I felt a strong urge to vomit. I grew dizzy.

Shit—I can't think straight. I need to get away. One way or another...I just...need to get out of here...

And so, after managing to get into the line leaving town, now that I only needed to follow the person in front of me, now that I had a moment to breathe, a voice suddenly called out from behind me.

"Excuse me... You don't look well. Are you...all right?"

"??!"

My breath caught at the cold voice. I steadied myself before the trembling could start naturally and turned around.

The second-rank knight woman, clad in the light of the moon, and the four third-rank knights, were all staring at me from within arm's reach.



Beautiful, threadlike, silver hair in a short cut. Dark-purple eyes reminiscent of amethysts.

She couldn't have been twenty yet... She was perhaps in her late teens. Her skin was fair, but not sickly like Lou's. Her features were, instead, well sculpted, giving the impression of intelligence, and if we hadn't been in the situation we were in, her beauty would have entranced me.

She was shorter than me, and slenderer, but the energy I felt from her was even more overwhelming than when I'd seen her from afar earlier.

Lou, who couldn't sense positive energy, seemed to have felt something, too—she was dumbstruck at the sight of this woman.

Even seeing her up close, she seemed almost divine, without a single shadow to be found, and ah, if such a beautiful person was to be the one to kill me—then I must have been, without a doubt, a being who was not permitted to live in this world.

Having said that...I would never actually consider allowing her to kill me.

Thankfully, my body seemed to be able to fully endure the energy.

Actually, maybe that sense that I'd be incinerated upon getting close had been an illusion, and the waves of power emanating from her body had no destructiveness in them. None of the fairy tales had depicted any undead being obliterated just from getting close to someone.

But I still couldn't stop myself from trembling.

It would be impossible to flee. My physical abilities would put any human's to shame, but I wasn't up against just any humans.

"You're trembling, and you look pale..."

That's your fault.

She spoke out of what seemed to be consideration for me, but her tone and gaze were cold as ice.

"You really are a strange bird, Senli," said one of her fellow knights, a brown-haired man with a sword hanging from his hip. He stood behind her, peering at

my face and frowning.

My preparations should have been perfect. According to the lord, the Ender Knights could sense negative energy and locate its position from far away. As long as I was hiding that with the amulet, they'd never have any proof, even if they were suspicious...

I rallied my nerves. If I couldn't counterattack or run away, I'd just have to deceive them.

Lou was remaining silent. The man who was like the sun never approached; he only watched over us—specifically the one called Senli—with a pleasant expression from afar.

If they hadn't suddenly attacked us, then at the very least, they hadn't found us out yet. Their gazes gathered on Lou's collar, but slaves weren't terribly rare. Lou looked like nothing more than an underfed child, and child slaves were everywhere. In fact, it was better at this specific moment that we were dressed in actual clothing.

"Sorry. The princess here might sound angry, but that's how she normally is. She's actually got a bright future ahead of her."

Normal? This is normal for her?

Those sharp eyes of hers—it was like they were seeing straight through my heart... And that was *normal*?

The woman who could have obliterated me with her aura alone seemed displeased with her companion's words and softened her eyes a little.

"Still, Senli doesn't worry about just anyone," continued the other knight. "By the way, I'm not sure how to put this, but you look like you have one foot in the grave. You're white as a sheet."

"Luphrey! What are you saying? That was rude!"

The female blond-haired knight behind him gave him a whack in the head, then peered into my face. It seemed I'd avoided the worst possible outcome, but this was still bad.

The sunlight was dazzling. With natural motions, I pulled my hood farther over my face.

“...N-no. Thank you, I’m just...recovering from an illness, so...I’ll be fine. Until just a few days ago...I was bedridden, and now I’m...finally strong enough to go for a walk outside.”

“Bedridden.....,” said Senli. “And are you.....all right?”

“Yes.”

The line out of town was moving, so I moved up with it. But the angels of death, not getting the message, followed me.

What the hell were they after? Had they already caught on to my identity? Were they waiting for the right time to annihilate me?

I was grateful for this undead body. If I’d been alive, I’d have been sweating buckets.

The disciple of the moon—Senli—said in a soft voice, “I can understand that. I, too...was bedridden for a time.”

“...Oh... Really...?”

I gave her a thin smile, and Senli returned it with the same—a somewhat awkward smile.

That shocked me in two ways. First, how could this woman possessing powers on miraculous levels ever have been sickly? And second—for her to use that to try to understand me...

Back during my life, I’d have thrown something at her. The only reason I could smile at those words now was because my body was healthy. And what was “healthy” for me was not “healthy” for them.

What was I to make of all this, then?

Having regained just a tiny bit of composure from her words, I lifted my head and looked once more upon the faces of the Ender Knights.

They wore a myriad of expressions. A sigh, a smile, admiration. And that was the second shock.

The Knights were glowing. But at the same time, unbelievably...they were just people.

In the stories I'd read in my lifetime, there had been Knights feared for their blazing-hot passion among their number. But the ones in front of me, at least, seemed incredibly human. They were showing me consideration—me, who didn't have any interest whatsoever in the people around me—just because my face looked pale.

Their compassion was fitting for disciples of light, but they weren't like the heroes I'd envisioned.

The heroes I'd had in mind...would know that I was already dead. In fact, if that man like the sun had come near, he probably would have realized my true identity.

He had the sort of presence that seemed to imply he'd do it, whether or not I had the amulet on me.

Senli's eyes widened as though she'd just thought of something. "Oh yes... I know healing magic—it should restore your stamina a bit."

"No, that's all right. I'm fine now... But thank you, Miss Senli. If it's all the same to you...I would rather you cast it on Lou. She's... Well, she's tired from taking care of me."

In that moment, I was able to give an actual, sincere smile.

Healing magic didn't work on the undead. In fact, any curative spell that shared positive energy with the target, such as the kind Senli was about to use, would be a powerful poison for me.

Senli, that deeply compassionate young woman, nodded slightly. She then turned toward Lou, who was tensely standing next to me, and placed her palm on her.

The waves of energy flowing from her body contracted, unleashed by a short incantation. The excess of energy, which seemed able to turn someone to ash with a mere graze, poured into Lou, restoring her sickly white skin to a healthy color in the blink of an eye.

As I'd thought...she was strong. Very strong. And despite having used powerful enough healing magic to have obliterated me, the presence surrounding her didn't wane in the slightest. Unlike the undead, the positive energy used by the Ender Knights had a limit. Was that the sheer difference in our strength?

But although magic that would instantly kill me had been used right near me, I didn't even blink. Because I understood.

She was both the natural predator of the dark—and an ally of the weak. Compared to her superhuman power, her mind was all too human...and there would certainly be a way to take advantage of that. Mentally, at least, she stood no chance against the crafty lord.

I couldn't fight them fairly, of course. To do so would be the height of folly. I obviously couldn't stand up to Senli's strength nor to the sun man's. I would have to come up with...a plan.

A strategy not for killing Senli and the sun man, but a strategy that would let me survive.

Without letting my thoughts rise to the surface, I lowered my head. The eyes of the numerous heroes bored into me.

"Thank you...very much. We are in a hurry, so farewell—"

The moment I nudged Lou in the back and tried to proceed, someone suddenly put their hand on my shoulder.

My heart, which had already stopped, felt like it was going to stop again. I had no pulse and didn't breathe. Plus, my body heat was actually far lower than a human's.

It was simple fortune the surprise didn't show on my face. The one who had stopped me was the blue-haired man with the guileful eyes who had been standing behind Senli. He hadn't said a word until now.

"What is it?"

"Ah, sorry for stopping you like that. We're actually... Well, on our master's orders, we're searching for a necromancer hiding in the area. A dark sorcerer,

the kind that mucks around with death and souls.”

“That sounds...difficult...”

“Nah. People call Senli the most talented knight in history. If we could only find the necromancer, they’d be dead in an instant. But we’re having trouble getting clues. The shadowy ones are always the best at hiding, after all.”

His tone sounded scornful; it certainly didn’t seem like how the widely known Ender Knights would speak. But in a way, I had to be even more careful of that than I did with Senli.

Giving my features a hard look, the man said, “I’ll be straight with you. Your complexion is very close to that of an undead. I don’t feel any darkness from you...but vampires are weak to the sunlight. Take the hood off. And if you don’t, I’ll make you.”

“Nevira?!”

Senli’s voice betrayed her blanching face, but Nevira’s expression remained steady.

I realized then: Senli was the strongest of the group, but the others were nearly her equal. Their “master,” more likely than not, was the sunlight man watching us.

I gave a little smile, then slowly put my hands on my hood and removed it without hesitation.

The sunlight entered my eyes, and I squinted against its brightness. With that weakness of the undead shining on my skin, I started to feel a faint prickling.

“Like this? I’ve been in bed in my room for a long time, so my skin is weak...”

Nevira, seeming surprised by my immediate acquiescence, widened his eyes and observed my face for several seconds. But eventually, he scowled and clicked his tongue ostentatiously.

“Guess not. Yeah, you’re fine. Sorry about that.”

“Nevira! ...We’re terribly sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s your job. I don’t blame you.” Smiling, I shook my head and pulled the hood back over me. Mentally, however, I was nowhere near calm.

I had no heartbeat, no pulse, and no breath. And with a low body temperature, there were several ways he could have found out even aside from my resistance—or lack thereof—to the sunlight. But they only checked the sunlight, because that was an undead’s greatest weakness. The powerful ones who were intelligent enough to get lost in the crowd also generally had a weakness to sunlight, and because they were professionals, it didn’t strike them to check for other things. Just like how the lord hadn’t seen through my mutation.

...Come to think of it, didn’t vampires have a pulse and a heartbeat?

If I recalled correctly, vampires would die if a wooden stake pierced their heart. Furthermore, they subsisted on consuming blood. It wouldn’t be strange for them to have blood running through their veins.

I’ll have to read through the undead encyclopedia again once I’m back, I decided.

I said my farewell to Senli and the others, my smile never wavering. “Thank you very much. I bid you farewell...”

...and pray that we never meet again.

This encounter had been a coincidence. For some reason, I had a premonition.

The next time we met...would be in battle.

I would live. I’d decided I’d live even if it meant turning into a monster.

I had no intention of being the one to attack them, but I would have to bat away the sparks falling on me before they ignited.

Even if those were no sparks at all, but the light of justice come to purify me.

§ § §

“What?! You—you encountered the Ender Knights?!”

Upon hearing my report, the lord's expression underwent a dramatic change.

His twisted, demonic face conveyed the deep power of darkness, unlike the Ender Knights.

I told him everything. Lou would have reported it anyway, so it was all the same if I did it. Their numbers and their weapons. The energy pouring off their bodies. The only thing I didn't mention was the softness I sensed from Senli and the others.

And when I told him about the older man whose energy was like the sunlight, the lord's emotions reached their peak.

His eyes blazing with deep anger and resentment, he pounded the table. It was exactly the kind of thing I'd expect to see from a necromancer. After listening to the details, he balked.

"A first-rank knight... And the man himself—he's...he's here?"

"Do you know him?"

"...Yes, I do—he has been a mortal enemy for a long time. I thought I'd kept myself perfectly hidden, but to think he would seriously come to this remote area now that my long-held wish is before my eyes, to extinguish me... How long must he get in my way before he's satisfied?"

"Can you beat him?"

"Of—course—I—can!" the lord shouted, out of breath. In his words, I sensed an inflated ego, anger, and enthusiasm.

He wasn't lying. Or he didn't believe he was, at least. He had grounds to think this way.

"Still... If I only had a little more time, I would have gained even greater power! Is this...? Is this my final trial?! No—there is still time. Though it pains me to say, with that man as our opponent, we mustn't delay."

The lord picked up the cloth-wrapped item. From within it appeared a rod with a smooth bend. Black. It had a glossy texture with a thick bottom that thinned the farther up you went...

And then I finally realized what the thing was. Without meaning to, I shuddered.

When the lord saw me shiver, he smiled deeply.

It was...a fang. The fang of an enormous creature.

If a single fang was the length of my arm, how big must the rest of it have been? It was nothing remotely comparable to any of the magical beasts in this forest, at least.

Carefully stroking the fang, the lord frowned. "But resentment is not enough. I'll need another. I'm having Hak prepare one... End, you said that you felt incredible power from the Ender Knights, didn't you?"

"Y-yes... They would have obliterated me in an instant. Turned me to ash at a touch. That was the kind of power I felt."

It was pathetic to speak of, but they were on another level. No matter how I simulated it, even in a state where I couldn't fully measure their power, I could say that much for certain. I didn't really know how much strength I'd gain from my next rank mutation, but I doubted one or two more mutations would put me in a position to beat them.

But what the lord offered to my answer was a loud laugh.

"Heh-heh-heh... Haaa-ha-ha! And that is precisely why you are the vessel of the king of the dead! You may rest assured, End—the power you sensed is proof of the depths of the abyss you possess!! The undead are intense shadows cast by the light. And yet a mere ghoul was able to sense it! The vessel shall suffice! We should have a little more time yet before they arrive here! Rejoice, End!"

His eyes twinkled with madness and rapture.

And it was all the more hideous to behold after seeing the glowing Knights in person.

I didn't need any power. I'd never wished for anything about the depth of my abyss.

Once again, I keenly felt the danger the lord posed. I didn't know what it was he was going to do, but the man before my eyes now was a devil, through and through. He was on the opposite end of the spectrum from the man of sunlight, but he was no less...a monster.

I couldn't stand the idea of getting caught up in a battle between monsters.

There wasn't a moment to waste. Yes—the lord was right. There *wasn't* a moment to waste.

"I will make you into the king of the dead! And then I will teach these lowly vanguards of the gods how foolish they were for interfering with my magic!"

The lord roared. Lou flinched away, afraid, as though waiting for a natural disaster to pass.

But the more the lord shouted, the more I felt my thoughts cooling.

It wasn't fear. My survival instinct was overriding that.

King of the dead? Count me out. I was a dead man who knew his place. He should have just left me alone like the corpse I was.

As for a plan...I did have one. One I'd thought of on the way back—the perfect strategy.

It was replete with risks, but I had to try. And unfortunately, I would need help to do it.

I'd make a deal with Lou. I'd already thought of what to say to win her over. I understood how the weak felt. It would work.

The Ender Knights, necromancers—anyone who got in the way of my peace could die. Every last one of them.

The moon shone gently in the courtyard of the lord's mansion.

Using centrifugal force, I whipped my billhook around. Against that attack, which I'd performed with superhuman power, the alert, poised skeleton knight facing me stepped back, then used the sword it gripped in both hands to skillfully parry.

I could feel the weight of years of training and experience behind every move it made.

A skeleton's abilities depended on the owner of the bones used for its creation. You could make a battle-worthy one by using the bones of a veteran mercenary, and you could make a skeleton with the bones of a regular person with no combat experience—but there would be a stark difference between the two. Though the story was dubious, one born of a hero of mythology could apparently even kill dragons. I didn't understand the logic behind it, but maybe their experience had somehow permeated their bones. And that was, it was said, the merit to making skeletons.

Like flesh-men, skeletons were one of the lowest ranks of undead.

Undead all sprang from one of four roots, namely: skeletons born from bones; flesh-men born from flesh; wraiths born from souls; and zombies, reanimated rotting corpses that had been the origins of necromancy.

They each had their own characteristics, but there were no major differences among them. As a ghoul, the result of a single mutation from a flesh-man, I had higher abilities than a skeleton (this one had a knight's sword and armor, but it was still just a skeleton). The reason it was handling my attacks in one-on-one combat was none other than the difference in our experience.

A skull wearing a helmet. A red light shone from the deep, vacant eye sockets.

My opponent was only bones, and I was only muscle. I had more strength—and more speed as well. It had more agility, and as for exhaustion—neither of us felt it.

Each time it warded off an attack, it made me more certain.

I couldn't do it. At this rate, I'd never be able to match the Ender Knights.

If I were to encounter this skeleton on a real battlefield, I would probably win. I could shatter its bony body in one hit if I landed it, and I had strong regenerative abilities, too. But it was only brute force in the end; it wouldn't work on anything with more power than me.

The Ender Knights weren't just some run-of-the-mill mercenaries. *They* were heroes. Their skills and experience were far removed from the skeleton knights

the lord controlled. Which meant I doubted I'd even be able to stall for time were I to face them.

The lord had listened to my request and prepared one of his underlings for me that had an especially good technique; he shouted at me as he watched the mock battle.

"That's right, End. Think. Your intelligence is your strength. Let your resentment, your emotions, your negative impulses burst forth. The abyss hidden within your body is truly deep. And that is the essence of an undead!"

And it wasn't anything I'd wished for.

Sure, I might get stronger by letting my negative impulses explode, but strength wasn't what I was after.

Battle was a last resort. If I lost my cool, I'd be mistaking the means for the end. It might even cost me a successful escape.

The lord seemed to see a lot of talent in me, but I didn't trust him enough to take that at face value.

Still, I would need a degree of strength. Even if I was to survive and managed to flee the lord, I'd have many more opportunities to battle after that. My current eagerness for this mock battle with a skeleton knight in lieu of raising my negative energy through hunting was for my future's sake—for the sake of feeling that difference, of feeling what *technique* truly was.

So that I would never grow drunk on power and engage in reckless combat.

I'd gotten a pretty good grasp of how much stronger I was than my opponent, so I thrust the billhook down with all my might, almost tearing muscles in the process. As a reward for the dull pain in my arm, the skeleton knight's sword broke upon taking the hit, and its bony body and armor both were knocked away.

Even then, the lord's skeleton knight was powerful. It turned, broke its fall, and repositioned itself.

But the battle was already over.

If I could close the distance before it took the fall, I could destroy my opponent. There was no further point in this battle.

I lowered the billhook. I didn't know what metal the black-painted blade was made of, but even after crushing a sword, there wasn't a chip on it.

Perhaps there was a magical power imbued in it, like the Amulet of Shadow or the Cloak of Perpetual Night.

"Satisfied, End?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I get the gist of it now."

The gist: I wouldn't be able to gain the mindset of a swordfighter. Maybe I shouldn't have relied on my natural ability against the beasts in the past, or maybe I just didn't have any talent for it.

Unfortunately, I couldn't master swordplay in a single day. Even if I could, I didn't have the time to build up actual combat experience. For now...I'd set it aside. I should fight with the cards in my hand instead.

"Then go hunting. Time is short, but you need to gain as much strength as possible. It will make you notably stronger than learning techniques. If you become a darkstalker, your power will be incomparable to a ghoul's. That...is how the undead are."

The lord's words had logic to them. One of the reasons the undead were so feared to begin with was—apparently anyway—how they extended their abilities in leaps and bounds by accumulating negative energy.

When Lou came frantically running over, he gave her a brief order.

"Lou! Give that skeleton a spare weapon from storage. I must prepare for war... End, finish your hunt by the end of the night and return here. Do not forget that you cannot use your full strength under the sun."

"Right. I don't want to die, either," I replied shortly.

The lord snorted, then headed back into the mansion.

Lou trotted over to the skeleton, who stood there idly, having lost its weapon. Her complexion, which had gotten better for a time thanks to Senli's magic, had returned to its former pallor.

This was my chance. The lord almost never used this courtyard, and he had no familiars here. Most of them were outside, on alert for enemies. I walked over to Lou casually, careful just in case there were watching eyes, then whispered to her.

“Lou, I have a request.”

“.....”

“I want to make a deal. There’s something I really want. It isn’t much, and it won’t interfere with the orders you’ve been given.”

“.....I refuse.”

Her reply left me helpless to argue.

The skeleton was watching Lou, but it didn’t have the intelligence to say anything. The skeletons were wary of me, and I was being monitored constantly by familiars, but they weren’t the same with Lou, nor was she being surveilled.

She was a slave and a paragon of weakness. All she did was carry out the lord’s orders. She was like a living undead. And the lord’s expectations of her were, sadly, very accurate.

After all, even with the lord’s enemies—the Ender Knights—in front of her, she hadn’t sought help. Even if she was scared of her whole body being racked in agony for disobeying orders, she should’ve been able to do *something* about them.

Lou was weak. She wouldn’t live long like this, and she probably knew it.

I squatted, peered into her exhausted dark-black eyes, and smiled.

“I’ll make you the same proposal as before. If you listen to my request, then after the lord dies, I’ll bring you to the town safe and sound. In fact, I could even stay with you until you can make a living for yourself.”

“...The master...would never die. That’s a...meaningless assumption.”

She didn’t seem surprised like she had been at first. Her body, her voice—they weren’t shaking. Her eyes contained conviction, just like before. Even if she hadn’t been punished because of me, she probably would have given the same answer. That was just how she operated.

I decided to try assuming just a little bit of subservience. “Then I’ll owe you. If something happens... I’ll help you... So please.”

“No. I have...no right to...indebt myself to anyone. And you...definitely wouldn’t...repay me anyway,” answered Lou in a small voice, frowning.

She was right. Between a debt and my life, I’d choose the latter.

Actually, more importantly... Lou probably had no intention of listening to my request.

As I’d planned, I changed the direction of my proposal. I asked the poor slave, “Then why are you listening to me at all?”

“.....What?”

Lou’s eyes widened, her expression showing confusion for the first time today.

Feeling taken aback by how terribly human that expression was, I continued to persuade her, voice filled with passion.

“If there was nothing you wanted, you wouldn’t have to listen to what I’m saying. You could just shut your ears and leave.”

“.....You’re...talking nonsense. I...am not listening.”

“No, I understand. I’m a weakling like you, Lou. I know what you want—what you wanted. If you bring me what I want, I’ll give that to you.”

“.....?”

I’d had desires in my past life—but Lou, the lord’s miserable slave, didn’t.

Lou looked up at me questioningly. Her face seemed even paler than usual.

Maybe she didn’t even know what her desire was.

I hadn’t personally wanted to make a proposal like this. But I couldn’t weigh that on a scale against my own life.

I brought my lips closer to Lou’s ear as she tilted her head curiously before whispering my persuasion to her.

After listening to my words and understanding what they meant, her expression changed. Dramatically.

She seemed ready to burst into rage, tears, and laughter, all at once—such was the mixture of emotions on her face.

“Wh-what...?! Ah... That’s...ridiculous—”

“I’ll keep my promise. I swear. Well?”

Lou swallowed and shuddered. But it was pointless for her to resist anymore.

A single tear dripped from each eye.

Now she knew. She knew what she wanted—knew so keenly it brought her to tears.

“You’re...horrible... What a horrible...monster...Master Horos Kamen has—!”

Her parched lips reviled me. But she couldn’t resist my offer any longer.

Even if it meant being struck with terrible pain, she would carry out my small request.

After checking a second time to make sure we weren’t being watched and feeling a tinge of self-hatred, I told Lou what I wanted.

Chapter 3

Light, Darkness, and the Miserable Dead



Chapter 3

Light, Darkness, and the Miserable Dead

The Ender Knights had assembled in a room at an inn in Enge.

The Knights were a combat organization formed to battle darkness. Though they called themselves knights, they didn't belong to any nation, instead traveling the world to eliminate any enemies who would cause harm to humans.

Their few members were considered the cream of the crop, and even the lowest members on their three-rank hierarchy were no different from the very best mercenaries in terms of skill. The burden of facing the vanguards of the dead was too great for mere humans. The Ender Knights were humanity's last bastion—the reason they were spoken of as heroes so frequently in fairy tales.

In the center of the room, a man was sitting heavily in a comfortable armchair. He was in his forties or fifties. Deep wrinkles creased his face, and his hair had faded to white. His body, however, trained through many long months and years, still hadn't waned much at all; the massive power housed in it would have made anyone who saw him feel like they were dreaming.

In reality, the older man was a first-rank knight—of which there were no more than five in the entire Ender Knights—and the leader of the ones who had come to Enge on this occasion.

He boasted absolute authority and strength within the Knights as the central force of the light that had protected humankind from many calamities.

His many martial exploits and his mild demeanor earned the old knight much respect, and as always, he watched his pupils with quiet eyes.

"I see...," he said. "So we haven't found Horos Kamen yet."

“It’s to be expected from a second-rank necromancer. There seems to be little doubt he’s in the forest...but his Warding Morass spell is powerful. Not a single rip in his defenses.”

“Regular tactics will take time. We can’t go on like this.”

At their master’s words, one of the disciples—Luphrey, the third-rank knight whose positive attitude always buoyed the group—shrugged, while the coarser Nevira clicked his tongue.

Sorcerers with real ability had a comprehensive grasp on spells even outside their field of expertise. The ones who violated taboos, especially, tended to be skilled in concealment spells. The Ender Knights were far from ignorant when it came to sorcery, but they were a step behind the sorcerers experienced enough to have broken taboos.

Warding Morass was a high-level barrier spell of the illusion type that confused those who entered a specified area and caused them to become lost.

It was nigh impossible to brute force one’s way through it. On the other hand, the bounded field was said to have a weakness: It would stop working if someone who knew the path guided you through.

Epe narrowed his eyes at his disciples’ report, then said in a low voice, “He’s dangerous. He’s slipped through my fingers many times. We must destroy him before he reaches first rank.”

Just as the Ender Knights’ members were split into three ranks, necromancers—their fated enemies—were divided into three as well. Horos Kamen was classified as second rank, while a first-rank necromancer was closer to an evil god than a human. Second-rank necromancers were extremely dangerous mages.

Defeat was an impossibility, of course. But depending on how they went about destroying Horos, several third-rank knights could be killed.

But Epe offered a genial smile to change the mood.

And in it, for just an instant, was absolute confidence.

The few first-rank knights in existence had another crucial mission aside from the subjugation of darkness.

It was to pass on their strength and experience to their juniors.

His gaze was directed at the youngest female present. She had been listening patiently, not saying a word.

“Senli, as planned, I’ll leave it in your hands. Take Lumphrey and the others and kill Horos. You can do it, right?”

“...Yes, Master.”

A second-rank mage was a significant threat—not as bad as first rank but still considerably rare.

Senli, the designated leader, didn’t sound the least bit ruffled. Her violet eyes never wavered as they returned Epe’s gaze.

Epe nodded deeply at her expression, indicating his satisfaction. “You’ll be fine, Senli. Despite your youth, you’re nearly a first-rank knight. The power of your blessing, especially, is top class, even including those who have come before us.”

A virtuous spirit. A blade-wielding princess of light. One blessed by all the gods upon her birth. Senli Sylvis.

Her talents stood out even among the Ender Knights, who were the best of the best. In particular, her blessing, which was directly linked to her ability to purify darkness—necromancers referred to it in several ways, such as positive energy—was stronger than any pupil Epe had ever had.

The Ender Knights strengthened their blessings through severe training and mental concentration, but by the time Epe had scouted Senli, she’d already possessed a blessing of seemingly impossible strength. And as the power of light grew, she would reach even greater heights.

It was as though she’d been born to become an Ender Knight. With experience, she would doubtlessly rise to a first-rank knight and even surpass Epe.

“Your opponent is especially strong for a second-rank necromancer, but if you face him with your companions, you will be able to win. When you defeat Horos...I plan on recommending you for a first-rank position.”

“?! But that’s... I’m still not...”

“Your relative weakness isn’t an issue. I’ve been a first rank for thirty years, so it’s meaningless to compare yourself. Besides, you will catch up in no time. You have the sword technique of a natural genius, and the strength of your blessing is beyond words. The only worry I have about you is... Listen to me carefully. It is your...naïveté. Necromancers are, well... They’re a crafty bunch.”

Senli nodded solemnly. The other members watched Epe with similarly serious expressions.

Senli met Epe’s gaze and replied with the utmost calmness, “That won’t be an issue. I’ve seen many disasters and tragedies. These necromancers would bring pain to humankind. I was bestowed this blessing so I could slay them and grant their corrupted souls salvation.”

“...Your kindness and righteousness are strengths as well as weaknesses. But this is a path all must take. One cannot become a first-rank knight without facing hardships and conflict.”

“Please, leave her to us, Master,” said Lumphrey. “She does still act naive at times, but we’ll be with her, too. Even if the strength of our blessings isn’t much compared to hers, we have more experience fighting the darkness. We can make up for what she lacks.”

Epe eyed his students fondly as Lumphrey took a step forward from Senli’s side and rapped on his chest. The other knights nodded as well, a variety of emotions on their faces.

Epe appeared satisfied. He crossed his long legs and looked hard at Senli. “Even necromancers cannot survive on their own. Powerful magic requires precious catalysts. Someone in this town must be working with Horos. Continue your search. This, Senli, is...your job. I will give advice if needed, but I will not interfere.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Still, you’re not a first rank yet. I will be on call. That Horos should still be second rank...but if the worst comes to pass, and that has changed, report it to me.”

Engraving her master Epe’s words deep into her heart, Senli left the room with her companions to resume their search.

As Senli was checking on equipment at their base, Nevira addressed her. He wielded a mace as his main weapon and took the front line in Epe’s squad.

“Senli, I still think we should destroy the entire forest along with the barrier. Your blessing would probably manage it. Warding Morass is a delicate spell. If we mess with it even a little, we can obliterate the barrier.”

“I’ve said this many times... That is our last resort. If we disrupt the forest, the fleeing magical beasts may attack the town.”

“I’m telling you: That’s exactly why the master says you’re naive. There would be casualties, yes, but far less than if we let a second-rank necromancer run loose,” said Nevira, gritting his teeth as he looked down at Senli.

Senli and Nevira didn’t get along well, but she still thought his words held a nugget of truth.

The Ender Knights’ mission was to destroy the darkness. Everything else was secondary.

Several civilian casualties would occasionally come about as a result of their conquests.

And the Ender Knights viewed those choices as correct.

A corpse-controlling necromancer was a fearsome opponent. Those dark sorcerers who played with souls, even death itself, wouldn’t hesitate to stoop to the most cowardly of acts. Fighting one required resolve.

Senli knew the reason others called her naive. But she’d become an Ender Knight in order to protect the weak.

Once, Senli had been confined to bed for a long time for reasons unknown.

Her blessing had been too strong for her, and the ever-increasing positive energy had been straining her body.

But she'd grown, and after physical and mental training, she could use that power perfectly. Now she had the ability to fight.

"I'm the leader this time. We'll continue the search. As long as we are in Enge, the necromancer won't make any big moves. We'll proceed with caution."

The Ender Knights had an overwhelming advantage against necromancers. In a fair fight, they'd never lose.

Nevira scratched his head at what she said and, after a moment, replied angrily, "...Hmph. Fine—you're the leader this time. But...at least give a time limit. True, we should eventually be able to find someone who knows where the guy is, but we don't have the leeway to be taking it easy with our search. Horos isn't the only necromancer out there. You understand, right?"

".....Yes, I do. We will settle the score within a month."

"That's too long. The more time we give him, the stronger he'll get. He's already being more cautious in the forest. You might emerge unscathed, but Horos is a powerful mage. Your companions will die."

Senli briefly fell silent at her companion's strong, threatening voice but eventually looked back up and said decisively, "One week. If we don't find the key in that time, we'll destroy the forest. Conduct preparations while we search. Both to clean things up after we've destroyed it and to survey the destroyed location."

"Understood."

Senli's violet eyes contained not even a shred of doubt. Nevira's lips twisted into a cold-blooded sneer, and he gave her a firm thwack on her slender back.

§ § §

Preparations proceeded rapidly. When I visited Enge again on an errand, the entire town was abuzz. Listening closely, I could hear gossip about the Ender Knights, which I hadn't heard much of last time.

Shrinking away from the sunlight pelting me, I carried out my responsibilities.

These errands took place during the day most likely because the undead were more active at night, and thus they would be more cautious.

I received an item from Hak that looked to be the same as the one I'd received on my previous errand.

After taking it, I moved to leave the room immediately, but Hak called out to me and asked me to relay a message.

His typically aloof expression looked just a little more tired than usual.

"Tell the lord I look forward to the day we can meet again. They're sniffing me out. I don't plan on betraying him, but their noses are sharp. It's too risky to procure anything more for him."

"Right, got it."

"...You really do have intelligence. To think you can manage just fine under the sunlight... How fearsome. The lord, your master—he is, without a doubt, the strongest out there. First-rate even among my customers."

Hak gave a bitter smile, visibly shuddering as he spoke.

Once the deal was finished, I went outside. I had just a tiny bit of free time. This was the more important part of the trip. I entered a deserted alleyway. Lou, despite her criticism of me doing something I wasn't ordered to, followed in silence.

I only had so much time when the lord's eyes weren't on me. His guards were always in the basement room he kept me in, watching me, and they wouldn't let me go outside without asking.

These errands were some of the few moments the surveillance wasn't on me. The Ender Knights were on constant lookout, so he couldn't use a familiar to watch me. Hiding Lou with my body as she shrunk down, I peered into her dark eyes and asked, "Did you get them?"

"Y-yes. B-but...what are you...going to do with—?"

"Excellent. Thank you, seriously."

Time was of the essence. The lord spent longer and longer hours cooped up in his laboratory by the day.

He was probably preparing some sort of ritual. At this point, the only times I saw him were the moments when he commanded me to go out hunting.

Deep exhaustion had been evident on his face, but his eyes glowed with an eerie light. He was trying to break yet another taboo of some kind. Truly terrible—though as a detestable being myself, I didn't have much room to talk.

I already couldn't hope to match the lord or the Ender Knights. If they took the initiative, I'd have no chance.

Lou took the items I'd requested from her clothing and held them out, her face a mix of fear and questioning.

I snatched them away from her, looked at them closely—and smiled, for the first time in a while.

They might not have been much to Lou, but to me, these were the keys to my survival.

Lou didn't seem to be in any pain. She was the one purposely making decisions that went against her slave commands.

That meant her cooperation with me wasn't considered an indirect attack against the lord.

Lou nervously glanced around and whispered in a shaking voice, "A-anyway... About what you said before—"

"Yeah, of course. You'll just have to trust me, but I will keep my promise."

She probably still didn't trust me, but she looked clearly relieved at those words.

Her expression softened, and it even looked like a little of the tension left her shoulders. Maybe I'd even reassured her?

I was weak, but Lou was weaker. She didn't even try to fight. That was the difference between her and me—I resisted death while I lived, even right up to the moment I died. She was truly a helpless, pathetic person.

But I couldn't afford to be goofing off. I needed to prepare.

“Lou, we’re going back right away. I have one quick thing to do, so please wait at the town’s exit for me.”

“Ah—”

Without waiting for a response, I dashed out of the alley with the items.

The only thing I had to be cautious of was that I didn’t accidentally run face-first into the Ender Knights.

My situation was essentially life-or-death, just like when I was alive—but this time, I had a body that could move.

I didn’t want to bet on either the lord or the Ender Knights.

Because neither of them would be the winner.

The winner...would be me.

§ § §

The lord was downright ghastly now, as though the moment of truth was near. His expression twisted in strange ways, and the power I felt coming off his back was wicked enough to make even an undead like me flinch away.

While the lord’s emotions had reached a fever pitch, the slave Lou was growing even more haggard than before. She was helping him with his experiments, doing only as she was told as he yelled and screamed at her.

My tasks, meanwhile, hadn’t changed.

Rather than getting any combat experience, I just followed the lord’s instructions and accumulated the power of death.

The contents of the second package I’d received from Hak was a black fang, similar to the first package.

With my limited knowledge, I couldn’t fathom what he would use it for, but I’d done everything I was able to do. There was nothing left now but to leave my luck to the heavens.

A necromancer or the Ender Knights. The lord or Senli. In the end, who would emerge victorious over the other?

However things turned out, the situation would change. I could feel my mind rustling with tension.

In the carnage to come, would I, the one with an incredibly low chance of winning, be able to survive?

After I'd finished my hunt, the lord, unusually, called for me. "End," he said, "we will perform the ritual now. Once it is done...you will be the strongest—the strongest king of the dead."

"What do you mean by the strongest...?"

The question was a sincere one. What did he mean by that? Would conducting this ritual cause me to grow more powerful than even the first-rank knights and their outrageous, supernatural abilities? Would I be able to crush Senli and the Ender Knights? Would it allow me to live freely and peacefully, not bound to anyone?

But the lord didn't answer my question. He spoke to me through his glaringly delighted gaze.

Of course. Those words of his—he hadn't been looking for my understanding. It was more like he was muttering them to himself.

"But for that, I require you to mutate into a darkstalker, at the least. No—you *must*. You are undoubtedly the single finest specimen among all the undead I have ever controlled, but as a ghoul...you are far too weak. I would have preferred to wait for the next mutation after that—to a lesser vampire—and execute this after ascertaining your capacity, but I cannot expect that much with a first-rank knight on my trail. It was truly fortunate that you, End, were my final undead at this moment."

A lesser vampire. That was an undead who came a step before a vampire.

The more rank mutations one progressed through, the greater the amount of energy needed, and the more time it took.

For one who hadn't even become a darkstalker yet, it was still a long way off.

The speed of my mutation had apparently been abnormal. If the lord's words were true, then typically it would have required a much larger chunk of time to create the king of the dead. He was playing the long con.

The lord's voice was a little feverish, as though he hadn't slept very much.

"Your soul—it continues to fall toward the darkness. Understand, darkstalker...? This will be in time. My Warding Morass will not be so easily broken. End, kill them—kill them all! Amass all the deaths you can muster! Feast upon their corpses and desecrate their souls!"

".....Yeah, of course."

My emotions didn't waver. My answer came in monotone.

Right now, in my mind, Horos Kamen was a complete enemy. I didn't know what this king of the dead nonsense was all about, but whether in tales old or new, from east or west, rituals performed by a necromancer were never good.

"Damn, if only we had more time... If they come, it will be during the day. Never falter—never let your guard down."

"I don't need an order for that."

"Very well. End, return to the morgue!"

Even at a time like this, the lord remembered to command me.

Partly impressed, I obeyed the order and returned to the morgue. Lou looked to me—she had been forced to help the lord in the laboratory or something—but our eyes didn't meet for long before I turned away. Our deal was already over.

I still had a card left to play. I'd played it once already, but in all likelihood, the lord hadn't found out.

His owl familiar stared at me.

The lord had said it would be in time, that there was still a little time left. But he was wrong.

There was no time left. Neither for the lord nor for us.

My mind was already made up, and so were theirs. The only one who wasn't finished was the lord.

And so, two days later, the lord came to me at a different time than usual, a horde of skeleton knights behind him.

It had been just about when I'd predicted. I knew exactly what had happened without having to listen to the lord, but he spoke in choppy phrases, filled with a clear, bottomless rage.

"The Ender Knights—they're—they're here. It's too early... Damn it all! The Warding Morass isn't working. Did Hak betray me? Yes—that is the only possibility. No more than a merchant after all! He sold me out—for money?!"

"..."

Lou was bound by her orders. I was there as her chaperone.

Apparently, even the lord wouldn't doubt his own slave. His eyes glittered darkly with vengeance.

"Fortunately, the Extinguisher doesn't seem to be here. We'll have to destroy them. I can't afford to create a barrier to buy time. The ritual isn't complete, either. They're...they're right under my nose. Very well—that is fine. Those hypocrites are standing in the way of my long-cherished wish. The king of the dead may not yet be complete—but I will show them all the secret arts of my necromancy."

Chapter 4

The Decisive Battle



Chapter 4

The Decisive Battle

Luphrey, one of the third-rank Ender Knights, checked the thickly overgrown forest and narrowed his eyes.

“So it wasn’t a trap...”

“Thought for *sure* there’d be an ambush.”

“The barrier isn’t functioning,” noted Senli indifferently. “Which means we have allies of our own.” She folded up the letter in her hand and placed it carefully in her pocket.

It was a letter of invitation from an unknown sender, and it contained a map to Horos Kamen’s stronghold.

Naturally, Luphrey had been suspicious. After coming this far, however, it wiped away the doubts he’d harbored.

The Warding Morass spell strung over the forest was a powerful, indiscriminate one.

It had none of the effects of a physical wall, but there was no better barrier for blocking a path.

As long as the barrier was active, Senli’s group could have brought a thousand others into the forest with them, and they’d never reach their destination—even if it was a hundred meters in front of them.

There was only one proper way to get through the barrier: to have someone who knew the way. If you had a guide, the barrier would lose its effectiveness. That was both Warding Morass’s weakness and the reason it was so powerful.

And if there wasn't at least one "guide" inside the barrier itself, the spell wouldn't work.

But the letter's sender was someone working with the necromancer. Whoever they were, they knew they were currently being chased. They would be within a certain range of the barrier's center, but it would have been nigh impossible to locate even a single guide in such a short period of time.

They'd thought they'd have no choice but to physically blow away the entire forest. The one-week time limit Senli had given on Nevira's suggestion was partly so they could search for a guide, but also so Senli could resolve herself. However, they no longer needed to use a trick that would create more casualties.

The letter sent to Senli had been a simple map, but it had still fulfilled the role of a guide. Her group could feel the barrier cast on the forest tugging at them. And that meant their ally was on the inside—in the necromancer's camp.

Someone there understood. And that fact gave her strength.

Senli Sylvis was calm as she faced a battle against a second-rank necromancer with powerful abilities right around the corner.

She was unafraid. They were all fully geared up: white cloaks to dampen attacks, be they physical or magical; light armor of silver covering their vital points; amulets to defend them against curses and mental corruption. Even the female members' skirts, which looked like normal cloth at a glance, were made of a special combat-use fiber.

Polished and sharpened weapons at the ready, they glared into the deep forest.

One of the Ender Knights—a blond woman named Thelma who used a bow—nocked an arrow, took aim in less than an instant, and fired. The arrow, silver to strike at the weakness of the undead, pierced the head of a black owl—a familiar—perched on a tree branch.

"Be careful. Our opponent will have countless undead at his command."

"Heh. Senli, since when were you in a position to worry about *us*? We'll give you all the backup you need, so you can just go in there, sword swinging like

you always do.”

Senli nodded and, as always, converted the blessing within her body into a more efficient form.

Energy surged inside her slender figure, and she unsheathed the sacred-silver sword hanging at her waist.

The positive energy to purify the darkness rose up around her in an explosion, flooding their surroundings with light. And then, Senli and the other Ender Knights began their assault toward Horos Kamen’s stronghold.

§ § §

The war had begun—a war between dark and light, between life and death, between positive and negative.

Even from the mansion, I could tell—perhaps because I was an undead—that a huge power of light was approaching in the distance. But its size was incomparable to what I’d felt during our first encounter.

The Ender Knights would not be the same as back then. They were coming to kill the lord—and me.

But I wasn’t trembling.

I was...prepared. No matter what I had to sacrifice, no matter what I had to suffer through, I *would* survive.

The only problem...was the lord.

His expression had yet to betray any fear, even as the immense radiant powers drew closer.

Either it was the madness encapsulated within him—or he still had a chance to win even against that power.

That was my only concern.

The lord—my master, the one connected to me via magical means—needed to die at all costs.

As long as he was alive, I wouldn't even be able to eke out a life of freedom surviving on the run, in hiding, in fear.

At his command, I followed him out of the mansion.

The lord squinted against the sunlight, then raised the short staff in his hand and cried:

“.....Ah, ye grand incarnations of death, ye captive souls, now is the time to crawl out from the abyss and invite the living to their doom. Trample all that lives! **Corpse Parade!**”

All of a sudden, countless animal corpses had gathered in the mansions' large courtyard.

Wolves and bears. Monkeys. Birds. Among them were ones I'd killed and the lord had turned into undead.

Lou's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets—she had come with us—and she began breathing heavily. Her body was trembling, but her gaze was pinned to the innumerable flesh-beasts.

The trees rustled eerily. Though the sun was out, it felt inexplicably like night had come.

One of the nightwolf corpses waiting in front of me suddenly creaked, and its already brawny body expanded. Its fangs grew a size larger, and a bloodred light shone in its eyes.

The transformation ended in seconds. I took a step back in spite of myself.

The lord waved his staff like a conductor. As though in response, the beasts howled.

An army of the dead. That was the term that occurred to me.

I had thought it strange—how was he planning to exchange blows with the Ender Knights using only the undead he had currently serving him?

He'd strengthen them. Necromancers couldn't only resurrect corpses—they could make them more powerful, too!

The undead resurrected by the lord transformed completely—into bigger, stronger, fiercer, and more profane creatures.

The power I felt from their bodies was incomparable to what it had been moments ago.

Blood and flesh sprayed, and a rotting odor drifted through our surroundings; maybe he'd put *too* much power into them. Beneath the sunlight raining down, the dark beasts made their bloodlust evident, as though they would devour that very light itself.

Were these...a necromancer's combat forces? There was no signal—in one breath, the beasts all charged toward the forest. They easily cleared the walls and disappeared into the forest's dark overgrowth.

Those that remained were only the skeleton knights, who had turned much more brutal through the lord's incantation, and me, who had not changed.

"They should at least buy time. My main spell will take a little while."

"You won't strengthen me?" I asked.

It was an incredible power. I would have liked to receive it, though only if I retained my sanity.

The lord looked disapprovingly at me. "...They are sacrificial pawns. The power is too much, and it will ruin their bodies. I cannot destroy the vessel of the king of the dead."

I see... It didn't seem like a great idea. Of course, if he could have strengthened me so easily, he would have done so long ago.

There was still much to learn from the lord. Necromancers were unlawful beings. While it was pointless to consider the future in a situation such as this, gathering detailed information on necromancy without the lord would be backbreaking work.

It was...very much a shame.

"They—they underestimate me. Heh-heh-heh. They shall see. The ingredients are in order. I should thank Hak for that—ah yes, and after I kill the Knights and meet him again, I shall make him into a splendid undead!!" the lord shouted.

The skeleton knights, changed into aberrations, waited for the lord's instructions without moving a hairbreadth.

The ingredients... That must have referred to those giant fangs he'd gotten from Hak. I never did find out what the fangs came from, but given how confident the lord seemed, they must have belonged to something incredible.

"Lord, before the fight...would you lend me the Amulet of Shadow, the Cloak of Perpetual Night, and the billhook?"

"Hmm...? Hrm..."

"Nobody else is here to use them, right? I'll...need them to fight."

This was a gamble.

Especially crucial was the Amulet of Shadow. It could deceive even the eyes of the Ender Knights, presumably making it a significantly precious item.

After this, I would absolutely need to have it in order to live a peaceful life on the run.

At my proposal, the lord looked at me dubiously for just a moment but then clicked his tongue dramatically. "Fine," he said. "They are in the desk in my laboratory. End—once you've retrieved them, return to me immediately. This is an order. I will be in the hall."

"Yeah, got it. Thank you," I said with a smile before running off toward the laboratory by myself.

It had been a little less than a year since receiving my new life. The mansion was quite familiar to me now, and I ran through it at full speed.

Every last one of the skeleton knights constantly patrolling the halls was gone. The lord had probably assembled them all for battle.

The laboratory wasn't locked. This was the first time I'd gone in by myself.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a moment to spare. The lord's laboratory was a mess. Strange potions, papers, spare staves, unidentifiable bones... Heaps of things I would've wanted to mess with, if I'd been able to sneak in here on my own.

But I ignored them all and instead went to the lord's desk to retrieve the items I was after.

The Amulet of Shadow and the Cloak of Perpetual Night. Just when I finally removed the black-bladed billhook I was so familiar with using, my hands stopped.

The cloak could reduce the effects of the sunlight. The Amulet of Shadow would hide my negative presence, and I needed it to survive. But the billhook—what about the billhook?

He hadn't given it to me when I went to town.

It was clearly no ordinary weapon, easily cleaving through flesh and bone alike, never chipping no matter how many times I swung it.

Was it...cursed? I'd used it many times before, so it would have doubtlessly had an effect on my body. Still...the Ender Knights would be able to sense negative energy.

My hesitation lasted only a moment. To begin with, I didn't actually plan on fighting, so I didn't need a weapon. I wouldn't be greedy.

I had a trump card. One that would bring about an incredible effect, depending on when I used it.

This entire time, I'd been watching carefully for the right place to play it. The fact that I hadn't when I first attacked the lord, that I hadn't *needed* to play it, had been a stroke of good luck for me.

That trump card...was my living name.

Naming something was an important act for a sorcerer.

Sorcerers bound people with names, made contracts with spirits. So when the lord revived me, he had first given the name End to what should have been a blank slate.

But I still remembered my name in life. And so, the commands the lord gave me fell into two categories: those that were able to force me to do things and those that weren't.

I'd always thought it strange, and it had taken a few days after my revival for me to hit upon the reason.

I'd been called by a different name for a dozen-odd years before death, and I had vividly retained my memories from that time. I was *not* named End. Therefore, any orders he gave using the name End did not hold sway over me.

Ever since then, I'd been purposely obeying every one of the lord's orders.

Despite his failure to christen me, I was still an undead created by his hand. If he didn't include my name when he commanded me, I couldn't disobey it. And if he'd ordered me to, he would have easily made me divulge what my name used to be.

I'd been hiding it this whole time—all so that I could use it with lethal timing to betray the lord.

And that time had come.

The one who had called Senli, the one who had written the letter to her—that was me.

I'd used the paper and pen Lou had gotten me as part of our deal... It had been a gamble.

There'd been a chance I would be unable to make the deal with Lou, and she could have changed her mind partway through, too. And since I couldn't give Senli the letter directly, it was possible it wouldn't even get to her. Even if it did reach her, she might not have taken action right away.

But my gamble had paid off. The letter had made it to Senli, and she'd immediately taken charge of her companions and come here to kill the lord. The lord's ritual to create the king of the dead hadn't been completed in time.

I'd made two miscalculations. The first was expecting the first-rank knight to come with them, and the second was not knowing about the lord having several other cards to play.

The bout wasn't over yet.

I had risked everything on Senli. If she lost here, I would be trapped by the lord once more, and he would never again allow me any freedom. All I could do

now was pray.

I threw on the Cloak of Perpetual Night and put on the Amulet of Shadow.

After taking a deep breath—a holdover from my past life—I started running in the opposite direction of the hall, where the lord had said he'd be.

§ § §

As the undead nightbear swung its shaggy black front leg up and charged her, Senli used her blessing-imbued sword to cut it down in a single stroke. The army of the dead was like an avalanche. She suspected they were the pitiful ruins of the magical beasts that had originally inhabited this forest.

Each individual creature's abilities had been enhanced to the extreme.

The skin on their front legs split apart when they swiped with their claws, and large drops of blood mixed with drool splattered from their wide-open mouths. They were like demons raised from hell as they continued their attack, destroying their own bodies in the process.

And Senli knew why.

It was all due to the detestable powers of necromancy.

While they would have stopped normal mercenaries...they were not enough to stop the Ender Knights.

The positive energy Senli and the others controlled—the power of their blessings—drove away the darkness. Imbued in a sword, this power was able to slice through the dark; imbued in armor, it would serve as a barrier to drive away death. Energize it, and your physical abilities would increase.

That was how the Ender Knights could combat the kindred of the dark and the inhuman powers they wielded, while still being human.

"Did you find the necromancer?!"

"No! Damn—he can control this many undead from a distance?!"

Her companions' breath was ragged as they continued to kill the flesh-beasts endlessly assailing them.

Light and dark. Positive and negative. They held the natural advantage. And so the necromancer thought to nullify quality with quantity.

The undead, through their strengthening by the necromancer in exchange for the destruction of their souls, would gain an even deeper abyss. So deep that even the Ender Knights, who were used to purifying undead, were having just a little bit of trouble.

Their master had been right—this necromancer seemed to be quite powerful.

“Senli, should we pull back for now? These things will destroy themselves in time.”

“We stay.”

“Heh. I thought you’d say that! That’s why you’re a first-rank candidate!”

Luphrey, who had worked up a light sweat, offered a deep grin at Senli’s immediate reply.

Their reserves were still high, but she could tell her companions’ blessings were slowly but surely draining.

The blessings possessed by the Ender Knights were great but by no means infinite. Should they exhaust them, it would take time to recover. And if they ran dry, they would have no way to protect themselves from the denizens of the dark.

Senli had barely worked up a sweat, but Luphrey and the others only had a tenth of the blessing she did.

The undead attacking them now were the minions.

Senli pondered this as she purified a pack of wolves with the same ease as taking a breath: A second-rank necromancer was extremely close in existence to a king of darkness. She doubted this army of flesh-beasts was all he had.

The Knights needed to conserve their power. Getting them home alive was part of Senli’s mission.

“I’ll deal with them all at once.”

“?! W-wait, Senli, they’re still—”

“That’s what Master would do.”

There was no hesitation.

Gripping the sword made of a precious sacred-silver—a weapon given to her upon becoming a second-rank knight—Senli prayed.

She stabbed the sword into the ground. Then she gathered all the blessings coming off her body into its tip and let it explode.

It was one of the thirty-six blessing arts that a second-rank knight was expected to know.

“Soul Release.”

The pure positive energy became a glowing wind that dispersed into her surroundings.

There was no destruction. An undead bear, about to swing its mighty arm down; a pack of undead wolves, lunging at their foes without regard for their comrades’ deaths; they all crumpled without a sound and turned into dust.

The dead, on their incessant assault, didn’t even have time to scream. They faded away like they’d been illusions all along. Senli saw them off with an indescribable feeling of melancholy.

Soul Release was the most basic of the arts. It was the power that made an Ender Knight what she was—the dispersed positive energy would fill up the abysses of all the undead, granting them repose.

It was almost impossible to defend against, and when used on so many low-ranking undead, there was no stronger technique.

Tranquility returned. The corrupted air was purified. Nevira put the mace he’d been swinging around onto his shoulder, giving an amused whistle. “Gotta hand it to a second-rank knight. That was a lot of undead to purify all at once.”

“I felt we couldn’t exhaust ourselves just yet.”

She pulled the sword out of the earth, squeezing her palm several times to check on the state of her body. Then she nodded without even batting an eye.

Soul Release was powerful, but it was extremely exhausting compared to fighting with a blessing-imbued weapon since you expelled so much light power. Because of that, the Ender Knights learned techniques to handle weapons so that they could conserve their limited blessing.

But Senli possessed the blessing reserves of a first-rank knight.

Firing off all that power at once made her feel a minor sense of malaise, but that quickly disappeared, too.

She could still fight. Her power hadn't even been reduced by 10 percent.

Her violet eyes stared into the forest.

There were still souls who had been violated by darkness. She had to save them.

"No issues. Our attack must have come as a surprise to Horos. We'll end this before he can regroup."

Her comrades nodded at her words, their expressions serious.

They found the mansion quickly.

Ringed by a high fence, it sat quietly in the dense, thick forest, giving off a somehow eerie aura.

After forcing the locked gate open, the Knights entered. Past the fence, in the courtyard, was a thick, lingering scent of death.

But the only undead they sensed were inside the mansion.

The flesh-beasts who had attacked them earlier had probably been allowed to roam free in this yard. Senli knit her well-proportioned eyebrows as the image of all those dead wolves running around the yard crossed her mind for a moment.

Mighty sorcerers had powerful presences to match the massive strength they possessed. A subdued mana flowed from the mansion. And it was, without a doubt, one of the five most powerful out of all the opponents she'd fought in the past.

He was here. She was positive. Horos Kamen was in that mansion.

Even knowing that Senli and the other Ender Knights—his mortal enemies—had come, he awaited them in arrogance.

“Ugh. Thought he’d flee if he knew we were coming. Pretty confident for a scared old necromancer who’s about to become a corpse himself.” Nevira gave another one of his wild-animal grins. But his face was a little paler than usual. He was on the verge of being swallowed up by the evil.

“Scared?” Senli couldn’t help but blurt out.

Nevira’s eyes widened for a moment, but he quickly clenched his teeth.

He wagged his mace—its silver head was the only part of it that was blessed—and shouted gruffly, “...Who the hell do you think you’re talking to? I’m an Ender Knight, you know. And I’ve been one a lot longer than you, Senli. I fight opponents like this all the time. You just worry about yourself. Beating Horos’s tricks is your job!”

“...Understood. Leave it to me.”

“Honestly. I know this is just your personality, but would it kill you to have more respect for your seniors?”

That much wouldn’t hinder her in battle, either. Nevira was right—all of Senli’s companions were hardened veterans with a lot of combat experience under Epe the Extinguisher. They might feel threatened by the necromancer’s power, but they would never flinch.

Senli couldn’t feel any more undead outside the mansion. The ones they’d just dealt with had probably been the last.

Horos intended to settle everything inside the mansion.

Its doors were wide open—as though he was provoking them.

Focusing her mind, she energized and converted the blessing flowing through her, raising her physical capabilities.

Luphrey and the others were poised as well, absent of the tiredness she’d seen before, energizing their own powers in the same way.

Just as necromancers were strengthened by death, those who belonged to the light had its protection. There was nothing to fear.

And so, Senli and the other Ender Knights invaded the mansion.

§ § §

It had been a long, arduous journey. But the end was in sight at last.

Fifty years had passed since Horos Kamen became a second-rank necromancer.

His ultimate wish: producing the king of the dead. Through its birth Horos Kamen would become one of the most powerful beings in the world—a necromancer of the first rank.

That the Ender Knights had launched an attack on him with perfect timing was certainly no coincidence.

They could feel it unconsciously: the birth of the most powerful being, the king of darkness.

And thus would they attempt to stop him at all costs.

It was truly a stroke of good luck that he had acquired the outstanding specimen called End as the final piece of his research.

His growth rate, his sheer caliber, stood atop everything else Horos had ever experienced in his long life as a necromancer.

End had gone to get his equipment and had yet to return. What was keeping him...?

Still, as his lord, the one who had birthed him, Horos could tell that he was nearby. End was a little too smart, which was the only thing that caused Horos worry, but he *had* given an order. Once End finished what he needed to do, he would return.

Right now, Horos needed to think about how to defeat the Ender Knights. If he was to lose End at this stage, there was no telling how many more decades it would take to acquire another undead like him.

First-rank knights were strong. Epe the Extinguisher was Horos's mortal enemy. In the current situation, the man wasn't an opponent he could handle;

Horos had shelved bolstering his forces to focus on his research. But there was no need to worry. Epe wasn't with them. Just once—he only needed to take them down once.

Normally, he would have preferred to wait for the next rank mutation, but with End's wits and intelligence, the ritual would succeed even though he was a ghoul. And if that ritual was a success, Horos would have no use for forests like this anymore.

He made a shallow slice in the palm of his hand, then used his own blood to draw a magic circle.

This would be a burden on Horos, a human, but the undead he'd sent out had been annihilated in short order.

Epe was apparently not with them, but the enemy seemed stronger than he'd imagined. The Extinguisher must have taught his apprentices well.

Horos Kamen would use everything he'd obtained thus far.

This...must be my ultimate trial.

He looked at his slave, who followed his instructions despite her fear. Preparations were complete. He didn't need the help of a slave any longer.

"Lou, you have a job to do as well..."

"...?!"

Under Horos's gaze, Lou blanched and took a step back.

Skinny, bony limbs and body. Her eyes were sunken, and her hair was unbrushed. Her clothing was in shambles, too. She was a truly minuscule existence, not rising even as high as a single skeleton.

Above all, her eyes no longer held the motivation to live. One could call her the archetypical slave.

And to that slave, for the first time, Horos offered a smile.

"Even the frail have their...uses. The wellspring of their power is life itself—prayers and pride. Corrupt them, and they will weaken."

"Wh-what are you—?" Lou squeaked.

Horos's eyebrow twitched, but he collected himself and gave his command. "I do not recall granting permission to question me... But it matters not. This...is your last command, Lou. Lou Doles—go with the skeleton knights to intercept and attack the Ender Knights."

§ § §

They walked through the dead quiet mansion, which was empty of any sign of the living.

The narrow halls, illuminated by the floating holy light, were incredibly eerie.

The presence of darkness was strong. The miasma was so thick it could choke someone, which alone would have stopped in their tracks any who weren't accustomed to it. Horos Kamen was up to something. Was it a last, compelling, vain struggle—or was it something he'd prepared for a long time before this? Senli couldn't figure which.

But they'd been aware from the start: They were up against a sly old necromancer. Any evil sorcerer who had lived as long as he would have a few tricks up his sleeve.

The miasma enveloping the entire mansion was slowly whittling away at the blessings clinging to Senli and the other knights, although it wasn't enough to break through their skin. They were essentially inside the belly of the enemy now.

It felt like the entire world had been covered in darkness.

Senli's senses already weren't working properly.

She could tell there were undead nearby, and she could make a decent guess at their direction, but she couldn't tell how many meters ahead they were. She felt like she'd been blindfolded, and her ears had been plugged.

The only things she could rely on in this situation were her five senses. She simply walked straight ahead toward the powerful darkness.

There were several rooms along the way, but she couldn't sense anything from inside them.

Horos Kamen was their top priority. He was probably awaiting them in the deepest chamber.

“Shit. Master Epe was right—this necromancer is a pain in the ass. I wonder... We might even see a vampire today.”

“I...doubt that. There is a low chance a prudent, second-rank necromancer would use something as dangerous as a vampire... Though he might use a lesser one.”

“...It ...It was a joke, Senli. You’re too serious.” Nevira frowned and sighed at her. “But...well, if worse comes to worst, and a vampire does show up—we’d probably be better served retreating.”

Vampires were a special kind of undead. They had numerous weaknesses—but extremely uncanny abilities to match.

In addition to massive physical might, their superfast regenerative capabilities could perfectly restore their bodies even if most of it was lost. They had intelligence above and beyond what humans possessed—but the main thing that separated them from other undead was their high resistance toward magic.

And because of that, necromancers didn’t casually employ vampires as their own underlings.

Vampires had a high resistance to magic, including necromancy.

Every once in a while, a vampire raised by a necromancer would kill their creator.

Vampires looked down on humans for being weaker, and yet they envied humans because they lacked a vampire’s weaknesses. It was said a vampire with an extremely strong power of death could even ignore commands at times—the special right and privilege of the necromancer.

Such monsters were not made for humans to control. Out of all the curses a necromancer created, vampires were the most harmful.

Thus, wise necromancers who lived long didn’t create vampires.

Those who did were either foolish third-rank necromancers who couldn't tell that vampires were too much for them to handle—or first-rank ones who were confident in their ability to control such evolved beings.

A vampire was monstrous enough to kill a third-rank knight one-on-one sometimes. If a single vampire showed up in a fight against a necromancer, you were better off withdrawing from battle to rethink your strategy.

But the Knights didn't need to worry. If Horos could control vampires, he would have been taking more of an offensive.

Because those undead before were extremely weak to sunlight and required the right timing to use properly.

Just then, Senli heard distant footsteps coming from somewhere.

She stopped in place and looked up, pointing her sagacious eyes beyond the light. She wasn't imagining things.

"Wait... Something's coming."

Luphrey and the others had already stopped as well.

There were many sets of footsteps. Hard, clattering ones, along with metal scraping.

Imagining the identity of those sounds, Senli gripped her sword tightly.

And then they appeared down the hallway. Luphrey clicked his tongue. "... Scarecrimson knights?"

"Lots of them."

The bone knights, splashed with crimson, rushed them, making shrill noises as they did so. There were too many to fit side by side in the narrow hallway.

Scarecrimsons were skeletons imbued with dark blessings by a necromancer. These strengthened, coated skeletons were fearsome indeed—they possessed resistance to the blessings the Ender Knights wielded and would continue their unflinching assault even as they were purified.

Nevertheless, if the Knights put all their strength into a Soul Release, it would pierce the dark blessings around the scarecrimsons and purify them.

But it was clear the enemy was trying to exhaust Senli's group.

Watching the scarecrimson knights as they ran toward them through the passage, Nevira said in a growling, intimidating voice, "Hey, Senli. Don't do it."

"...I know."

This still wasn't the enemy's main threat. Even Senli, with her powerful blessing, would exhaust herself if she tried to destroy the forces in front of them along with their dark blessings. They needed to take them out one by one to conserve their strength.

And then they heard the sound of a door opening to the rear.

From behind, countless more footsteps sounded.

Thelma cried out. "...Argh! They've got us cornered!"

"I couldn't feel anything... Were they concealed with a barrier?!"

A horde of scarecrimson knights appeared from a room Senli and the others had passed. Their bodies were protected by metal armor, and their hands by gauntlets, gripping swords and shields.

There was a definite technique to the combination of cautiousness and energy within them, as well as the way they carried themselves. They'd probably been made from the bones of combat veterans. When Thelma had fired a silver arrow at one of their skulls, it had easily knocked the arrow out of the air with its sword.

There would be differences between individuals, but how could he have gotten this many warriors' bones...?

"Be careful."

"I don't need *you* to tell me that!"

"Go!"

Though they were protected by armor and bolstered by dark blessings, the enemies were still undead. One strike from the Knights' blessing-infused weapons could purify them. At Senli's command, her companions quickly spread out.

Entrusting her comrades to the rear, Senli pointed her shining sword at the knights of bone charging at her from the front.

A mace smashed through armor and bone alike, while blessed arrows aimed at the gaps in their suits of armor purified the wicked beings.

Senli and the others specialized in fighting the denizens of the dark, but that didn't mean they were unskilled at close-quarters combat.

Though the scarecrimson knights were both powerful and skilled, they would never retreat. This weakness of theirs came from being controlled.

Senli's group currently had the advantage. None of them had sustained major wounds, and they'd already purified over twenty scarecrimson knights. The weapons their purified foes had been holding were scattered across the floor.

"Damn, there's too many! How long is this gonna go on?!"

"Be quiet and strike them down!"

However, even at that stage, it seemed as though the enemies' numbers hadn't decreased at all.

The skeletal knights never slowed their assault. They trampled over their comrades' weapons, crushing them, all while swinging their swords. One clean hit had enough force to possibly wound even an Ender Knight despite their strengthened physical abilities.

The miasma was steadily whittling away their blessings. Exhaustion was creeping into the group's expressions, with little stabs of distress crossing their minds.

How large a force had their enemy assembled? Would it be better to return to town for now and regroup?

Their undead enemies, meanwhile, had no such unease.

"Don't—rush things!" Lumphrey shouted.

"...!"

Senli bit her lip. She'd been considering whether she ought to use Soul Release.

She caught a downward-swinging blade on her silver sword, then used her blessing-enhanced leg strength to step in and push the enemy back. Her blade pierced its armor, and the scarecrimson knight's insides turned to ash and crumbled away.

Things were going downhill. Blessings didn't last forever—and neither did stamina.

Luphrey and the others were worried that Senli was exhausting herself. Senli, however, was more concerned about her companions' stamina.

There was no time to decide. The scarecrimson knights were nothing like the undead they'd fought in the forest.

If she purified the entire force with Soul Release right now—how many more times could she use it?

"I'm...fine. I still have strength left."

"..."

Luphrey and the others didn't respond.

They were out of options. She hated to play into the enemy's hands, but it wouldn't be possible for a third-rank knight's Soul Release to purify this many undead.

Making up her mind, she parried the scarecrimson knight thrusting straight at her, then put the strength of her blessing into her sword.

The instant before unleashing the energy, Senli caught sight of an unexpected figure. It was a girl crowded among the skeleton knights. She had a slave collar around her neck and was staring straight at the Ender Knights with a deathly pallor.

The decision took an instant. Senli finished funneling the almost excessive energy into her sword, and then light exploded.

"Soul Release!"

A terribly empty weakness caused her hands to tremble.

The excessive power packed within her blade turned into a dazzling radiance that shot down the narrow passage.

When the light touched a scarecrimson knight, it instantly turned to dust. Even their blessings of darkness wouldn't protect them from the tempest of light.

The light disappeared. Armor and weapons clattered to the ground. Senli almost fell to her knees, but she tightened her core and withstood it.

Then, she opened her violet eyes and inspected the situation, not letting her guard down.

There had been a sickening number of scarecrimson knights before, and now not a single one remained. Only one, the girl Senli had seen right before unleashing her purifying light, stood amid the armaments that had lost their owners.

Her right hand gripped a small knife, which looked incredibly unreliable compared to the scarecrimson knights' weapons.

Soul Release was an anti-undead technique. It wouldn't hurt humans.

Senli understood this, but she still let out a sigh of relief at the sight.

Thank goodness...

The girl looked several years younger than Senli. Her hair was black, and there was little color in her face. Her body was sickly thin—maybe she hadn't been eating properly. If she was fighting alongside the undead, she must have been Horos Kamen's slave.

And then Senli's eyes widened. She remembered that face. She had a memory of spotting her in the town and casting healing magic on her, since she'd looked unwell.

The girl stood dumbstruck, her eyes darting back and forth. Senli inhaled deeply to steady her breath, which was on the verge of becoming ragged.

The dark presence hadn't disappeared. But that seemed to have been the end of the scarecrimson knights.

She felt a heavy exhaustion settle over her. Not so much, though, that she wouldn't be able to fight.

The girl in front of her—her name was Lou, wasn't it?

"Dammit, Senli! That was overkill!"

"It's okay... Everything's fine, now..."

Lou wobbled uncertainly toward them. Fortunately, she didn't seem injured.

Senli spread her arms to embrace her. As soon as her hands were about to touch the girl's bony shoulders, the small knife in the girl's right hand suddenly leaped upward.

The blade, its coloring as dull as its edge, was aimed at Senli.

The strike was incredibly artless. It was slow, and the hand guiding it was shaking.

To say nothing of Senli at full strength, even now that she had used her power and was utterly exhausted, she could easily take the attack.

Her mind went blank for a moment, but her composure returned immediately. For someone who had hunted so many denizens of the dark, she was free to either dodge or take the amateurish strike. Even if she took it completely unarmed, it wouldn't be possible for those tiny arms to deal a fatal blow to Senli, protected by her blessing as she was.

She twisted her head and shifted herself out of the knife's path. The blade passed right by her.

And then—before Senli's eyes, Lou flew backward.

Her arms, which had tried to embrace Senli, whiffed through empty air. Something soft thumped down to the ground.

Lou had fallen. In her chest was a single silver arrow. Thelma's arrow.

Drool mixed with blood fell from Lou's colorless lips. Her limbs spasmed slightly.

Senli froze briefly, and then she frantically ran over to the girl. But it was already clear that the wound was fatal.

The girl's life began to drain away. Senli could do nothing but watch over her.

Thelma, her voice a mixture of anger and sadness, said, "I know how you feel... But she was a necromancer's pawn. What were you thinking, letting your guard down to welcome her with open arms?"

"*Sigh*... This time...Thelma is right. The girl may be a slave, she may look harmless, but who knows what she's been trained to do? You should know that story as well as we do—the one about a knight who took pity on a prisoner of a necromancer, only to be devoured when the prisoner turned into a monster."

Luphrey's words went in one ear and out the other. Senli understood what they meant, but they didn't sink in.

Senli lifted the girl's skeletal body. It was impossibly light for a human.

She recognized that necromancers walked an evil path, leaving tragedies in their wakes.

As an Ender Knight, she'd seen many tragedies before. She couldn't even count all the people she'd been unable to save.

Nevira looked down at Lou, on the verge of death, with cold-blooded eyes. "Rescuing people isn't our job," he said. "Our job...is to destroy. To stop the tragedies before they happen."

"....."

The Ender Knights were cruel. They fought demons, and kindness sometimes got in the way. Even if a first-rank knight had been here—even if it had been Epe, whose combat abilities far exceeded Senli's—the outcome probably would have been the same.



For the Ender Knights, who fought necromancers who toyed with souls, death *was* the salvation.

In Senli's arms, Lou's lips parted slightly. All Senli could hear was weak, shallow breathing.

Tears fell from Lou's widened eyes until she at last gave a tiny smile, then closed her eyes.

The strength left her body. Senli, hands trembling, laid the still-warm body on the floor.

She bit her tongue hard, controlling her emotions while getting unsteadily to her feet.

Her hand whitened as it gripped her sword. Power welled up within her, as though in response to her emotions.

Nobody touched Senli. One fellow knight simply asked quietly: "Can you fight...?"

"Once we defeat Horos... I'll build her a grave," Senli replied, voice quivering, before gritting her teeth and looking ahead.

The necromancer was waiting patiently for the Ender Knights at the center of the mansion—in a hall, its doors opened wide.

After the horde of scarecrimson knights, there had been no signs of any new undead appearing. However, it was clear that they weren't the last trick up his sleeve.

Horos Kamen was an elderly man. He stood there calmly, attended by two skeleton knights holding something behind him.

Wrinkles creased his features, and his hair was stark white. The only thing brimming with life were those glaring ashen eyes. He was tall and wore a full-length jet-black robe. In his right hand, he held a short staff.

The Knights' master, Epe, had an indiscernible age because of his abundance of blessings, but the man before them was ageless in a different sense.

When his clouded eyes fixated on something, it seemed like he was peering into an endless darkness.

A strange, bloodred magic circle had been drawn on the carpet beneath him. Lumphrey and the others gasped at the demonic aura.

In a raspy voice, the sorcerer said, “So, Ender Knights...you’ve come at last. You are fearsome foes indeed, to have scattered my minions to get here...”

“Horos Kamen... I, Senli Sylvis, of the Ender Knights...shall be the one to kill you!”

“Hmph... It appears Lou was of some use.”

“!!”

Horos Kamen remained unflappable at Senli’s words—at the words of the Ender Knights, his mortal enemies.

Persuading him would be impossible. She wanted to tell him how Lou died and press him on that, but that was more than she could manage.

This man was nothing like Lou. His was a wholly wicked existence who had tread this path of his own volition.

She couldn’t even take a step. Not because of fear, but because Horos Kamen still had a trick to play.

At a glance, Horos currently seemed defenseless. But assuming that would be a mistake.

This hall was filled with such an incredible negative presence, the likes of which they’d never felt before. Horos Kamen shouted.

“But the spell is already complete. This place...is now the netherworld. Obstructors of my fervent wish...burn my power over death into your eyes...and die!”

The earth, and the very air, began to quake.

The two skeleton knights suddenly collapsed, and the black objects they’d been holding flew into the middle of the magic circle.

...And then they took shape.

Senli understood. Those...were fangs. Two giant fangs.

Luphrey and the others stepped back, faces white. They'd realized what this spell was.

Darkness gathered around the fangs. They took the shape of arms with sharp, hooked claws—of great wings that blocked out the sunlight—of fangs that could crush all things between them—of shining eyes. Horos Kamen cackled.

“Heh-heh-heh! Witness it—for this is my ultimate necromancy!”

“Impossible... Only two fangs, and it—”

The typically easygoing Nevira gripped his mace tightly and shuddered.

This was, essentially, the culmination of all the necromancy Senli had ever seen before.

Normally, when creating the undead from remains, most of the body was required. At the very least, Senli had never heard of anyone creating an undead from a pair of fangs.

Before them was an evil black dragon.

Wings and fangs. Claws. A giant tail. Smooth skin and a veiny body. Pure darkness had replenished the creature's lost flesh and blood, and it was so tall that it couldn't fit inside the mansion.

Its head easily tore through the ceiling, and sunlight shone down onto its black body.

The evil dragon roared as if to defy the sun.

Horos Kamen shouted his order.

“Now, guardian of death, watcher of the underworld—kill them!”

So incredibly wicked. How many years had this man spent studying this ritual?

The dragon howled. The negative energy forming its night-black being was far greater than even the vampires Senli had fought in the past. It was probably stronger now than it had been in life.

Destructive energy gathered in its wide-open jaw before instantly condensing into a single point.

Then, as though a hole had opened in the world, black energy began to swirl.

With that, the creature unleashed its flames.

The dark flames formed a beam that engulfed Senli and the others in an attack modeled after the strongest of all illusory beasts—the dragon.

Luphrey and his companions gritted their teeth. But Senli was entirely calm.

She simply focused her mind like she always did, gazed at the approaching death, and put all her blessings into her sword.

Under Epe's tutelage, she had studied the power of light—and learned of her own duty.



The next moment, the second-rank knight, Senli Sylvis, swung her sword directly at the oncoming darkness.

“Photon Delete.”

“?!”

The light streaming from the blade turned into a streaking comet that engulfed the beam of black flames.

It continued blowing away the unresisting fires and plunging forth until it obliterated half of the evil dragon’s body.

Her strength left her. Exhaustion caused her head to sting. Her body nearly collapsed.

But her eyes were glaring firmly at Horos Kamen.

Photon Delete was a godlike art of Epe, Senli’s master and possessor of top-class strength even among the first-rank knights.

The technique condensed a massive amount of blessing power, converted it into destructive power, then released it. It was simple but hid within it the possibility to send any denizen of the dark to their grave. The technique consisted of nothing more than brute force—but it was perfectly suited to Senli.

The spent power was quickly replenished, and her body got a bit lighter. That was Senli’s physical constitution at work—the massive power stored within her, the power of her blessing that recovered immediately, which her master, Epe, had called a soul who reaches further heights.

This was a blessing given to her by divinity, one bestowed upon her as an Ender Knight.

The tragedy—the *indignation*—Senli experienced gave her strength. Power sprang forth again, as though in response to her feelings.

She’d exhausted energy on the way here—but she had more than enough to blow away this necromancer.

To date, Senli had never once run out of blessings in the middle of a fight.

“Impossible...! That power—it’s *his*!”

“My apologies, but I need you to die.”

“Curse you... Don’t tell me you’re a first-rank knight?!”

“I’m about to become one.”

This was by no means revenge for Lou. Nor was it a venting of anger.

This was the divine command passed down to Senli Sylvis, Ender Knight.

The evil dragon, now missing half its body, had regained its physical form through Horos’s power.

Once again, Senli gathered her blessing into her sword, then swung at the beast with more strength than usual.

The evil dragon roared. A chill ran down Senli’s back at the intense presence of death. The entire world felt as if it were covered in darkness.

Light and dark were opposing forces. The power of death, wielded by necromancers, had mental effects on the living.

That power would normally have had no effect on the Ender Knights, who were protected by the strength of the light, but the dragon’s ferocity was too far beyond. If a normal human had been here, their instinctual terror would have prevented them from moving a muscle.

...So strong. So beyond compare.

She’d realized how massive Horos’s might was with a single glance. Right when he’d created the evil dragon, Senli understood that he was far stronger than any of the second-rank necromancers she’d fought thus far.

Those fangs he’d used as catalysts were likely the fangs of a notably powerful dragon. But the might of any undead was heavily influenced by the strength of the caster. Senli had been on support duty for several first-rank necromancer hunts with Epe, but this man, who had an evil dragon to do his bidding, may have been even more powerful than some of them.

Three times already, the dragon, its body destroyed, had stood firm before Senli and the others as though nothing had happened. The power of a blessing was the ideal force to bear against the power of darkness. But even then...a

third-rank knight probably wouldn't have been able to win. She doubted even a second-rank knight had a surefire chance.

She could feel the deep-seated obsession of many years from the detestably enormous mana pouring from his old bones. It was strange, even, that he hadn't yet become a first-rank necromancer.

She gave her gratitude to the one who had sent them the letter that nullified the bounded field—thanks to that, they'd made it in time.

Their strategy was already set in stone. Lumphrey and the others were companions she'd been with for a long time. They didn't need to exchange words.

At Senli's flanks were Lumphrey and Nevira, wielding weapons made of sacred-silver to drive off demons as they took the attacks. Thelma aimed for Horos with her arrows. The quiet sorcerer, Adrian, softly incanted spells to put up a barrier that would prevent the dark from getting inside.

Against an undead of this level, it was very difficult to deal effective damage with average abilities, even if you aimed for a weak point. Indeed, the arrows pointed at Horos were repelled by the shock wave that followed the evil dragon's roars. Nevira and Lumphrey sliced apart and pushed away its flinging tail and the sharp, shadowy tentacles extending from its body, but the dragon didn't seem the least bit affected. And even with most of its body obliterated, it regenerated in an instant—via necromancy.

The only one who could defeat them was Senli.

Even with his mortal enemies before him, even with his dragon thrice blown apart, Horos still hadn't dropped his haughty attitude.

They had to defeat him before he turned into a first-rank necromancer, at any cost.

They could win. They *would* win. Senli wasn't alone.

"Epe the Extinguisher, you old bastard... You would yet obstruct my road to domination?!"

Horos screamed with rage, hiding himself behind the dragon. His cries made Senli remember what her master, Epe, had told her.

Horos Kamen apparently had a longtime feud with Epe.

He had cornered the necromancer several times, only to have him slip through his fingers at the last moment each time.

Perhaps Epe had entrusted this conquest to Senli and the others because, though he still had strength remaining, the heroic knight leader had grown old, and he wanted to entrust his mission to the next generation of Ender Knights.

She focused her eyes and mind. Rallying her strength, she put all her heart into her sword.

Her companions were desperately fending off the dragon's attacks. Senli unleashed her power anew.

"Photon Delete!"

The torrent of light she focused her mind on and fired had been given the attribute of destruction, and it was far more enormous than the previous ones. It pierced the evil dragon like it was made of paper and continued on, engulfing Horos behind it.

The light disappeared. Photon Delete converted blessings into destructive energy to deal damage to the undead as well as other living creatures. One could call the technique the pinnacle of blessing-based attacks.

Epe, her master and the technique's developer, was said to have used this power to destroy an entire castle.

But Horos Kamen's evil presence didn't vanish. Senli's companions were still alert, too.

Horos, who should have certainly been blown away, floated calmly in midair. His robe wasn't even frayed.

The Knights should have dealt enough damage to the dragon that even an undead wouldn't be able to regenerate fully...yet the creature did exactly that.

Breathing roughly, Nevira spat. "Soul Transference... Dammit, what a pain!"

It was one of a necromancer's arcane secrets—splitting up and relocating one's soul to defy death.

As long as they didn't kill the lord, his evil dragon would revive as many times as it needed to.

But Horos wasn't immortal. They just had to destroy every one of his partitioned souls.

The necromancer was clearly exhausted. Controlling the dragon and reviving it must have been draining enormous reserves of mana from him.

Senli felt her heart race. Her fatigue from firing her blessing so many times had filled her body with a mysterious sense of elation.

This would be a battle of attrition. Senli caught her breath, storing new power in her sword, her expression unchanging. "I'm fine. I'll destroy him until he's no more."

"Don't patronize me, you toddling child!"

Horos took something from an inside pocket and scattered it around himself. In his hand were small, decaying white fangs.

When they hit the ground, in less time than it took to blink, they changed into skeletons wearing helmets and armor.

This was an ancient spell called Dragon-Fang Soldier. These beings weren't undead, but rather they were a type of golem. Was it a countermeasure specifically for the Ender Knights?

The evil dragon, with its gargantuan frame, charged at them while the waves of golems attacked from the flanks.

The creatures were after Senli. But they weren't worth being afraid of.

Her companions stepped out in front of her to intercept the assault.

Senli left her fellow knights to contain their opponents, then calmly stepped back before spurring her heavy body onward, focusing on accumulating power.

Brilliant lights, strong enough to blot out the sun, flashed many times.

My body shuddered with instinctual fear just from hearing those angry roars foretelling death shaking the forest.

Light blew away the mansion, and overflowing darkness devastated the world.

It certainly wasn't a battle I could even think about joining—it was the kind they sang about in legends.

I sat hidden atop a large tree growing very close to the mansion in the woods behind it, observing the fight.

Necromancers could sense the locations of their subordinate undead. The ability didn't seem to be very precise, but the lord might have noticed if I got too far, so there wasn't any way I could leave the mansion.

Not until the lord died anyway.

The monster the lord had created was a massive, pitch-black dragon. Those fangs must have been the catalysts. Its veiny body was like darkness itself. Its tail extended like a shadow, easily wrecking the mansion, and the black flames it unleashed from its oral cavity engulfed the surroundings like a tidal wave, incinerating them.

The monster was a stark difference from the undead I'd seen the lord control in the past. If I'd known about this ploy of his ahead of time, I would've been a little more prudent about all this.

But that jet-black giant was easily obliterated by light of such quantity it would make one shiver.

If it had been me, I'd have died a hundred times just from a graze. I was sure of it—that was how massive the positive energy was that wiped out the dark breath, incinerated most of the dragon's body, engulfed the lord standing behind it, and continued on without stopping, shooting by a few meters past the tree in which I'd concealed myself.

A single, petite young woman had done all that—Senli.

She didn't retreat from the giant dragon that could swallow up the entire world; instead, she swung her sword. The positive energy housed within her decreased with every blast but then returned to her right away, as though it was being resupplied somehow.

She was the very picture of a hero. The lord was impenetrable, and yet so was she. And if a second-rank knight could do this, how powerful was a first-rank knight?

Most of the evil dragon's body was blown away—but in an instant, it regenerated, reverting to normal. The lord, who had supposedly disappeared into the light, stood there as well, perfectly unharmed. His angry shouts overlapped with the roars of Senli's companions.

I couldn't tell who was dominating the battle.

I was weak. I was by far the weakest out of all those here right now. Both the dragon's tail and a strike from the light would reduce me to rubble. My newly gained regenerative and physical abilities from becoming a ghoul would not avail me.

But even watching it, I was calm. I'd come to terms with my weakness long ago.

This was...the only thing I could have done. And my decision had been right.

Even now, having invited the fierce assault, they were on even footing. If I'd given the lord any more time to prepare, he might have easily put down Senli.

The Ender Knights were the strongest. That was my sense of them, at least, having read about their exploits in fairy tales so many times while bedridden.

According to my plan, Senli's group should have been able to kill the lord more easily. He may have possessed 120 lives, but the Knights were supposed to be accustomed to fighting against necromancers like him.

Senli and the others used subtle combinations to oppose the dragon-controlling lord. She struck, and her teammates supported her. And that wasn't how I'd imagined one of the Ender Knights' battles to go.

I pulled the front of the Cloak of Perpetual Night around me more tightly and gripped the Amulet of Shadow.

I hadn't bet on the lord. I'd bet on Senli. I'd done everything I could to ensure Senli's victory.

I'd decided it would be easier to run from the Ender Knights than the crafty lord, who had several facets of authority over me, not least of which were his absolute commands. I figured that with me as a ghoul, still able to operate in the sunlight, still possessing intelligence, still able to hide my negative presence with the amulet, I could shake off the Knights.

I'd risked it all. If the lord was to win here, he would have doubts about me, since I hadn't returned to him right away like he'd ordered. I would have to trust that he was exhausted and attack him before he realized the command hadn't worked.

The din never ceased. The mansion I'd spent almost a year in after becoming an undead was crumbling to the ground.

It was being ruined by flames, light, blades, and draconic strikes.

As I stared, without making a sound, I remembered my promise to Lou.

The sun had reached its zenith. At last, the time had come.

The evil dragon let out a roar. The ground quaked, the air shook, and it almost seemed like cracks had run through the earth. Dark energy gathered and glowed, so deep it could drag you into its abyss at a mere glance.

There was a tenacity behind it. This is how he planned to end things.

Senli and the others were already wounded all over. It didn't seem like something they could withstand.

As I sucked in my breath, I heard a voice slicing through the darkness.

"Haaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"?!"

For the first time, Senli had let out a cry. Her silvery sword gleamed.

Light clashed with light. The battle was over. It wasn't even a contest.

The light that burst from her sword was so enormous, it was like a second sun—it enveloped the darkness and burned the evil dragon away.

It was a miracle.

The dragon had attacked with all its might, but Senli's voice had life in it. There was no way she could have been able to control such a giant power after firing energy so many times in succession. But she had.

The dragon, which had immediately spread its wings out wide as if to protect the lord, disappeared, reduced to dust.

The light vanished, and atop the mountain of rubble, a kneeling Senli and her worn-out comrades remained.

And...

"That's absurd... How could you still...? That much power... Im...possible..."

The lord groaned, his eyes opened wide.

There was no sign of the evil dragon reviving. The lord's body began turning to dust, starting from his toes.

Had he used up all 120 lives? The staff fell from his hand, and as it began to disappear, he looked at it dumbly.

There was no fear in his expression. Without crying out or wailing, the lord was, right up until the end, like the necromancers I'd always envisioned.

Senli, breathing raggedly, watched their enemy with sharp eyes as he disappeared.

Her silvery bangs stuck to the sweat on her forehead.

Even her power must have been spent, because the blessing bursting from her before had now dried up so much that even I might be able to defeat her.

"It's...over."

"Such regret. If my wish had been granted, the likes of you would be... If it had been...night... Ah..."

And so, without cursing Senli, the one who had brought him to destruction, or even looking at her directly, the lord, with surprising ease, vanished.

Nothing remained—it was like everything had been an illusion.

His robe had turned to dust with his body, and the only evidence of his existence was the staff that had fallen to the ground.

I shuddered.

I'd won. I'd won my gamble.

The lord was my savior and mortal enemy. A great foe I couldn't have ever destroyed myself. There was no sense of accomplishment. Nor any particular grudge. Perhaps that was why I felt, paired with relief, a faint sense of loneliness.

I'd been the one who survived. Now there was nobody who could bind me.

Senli and the other Ender Knights were exhausted. But I didn't intend to attack them.

Then Senli fell, as though a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut. One of her companions supported her, giving a wry grin.

The presence of companions. That was the major difference between the lord and Senli's group. The lord had had subordinates but never companions. I wondered what the battle would've been like if he'd had any.

No... I wouldn't answer that.

The lord had used everything he had, always sticking to his convictions, and he had lost. It wasn't my place to say anything.

One of the Knights picked up the staff the lord had left behind, then broke it clean in two before incinerating it with light. Supporting one another, Senli's party made their way away from the mansion grounds. I saw them off from where I was, not moving a muscle.

I never took my eyes off them for a moment until they were long gone.

Chapter 5

Vessel for a King



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After making sure nobody was around, I jumped down from the tree.

I'd been perched up there for a few hours, and my body felt just a little bit stiff. Stretching out my back muscles, I headed for the remains of the mansion.

It had been utterly destroyed. The roof and walls had turned to rubble, lacking both the presence of the undead and the living.

Still, even if it had somehow survived, I couldn't have stayed there forever.

I didn't even have the time to bask in the victory.

This was a necromancer's base. The Ender Knights had withdrawn for now, but once they recovered their stamina, they would come back to deal with the mansion—possibly as soon as tomorrow. In the fairy tales, they always put necromancer hideouts to the torch.

So what do I need to do now?

I was a ghoul. I didn't know what luxury was—any lifestyle would be better than my previous life, and as long as I had fresh meat, I was confident I could survive. Unlike regular undead, I didn't intend to attack humans. But I would probably need to avoid any contact with them.

The one thing I knew for sure was that I had to get out of this forest quickly.

The Ender Knights didn't know the meaning of mercy. If they were to somehow find me, my annihilation would be swift.

...But I still had a promise to keep before I fled.

I found Lou's corpse buried under a pile of rubble where a hallway had once been.

Miraculously, the body didn't have any grievous wounds. The silver arrow stuck in her chest, meant to purify darkness, had probably been the cause of death.

I wiped the trickle of blood from her lips. Her face was tranquil; it almost looked like she was just sleeping.

I wondered if she'd ever made such a peaceful expression in her lifetime. The only faces she had put on around me, at least, were of anger or fright.

The corpse whetted my appetite. It smelled so fragrant.

For a ghoul, human corpses were delicacies.

But I wasn't going to eat her. I'd never eat a human.

"Even now... I'm a man who keeps his promises. You don't need to worry."

I gripped the silver arrow. White smoke rose from my hand, and a sharp pain shot through me, the kind I hadn't felt for a long time, at least not since becoming an undead. But I ignored the pain and yanked the arrow out, tossing it to the side before hoisting Lou's corpse.

She'd never been that big to begin with, but her corpse was incredibly light. I couldn't tell if it was because she was missing something that made her human or if my arms were simply that strong.

Her soul probably wasn't here any longer, either.

Lou had been fated to die.

She'd foreseen as much herself, and if she hadn't died here, she would have died in some other place without fanfare.

She'd lacked the strength to live. But neither had she the courage to die.

She had been altogether weak. That was why I'd known what she was looking for.

When Lou had heard my proposal, she'd cried. She'd called me a monster for correctly guessing what she, a weakling, wished for.

She'd had a chance. I'd offered to rescue her, and there might have indeed been a way to save her. I couldn't have done anything since, in reality, the lord

had kept her close at hand until the final moments, but when I'd offered to bring her to town, she'd had the option to agree.

But she wasn't even strong enough to do that.

Ah, how out of our control this world was—that one who had already died would cling to life so dearly he would return from the grave, yet she should lose that motivation to live at all.

I spoke to the one who had lost her life, who now slumbered with a somehow relieved expression.

“As promised...I'll make you a grave. And I'll even pray for you, so you can rest in peace. See? It was a good thing you made that pact with me.”

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to spend finding the perfect place for her grave.

It was all I could do to bring her beyond the mansion's fences. I hadn't promised a specific location, though, so she probably wouldn't mind.

Lou would've understood that I wasn't the type of person to care much about graves. I understood her feelings as a weak person, but I by no means empathized with them.

I chose a spot outside the fence that at least had good sunlight, then got to digging.

It was fortunate Lou's body was small. Using a piece of destroyed wood from the mansion, I was luckily able to dig a hole more than big enough to fit her in, with stamina to spare, and I laid her body in it.

I placed a flower I picked nearby in her hand and held it to her chest. Unfortunately, there was no time to cremate her.

Still, with the evil necromancer dead, I probably didn't have to worry about her being resurrected.

“Sorry about this. I don't really know the proper way to bury people... I was buried once myself, but I don't remember it. Oh—I should take this off.”

I grabbed the proof of her enslavement around her neck and ripped it off. The magical collar that had bound her in life came off easily, perhaps because its

wearer had passed away.

A white mark remained where the collar had been. I wondered if removing the collar would let Lou's soul go free.

Making excuses to myself, I began carefully filling in the dirt over her body.

There was no tombstone. She didn't even have a funeral—just a single undead to pray for her.

It seemed a terrible end. But even a burial like this was far better than the lord making her into an undead and forcing her to work after her death.

Her legs were covered first and then her body, leaving only the face.

I wavered on what to say to send her off, but in the end, I spoke the way I usually did. "You were luckier than the lord, Lou. You had someone to make you a grave. I suppose the lord got what was coming to him, though..."

I finished filling in the grave, covering her face before pounding in the dirt. Then I stood up, but one thing gave me a slight tinge of sorrow.

Above all, even if I got it in my mind for some reason to visit her grave in the future, I wouldn't know where she'd been buried. I needed to get out of here quickly, but the dead Lou might grow angry with me, claiming this wasn't a proper grave. If she told me I'd broken our promise after I'd done all this, I wouldn't be able to look her in the eye.

For a moment, I vacillated, but remembered I had something good to use, and so I returned to the mansion.

The silver arrow. I'd pulled it out of her not long ago; now I brought it over, bearing the pain, and stuck it into the ground where Lou was buried.

Silver was said to ward off evil. It wasn't a cross, but if I made it a cross, I might not ever be able to come back to visit if I mutated into a vampire and had crosses added to my list of weaknesses.

I also took the opportunity to bring over a large, relatively pretty stone from the mansion's rubble, and into it I carved her name.

"...Looks lonely with just the first name."

There was space left. But I didn't know Lou's last name. Giving up, I appended my own last name to it. Better than making it Kamen.

I wasn't sure if I spelled her first name right, either; I hoped she'd understand anyway.

Finally, satisfied with my work, as a last act, I put my hands together and prayed.

She was probably the first person to have an undead pray for her after their death.

Please—let Lou rest in peace.

“What.....are you doing?”

“?!”

It was a voice I never should have heard.

I ended my prayer and stood up slowly. The tips of my fingers shook. It felt like a knife was being held to my neck. I turned around and prayed once more, not for Lou's sake but for my own.

There was Senli, who had left with her companions not long ago, watching me with those sharp eyes of hers.

It was completely unexpected.

I could sense positive energy, but that didn't mean I could perfectly detect even minuscule amounts of it.

It was just like not being able to hear soft sounds without listening carefully—I could miss it if I was preoccupied with something else.

Senli had collapsed earlier, and not even half a day later, she was back. How could I have predicted that?

I'd let my guard down. I'd thought that even if they ultimately did come back to clean things up, I would have the night to spare.

Those violet eyes seemed to draw me in as she watched me. Her features were impassive, and if my heart could still move, it might have stopped then out of sheer despair.

“You...”

In the span of a moment, I racked my brain.

First, I checked whether Senli’s companions were present.

The other four Ender Knights weren’t here. That was good news.

Next, I confirmed the difference in our strength.

Senli was exhausted from the battle with the lord. However, the positive energy stored within her had recovered quite a bit since she’d left. It was far from fully replenished, and while her blessing must have had a limit...she was a monster, pure and true.

She was a little dirty, but she had no major wounds. And besides, considering how she’d endured throughout the battle with the lord, even if she’d been about to die in the midst of that fight, she probably would have awakened to more. That was basically how the necromancers in the stories were destined to be defeated.

Lastly, I tried to imagine what she thought of me.

I’d already been seen in town with Lou, who had in all likelihood been killed by the Ender Knights. It seemed extremely obvious that Senli would consider me an enemy because of that.

Senli’s eyes were fixed on me. But for just a sliver of a moment, I saw her gaze shift to the sun shining in the sky. Only lower-level undead could be active in the sunlight. It wasn’t affecting me, and yet I also wasn’t giving in to instinct and attacking her—she was probably wavering on whether to assume I was undead.

My negative energy was hidden, so I wouldn’t look like an undead at a glance—at least, I thought.

I clenched my right hand, which was still burning with pain from touching the silver arrow.

Blessed silver arrows were a weakness of all undead, and ghouls were no exception. They were weak enough that they wouldn’t kill one without striking a vital area, but not only had this one blocked my regenerative abilities and left a scar, there was still white smoke billowing from the burn wound.

There was no point in hiding it now. Senli would have to notice.

And even if I had been human, the Knights would have put me down as well for being one of the Lord's companions.

The Ender Knights were all offense, so much so that a few children's tales had scenes where they mercilessly slaughtered people who were under a necromancer's control.

I didn't know why Senli had returned on her own.

But if I ran, I'd be killed. If I attacked her, I'd be killed then, too. Neither of those options would spare my life.

Which meant...I'd just have to persuade her. If I were her, I wouldn't let me go, but she wasn't me.

And most importantly, when I saw her in town, she wasn't like the other third-rank knights, either.

She had something the other third ranks didn't: mercy.

She had tried to save Lou and me, even though it might have been because she'd convinced herself that we were humans.

I could say one thing for certain. If another third-rank knight had come instead of Senli, I would have already been dead.

Both third-rank and second-rank knights were equally lethal and invincible to me, so it was actually good fortune that the one to come had been Senli.

She was different. Compared to the ferocious Ender Knights who appeared in the fairy tales, she was deeply compassionate.

And that was an opportunity. Endeavoring to remain calm, I constructed a sad sort of expression and looked at Lou's grave.

"Before she died, Lou asked me...to build her a grave. I was praying so she could rest in peace."

".....Right."

Senli's response was curt, but I saw just a hint of sorrow flash through her eyes.

Her tone was less formal—maybe this was the real her.

I still couldn't let down my guard, but it appeared she didn't intend to wipe me out right away.

I'd try a friendly approach. Show her my humanity.

I still hadn't acted like a typical undead in front of her.

"Um..... Senli, was it? Why did you come here?"

Her silver hair blew gently in the breeze. Senli was silent for a few moments as she looked at the grave, then she finally spoke.

".....I came to retrieve her remains. I thought I'd bury her in town."

That was...not what I'd expected to hear.

"I see..... I suppose this was unnecessary, then."

That was the truth. If I hadn't made Lou a grave, I would have gotten out of here before Senli arrived.

Lou obviously would've been happier resting in a pretty grave in town than getting one built in the middle of the forest like this.

One couldn't blame me—it was a promise, after all—but I hadn't thought the Ender Knights were such a commendable organization.

I stayed silent to prevent my irritation from showing. Senli drew nearer, coming to my side, looking down at the grave.

The scent of her pale, soft-looking neck spurred my appetite.

It wouldn't take more than a second to extend my claws, swing my arm, and grab it. But that wasn't an option. I couldn't give her an excuse to attack me, even though being an undead was excuse enough already.

"Were you...her friend?" she asked me.

Friend? Lou would've been angry to hear that. We weren't anything like friends. At the end, we made a promise and joined forces, but if anything, we'd been enemies since the very beginning.

I held a hand to my face, then said in a despondent tone to match hers, “No... We were...family.”

“.....”

Let that stir her heart. Let that evoke her sympathy—this compassionate angel of death’s sympathy.

It could work. I hadn’t died yet. I could do this. I’d use whatever makeshift means were available to me.

Fortunately, I didn’t need to keep up appearances. I felt weird saying it about myself, but I was a much more pathetic person than I had been in life.

“But now she’s finally at peace,” I said. “She wouldn’t have had any future, even if she’d stayed Horos’s slave. Deep down, she wished for death. I didn’t have it in me to save her. You and your friends did, Senli.”

“That isn’t...,” muttered Senli, not batting an eye when I mentioned her by name.

Her expression hadn’t shifted almost at all, making it hard to read—but there was little doubt that she was emotional.

I’d just hedged my bet. Time was not on my side. The longer Senli was out here, the higher the chance her Ender Knights companions would come looking for her.

Pointing at myself and heaving a big sigh, I said, “Sure is inconvenient having an undead body at a time like this. I feel so sad, but I can’t cry.”

“?! You... So you were...!”

Her eyes full of conviction, Senli swiftly took a step away from me to put me within striking distance.

I was as good as dead even if she hadn’t drawn her sword yet. But I didn’t panic. I’d do this carefully.

To show I meant her no harm, I managed to smile, spread my hands, and put them up for her.

“Yes, I’m...a ghoul. But for some reason... I still have my memories from my lifetime.”

“.....Huh?”

Senli’s expression, which hadn’t changed much at all until now, shifted. She gazed at me in wonderment, eyes devoid of hostility.

The lord had never once suspected that I retained the memories from my life. And, judging by the look on Senli’s face, this was a considerably rare occurrence.

I’d won. That which had pierced Lou’s breast was an arrow. Senli’s weapon was a sword.

She couldn’t slay humans who evoked pity. Even if I had a monster’s body, I had the intelligence and reason from being a human. She couldn’t kill me. Even if nobody else criticized her for it, she empathized with others too much.

As an Ender Knight, being that soft was a fatal flaw. Her combat abilities were tremendous, but she had far too much of her humanity. I didn’t need to exaggerate. I would simply tell her exactly what had happened.

After taking a dramatically deep breath for emphasis, I began my story of the sad, pathetic End.

Senli listened to my tale silently, her face emotionless.

But all throughout it, waves of confusion roiled within her amethyst-like eyes.

I didn’t harbor a grudge. What I’d had in my lifetime was agony and hopelessness. Without any room to make real efforts, my short life ended with me clinging to it. That I’d been able to awaken again and retain my memories even after becoming an undead...was a miracle.

I didn’t know the reason. It hadn’t been my intention to come back as an undead. Still, I’d been fortunate. Fortunate that I could stand on my own two feet once more, that I could run through the forests like I had.

What, precisely, was the difference between an undead who didn’t attack people—who had no need to attack people—and a human?

I was trying to get Senli to answer that question for me. I added story after story, recalling the tale of a cheerful swindler who had appeared in a comedy I read long ago.

“Ah. Then the letter...”

“Lou helped me. Horos Kamen was plotting to conduct a terrible ritual. If it went much longer, he may have commanded me to attack the living. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. It was good luck that you and the Ender Knights had come to a nearby town. I retained my humanity thanks to that.”

“.....”

I chose my words carefully, giving her further reasons to spare me.

Senli lowered her eyes, almost like she was trying to hide her indecision. I hadn’t lied to her once.

I’d never assaulted a person—because I’d almost never been out of the forest.

I didn’t want to attack people—because I didn’t want to make enemies of the Knights.

But if it had been essential to my continued survival, I probably would have discarded my hesitation and become a monster who did attack humans.

I was logical. A monster with human logic and intelligence. Objectively, that made me a truly dreadful monster. If I were one of the Knights, I’d never allow me to live. What irony it was—in a sense, I, an undead being, might have been more of a fit for the Knights than Senli and her abundant talents.

“Fortunately, nobody lives in this forest. I plan to carry out the rest of my life in peace, watching over Lou’s grave. I can hunt animals for food, so that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“...I see.”

“Is that bad?”

The sun had begun to set without my realizing it. A beautiful scarlet washed over Lou’s simple grave.

I waited for her answer. The wound on my hand from gripping the silver arrow had already healed. Night was my time—the time for the undead. Ghouls were weak, so the dark wouldn't strengthen me very much, but it was far better than daytime.

Senli vacillated. Each second, each minute felt like ten minutes.

Patiently, I awaited a response with a smile. Patient was all I could be anyway.

If I fled now, Senli would give chase. And the legs of a low-rank undead wouldn't match Senli, who had easily blown away a dragon and killed the lord 120 times. Not even at night.

She didn't realize it, but she was essentially holding her sword to my throat right now.

Eventually, she looked back up. There was no hesitation in her eyes.

She had intelligent eyes, and unlike her dispassionate voice, they held compassion.

“.....All right. I've never met an undead with their previous memories intact, but... End, you're certainly a rational person. In which case, there won't be any issues...I think.”

The last part of her sentence sounded slightly doubtful. But the rest of it was firm and resolved.

She probably intended to persuade her companions. She was righteous, and kindhearted, to the end.

I sighed in relief, then looked down at the grave.

“Thank goodness... I'm sure Lou is happy, too.”

“.....I'll come again tomorrow. If there's anything you need, tell me, and I'll bring it.”

“I couldn't impose on you like that. But I suppose... If you find any flowers for Lou, I'd like you to bring them. This forest doesn't seem to have much in the way of flowers.”

“.....All right. I promise I'll bring some...so wait right here.”

Senli nodded deeply.

What a radiant individual. It seemed to me that her soul was the purest out of all the people I'd met, even in my lifetime.

She had faith in people. You couldn't become like her by living normally.

She was a little different from the Ender Knights I'd admired, but even from an outsider's perspective, her nature was noble.

Which was why it pained me very much to trick such a purehearted girl.

The sky changed to dusk. After offering a prayer at Lou's grave, Senli headed off toward the forest's exit.

I'd probably never see her again. As soon as she was gone, I was going to get out of the forest myself.

Her silvery hair fluttered behind her. I called out to her one last time.

I still had one particular question, and maybe Senli, as an Ender Knight, would know the answer.

"Senli—by the way, Horos Kamen mentioned something. He said he would create the king of the dead. Not that it matters anymore, but do you know what that means?"

Senli stopped dead in her tracks. Without turning around, she replied casually, "A king of the dead...refers to a first-rank necromancer who has transformed himself into a special kind of undead through forbidden magic. Horos Kamen was human. I destroyed him. This issue is...no longer relevant."

After waiting for Senli's presence to vanish completely, I immediately got moving.

I needed to hurry.

Senli had chosen to let me go. She'd accepted my proposal to spend the rest of my days in this forest.

Her words had been sincere. I hadn't known her for long, but it was clear she wasn't the type to tell lies.

However, she probably wouldn't be able to persuade her companions.

Of course she wouldn't. I had memories from my lifetime, but I was undeniably still a monster. The Ender Knights made it their divine mission to subjugate the denizens of the dark, and they would never overlook me. As someone who had admired them so much, I knew all about them. It wasn't that the other knights were cruel. Senli was just abnormal.

Would she keep quiet about me to her companions? No, that was impossible, too. She was no fool, but she was far too trusting. Even if she did stay quiet, what would her fellow knights think when she came back without the remains she'd gone to collect? If they asked her, she would probably tell them. And then she'd beg their compassion for my sake. Just as I had begged her.

They would doubtlessly come to kill me. The entire group would come to slaughter me, the unsightly creature who had taken advantage of their princess's emotions and deceived her.

I didn't want anyone's acknowledgment or acceptance.

I was already a monster who lived in the dark. A monster who ate raw flesh—and one who would, if he lived long enough, suck blood as well.

My wish hadn't changed.

My wish was simply to live. Survival and freedom. I would seek further purpose later.

I left Lou's grave and headed for the mansion's remains. My objective was the billhook I hadn't taken with me when I'd fled.

There would be time before Senli reached town. I could extend my nails, but I'd likely still need a weapon. Whether I wielded it or not, that billhook was like a keepsake of the lord. Something special.

Come to think of it, Senli had said a king of the dead was a necromancer who had transformed into an undead. Maybe the lord had procured the Cloak of Perpetual Night and the Amulet of Shadow for himself.

Laboring to overturn the rubble where the lord's laboratory had been, I eventually found the jet-black billhook. On the way, I located gear for the trip, including a bag.

By that time, the mantle of night had fallen over the forest. Only the silvery moon illuminated the world.

I could see in the dark. My vision was unobstructed. The night was *my* time.

I wouldn't know where to go without a map, but I had to get as far away from here as possible.

I'd done something bad to Senli. But I'd had to. I...couldn't have faith in people like she could.

As I started walking in the opposite direction from where Senli left—from nowhere, I heard someone call my name.

“End... The time has finally come, vessel of the king of the dead.”

The dim voice sounded like it was echoing out of the pit of hell. Something cold ran down my spine.

I immediately pulled the billhook from my waist and took stock of my surroundings.

There it was, floating in midair. I bit my tongue to drive off the terror welling up.

Blocking the silvery moon was that familiar face looking down on me.

I gasped. It wasn't possible. Horos Kamen had been destroyed—by Senli's hand.

He'd used everything at his disposal. He'd even created an evil dragon. And then he'd slipped away into the light so easily.

But that was definitely Horos Kamen floating in the air.

He was a pale blue, and his outline shimmered slightly, but everything about him, from the staff that had been broken and burned with holy power to the robe that had disappeared along with his body, was precisely Horos. His presence, however, was so thin—so unbelievably weak from the viewpoint of someone who had known him during his lifetime.

The lord folded his arms and spoke pompously. His voice didn't come out as physical sound, but I was distinctly aware of what he said.

“I cannot believe...that I...my flesh...would be destroyed... But the fragment of my soul I prepared ahead of time like this has proven itself useful...”

“.....”

He was on the verge of death. Recovering my calm, I firmly gripped the billhook and got my bearings.

This was the lord’s final provision. While fighting Senli, he had, beyond a shadow of a doubt, been at full strength.

I didn’t know if this was his soul or if he’d resurrected as a spirit, but he was nothing more than a vestige of his former self now.

How circumspect necromancers were. He’d fooled Senli and the Ender Knights, all full of experience—a fearsome mage indeed.

Could I...beat him? The problem was whether his special authority over me remained.

If it did, then I...

No... I would win. I hardened my determination as I coolly watched the lord.

If not, then what would using the Ender Knights to destroy him have even been for?

I’d cleverly avoided Horos without doing anything myself until now. I supposed I’d have to finish things on my own.

Fine, then. I’ll do it.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. A thought flashed through my mind: the information Senli had given me earlier about the king of the dead.

I mulled over everything the lord had said and done thus far... He’d called me the vessel for the king of the dead. Yes—a vessel!

Even an idiot would catch on. If Senli’s words were true, the lord’s goal was to —

“My lord... You’re all right?”

“End, I embedded my final soul within you. I needed to do so for the ritual. It is truly fortunate that you survived.”

Embedded...within me. Does that mean he's still alive?

The lord didn't sound like he suspected me at all. Apparently, he hadn't overheard the conversation I'd had with Senli. Perhaps he'd been sleeping until night, when his power would increase.

If he still didn't know I had my memories from my life, I still had a chance.

"Wait... Then why did you try to use me in the fight against the Ender Knights? What if I had died?"

"? You seem to be...misunderstanding something. I never...wanted to use you...in the fight."

"....."

That was...unexpected. But when I thought about it, he'd never given me an instruction like that. His final order to me was to return to the hall. Maybe after that, he was going to command me to hide somewhere.

Still, it made no difference to me. Either way, I'd made my decision.

The lord would die here, for sure this time. And I wouldn't make him a grave.

"We will conduct the ritual—the birth of the king of the dead... Hmph... I still have one concern. This will be different from my original plan, but there is no choice... My life...is like a remnant now. Heh-heh-heh..."

The lord, even now, laughed as though he were invincible. I steadied my breath. I'd probably only have one chance.

Suspended majestically in the dark of night, the lord gave his arrogant command.

"End, your body...is a masterpiece. My soul is the final key... When my long-held desire at last comes to fruition, you will become a king to overwhelm all who stand with the light. End, I will not allow resistance—cease moving."

I froze at the lord's order.

Horos Kamen's movements were slow. He hadn't ever used any spirit-type undead, so I'd never seen a wraith before, but I had some idea of what they were, if the encyclopedia I'd read was correct.

Horos emitted a pale-blue light as he descended near me. What would become of me the moment he touched me? It was terrifying to think about. But I didn't shrink away. My hands weren't even trembling.

Because that moment...would never come.

Horos drew within a meter of me—within striking distance.

I tightened my hand around the billhook. He wasn't wary of me. This would be easy.

And then, I put all my strength into that billhook, every last bit of the experience I'd gained, using everything to mow it through him.

“?!”

No resistance. Too little resistance. My swing sent me spinning around; I stomped on the ground to stop myself.

The billhook had pierced the lord's neck. But the lord was still there.

His head, which I should have lopped off, was still attached, and there was a dissatisfied expression on it.

“Hmph... My power...has weakened too much, for my commands not to affect you... And to think you would pretend they had—truly, you are a man I must always be on guard against.”

My strikes were powerful. They easily split open the thick skulls of magical beasts, cut through bones and all.

The damage from the silver arrow had already healed, too. I didn't falter for a second.

Without stopping to breathe, I swung the billhook several times at the stoic lord. He didn't even resist.

A cut slantwise from the shoulder. A cut slantwise back to the shoulder. A lengthwise slash. I repeatedly struck from every direction, each blow lethal. But none of them met any resistance. It was like I was attacking something that didn't even exist. The lord's body would disperse for a moment when hit, but it would immediately go back to normal.

“It won’t work. It is futile, End. You are smart. You have nerve, and you are vigilant...but you lack knowledge. Right now, attacks...will have no effect on me.”

I slashed at his face, but his voice didn’t stop. His expression didn’t show any pain, either.

I lacked knowledge. Those words certainly hit their mark. I stepped in firmly and lashed out at the lord. There was almost no gap between my strikes, since I didn’t need to breathe, nor did I grow tired.

I knew after the first strike that my attacks wouldn’t work. My rapid succession of blows was to buy time for me to think. He was right—I didn’t have much knowledge, but I’d read that undead encyclopedia. An undead with high resistance to physical attacks, one without a physical body, one who harmed humans as only a soul... The lord was probably close to that right now—as I’d first thought.

I hadn’t foreseen physical attacks being so ineffectual, but this wasn’t over yet.

I dug through my memories. Wraiths had high resistance, but on the other hand, since they lacked physical bodies, they were extremely vulnerable to positive energy even compared to other undead. They were weak against magical attacks as well.

The lord had set flesh and bone against the Ender Knights, but he hadn’t used souls—likely because they wouldn’t be opponents the Knights would struggle with.

But I couldn’t use magic, nor could I use positive energy. Could I seek Senli’s help? No, that wouldn’t be possible. It was too far to town, and a first-rank knight was there. It would be beyond suicidal.

During my full-power series of attacks, my bones creaked, and my flesh cried out in pain. But that wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t too much that my regeneration wouldn’t catch up. I slowly backed away, all the while slashing at the lord who was trying to control me even after death.

“Cease this pointless struggle, End. This...is why you were born.”

A selfish man right to the end. As I thought, we wouldn't understand each other.

We never would have, just because he had the authority to command me. He used words like *vessel*—in all likelihood, my consciousness would vanish. Come to think of it, maybe the reason he never gave me any knowledge was because he didn't *need* to.

I was the vessel. Not its contents.

What he needed was a strongly built, highly talented vessel. *He* planned to be that vessel's contents.

Perhaps deep down I had surmised the truth behind the lord's objective: the king of the dead.

There had been hints. As far as the lord was concerned, what I wanted might as well have been nonexistent.

But I wouldn't lose. I could feel my survival instinct flaring up. There was no fear. There was only...anger.

I would kill him. Absolutely and thoroughly. I would be the one to kill this being that not even a second-rank knight could defeat.

Horos Kamen, your "long-held desire" ends here...and you will be destroyed by the very vessel you sought to use.

Even as the slashing tempest sliced endlessly at the lord, he advanced forward.

Physically, my attacks couldn't even stall him for a moment. But he still hadn't jumped at me—perhaps his curiosity as a necromancer got the best of him, and he'd chosen to observe me instead?

"Your mind is lost to fear... But no matter. All I need is the vessel and its exceptional aptitude for the power of death. It has been so long...but I, and only I, shall be the most powerful king of the dead."

I cut his eyes. Then his nose. And yet the lord's attention was still on me. I cut his throat. His voice still reached me. I sliced up every part of him, and yet I could see no panic in him. He was the strongest. Truly the most powerful.

Shrewd and haughty—a dark sorcerer the world wouldn't tolerate. It was only natural he'd be done in by Senli.

Still, I wasn't exactly attacking him mindlessly, without any sort of plan. And I hadn't lost control, either.

...I was good at thinking.

Thinking and enduring pain were the only things permitted to me in those days I spent bedridden.

Finally, apparently bored with his observation, the lord swooped down. The moon illuminated his eerie features. I leaped aside to avoid him, then dropped the billhook I'd been swinging. The lord's eyes opened wide.

"Horos Kamen. Your weakness...is your lack of perspective."

"What?!"

That was how I'd deceived him. That was why he didn't notice the change Lou had undergone. That was why he'd lost to Senli.

The only one in Horos Kamen's world was Horos Kamen.

Didn't he realize where we were? Did he really believe I would thoughtlessly retreat?

The large stone engraved with Lou's name—the spot where the soil had been dug up, then packed back in.

This is where your slave is buried.

Indeed, I had no way of using positive energy. I couldn't utilize magic, either.

However...this place held a weakness of the undead.

I tightly grabbed the arrow I'd stuck in the ground in place of a cross, all of it made of silver from shaft to head, and pulled it out. Intense pain once again shot through my palm, which had finally healed—accompanied by the sound of something dissolving in the night.

Silver weapons were a weakness of all the undead, including wraiths. And even if it couldn't completely kill me, it would be highly effective on a wraith without a physical form.

The lord had probably realized what I was holding. His eyes went wide, and he launched himself at me, fast as the wind.

But he was too late. He was quick—too quick for me to react had I still been a live human being—but now that I was a ghoul, his speed wasn't even an obstacle.

I thrust out the silver arrow, piercing the lord's brow as he flew at me headfirst.

He screamed into the dark night—a scream that not even Senli's attacks had coaxed out of him.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!!

“...Is that what you thought I'd say?”

“?! ”

The lord hadn't changed at all. He'd neither disappeared nor shown even a hint of pain.

With the arrow, packed with destructive power, buried halfway into his forehead, the lord spoke to me in a somehow pitying tone. His bony fingertips approached me. His clouded black eyes peered into mine. I couldn't stop them.

“That was why...I said...you had no knowledge. I am not...a simple wraith. My foundation...has been embedded within you. As long as it remains intact, I am immortal. Wraith-type undead do not have perfect resistance to the physical. You should have realized that when Bloodruler didn't affect me.”

“ ... ”

“How pathetic. But rest easy. Your vessel will become the most powerful king of the dead.”

“...Die,” I growled murderously.

Horos frowned like he'd just heard a bad joke. “We're already dead, you and I.”

Never thought the lord had a sense of humor.

Horos's spirit form overlapped with my body.

My vision flickered, and something dark black, like a muddy river, flowed into my consciousness.

My body and mind were being corrupted with darkness. My body should have lost its sense of pain, and yet agony racked me, as though I were bursting apart from within, as though something were devouring me inside out.

“Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

A scream echoed through the dark forest. A moment later, I realized it was mine.

Death was close at hand. This incredible pain, which I hadn’t felt for a long time, forced me to understand that I was still weak, just as I had been in life.

The silver arrow slipped from my sweaty palm. The wound wasn’t healed yet, but that didn’t matter to me whatsoever.

I felt devastating nausea. Pain. Lethargy. Suffering of all kinds assaulted my very soul.

I even felt like my feet were being tugged down into the pit of hell—into the netherworld.

Your soul...continues to fall toward the dark.

Something Horos had once said came to mind again. By desperately focusing on it, I eased the pain a tiny bit.

I didn’t know left from right, up from down. I managed to grab and cling to a tree nearby to prevent myself from falling.

My heart, which was supposed to have stopped, beat with a fierce rhythm. My breathing was out of control.

Memories and knowledge that weren’t my own flowed into my mind. They made me feel the sickest I’d ever experienced. I rammed my head as hard as I could into the tree, over and over.

What...is this?

I wanted to throw up. I didn’t understand what was happening, save for just one thing—if I let go, I would die.

The tree snapped. Blood flowed from my head. I dropped to a knee and fell to the ground, but then I crawled over to cling to another tree.

I used everything I had to keep my sanity.

I remembered my time bedridden.

How the pain had gotten stronger, little by little, as my strength had grown weaker.

The unending torture hadn't even let me sleep, in those days when every action was accompanied by agony. The isolation of holding on just to live as none of the sorcerers or doctors could help me—and the mortification of being able to do nothing but watch myself slowly exhaust and die.

I was changing. My body—my soul was shifting. It was fusing into something more tenacious, more wicked...more suitable for the king of the dead.

The lord must have done something to me before. Ignorant, I didn't know what it had been.

The memories streaming into me, the knowledge—they didn't belong to me. And I could not allow myself to accept them.

As the suffering I could do nothing about continued, I suddenly noticed a thought that didn't belong to me cross my mind.

—Impossible... Why isn't it consuming him?

It was dark. Nobody was around. My breathing was hot and ragged as I looked up.

The lord was standing before me. Unlike his wraith form earlier, he was now standing on two feet. For some reason, I realized that it wasn't his physical form, nor was it his soul. It was just an illusion my mind was showing me.

It wasn't something I'd done consciously.

I overwrote the pain with bloodlust and rage. My body rose up, and I swung my arm high over my head.

It didn't get any actual speed, nor did I have the capacity to extend my claws. But the strike easily split apart the illusion of the lord.

His apparition vanished.

—What a tenacious soul... He still won't admit defeat?

My whole body felt like it was on fire, especially my head—no, my mind—and my heart.

I heard a voice from behind, then swung my arm in that direction. The lord's illusion was standing there again—the one I thought I'd just blown away.

The illusion vanished. But something new appeared in its place. Suddenly, my vision was filled with countless images of the lord. Above, below, in front of me, behind me, to the left and right. Some stood on the ground, others were half buried in it, while yet others flew through the air. Innumerable eyes, impassive and crafty as a snake's, looked down on me.

I attacked them out of anger. Horos Kamen was intruding on my mind.

His will flowed into me like a filthy river, so strong that if I wasn't constantly vigilant, it would crush me.

—Im...possible... His consciousness...too dense...for a paltry soul...that died of sickness... Is this...his noble blood...? No... It cannot be...!! He...could never...possibly...resist me!!

No matter how many of the lord's illusions I felled, they showed no signs of abating.

With all my might, with my second life hanging in the balance, I fought against the soul trying to engulf me.

I would live. I would live—and then gain my freedom.

—This vessel's...abyss...is far too deep! How did it get this deep...? End, this is an order! Cease your resistance!

The lord's voice echoed in my brain, tormenting my mind.

End...? Who is End?

I clawed at my stomach. My heart was pounding. It wasn't just my imagination. My heart *was* moving. Alive. With a pulse. Not a corpse. I was

being reborn into an even more wicked creature... Into an abominable monster, one who had transcended even death.

Ah... Is this where the necromancer's curse, his objective, leads?!

The pain was so terrible I couldn't think straight, but even then, I suddenly understood what necromancers were truly after.

Where the curse that gave me life would lead. Their goal, the king of the dead, was...*immortality*.

Not to keep living even as a corpse but to keep existing as a *living being*. Perfect immortality and invincibility.

For necromancers, death was no more than part of the process. They created countless undead—they were experts on them. If they only wanted to make themselves into undead creatures, it would have been easier.

But the lord hadn't opted for that method.

Senli had said that first-rank necromancers were beings who had transformed themselves into "special" undead.

At some point, the lord's illusions had vanished. In their place was a large ball of darkness in front of me.

It was a different illusion. Horos Kamen's face was protruding from the center of the huge black mass of mist.

He was trying to devour me—trying to send me plummeting into the pit of darkness.

His voice echoed in my mind. One filled with anger and confidence.

—It is over! I will take that body! I have the upper hand! You...will live forever, as the vessel of the king of the dead!

"Urgh, hah, hah, ahhhh, aahh..."

He was strong. I didn't know how many years he'd lived, but even a fragment of his soul was this powerful.

Obsession and delusion joined that strength.

The lord hadn't expected this development—him losing to Senli. This ritual was supposed to have been a last resort. If he'd performed the ritual he'd *originally* planned...what would have become of me?

The lord jumped high into the air. His dark specter covering up the moon, the sky, the whole world, before plummeting toward me.

My hand moved. Was that my instinct as a monstrous being, or was it my soul moving my body because it didn't want to die? My fingertips weren't aimed at the lord, but instead inside my own mouth—and I sliced a deep cut in my lips.

The pain was trivial at this point. Floating in the dark, the lord took on a dumbstruck expression. I gave a big grin with my sliced lips. The agony vanished from my mind for a moment.

The one to become the king of the dead...will be me. Sorry, but you're the one who will be devoured for my sake.

You will be...the first human I've ever eaten.

I dove into the dark mass before me, opening my sliced mouth as wide as it could go, and took a bite.

The darkness didn't taste like anything. It was the visions I'd been seeing—it didn't have a physical form.

But a tremendous scream reverberated in my mind.

—Ah—————aaah—————

So that...was what a true scream sounded like.

While I was busy being strangely impressed, the voice faded. Silence was the only thing left in the night forest.

The strength fled my limbs, and my body slumped to the ground. The pain that had been assaulting me vanished without a trace.

The voice ringing in my mind was no more.

The round moon shone in the night sky. It was probably almost dawn.

As a cold breeze caressed my faceup body on the ground, I assessed the situation.

There were no other beings inside my head. The lord's soul, that foreign body that had tried to dominate me, had instead been devoured—if not whole, then the important parts of it—and incorporated into me. It felt refreshing.

The knowledge and memories that would have fused with me—I couldn't recall them. Maybe my instincts had decided they were too dangerous and contained them. The lord's experience and memories were far longer and far denser than mine. If I were to remember them, they could well overwrite my own thoughts. I was probably better served not trying to force myself to dredge them up.

Now that I'd calmed down a little, I put a hand on the ground and tried to stand but failed.

For a moment, I didn't know what had happened. But then, as I clung to a nearby tree once again, I put all my strength into it and stood.

But no—I couldn't move my limbs at all. My mind grew distant for a moment. I hadn't felt exhaustion in a long time, and now it weighed my body down.

It seemed...I still wasn't out of the woods yet.

I could sense that my body, my very self, had changed. I'd probably experienced a rank mutation.

Had I fulfilled the conditions for it by taking in the lord's corrupted soul? Or was it something he'd engraved upon me beforehand? At present...I wasn't a ghoul. But for all that, I wasn't a darkstalker—the next mutation I was supposed to have—either. My flesh was supposed to darken if that had happened, but it was still the same as before.

I'd think about the details later. I was completely sapped of energy.

It reminded me of when I'd mutated into a ghoul and first felt hunger.

I wiped the blood dripping down my forehead and took a deep breath. I didn't have enough power. Could I even beat the magical beasts in the forest like this? Would I even survive long enough to be able to see any?

No—I *had* to. I'd eaten the lord, my master.

I'd used every means available to me. And at the end of all that sacrifice, I was here.

For the moment, aside from food, I would need to search for a place away from sunlight before dawn broke.

Having mutated from a ghoul, I would have more weaknesses, too. Whatever I'd mutated into, the sunlight could be a lethal weapon. I didn't have a spare moment to pay any attention to the pain I was in, but my fight against the lord seemed to have taken a significant amount of time. It wouldn't be long before the sun rose. I had the Cloak of Perpetual Night that the lord had gotten for me, but I couldn't afford to overstate its effects. If a thing like that could nullify the sunlight's effects, the undead would be more of a threat.

My body was an inconvenience. But that only meant I felt truly alive. And it wasn't a bad feeling.

One step at a time, I moved my incredibly unsteady body, feeling the firmness of the ground under my feet as I proceeded carefully.

And then I remembered I'd dropped the billhook nearby.

I...should probably get that. Even in this powerless state, hunting monsters would be easy with that in hand.

I turned, then stopped for a moment. A silver arrow a few centimeters across whipped past me.

"...Huh...?"

A whooshing sound. A moment later, intense pain shot through my left leg. It felt like it had been torn off. I fell to the ground.

Clamping down on the agony, I desperately looked at my leg.

An arrow was stuck into my knee—one that hadn't been there a moment ago.

A silver arrow. It had pierced all the way through flesh and bone, and white smoke rose from it.

I tried to pull it out, but my hands, shaking from the pain and exhaustion, wouldn't move.

My mind was in utter chaos when my ears picked up a familiar, rough voice.

“Ah, that’s good. You’re still around...you monster. You’re a real piece of work!”

“Oh, calm down. So you’re the one who deceived our princess, aren’t you?”

“Those wounds... And those eyes—a lesser vampire, eh? I heard you were a ghoul... Guess Senli lacks the experience to be a first rank.”

“Wh...why...?!” I managed to squeeze out.

A few meters ahead was the blue-haired man who had suspected me of being an undead back in Enge. He watched me as I writhed as though he’d seen fresh garbage.

“Why? Did you just ask *why*? There’s only one reason the Ender Knights would show up. To slay monsters.”

Damn—dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit.

I didn’t have any strength. The silver arrow was lodged in my left leg, and the wound was actively being corroded by its holy power. Even if I’d managed to stand, any quick motions would have been impossible.

In the darkness, wrapped in great holy power, the Ender Knights slowly approached.

There were four of them, all third ranks. The lord had told me that I couldn’t fight them until I became a vampire. And I knew how much of a monster the lord was—he’d fought all five, including Senli, for hours.

My heart, now finally beating, thumped at a quick rhythm in my ears.

I heard a voice from above me. “Seriously... It was quite a surprise when stubborn Senli, the one who came back here insisting on bringing the remains back, returned empty-handed.”

“Senli may be strong, but she’s far too soft. She looks cold, but she’s honest to a fault—and terrible at keeping secrets. So she makes mistakes like this once in a while. And that’s what we’re there for.”

I gave a yelp and crawled away, trying to put distance between us. I needed to stall for time. I needed to pretend to be weak.

There was no chance I would win. The four Knights were altogether too strong. The hopelessness in the situation brought my calmness back.

But could I give up here after coming so far? I had to think of something. To search for a way out.

It was frustrating. If only I could replenish my power, I could have at least managed to flee.

Opening my eyes, my body trembling, I looked at my enemies.

Seen from up close, the third-rank knights were literally angels of death.

Senli wasn't with them. These were weaker than her but more guarded—four true third-rank knights.

They were more than able to annihilate me. They were overwhelming and thorough. I didn't know if I could beat so much as a single one of them, even if I was at full power. I couldn't do anything. And I couldn't surprise them, not with four in their group.

The next silver arrow pierced my right leg.

I'd seen it coming, but since my body wouldn't move right, I couldn't get out of the way.

And having one safe leg wouldn't have gotten me out of this dilemma anyway.

It was fine. I didn't need my legs. What I needed was to lure them into making a mistake.

I let out a cry at the burning pain. A cry to evoke sympathy. But the eyes of the blond female knight who had shot me remained chillingly cold-blooded, unlike Senli, and didn't waver at all.

Everything about this...had been unexpected. Was I cursed or something?

Senli's appearance earlier was a surprise.

The defeated lord trying to consume me—also unexpected.

And the Knights coming here before dawn had even broken... This was much earlier than anything I'd anticipated.

I'd predicted any lies from Senli would be revealed. But I'd figured they would at least wait for morning to send a kill team for me.

Night was the time of the undead. Once again, I assumed they'd choose daybreak. A naive assumption. I didn't have the time to be lying around. I should have gotten away from this place, even if I had to crawl, even if I had to abandon everything I carried.

The four of them were exhausted. Their clothing was rumpled, and the power surrounding them was far from full. However, and while they weren't as strong as Senli, they had more than enough positive energy to destroy me.

Resistance...would be futile. The moment I tried to attack them in return, they would utterly annihilate me.

And everything I'd gained—a body, my freedom—would be for naught.

Think. Just think. Think of the best method to take now.

The Ender Knights split up to surround me as I got on my hands and knees. They had no holes in their guards. But they didn't consider me a powerful enemy, either. If they had, they would have destroyed me with an endless series of attacks, without even giving me a chance to crawl on all fours.

I couldn't give them an excuse to attack me.

With my power dried up, I might have been able to inflict a perfect strike against an undefended point, but it wasn't possible to defeat the ones in front of me. I needed to stall for time, if only for an extra second. Even if everything turned out to be futile...that would be best.

The wounds on my legs were slowly getting bigger. It would've been a little better even as a ghoul. The strengthening that came from the rank mutation was working against me.

I gazed pleadingly up at the approaching male Ender Knight.

It was the man who had suspected me of being an undead in Enge. I remembered Senli calling him Nevira.

I desperately appealed to him. I made my voice tremble even more than I had with Senli. “*Pant, pant...* I... I have my...memories...from my life.”

“Yeah, seems like it. Heard from Senli. Sounds unbelievable, but you were apparently digging a grave, eh? Not desecrating one—but *making* one. Never heard of a monster who did that.”

“And... And I’ve never attacked...humans, either. And I don’t...intend to!”

“Right... So?”

Perfection—the man before me was a perfect Ender Knight.

The very picture of the cold-blooded, powerful knights I had envisioned.

His brow didn’t even twitch. But incredible hostility assailed my body.

He was angry. I didn’t know what I’d done, but I’d earned his wrath. In the Ender Knights’ eyes, monsters were monsters, whether they attacked people or not. And for people tasked with protecting the world, that was the correct mindset.

“Senli said—”

“Don’t say her name, you fucking monster!!”

“...?!”

His face twisted like a demon’s. His eyes opened wide, and his lips quivered. The hand on his mace gripped it so hard it went white. The man holding a sword, who had closed in on me from the side—and the woman with the bow, and the man with the staff... They all looked down at me, aggravated.

I could tell that even the littlest thing would set them off.

“Did...? Did she...sell me out...?”

“If she could do that, we wouldn’t be struggling so much. She covered for you until the end. But *we* aren’t as soft as she is.”

Thank goodness. Those words saved me in a very small way.

I’d had faith in the depth of her compassion. Sure, I’d taken advantage of it, but I’d still trusted in it. Even if it hadn’t helped at all, it was always difficult to be betrayed by something you believed in.

I couldn't think of a way out of this situation. No weapons, either.

For an instant, Nevira, who had come right up to me, softened his expression. And then he held out his left hand, the one not on his mace, as if to try to help me up.

"I sympathize with your plight. You woke up and found you were a monster—not even nightmares go that far. Isn't that right?"

His left hand was filled with the power of light. Strong light. If I touched it, I'd probably be purified immediately.

He was doing it on purpose. As I hesitated to reach out, Nevira gave a vicious smirk, then grabbed my left hand and pulled me up until my feet were in the air.

"But you cheated her—took advantage of her weakness. And that will leave a scar that will never heal. I don't like that spoiled second rank, but she is still our boss."

White smoke billowed from my left arm. My body spasmed in agony, my back craning over as far as it could go.

My spine began making creaking noises. A monstrous scream escaped—I couldn't believe it was my own. You could wrap positive energy around yourself to use for defense as well. And that was a very direct power that could hurt the undead.

My right hand shuddered. Nevira was at point-blank range. I could reach him from here, but no matter how hard I pushed, my arm wouldn't move at all. It was like the strength was draining out of the arm the man was touching.

Well, it probably wasn't draining out, strictly speaking. It was being filled in—my impossibly large abyss was being filled in and was on its way to zero.

"It will be a *deep* wound. She's accustomed to tragedy, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt her. From now on, in every tragedy, she will remember *you*. And that might turn into a major weakness someday. You're every bit the monster Horos was, to hurt someone protected by such a powerful blessing."

"...You could...just let me...be! I... I don't wish for anything!"

I eked out an appeal. A sincere appeal. All I wanted to do was survive.

I wasn't going to cause any trouble for people. Nor did I have any grudges.

But...they all still came to kill me. My vision narrowed, and I desperately looked up.

"We'd never let a monster go!" Nevira declared. "...You may be harmless now, but eventually, you *will* kill someone."

"And we're here on our master's orders. Hey, do you want to know why Senli isn't here?"

The female knight spoke to me next as I was on the verge of death. While aiming a nocked silver arrow at me—as if to torture out of me a reason to kill me.

"Our master, you see," she continued, "listened to Senli's plea. He smiled and said *All right, I'll overlook it*. Senli's so stubborn, they never would have come to terms. But she knew he was lying. Or at least, she wasn't sure if he was telling the truth. You see, right about now...she's waiting for the master to leave the building."

"Which was pointless, too," added Nevira. "The master sent us, telling us to make sure we destroyed you. Didn't think he'd send us here before day broke... but from another point of view, this will be a good experience for Senli. Something she would have had to experience eventually to become a first-rank knight."

My foes—the woman with bow and the man with the sword—were impenetrable. The same probably went for the man behind me holding a staff, who had been quiet this whole time.

Did they think my life was *worthless* or something?

What ways did I have to recover from this?

Senli coming to rescue me? That was unthinkable. Even if she came, I'd be dead by the time she arrived.

And even if she were to show up to save me right now, Nevira would kill me without a second thought before she could interfere.

This man before me had that kind of resolve: the resolve to kill me even if Senli hated him for it.

I didn't feel hungry, but I was awfully thirsty. The man holding the sword had called me a lesser vampire earlier. If that was true, then what I needed now...was blood.

It was so close and yet so incredibly far away. Even if I craned my neck, I wouldn't reach Nevira, the person closest to me. And I had no idea what would happen if I dug my fangs into any of the Knights, with all the positive power wrapped around them.

The male knight gripping the sword carefully approached me and tore off the Cloak of Perpetual Night. Then, spotting the Amulet of Shadow around my neck, he yanked the chain off, held it up, and cursed. "So this is why we couldn't sense your negative presence."

"A treasure of Horos's... Blast. Without that, we never would have let you leave town..."

If I hadn't had it, the lord never would have sent me to town to begin with.

As for the bag, I'd already lost it somewhere during the battle with the lord's ghost.

After inspecting my possessions, Nevira threw me violently to the ground. Was he going to let me live? For an instant, I had an impossible hope—but the Ender Knight shattered it.

"Only one mission left now. Killing you. But...", said Nevira in a low voice as I crawled miserably along the ground, enduring the pain and curling up. His mace was aimed at me. His eyes sparkled golden as they looked down at me. And then, after bringing his face mere centimeters away from mine, he said:

"Apologize. And I'll give you a quick death."

This was...truly one who called forth the end. An angel of death.

Far more relentless than the ones who appeared in fairy tales—and far more realistic.

They were enemies, those who opposed humanity's foes. And I was one of those foes.

They probably had families back at home, too. People they cared deeply about.

And as far as those people were concerned, their beloved knights were without a doubt steadfast, dependable individuals.

...But still... I didn't want to die.

"I don't...want to die... I just don't...want to die!!"

My lamentation echoed through the darkness. The shout came from my soul, even if it would cause further brutality.

Nevira and the other knights didn't become indignant. They just looked down at me as I writhed on the ground like a caterpillar, as though they were watching something beyond praying for.

"...Ugh. Are you out of your mind? You haven't even fought back... You're too pathetic. How were you Horos Kamen's underling? I can't blame Senli for letting her emotions get the better of her. Weaklings are her mortal enemies."

"Nevira, make sure to finish him off. Master's orders."

"I'm *getting* there, dammit! I'm not like her!!"

I was going to die. I was going to be killed. No rescue would come.

Killed by a mystery illness in life, then killed by the Ender Knights just when I thought I'd gained freedom. Surrounded, unable to resist, trampled by overwhelming might.

Tears began to flow. Tears of blood. As my vision narrowed, I desperately looked up at my enemies. My body didn't move.

I couldn't even think clearly through the pain. An opening—I needed an opening. I didn't know if they had a weakness, but I had to find one. I had to struggle until the very last moment. And if I died...I'd come back to haunt them.

"Don't you dare look at me like that!! How can you still make that face after all this?! Dammit!!"

Nevira began kicking me. Each time, positive energy flooded into me with the impact.

I didn't even cry out anymore. I could feel the positive power bringing my existence steadily closer to zero.

Even in this situation, Nevira didn't give me the easy opening of raising his leg up. He was used to this.

My bones snapped, my flesh tore, and I lay on the ground like a corpse. He grabbed my hair and forced my face up to his. He peered into my eyes, his own filled with intense cruelty.

"...Fine, then. This is my last act of compassion—I'll give you time to regret this."

"...Nevira?! You can't—"

"I'll teach you that purification by the Ender Knights is *salvation*. What did you say your name was? Doesn't matter. Do you know what the most painful way for an undead to die is?"

My body didn't even have the strength to tremble anymore as I heard Nevira's deep, intimidating voice in my mind.

Suddenly, a dull impact shot through my left shoulder.

Nevira had, at some point, grabbed a short sword and rammed it into the ground. He reached out, then lifted something up.

It was...my left arm.

Nevira squeezed it, purifying it instantly. It turned into dust and vanished.

...Fine. I'll give you an arm. I can't even move. My left arm is nothing—

"Sunlight. We weaken you to the point where your regeneration won't work, and then very slowly, we use the sunlight to fill in your abyss. You'll be in unendurable agony until the moment you die. Even the most wicked of undead start crying moments into it. We call it the sunsentence. It's so cruel we only ever use it to make examples of undead, but..."

Sunlight. Even as a resistant ghoul, I'd felt a tingling pain after being in it for too long.

How much damage would it do to me *now*? As my consciousness wavered, I managed a dry, hoarse voice. "Ah—ah..... How...frightening..."

"You'll have time to repent. Time to regret. Consider this your punishment for deceiving Senli and trying to live after death!"

It was anger. Nevira was angry with me, and he was trying to dispel it.

He was attempting to torture me. Despite what he said, this act was an emotional one, like a personal grudge. That was the first actual emotion I'd seen in Nevira that was unbecoming of an Ender Knight.

But that was fine. Perfectly fine. Shallow breaths escaped my lips.

If they wanted to kill me slowly, I'd welcome it with open arms. No matter how much it hurt, no matter how humiliating it was, I would endure. If it gave me a chance to survive even another moment, a chance to flee, what was a little pain?

Nevira looked down at me as I lay unresisting—but desperately clinging to sanity—and narrowed his eyes.

A dull impact shot through my right shoulder.

"Do you still think you can survive? Well, you can't. We'll give you time but not freedom."

Nevira lifted up my severed right arm and turned it to dust, right in front of me, as I stared dumbfounded.

"The only thing we'll leave of you...is your head. That's all you'll need in order to repent, isn't it? Oh right. And just for you, I'll put your head next to the grave you dug."

§ § §

I...couldn't move. Of course I couldn't—I didn't have anything left below the neck.

The Ender Knights, more specifically, Nevira, had mercilessly dismembered my body. Purposely not using his silver sword, he'd lopped off my arms, clipped off my legs, carved up my body, chopped off everything below the neck, and purified it all.

I didn't understand how I was still alive. I had no energy, nor could I regenerate.

The intense pain and the freezing chill throbbing in the back of my head indicated that I was dying.

The nighttime forest was quiet. The Ender Knights were already gone. This isolation was probably part of their sentence. All I could see from my vantage point atop Lou's grave were the remains of the lord's mansion.

I couldn't do anything anymore. I couldn't fight, nor could I flee. The only things I had were pain and hopelessness.

It was just like my past life. Ah... What a terrifying thought.

My mind desperately ran in circles. And then I suddenly heard a voice on the wind, my hearing now restored.

"How pathetic you are, End..."

"?! ...You're still...here...?"

It was the lord's voice. He was so stubborn I would have laughed, had I the body and the strength to do so.

The illusion of Horos Kamen stood before me scowling.

"Did you...come...to get...me? Unfortunately...there's nothing left...of me...but a head!"

"Fool. I haven't the power to do so, now that you've consumed me! I'm a mere vestige of a vestige now."

"Do they have vestiges...of vestiges...of vestiges, too?"

"End, you will die. If you had given your body to me, nothing like this would have ever happened."

But that would have been like dying in itself. No different than now.

He must really not have had any strength, because I didn't sense him trying to do anything to me. If only he could've saved me, the hopeless illusion that he was.

But he was someone to talk to. Even if I was hallucinating his image and voice, that was enough.

"Why...have I not...died yet? I don't...have a heart."

The heart was supposed to be a vampire's weakness. It wasn't natural that I could survive this long without one. I was grateful for it, of course, but...

The lord frowned at me like a teacher might at a poor student, and answered, **"Vampires die when stabbed in the heart with a wooden stake; it's part of their curse. If you're not stabbed, you won't immediately die."**

"Ha... Ha-ha... What on earth? What kind of strange creature defies all logic?!"

Not dying even after losing everything below the neck? That was absolutely absurd. If the world allowed *that*, then all tearing out my heart did was remove a weakness.

The lord snorted. **"But a heart is still the source of a vampire's strength. Without it, you lose most of your abilities. That goes for you as well, even as a lesser one."**

"I never...had strength to begin with."

Even after being reborn, I'd been utterly weak.

The only ones weaker than me that I'd met had been Lou and Hak, who was a noncombatant.

Of course, on my sickbed, I'd been far weaker than either of them.

The lord didn't answer that. Instead, he continued disinterestedly: **"The lesser vampire is a preparatory step toward becoming a vampire—a pupa, if you will. You lack most of the abilities of a vampire, but so, too, do you lack most of their weaknesses. You won't turn to ash immediately upon contact with sunlight."**

"O-oh... That's...great."

“But that means your suffering will be extended. Your power is dried up, and you cannot regenerate. Your soul will be ruined by the sunlight, and you will die very slowly. Your abyss is deep—likely far deeper than what the Knights believed, but...it will not be possible to survive for long. Upon the dawn, you will have only an hour left.”

“What...should I do?”

I quite literally didn't have a leg to stand on. The only thing I could move was my mouth—and it was possible I'd lose the capacity even to do that.

Despite the fact that I'd devoured him, the lord didn't so much as frown at my question. His answer came immediately. **“There is nothing to be done. There is nothing a lesser vampire whose power is exhausted can do.”**

I see... Then this is the end.

The lord's illusion vanished. His words began to convince me.

Which meant.....from here on, it would be a battle of attrition.

I'd fight the pain. I'd keep my wits about me. I'd resist death.

The same as I'd done on my deathbed. The only difference now was that I was just a head.

That marked the beginning of my final battle.

The dark sky brightened, and a faint light began to illuminate my surroundings.

The first thing I felt was a pain like I was sunburned.

It started at the crown of my head, then changed into a fiery heat as it spread to take over my entire face.

Right after receiving the sentence, I'd thought I'd have some leeway. That this would be a lot better than dying.

But I quickly realized that had been a misunderstanding. The positive power crept into what little remained of my body, burning it, scorching my very thoughts. And with only a head, I couldn't even writhe in pain.

It felt like the sun had been shining directly on me for dozens of hours continually. Little by little, bit by bit, the pain was trying to kill me. Trying to make me a corpse again.

I opened my eyes as wide as they could go and desperately endured the pain. My restlessness grew a little at a time, as though with the ticking of the second hand on a clock. That plus a powerful terror and a hopelessness attacked me, the likes of which I hadn't even felt with the Ender Knights right before my eyes.

My instincts screamed warnings at the coming of the sun, my mortal enemy. It had only just begun to peek over the horizon, and it had done this to me. It was a wonder I hadn't been obliterated yet. My abyss was filling in. I was returning to zero. To nothingness.

There was nothing I could do anymore. Dark and light battled within me.

I just kept on steeling myself against the agony. The light illuminating the grave was getting stronger, a little at a time.

Suddenly, a question crossed my mind.

The lord had said one hour. But an hour had passed a while ago.

How long could I hold on for, then? How long could I endure? How long...would I *have* to endure?

And...was there any meaning in it?

I now understood why Nevira, and the Ender Knights, had called this the most agonizing death for an undead. Leaving me here hadn't been a slipup.

This...was torture.

Pain assaulted me—a punishment of the sun itself, endpoint unknown. Powerlessness. Death's footsteps.

The further an undead got from death, the less they could withstand this sentence. Because the enemies were no longer present, they couldn't let go of their last hope. Their minds would die before their bodies.

My throat kept getting dryer. I cried at the scorching-hot pain. I desperately sucked in breaths to keep conscious.

If I accepted death, it was over. I knew that because I'd managed to live on for several years after contracting the strange illness.

As I weakened, withstood the pain, and clung to life, the doctors had called me a miracle.

And the pity they'd had at the start turned to shock. Everyone—the doctors, my family, the sorcerers—thought I would die immediately. But I'd survived. Ultimately, I'd passed away, but I'd never given up on living, right up to the very end.

Whipping my breaking heart back into shape, I steeled myself again.

I wouldn't give up this time, either. I'd already died once. Died, then been miraculously resurrected with my memories intact.

This was nothing—this agony, this despair—and I would never resign myself.

I looked up, glaring desperately at that hateful sun.

I was a dead man. The vessel of the king of the dead, in whom Horos Kamen had seen promise. This would not destroy me.

I didn't scream. I could distract myself from the pain if I made noise, but it would expend stamina. It was a skill I'd developed in life. I simply stayed quiet, my thoughts burning, fighting against the pain as it threatened to drop the curtain of darkness over my mind.

I had no chance of winning. I had no plan.

What I sought was...a second miracle.

How much time had passed, I wondered?

The sun got higher and higher in the sky, and the light shining on me increased my pain little by little. I burned it into my eyes so I would never forget it.

It was radiant. Painful. Terrifying. And...beautiful.

I'd once loved the morning, the light of the sun—and now it was trying to drive me out of this world.

It was no use—I couldn't win.

I'd be destroyed. My soul would vanish. It hurt. My face, with the sun shining on it—what had become of it?

The light was too strong for me to see anymore. Everything burned, like I was engulfed in the fires of hell itself.

...I don't...want to die.

I gave a silent scream.

And the very moment I felt my mind begin to plummet, my head was suddenly picked up.

At first, I thought my soul had ascended to heaven. But I quickly realized that wasn't correct.

They said a soul corrupted by a necromancer would never be able to go to heaven.

The overwhelming light in my vision was dampened, replaced by silvery-white hair right in front of me.

A pair of familiar violet eyes, blankly amazed, came into view.

I opened my lips. What came out was a single, broken word.

"...Sen...li..."

"——!! ——!! ——!!"

"I can't...hear..."

I couldn't hear her. My tongue was burned. It was sheer luck that my eyes were still okay.

This was my limit. I...was about to die. Almost all the negative energy I'd accumulated now lay buried.

I couldn't even bear a tiny bit of sunlight anymore.

In my hazy consciousness, I simply groped for threads of survival.

What should I do? How would I be saved?

How would I most effectively incite someone like Senli, her weakness unbefitting of an Ender Knight, this young woman who had compassion to act?

I had no strength. I couldn't move. I barely had any time to exchange words. My actions were extremely limited.

And so, for the briefest moment, I managed to move my tongue, causing intense, dry pain to shoot through me, and said my final words.

“Th.....ank.....y.....you.....”

Senli's hands, which had been gently holding my head up, trembled.

This was my limit. I was at death's door. But after confirming that successful reaction, I was relieved.

Senli was tenderhearted and smart. She put her all into whatever she did; she'd mastered her incredible powers; she was stubborn; and according to Nevira, she was the kind of person who would feel shock over the death of a passing undead like me.

They—Nevira and the others—should have destroyed me.

They shouldn't have given in to their anger and passed this sentence. They shouldn't have given me time to repent. They should have destroyed me, completely and utterly.

And now they would lose—that which they truly held dear.

The hesitation lasted only a moment. Feeling a sense of floating, slightly chilled hair touched my forehead.

I couldn't see any longer. Couldn't see in front of me. But the smooth softness of lips touching me was no illusion.

The sweet scent of skin momentarily blew away the agony and despair. My tongue, which hadn't been able to move, reached out and tasted that skin.

The intense pleasure became a shock, jolting me awake again. My dried-up power recovered a tiny bit.



My blacked-out vision returned. My tongue moved more naturally than before.

“Thank...you...for this...”

After properly thanking her in her ear as she trembled before me, I dug my fangs into Senli’s proffered neck.

§ § §

“Hmm... Senli isn’t back yet.”

“Yeah. What the hell is she doing...? He’s just a monster.”

At their master’s words, Nevira glanced at the room’s clock in irritation. It showed that the sun would already be setting soon.

Senli had left the room a short time after day had broken.

When she’d seen Nevira and the others return, having made sure the sunsentence would have enough time to succeed, she’d understood the situation immediately and burst out before anyone could stop her.

Luphrey frowned, recalling her expression—she’d looked to be on the verge of tears.

Epe’s group’s mission had been to kill Horos Kamen, second-rank necromancer. They’d already accomplished that.

That meant Senli Sylvis would be promoted to first-rank knight, but this didn’t seem like the best time to celebrate.

Senli had soft spots. Normal people would call it kindness, but for the Ender Knights, it was unnecessary. The Knights would do whatever they had to in order to carry out their duty fighting the shrewd, deceitful denizens of the dark. And their methods were not always just.

Sometimes they tortured, and sometimes they killed in grisly ways as examples. Sometimes they killed humans who supported the denizens of the

dark, and sometimes they even ignored hostages. Many of the Ender Knights had personal grudges against the denizens of dark, too.

And the world had tolerated all of that. Undead had profane powers the living did not, gaining strength by absorbing death, and regular people could do nothing against them—they were humanity's fated enemies.

This time, Epe had given Senli Sylvis a lie. After telling her he would overlook the harmless undead she said she'd met, he'd sent Lumphrey and the others to put him down.

But Epe didn't regret doing it in the slightest.

He was sorry that he'd had to lie. He knew it would leave a lasting scar on Senli. But he didn't *regret* it.

Because...it was the proper thing for an Ender Knight to do.

Senli was a tiger cub. As the days passed, her blessing grew stronger, and in what seemed like the blink of an eye, she'd surpassed Lumphrey and the others—knights who had joined before her. What she needed to train now was her heart. She utterly lacked the proper attitude to be an Ender Knight. And this would be an opportunity for major growth.

Thankfully, she was smart. He knew if he talked to her, she'd understand. For now, she just needed a little bit of time to calm her emotions.

Once she had a little more experience fighting undead, she'd get it.

There *were* no harmless undead. They attacked people on instinct. They envied life.

Ghouls ate human corpses, and darkstalkers struck from the dark. Vampires sucked human blood. For undead like them, humans were no different than livestock.

The state of being undead was a curse. Detestable necromancers had put a curse on them to make them like that.

That was why the Ender Knights purified their souls—to grant them an end.

"Master, is it really possible for an undead to retain their memories after dying...? I know that vampires have the power to make people into their thralls

by sucking their blood, but... That undead certainly wasn't dominated by instinct. He never attacked us."

Nevira clicked his tongue softly at Lumphrey's question and responded in an intimidating tone. "He didn't attack us because Thelma shot him in the legs first, idiot. It was coincidence! Have you even been paying attention to anything before this? You can't talk things out with those bastards!"

Nevira was a little rough, but he had more willingness to fight the undead than most others. People like him were necessary for the Knights, too. Epe narrowed his eyes, then, without answering the question, replied, "Nevira is right. They all need to be destroyed."

The existence of the undead who kept their memories from life.

It was a secret only told to the Ender Knights—and then only to first-rank ones.

Death was a parting from life. It was irreversible, which was why people grieved the deaths of loved ones but kept on living anyway.

If it became known that there was even the slightest chance of overcoming it, the world would be thrown into chaos. Many might appear who tried to use necromancy to bring back companions.

It wasn't public knowledge, but they'd actually had members who had done that. No matter how low the chances were—people would still think they'd be all right doing it, even with no proof.

Epe then turned to Nevira and said in a criticizing way, "But you shouldn't have given a sunsentence. You should have purified him before he felt pain. It's a mental weakness of yours, Nevira. I believe we should never use the sunsentence without a strategic reason."

"...Tch."

Lumphrey and the others frowned at Nevira. They probably hadn't been keen on the idea, either.

A sunsentence was torture for an undead. Inflicting pain for no reason went contrary to the Ender Knights' reason for existence—they made it their mission

to purify defiled souls. Nevertheless, the method of punishment was allowed within the Knights because it was a sort of salvation for certain ones who had grudges against the undead.

They couldn't survive on platitudes alone. That the Ender Knights had emotions like everyone else was proof.

But Epe wasn't telling Nevira this out of a moralistic reason.

He narrowed his eyes, watching Nevira, who had done something thoughtless. "I thought I'd told you to make sure you destroyed him. That was why I immediately sent you there—*before* the night was over."

"...The sunsentence never fails. A lesser vampire with nothing but a head can't do anything. You understand, right, Master? There was no rescuing him. He had no companions. If it was possible, even I wouldn't have used the sunsentence."

"....."

"And I made sure he didn't start regenerating. His power was completely drained. Even if he survived for a time, it was probably only for thirty minutes. Of course, it might have felt like hours to that monster..."

"Master, what Nevira says is right. It is true that the sunsentence was not premeditated but emotional, but... That undead was so...so *creepy*—enough to make Nevira do that."

Recalling the sight, Thelma shuddered slightly.

In general, the undead acted on instinct. That led them to attack the living. The sense of self that began to sprout in ghouls was predicated on powerful instinct.

But those who had memories of their life... They were different.

It wasn't clear whether it was a unique trait of individual examples who had retained their memories after death or if it was a result of the mixture of their human memories and undead instincts. Regardless, such undead were, in most cases, aberrant.

Since undead with their past lives' memories intact were extremely rare, there were maybe three or four examples to draw from, but records of battles

with those aberrant undead did still exist at the Ender Knights' main headquarters.

These undead possessed both the body of a monster and the intelligence of a human. They needed to be killed while they were still weak.

Even if they'd never attacked anyone to date, their very existence would bring calamity down on the world.

"Nevira, enough of this," said Epe. "Go look for Senli and bring her back. We can't afford to stay in this town forever. We have many enemies aside from Horos Kamen."

"Ugh... If she hasn't come back yet, that must mean she's still upset. She's so stubborn... I don't even know if I'll be *able* to bring her back..."

"I was the one who sent you on the mission, but you were the one who decided on the sunsentence. It is your responsibility to explain things to her, Nevira. It'll be fine—she's a strong one. If you talk things out properly, she'll understand."

Senli was set to become a first-rank knight at Epe's recommendation. Once she had, she would be permitted to learn about the undead who kept their memories. And she would learn of the threat they posed.

If only their chance meeting had come a day later—but there was no point harping on that now.

"...Fine, fine. Time to go get punched by little miss princess, I guess..."

Nevira sighed in heartfelt frustration and stood up.

And then, as though timed for the moment, there came a knock at the door.

Everyone turned to look at once. The presence they could feel from behind the door was extremely similar to Senli's.

Nevira's expression softened a bit. With an exaggerated gesture, he turned his gaze to his companions and said, "Sheesh, Senli, you're late! Enough with the hesitation already. The master's worried, too—"

"Ah! Wait, Nevira—"

Sensing something wrong, Epe tried to stop him, but it was too late.

Nevira unlocked the door and turned the knob.

“...Pardon the intrusion. It felt as though I couldn’t enter unless invited—maybe because I’m a vampire, albeit a lesser one.”

With a creak, the door opened slightly. Nevira’s softened expression turned to a flabbergasted one, then immediately his face drew back in tension.

The slender figure entered the room quite casually.

The man, wrapped in the exact same aura as Epe’s pupil, narrowed his crimson eyes as he gave a thin smile.

§ § §

It was better than anything I’d ever felt before.

I’d felt euphoria when I’d eaten for the first time after becoming a ghoul, but the moment I’d sucked blood had been something else.

Probably because Senli’s blood was of the highest quality. Regardless, I was now keenly aware why vampires would risk being attacked to suck the blood of young women.

It was common knowledge that vampires grew stronger by sucking blood. Lesser ones, the pupa of vampires, were no exception.

Senli’s blood had completely regenerated my body, including my heart. My physical form had been on the verge of death and would have been destroyed if she’d come only minutes later.

I could see it. The powerful positive energy wrapped around the Ender Knights. But I felt none of the despair I had felt last time.

In that moment, my power was at its peak. Lesser vampires were a preparatory stage on the way to vampires and apparently weak even among other types of undead, but none of that was even important.

My body no longer had the frail physique it did in life. My limbs were toned and muscular, and I even had prominent abdominal muscles. It went without

saying how much power was hidden within me. My undead body, which was never supposed to grow or mature, had changed. That, too, was likely proof that I had progressed beyond the curse—beyond what the necromancer had planned.

All the Ender Knights were present in the room. The one holding the mace, Nevira—the one who had tortured me—took a step back out of shock. He must have thought I was Senli.

“Y-you...!”

“How?!”

It would have been utterly unexpected for them. But their reactions were still beyond those of normal humans.

The female blond-haired knight—Thelma, who had shot me in the legs in the forest—grabbed her silver bow, which had been leaning against the wall, took aim, and fired a silver arrow, all in the blink of an eye. At about the same time, Nevira brandished his mace.

But I was calm.

If I hadn’t been confident I could survive coming to the enemy’s base, my timidity would have never allowed it.

The mace flew at me quickly, and the arrow shot toward my head. But now that I was a lesser vampire and possessed eyesight superior to a human’s, I could see them very clearly.

Third-rank knights were certainly strong. Their positive energy produced inhuman physical abilities, and they boasted strength fitting of heroes who had perfected their combat techniques—but they were still only human. They weren’t on my level. Not after I’d reached the pinnacle of a true monster, having gone through the greatest experience of my lives.

I took a step forward, then used my left palm to stop the swinging mace. With my right hand, I grabbed the arrow out of the air just before it hit my forehead. Pain shot through my hands, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as my execution during the sunsentence.

For vampires, the act of sucking blood wasn't only to replenish their energy.

I tossed the arrow aside. Gripping the mace, I forced it out of Nevira's hands and threw it to the floor.

My smoking palms quickly regenerated, and the smoke disappeared. That wasn't something you would normally see from a vampire.

"Most of what's below the neck right now...was made from Senli's blood. And it's all thanks to your purifying everything but my head."

The Knights were dumbfounded. The only calm one was that sun man—Senli's master, Epe the Extinguisher.

He was strong. Even seeing him again now—he was overwhelming. The energy he possessed went beyond even Senli Sylvis and her talent of blessing, which was very high for a knight.

I'd heard the name Epe the Extinguisher in life. He was fairly well-known, even among the first-rank knights.

The crazy story of him attacking a vampire king's castle on his own and extinguishing an army of undead thousands strong in a single strike was a popular subject for theater plays.

He was a living legend. I'd been surprised when I'd heard the sun man was Epe the Extinguisher, a childhood hero of mine, but then it made sense that I'd felt like I'd be obliterated by his immense energy just from getting near him.

He'd remained seated even after my visitation, probably because he wouldn't need to stand to wipe out someone like me. He narrowed his eyes and spoke calmly. "What do you need of us, then, lesser vampire—End, was it? Revenge? Do you think you can oppose a group of Ender Knights...just because you recovered the rest of your body? You underestimate us."

I didn't have any such intention, of course—not a scrap of it.

Even now, my heart was pounding quickly at seeing Epe in front of me.

He was strong. Too strong. He was a monster wearing human skin. An utterly different creature than the third-rank knights.



I began to slightly regret coming to this room, but it was a necessary part of the process.

Don't let him pressure you. There's already an enormous gap between us. If you get too excited and lose, it's all over.

I shrugged, then returned Nevira's unyielding glare.

"I'm not here for revenge, of course. I don't have a grudge against you. I mean, I thought for sure the sunsentence would obliterate me, and I couldn't understand why I had to go through something like that... I may have my memories from my lifetime, but I'm still an undead. I can't blame you."

I stared at the armed third-rank knights, with all their weapons brought to bear, and made my bluff. This was the turning point.

"I know all about the Ender Knights. I'm a fan of yours. I was bedridden for most of my life, and reading books about all the things you've done helped me through it. I'm willing to forget you almost killed me. Thanks to Nevira's heartless actions, Senli sympathized with me. Thanks to being on the verge of death, she offered her neck to me."

"What?! I always knew she was naive, but...what...what a foolish thing to do...!"

Finally having grasped the situation, Nevira glared at me with absolute rage.

Normally, a lesser vampire would never suck the blood of an Ender Knight with their intense positive energy. That energy covered their bodies, acting like a sword and armor against the undead.

They needed a willing host to drain blood. In other words, Senli had stripped off her armor for me and offered her neck willingly.

Upon hearing that, Epe's gaze was still just as warm as before. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Then why did you come here? Did you think I would let an undead like you leave unscathed?"

"Oh, and Senli is alive. I took her up on her offer and had a little of her blood, but I'm not cruel enough to kill the person who saved my life. I'm not an Ender

Knight, after all. I'm human... And my body is still pure, of course."

The third-rank knights looked shocked as they shuddered at my answer.

Epe's stony-calm, king-like expression twitched slightly then, for the first time.

"?! You resisted...the impulse to suck blood?"

"Yeah. I thought I was about to go to heaven. I even forgot about the impending destruction. To think such pleasure existed in this world... But I'm human, and humans don't let their impulses control them. The fact that I know your names is proof. Epe the Extinguisher, Nevira, Lumphrey, Thelma, and that quiet man—Adrian. Senli told me. I needed them for negotiating and to defend myself."

I let out a passionate breath as I recalled the time I sucked her blood. That was an experience that could have changed my entire view on life.

But I hadn't let myself become fully undead. The urge to suck more blood had been intense, but my survival instincts and logic had won out.

The undead had too many enemies. And I wanted to survive, no matter what.

"...Self-defense? State your conditions, then."

Epe was thinking about what I was truly after. About whether he should just kill me. About a way to rescue Senli, his pupil, who was supposed to have become a first-rank knight.

Epe was thinking—that I planned to use Senli as a hostage.

But he was wrong. I had no such intentions.

I'd risked my life to come here in order to clear things up. I hadn't really wanted to come, but there was enough value in doing so.

I wore a random robe I'd found in the remains of the lord's mansion. From it, I took out a sword, wrapped in cloth.

Careful not to touch the silver hilt, I undid the wrapping. It was a single sword, tucked away in its sheath.

When they realized what it was, Nevira and the others changed their expressions—to indignation, to unease, to sadness.

I placed Senli's sword on the table, then gave Epe the same sort of amiable smile he'd been giving me. "Conditions? You misunderstand. I'm not taking Senli hostage. I...came to return this sword. Senli gave me a message to pass along. *Forgive me. I'm quitting the Ender Knights. Thank you for everything.*"

The eyes of Lumphrey and the others went wide, then immediately froze like that.

My words, my message—they were all the truth. I'd willfully evoked sympathy and manipulated her volition, certainly, but she was the one who made the final decision.

Senli Sylvis was an Ender Knight, but certain things clearly set her apart from them.

The Ender Knights, Nevira, and the others—they were allies of justice, enemies of the denizens of the dark. But Senli was different.

Senli—she was an ally of the weak. Soft, as soft as someone could possibly be. That was why she'd sympathized with a weak, pathetic undead like me. Some would call it kindness, but it made her an ill fit for the Knights.

"Senli told me that she would stay with me and make sure I didn't let my undead instincts take over. She can't allow me to attack people, but in exchange, she'll continue giving me the blood that I need to survive." I sighed. "Such a good girl, but she's not cut out for the Knights."

"You...bastard..."

Nevira's face was bright red with rage, and he tried to come closer to me. Immediately, I raised my voice. The Ender Knights were incredibly fearsome. They didn't need a reason to attack the denizens of the dark. "Whoa, wait! Don't attack me. If I die, Senli dies."

"?!" Epe's expression sharpened.

I leaned into my sense of omnipotence and excitement at having sucked blood and said loudly, "Who will kill who, you ask? No—it'll be suicide. We promised. If I should die during these negotiations, if I never return, Senli will slit her own throat. If I didn't have a guarantee like that, I'd never have come here!"

“.....You’re bluffing.”

“Luphrey! You would be the ones who would know best if she’d actually do something like that—you’ve been with her far longer than I have. You’d better be careful. Senli’s not an undead like me. *She* can’t live with only a head.”

It felt *amazing* being able to glare at them. I was a harmless, pathetic undead, but I wasn’t enlightened enough not to feel anything at having everything below my neck destroyed.

I sensed their murderous intent tingling in the air. Of course, there was a chance I could be killed right now.

But there was value enough to risk my life on what Senli had said.

The blood of a strong, beautiful, young, pure maiden. The blood of a former Ender Knight. If she let me drink of it regularly... There was no more favorable condition for a vampire.

Just a little bit extra, and my body had regenerated, and I’d gained this much power.

If she let me suck her blood on a regular basis, it would massively raise my ability to survive.

Vampires had the fearsome ability to change those they sucked the blood of into their kin—into lesser vampires.

I didn’t have that ability yet as a lesser vampire, but even if I did acquire it, I couldn’t turn her. If I made her into a vampire, I wouldn’t be able to suck her blood anymore.

Epe made his first major movement. He stood up, then said calmly, “This is absurd. If she was going to live a life like that, like livestock, only to have her blood sucked by a vampire, killing you would be a mercy...”

“Yeah, you’re right. You’re completely right on all counts.”

I was a monster now. The mutation had changed my blackened irises to bloodred. I was translucent in mirrors. One day I would have fatal weaknesses to crosses and garlic, and I wouldn’t be able to go into other people’s rooms unless invited. And I wouldn’t be able to cross running water.

But no matter how monstrous I became, Senli would remain human. In a tempting voice, I said, “But think about it. Even Senli, as overly optimistic as she is, wouldn’t put up with having her blood sucked by a monster forever, would she?”

“...What are you getting at?!”

“Senli is a little frenzied right now. That’s what I’m getting at. And you, Nevira, and the rest of you—you’re the ones who made her weak.”

Nevira’s face changed slightly after I mentioned him by name.

Senli was soft. And she was an ally of the weak. But that wasn’t enough to make her offer her neck to a vampire, an enemy she’d always been fighting. She got that way because of Nevira’s torture.

The sunsentence had weakened someone who was already miserable and frail to begin with. Senli blamed herself for not being able to stop Nevira and the others from doing it. As a result, she offered her blood to me. It certainly wasn’t something I’d intended, but it was also a very good deal for me.

Now that I was safe, it was even enough to make me feel glad for almost being killed.

“To tell the truth, at first, Senli tried to come here herself to return her sword. But I stopped her. I decided to risk my life to travel here in her place. She really does trust people too much.”

If she’d done that, she would have surely been arrested, persuaded, and made to come to her senses.

But even if she hadn’t been detained, it wouldn’t have lasted forever. She was endlessly kind, but at the same time, she was sensible and smart. She was justice itself. And it didn’t change that I was an evil being. It was very possible there would be discord in the meantime.

My relationship with Senli was very precarious. Making a slightly more serious expression, I looked at Epe.

“Senli is strong. Frankly, she’s a monster. Even after drinking a few drops of her blood, I could never stand up to her. She’s no damsel in distress. If I turned

harmful, she would kill me without hesitation.”

“...And so we should let you go?”

“If you kill me now, Senli will not hesitate to die. She’s very unstable. What she needs is a little bit of time to calm down.”

But I wouldn’t let her.

What she had for me now was sympathy. If I wasn’t weak anymore, that would disappear. Before then, I would have to appeal to her, giving her some kind of rationale—a reason to stay with me or reasons not to kill me.

Regardless, I wasn’t worried. I was just an undead who wanted to survive—a king of the dead of a type the lord probably hadn’t intended. I couldn’t become an enemy to justice, to humanity. As long as I wasn’t attacked.

Epe snorted. He opened his eyes wide and looked down at me. The old man’s eyes were sharp and bright. The pressure I felt from his impressive frame was petrifying for someone who had already risked everything there was to risk.

My heart itself trembled. But I didn’t let it show.

After being amiable for so long, Epe’s expression changed. Baring his teeth, he said quietly, “You *have* underestimated the Ender Knights. Did you think we were *soft* enough to decide that was enough and let you go? End, you’ve misunderstood something. Senli has lost. Her death is on her hands, and there’s nothing we can do about it. Our mission is to kill the blasphemous living dead like you.”

I raised my eyebrows, then sniffed.

Whether it was a bluff or a threat, it was altogether infantile. *Even the famed Epe the Extinguisher...isn’t all that great.*

I would live. I would use any means at my disposal, any martial force, any words, any good fortune to survive.

“If you could choose that option, Senli wouldn’t be as soft as she is. I know all about the Ender Knights—I’m a fan of yours, after all. You have no mercy against enemies, but you’re soft when it comes to your own. And you never pick the wrong choice. If you could kill me, you would have done so a long time

ago. I'll ask you again... Do you really want to make your precious princess kill herself for a single harmless lesser vampire like me? Ha-ha-ha... What a pointless death that would be. She said that if I was killed, she'd journey to the afterlife with me—but I am cursed, and we'd be going to entirely different places to begin with."

Still smiling, Epe fell silent. Lumphrey and the others looked at their master with grim expressions.

I made preparations to move. I didn't know the extent of Epe's abilities, but it was night now...the time of the undead. If my prediction somehow happened to be wrong, and he attacked me, I might be able to run away.

The darkstalker, one stage before the lesser vampire, was said to have the ability to blend into the dark.

I'd skipped that stage after absorbing the lord's soul, so I couldn't use that power. I might be able to learn it if I practiced, but it wouldn't do me any good right now, at least.

But Epe and the others didn't know that.

They were thinking about it—weighing my threat against Senli's worth.

The Ender Knights would not make a mistake. The only sound in the room was the soft ticking of the hands on the clock.

The silence ended abruptly.

Epe frowned, then slowly sat back down in his chair. His disciples exhaled.

I couldn't believe their softness, considering how they'd tried to kill me in such a tragic way, but it just went to show that both Epe and his pupils were human, too.

They were able to show concern for others. I didn't have that. I relaxed my shoulders in a way they couldn't see. "Oh, and there was one other thing. I'd like you to return the Amulet of Shadow and the Cloak of Perpetual Night to me—you stole them. I'll need them in order to live peacefully, and they're keepsakes of Horos. They belong to me. You wouldn't want your princess to be sleeping outside...right?"

“...Luphrey... Would you mind...bringing them here?”

“...Yes, sir.”

I hadn't thought I'd be able to get them to return them, but it looked like it would work.

Luphrey took a familiar cloak and the Amulet of Shadows from the chest in the back of the room, then handed them to Epe.

Epe placed the cloak on the desk, then picked up the amulet, imbued with a black gemstone that concealed negative energy.

He showed it to me, and as I watched it with hopeful eyes, he then said quietly, “End... We will accede to your silver tongue this time and overlook it. But this doesn't mean we trust anything you say. Senli... Senli is the one we trust.”

A crack ran through the gemstone.

And then, before I could cry out, the Amulet of Shadow shattered.

Epe casually brushed away the shards and added with a thin smile, “You should leave now...while I am just barely containing my anger. And please tell Senli that we swear we will come to get her.”

“...Tch. You're a monster.”

My spine froze. I had a feeling something was about to occur.

If I didn't leave right now, I really would be killed. Epe's words were powerful enough to convince me of that.

Maybe I'd provoked him a little too much.

I turned my back. At about the same time, a silver blade grazed my cheek.

I hadn't sensed it. I hadn't heard it. I hadn't let my guard down. White smoke rose from the thin cut in my cheek. The blade stuck in the door with a sharp sound—it was Senli's sword, which I'd returned before.

My heart simultaneously skipped a beat as I felt the pain set in.

Epe spoke to me from behind: “...Return that to Senli, if you will, End. That sword is no mere bauble to be returned by proxy...”

Epilogue

Recovery



Epilogue

Recovery

“Senli, your talents are surely a divine gift.”

She'd been having a dream. A dream from long ago, of when she still hadn't known the way to control her all-too-powerful blessing, of when the power that should have affected her for the better was instead binding her.

After collapsing for unknown reasons, with no pain, unable to move, Senli had a man come to her with a smile like the sun, saying, “I will teach you to use your power. If you master your colossal blessing, you could do anything. Save anyone. This world... It needs your strength.”

She'd had the option to refuse. But the moment she'd heard those words, she had almost reflexively agreed.

Not that she'd wished to be a hero. No, she had only thought one thing: that it would be nice, just like how those around her had rescued her in her moments of frailness and when her physical condition had deteriorated, to be able to save others.

Apparently, people like Senli were born in this world every so often with naturally powerful blessings. Most of those people—called souls who climbed ever higher—did, however, leave the Ender Knights after learning just enough technique to let them control their blessings.

The war against the denizens of the dark was not something one could get through with only the power of one's blessing. Even Senli had seen her fair share of struggle to become a second-rank knight. And she knew she still lacked things in certain departments.

The Ender Knights were by no means purehearted allies of justice.

Their goal was to exorcise the darkness. Sometimes they killed humans, and sometimes they would abandon the weak for the sake of a greater cause. Thelma shooting Lou, who had suddenly attacked them, had been intolerable from Senli's point of view, but that didn't mean it was the incorrect action for a knight to take.

Logically, she understood that. And she understood that she was all too softhearted.

But even so, Senli still wanted to save others. That was why she'd become a knight.

She'd witnessed many tragedies in the past. Many people had slipped through her fingers.

But she couldn't abandon him.

Because now she knew—there were irregulars, even among the denizens of the dark.

The miserable dead who retained memories of their life, resurrected along with their humanity.

Her master probably knew about it. He'd known, and he hadn't told her. And she had a feeling she knew why.

End was just so weak.

Senli, who had experienced battles against many kinds of undead, couldn't believe how perfect his memory was and how much of his sense of self remained. On top of that, he knew he was something to be purified.

His expressions were absent of the personal grudges most other undead harbored.

He pretended to be calm, but his inner feelings were as clear to Senli as a fire in the dark.

Fear. End was constantly terrified of Senli, who was of an age not unlike his own.

And it was...the same as what innocent townspeople displayed with the undead.

His eyes sought salvation.

And it was...the same as what innocent townspeople looked to the Ender Knights for.

Senli deeply understood how dangerous the undead were. However, there was no doubt that End was supposed to be the kind of person she needed to protect.

While she knew purification was salvation for the soul, she couldn't bring herself to kill the all-too miserable dead before her. Her guilt at what Nevira and the others did certainly wasn't negligible in her decision to offer her neck to him, but she'd still done it of her own volition.

And her decision to go with him had been a choice she'd thought about herself.

There were many in this world who hunted the undead. If left alone, End would be ruthlessly killed by the Ender Knights or vampire hunters before long.

And even if he managed to avoid all that—he'd need to be watched.

She didn't understand how it had happened, but upon seeing him again, End had mutated into a lesser vampire. And vampires needed human blood.

A vampire's urge to suck blood was considerably strong. Vampires had been detested for so many years because when they drank a person's blood, they tended to drain it all, killing their target.

End had overcome his initial bloodsucking impulse. He hadn't drunk Senli's blood until she died. He'd stopped once he didn't have to worry about death any longer. One could call it a rare strength of reason; but she didn't know if his reason would hold out next time.

Senli Sylvis was End's ally. If he needed blood, she would give it to him.

That timid young man was fighting against his undead instincts. She didn't regret her choice.

But she needed to make sure she was prepared.

If End was to ever be consumed by his instincts and attack someone, she would need to kill him.

For nobody else's sake but his own—for the one who had tried to be human.

It was her responsibility as the one who had handled this situation in a way unbecoming of the Ender Knights.

Noticing his presence approaching, she opened her eyes. She felt just a little anemic, possibly due to having had so much blood sucked, but it wouldn't deter her from moving.

She rubbed the spot on her neck where she'd been bitten. The bite marks from the fangs were already gone.

§ § §

I left the building and dashed through Enge in the night with all my strength.

Leaping clear over the gate on impulse, I headed for the forest.

In my mind were two things: intense fear—and relief.

Epe was more of a monster than I'd anticipated.

He was humanity's ultimate weapon. Our mortal enemy, who existed only to hunt inhuman beings like us.

His sheer presence alone was so overwhelming that a newly mutated lesser vampire like me couldn't even hold a candle to him. If he'd been serious, I'd have been killed instantly.

But I ran. And I got away from him.

Arriving at the forest, I stopped for a moment and sharpened my senses.

There was no sign of any pursuers. Even Epe wouldn't have been able to follow me unnoticed, since I could sense living beings.

And if he was going to chase me, he might as well have killed me on the spot and headed to the forest himself.

Senli's feelings were what was critical. And now that they'd lied to her once, there was no going back.

I was keenly aware that my life hung by but a single thread.

But Senli was absolutely crucial to me. I had a premonition—a strong one.

If I'd run away alone, we would have had no connection. I was prepared to turn the world against me when I became an undead. But I knew...that I wasn't strong enough to keep on living without anyone who understood me, even if it was a facade.

And Senli fit the bill—she knew all too well how fearsome vampires were but still offered me her neck.

Even if I met my second death as a result of this decision, I probably wouldn't regret it.

Catching my breath, I went to the meeting place.

It was near the watering hole a short distance from the ruins of the lord's mansion. She was waiting there, hidden among the trees.

I didn't let the relief show on my face. Her silvery-white hair, cut to shoulder length, dully reflected the moonlight. Her skin was as fair as could be, seeming somehow ephemeral—perhaps because I'd sucked her blood not long ago.

She looked exactly the same as when I first met her: a messenger of the moon.

When she saw me, ignorant of my own discretion, Senli Sylvis breathed a short sigh.

“End, thank goodness...”

My expression shifted in spite of itself at her heartfelt words, but it quickly went back to normal.

I was...a terrible person. I'd taken advantage of her feelings, her sense of justice, her kindness. Her future had been sure to give her glory as an Ender Knight, but now it was sure to veer significantly off course.

But even if it meant tricking the only person who had sided with me since receiving my second life...I wanted to survive.

Her blood had given me the ultimate pleasure, such that I had never felt before.

It was hard to resist. The blood tasted sweet, but more than that, her act of voluntarily offering her neck had moved me greatly. Still, I...would never be carried away by my bloodsucking impulse.

I couldn't afford to make an enemy out of Senli. Nor least of all humanity.

This was the most ideal route to survival. And the one that Epe and the others would probably hate the most.

I was a coward. I'd feared death my entire life, and now I feared being killed.

This time, though, there was something I could do about it.

I had a way to fight against it—I had power. I had a body that could move freely. I had a future.

The Knights hadn't pursued me, no, but that in no way meant they would tolerate or forgive me.

I'd already become the king of the dead: intolerable and unforgiveable, an enemy to the world at large.

But that was fine. I would use everything at my disposal. I would sacrifice anything.

Kindness, emotion, anger, happiness—I'd take advantage of all of it, if it meant gaining freedom and peace.

I was more than happy to become the most terrifying monster in the world.

I offered her the sword Epe had returned. Senli was silent for a few moments, then took it without saying anything.

"I figured as much to begin with, but I couldn't persuade them. They were furious. It's a miracle I even came back alive."

"...I told you..." said Senli softly, not seeming surprised.

But I'd won my gamble. Making as apologetic a face as I could, I told her, "I was thinking...of leaving the forest and running far away. They'll probably follow me. Unfortunately, we can't live peacefully here. They broke the pendant that concealed my presence, too."

"...All right. I think that's a wise plan."

The wedge had been driven. Even so, when they realized after a time that Senli wasn't coming back, they were sure to follow me. I was abnormal for an undead, but I was also a complete amateur, and it would be nigh impossible to escape from undead-hunting professionals.

But allied with someone who had all the techniques of the Ender Knights, my chances rose.

"Are you all right? That was my first time. I might've drunk too much blood."

"Not enough to be an issue," answered Senli in a somewhat cold voice. But it was clear she was forcing it.

She possessed enough strength to defeat the lord in a straight fight, but she was still only human. If her blood was drained completely, she'd die, and her stamina wasn't endless. She needed food, too.

Our escape would likely be tougher on her than it would on someone hardy like me.

After thinking for a moment, I looked up. Staring straight into Senli's eyes, I said in a hoarse voice, "Senli, it may be a little late for this, but you do have a choice. You can return to town. I've been alone the entire time I was bedridden and ever since I was revived. I could probably make it on my own going forward, too. Even though I need blood now... If I do a lot of research, there might be a way out of it. Siding with me will cause you nothing but problems."

This was probably the last time I'd be saying this. My final...act of kindness, in my own way.

Senli, though, didn't seem especially hesitant at this half-truth I offered. "You needn't worry, End. I've decided to help you. It's my responsibility."

She was kind, compassionate, and courageous. She was so straightforward it was dazzling, and she had faith.

An exact replica of the heroes who appeared in fairy tales. I constructed a worried-looking smile.

We'd only spoken to each other for a brief time, but I could tell what Senli was thinking.

When she'd offered me her neck, if I'd let my bloodsucking impulse take over and tried to drink until she died of blood loss, she probably would have killed me.

She felt compassion for me. Regret, compassion—and responsibility.

The words I'd said to Epe hadn't been lies. Far from it.

She would not tolerate my becoming a monster. Part of why she was with me was out of compassion for me, but the other part was to take responsibility for letting a vampire, albeit a lesser one, go free.

If I was to become a true vampire who recklessly attacked people, she would, without doubt or hesitation, kill me.

With compassion—and for my sake, while I was still human.

She wasn't letting her sympathy get carried away with her. She had chosen to be my anchor out of her own empyreal convictions.

When I looked at her fair skin, my fangs gave a dull ache.

Recalling the sublime, sweet taste of her blood, I felt a strong thirst. A thirst that would probably never be slaked. But I had to beat it, using any methods I could find.

At least until the day Senli had complete faith in me.

"I'm all packed. We should get as far away as possible before day breaks."

".....Yeah, you're right. We'll have to be careful...when we go to sleep."

"...Are you all right? You don't look so good. Do you need more blood?"

Senli was nose to nose with me, close enough that I could easily embrace her if I reached out my arms. She looked up at me.

My keen sense of smell picked up the scent of the blood flowing beneath that skin, white as virgin snow, and I was stricken with a sudden bout of dizziness. The edges of my mind throbbed.

I pushed it all down and gave her a smile.

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. Sure, the impulse to drink blood is there, but I can overcome it just fine."

BONUS SHORT STORY I

The Merry and Mournful Days of the Undead



BONUS SHORT STORY I

The Merry and Mournful Days of the Undead

Undead.

The word referred to corpses resurrected via necromancy or dead people otherwise revived through irregular methods.

In society, their existence was especially abhorred; it was no exaggeration to say that human history was a record of wars against the undead. Anecdotes of the reanimated deceased were copious all over the world, many of them tragic tales.

If someone had told me that after being afflicted with a strange illness, despairing, and dying helplessly, I would become one of the undead, I certainly wouldn't have believed them.

In life, I'd harbored no interest in the undead. Everything I knew about them was common knowledge.

There I was in that dark basement room with nothing but rows of corpses...

Looking once again at the books I'd brought here from the library that were now lined up on the stone floor, I felt a deep, private sense of satisfaction.

Moving around felt sublime. But just because I'd obtained a working body that felt no pain—my heart's desire—I couldn't let myself neglect learning. The lord didn't suspect whatsoever that a sense of self had sprouted in me, but regardless of whether I continued to deceive him or chose to reveal it to him, it was imperative that I gained knowledge.

The books I'd sneaked out of the lord's library were about necromancy, the undead, and things of that nature.

Fortunately, reading didn't cause me any distress. Reading books was my hobby. You could say that since I'd been essentially bedridden, it was the only

thing I was able to do, but nevertheless, I'd read many things ranging from novels to encyclopedias.

I had more time than I knew what to do with. The key point of caution would be not letting the lord or Lou see me reading.

There were plenty of other teaching materials around, too. I was apparently a type of undead called a flesh-man, and the mansion was full of armed undead creatures called skeletons roaming the halls. When we went hunting, the lord would bring reanimated animal corpses for protection, and he'd made me fight them a few times. I'd even gone into the lord's laboratory once, though I didn't have the opportunity to observe for very long.

I looked around at the corpses in the underground room. I wasn't sure what purpose this room served, either. Maybe the bodies were going to suddenly come to life. I highly doubted they'd attack me, but still...

Leaning against the corner of one of the wooden platforms with a corpse on it, I slowly started turning through the pages of a worn-out encyclopedia.

A flesh-man is an undead created by a unique necromantic technique using a fresh human corpse as a base. Flesh-men possess strength comparable to their abilities in life, as well as bodies that do not grow tired. Corporeally, they are in a near-living state, and if undamaged, they are indistinguishable from humans at a glance. They never rot, but even if they receive a wound, they do not shed blood, and their heart is permanently stopped. Their muscle strength is higher than that which they had in life, but they possess no regenerative abilities. They retain certain knowledge from their life, and while they have the ability to think, they have no will of their own and never act without a command from their master. Their combat abilities are low compared to other undead of the lowest class, such as skeletons and zombies, but discovering one means there is an extremely high chance a necromancer was around to create it, and thus it warrants caution. Through rank mutation, a flesh-man will mutate into a ghoul, then a darkstalker, then a lesser vampire. Ultimately, this being will become a fearsome undead possessing a body very similar to humans as well as immense power and high intelligence.

It seemed I was the lowest class of undead. The gist of what was written there aligned with what I felt. I never got hungry or tired, and I didn't feel pain, or lust, or a need to sleep, either. Nor did I have to go to the bathroom.

Only the point about flesh-men not having a will of their own was clearly different.

Considering what had been declared as fact, what happened to me must have been a notably out-of-the-ordinary occurrence. Maybe it was only natural the lord never realized that I had self-awareness.

As I continued flicking through the pages, I found several other pieces of information.

First, while flesh-men were of the lowest class of undead, they were comparatively rarer.

And come to think of it, plenty of skeletons roamed the mansion, but I was the only flesh-man. Many other corpses who hadn't rotted yet were in the basement room, but the lord didn't seem to have any intention of creating more flesh-men. I didn't know if the ritual to create one was difficult or if there was some other reason, but I had a feeling there was something special in the lord's eyes when he looked at me.

Flesh-men themselves seemed to be relatively featureless undead. Their biggest—and only—strength was probably that, through rank mutation, they eventually mutated into the infamous kings of the night: vampires.

That was another thing I'd just now learned. I'd always thought people became vampires after getting bitten by other vampires, but that didn't seem to always be the case. Of course, the only vampires I knew were the ones who had been bitten, so this was more of a chicken-and-egg issue than anything.

Details about rank mutations, which I'd wanted to learn about, were evidently entry-level knowledge in the undead business world (if such a world actually existed), and it was described in some detail.

Most undead accumulate negative energy by killing living creatures and thereby mutating into more powerful beings. This phenomenon is called rank mutation. Undead created from a necromancer's curse see

especially dramatic changes during a mutation as they become even stronger beings.

That was, in other words, the reason the lord brought me on hunts.

He was trying to make me into something more powerful—even though he clearly didn't seem to lack battle power, considering the many strong skeletons serving him and his own mastery of mighty magic... I would have to be cautious of this.

I'd let myself loosen up a little, perhaps because I'd gotten used to being an undead.

As I contemplated, I continued reading the book—which was interesting enough on its own—and eventually got absorbed in it. When I'd been bedridden from illness, I'd adored the heroes who appeared in fairy tales.

And because of that, the monsters the heroes fought were a subject of interest as well.

Ghouls are flesh-men who have achieved rank mutation. They have few differences in appearance, but ghouls possess stronger physical abilities and regenerative capacities than flesh-men, in addition to the abilities Sharpen Nails and Hone Fangs, through which they can freely alter their fangs or claws. Driven fundamentally by powerful resentment and hunger, they prefer to attack people and devour their fresh corpses to accumulate power. In addition, they possess a greater capacity for thought and self-awareness than pre-mutation, having intelligence on the level of a small child. Their combat tactics are juvenile but worthy of caution. Ghouls are mainly active at night, as they hate sunlight, but they are able to operate during daytime as well.

Ghouls. The lord had mentioned that before. Apparently, it was the next thing I'd be mutating into.

It would be wonderful to grow stronger. Whatever happened in the future, amassing power would improve my survival abilities. That regeneration ability was what I wanted most—I wouldn't have to rely on the lord's magic then.

As a bonus, I'd even gain the ability to alter my nails and fangs. I stared hard at those words on the page.

Abilities. They were *abilities*. I loved heroes, but I loved magic, too. Altering my nails or fangs didn't seem like magical abilities, but they were probably something similar. Just imagining it got me excited. I hoped I would mutate soon so I could try that out.

The problem was where the book talked about powerful resentment and hunger, but I couldn't do anything about those. I couldn't exactly sit out a night of hunting, so the mutation would eventually come. I would just have to brace myself and accept it when it did happen.

...How exciting. It's been such a long time since I last ate anything but liquid food.

What would I eat when I gained hunger? If I could eat corpses, surely I could eat anything else.

Darkstalkers are the result of a ghoul undergoing rank mutation. Their physical abilities aren't vastly different compared to ghouls, but they have a human level of intelligence and excel in concealing themselves. Though they have the form of a human, a clear indicator is the jet-black skin that blends in with darkness. Their Shadow Creep ability allows them to conceal their presence, making them difficult to detect at night. Though they strike at humans from the dark, they boast higher intelligence than a ghoul and lower brutality. Since darkstalkers are few in number, they are rarely spotted. Their skin has a major weakness to sunlight, and they can't be active for very long in it.

That...was troubling. The ability was fantastic, but it would feel weird to have skin the color of night. And if that happened, even the lord would notice the mutation right away.

Plus, while I hadn't done it recently, I enjoyed sunbathing. It was a little sad I wouldn't be able to stay active in the sunlight. I was an undead now, so perhaps it was only natural, but still...

But the buck would stop there. If I mutated that far, the lord would realize it. I'd have to think of my next course of action before becoming a darkstalker.

The undead encyclopedia I'd brought here had been exactly what I'd needed.

It probably didn't contain as much information as something more technical, but this had everything from undead traits to examples, from somewhat entertaining columns to hair-raising illustrations.

Those illustrations were especially fun. Depicted with a precise brush, they were fairly dubious when it came to how realistic they were (after all, the flesh-man illustration had it crawling on the ground; I didn't remember crawling on the ground since becoming a flesh-man), but they had a strange sort of charm to them that drew you in.

As I was flipping wide-eyed through the encyclopedia's pages, I suddenly heard a soft clatter.

I'd let my guard down. For a moment, I didn't know what happened, but then I frantically looked up.

That was the same moment the basement room door opened.

A chill ran down my spine. My body froze.

The one who entered was Lou, the servant. She carried a mop—perhaps she was here to clean?

I'd forgotten the time. I should've known this might happen, but the encyclopedia had really sucked me in.

I immediately stiffened like a statue. She wouldn't have seen me moving. At least, I didn't think so.

But I was usually standing up against the wall. Now, not only was I in the corner of the room, but I had a book open on my lap. I was reading. It was clearly not right.

Lou looked around the basement room with her usual irritated expression. When she saw me, her eyes went wide.

"?!????"

She plodded over and got right up close to me, staring at the book in my lap, then tilted her head curiously.

Lou was the lord's slave. She wasn't treated very well. But if something happened, she would at least report it to him. I didn't want the lord thinking that anything was wrong right now.

Luckily, my body couldn't sweat. A second felt like a minute, even ten minutes.

Lou watched me for a short time as I pretended, belatedly, not to move, but eventually she gave a little sigh and muttered, "Well, whatever... I should clean."

Wait... Really?

As questions swirled in my mind, she let me be, swiftly cleaning the basement room before giving me one final confused look and leaving. Her plodding footsteps grew distant.

Timing it to when I could no longer hear them at all, I finally deflated.

Had I...tricked her? As far as I could tell from her attitude, she certainly didn't look like she was going to report this to the lord.

His servant was more harmless than I thought.

I heaved a sigh, but this wasn't an occasion that called for relief. Luck had saved my neck, but this had been a complete mistake on my part. It wouldn't have been strange to lose my freedom because of this.

I really need to be more careful, I chided myself before lowering my gaze to the encyclopedia's pages again, this time paying attention not to let any footsteps escape me.

§ § §

Skeletons are one of the lowest classes of undead, created using human bones as a base. Like their name implies, they possess bodies constructed only of bones, and they attack the living through grudge alone. They are weaker than when they were alive, but they have fast, light bodies, and because their characteristics in life greatly color their actions, there is a large variation between individuals. A few retain dim

recollections of their lives, while some carry weapons or dress in clothing themselves, unlike other lowest-class undead like flesh-men and zombies. Through repeated rank mutations, they acquire a more powerful sense of self as well as mana, but they warrant caution as they carry deep envy for those with bodies of flesh. Because one can create exceedingly powerful skeletons depending on the bones used, necromancers frequently employ armies of them.

“Not all fun and games for you guys, either, huh?” I whispered, voice filled with emotion, to the skeleton knights patrolling the dim corridor.

The skeleton knights said nothing as they silently searched for intruders. They didn’t seem to particularly feel anything as I walked with them, even if I got in the way.

As far as I knew, skeletons were the most populous undead in the mansion.

They were armed with grand helmets and suits of armor, but they didn’t have any blood or skin, and unlike me, they’d been trained in combat. If the information in the encyclopedia was to be believed, they’d probably been created from the bones of talented warriors.

Because they secured their vital points behind light armor, they all appeared the same at a glance. But a closer look would reveal that their bone shapes were all different, as were their builds. I didn’t know where the lord had gotten the materials, but necromancy was truly sinful, for forcing them to fight on like this even after their deaths.

Unlike what the encyclopedia mentioned, the skeletal knights didn’t seem to have any grudges toward the living—or anything of the sort. Were they prioritizing their necromantic commands, or was I simply not an object of envy because I was an undead as well? Still, if I’d been created as a skeleton, I would have had a little envy of my fleshy body. I was thankful to the lord for building me from a fresh corpse.

The reason I’d risked sneaking out of the basement room to see the skeletons like this was certainly nothing frivolous, like wanting to observe up close for myself the skeletons I’d read about in the encyclopedia.

My objective was to gauge the lord’s military prowess.

If I was to ever turn against him, this skeleton army was sure to block my way. Just fighting a handful of these things would lead to me being utterly dismembered, and besides, I could be suppressed in a fair fight with the lord's absolute authority over me. Still, it couldn't be a bad thing to know the skeletons' numbers.

They moved in small groups, patrolling fixed areas in a loop. They never entered the numerous rooms, either—maybe they couldn't open doors.

It was strange, but once I got used to their horrifying forms, I began to like these skeletons, silently continuing their patrols without taking any breaks. It was just a little unfortunate, to me, that we couldn't communicate. It was written that, after repeated mutations, they gained strong senses of self, but as far as I knew, no intruders had ever come to this mansion.

In that case, why not give them names? Knowing the lord, he probably didn't distinguish between them. And if I gave them names, I might become friends with them when they gained awareness one day.

I had so much time that even naming every single one of them was feasible.

"Let's see... The one with the scar on his rib can be Jack. That's a good name, right?"

Jack completely ignored me, but I supposed it would have been bad if he *had* responded.

As I was soaking in self-satisfaction and thinking of a name for the other skeleton who was with Jack, I suddenly heard heavy footsteps.

They were coming this way. I had no time to hide.

But I didn't need to panic. The lord almost never came out of his laboratory, and his footfalls sounded different.

I calmly followed after the skeleton knights. I pretended to be a mindless undead, somehow keeping myself hidden as I walked.

A faint light appeared. Coming from the other direction was Lou, holding cleaning supplies. She was a hard worker, unlike the lord, and patrolled the mansion on an irregular basis, which made her troublesome.

When she spotted the skeleton knights, she lowered her face and started walking ever so slightly faster.

The skeleton knights glanced at her as well but immediately turned back, having lost interest.

I did my best to pretend to be undead, walking with as regular a pace as I could.

Right before we passed each other, Lou lifted her head slightly and caught sight of me.

“.....?”

She passed me by, and eventually I lost track of her footsteps.

But Lou’s mystified expression had been burned into my mind.

It seemed it wasn’t that she was dull-witted but that she had very little willpower to *do* anything.

Did she think something was going on with me? Was I in danger of being found out?

Still, it’d be boring—that is, a waste of precious time to stay in that basement room forever. Lou had encountered me several times already, but it didn’t seem like she was reporting it to the lord.

I’ll proceed with caution, I decided again before going to check how strong the other skeletons were.

§ § §

The rank mutation happened while I was on standby in the basement room.

The change was sudden.

A nauseating heat permeated my gut, and a strong sense of urgency overwhelmed me. The pain was hard to resist, and I’d only realized it was hunger—which I hadn’t felt in so long—after a day’s worth of resisting impulses, thinking that the corpses laid beside me looked “delicious.”

I cowered in place, still desperately restraining my arms and legs, which so eagerly wanted to leap at the corpses.

I'd anticipated my mutation into a ghoul was close at hand, but I hadn't expected it to be this sudden.

I'd been convinced the mutation would at least occur during a hunt. The requirements for a rank mutation were killing living creatures to accumulate the power of death, so it wasn't a stretch not to expect it to happen while I was just waiting around.

Luckily, I didn't let the starvation overwhelm me and start chomping on the corpses.

The reason I was able to endure the hunger might have been because I hadn't had an appetite in so long, but I could only think of it as a stroke of good luck: how fierce the appetite was, how sweet the desire. It made sense that the book said the prime motivation for a ghoul was its hunger. If this sort of thing was going to happen to me daily, I wasn't confident I could continue to endure it.

The sense of urgency slowly ate away at my sanity, but I couldn't allow myself to feast upon the corpses in this basement room. There were ethical concerns, but more importantly, the lord would notice if the number of corpses in here went down. And I doubted my body could handle eating an entire person on its own anyway.

But I needed to sate my hunger as soon as I could. It'd become difficult to feel my stomach grow empty at all ever since being confined to my sickbed, so a long time had passed since I was hungry to the point of dizziness.

I didn't have a moment to spare. I shook off the corpses' fragrant scents and exited through the door.

My eyes spun. My gait was unsteady. I couldn't even hear. I'd probably eat a skeleton now if I had to.

I felt shockingly weak. I'd sneaked out several times before, but I didn't feel like going outside in this state. Sniffing around, not thinking, I headed in the direction of some delicious scents.

Perhaps it was the hunger that had made my sense of smell so awfully sharp. I passed several skeleton guards on the way, and at some point, I started running. Hunger threatened to cloud my judgment, but fortunately, I managed to figure it out.

This direction...was the kitchen. It was where Lou always made food for the lord.

Flesh-men didn't care about empty stomachs, so I'd never showed any interest. But if this mutation was going to happen, I should have made sure to investigate it.

Sweet smells and sounds came from the kitchen. It appeared my timing was poor—she was cooking right now. I could smell her in there. For me, the cooking wasn't the only ingredient; she was, too.

Vision swimming, I stopped my hand just before it reached for the door. I couldn't go in there. Even Lou would be shocked if I suddenly burst into the kitchen. Seeking food? Out of the question. I'd managed to fool her so far, but if I went looking for something to eat, she'd report it to the lord.

I leaned up against the side of the door and took deep breaths, but the smells were so sweet that my mind nearly blanked out.

That was...meat being cooked. And bread.

I was starving... I wanted something with bite to it. I hadn't had anything like that in so long.

My impulses wanted me to burst right in there, but I couldn't. The thing that seemed most delicious in there was Lou. It was probably a trait of ghouls—if I let go of my reason for even a moment, I would, without a doubt, kill her and eat her. Incidentally, the corpses in the basement room smelled even better.

Had I been alive, I would've started crying out of sheer agony. But I didn't seem to have such faculties yet as a ghoul; all I could do was repress my emotions as much as I could so they didn't show.

As I was desperately trying to keep myself in check, the door opened from the inside. The fragrant scents exploded into me at point-blank range, sending sparks flying before my eyes.

As Lou exited, holding a tray with the food on it, she saw me—standing there right beside her like a ghost—and let out a short yelp.

A warm, delicious air touched my cheek. *I'm so hungry... No—this is bad. I should've at least hidden in another room. What on earth am I doing?!*

Lou watched me for a few moments, crept out, but eventually mumbled:

“.....What is it?”

I'm hungry; please give me food...

I resisted the painful starvation and the awful heat spreading throughout my body.

After watching me for a time, Lou seemed to realize that she needed to bring this food to the lord and set off down the hallway at a quick pace. After making sure her footsteps had quieted, I immediately entered the kitchen.

I'd made it in time. For me, right now, this place was heaven.

I could smell all sorts of foods. Meats, vegetables, spices. Was that a pantry past that door? I didn't know where the lord was getting it all, but there seemed to be a surplus.

I couldn't even think about what to grab next. I snatched up a baguette sitting on a table and, without hesitation, crunched it down. No time to savor the tastes. Only a sense of fulfillment burst within me then, and my vision whited out. Apparently, ghouls could eat things other than corpses.

From that point on, I was absorbed in one thing only: sating my hunger. I grabbed the piping-hot meat from the frying pan and ate it, then downed the uncooked meat, still dripping with blood. I took tomatoes and cabbages out of their cloth wrappings and stuffed them into my mouth raw.

As I satisfied my craving, power unlike anything I'd experienced before welled up inside me. The only thing that stopped me was when all the food in the kitchen was gone.

The hunger that had been tormenting me the entire time had utterly disappeared. And it felt wonderful.

After lapping up an unknown soup I had in my hands, I rubbed my belly, which hadn't changed at all after achieving my goal of filling myself up.

And that was when I realized: *Oh no.*

The kitchen was a mess. Cooking implements littered the floor, and plates were broken. The floor was splattered with scraps of ingredients and juices, probably because I'd stuffed it all in without thinking about it—even beasts wouldn't have made such a disaster out of things. The only saving grace was that my clothing wasn't that dirty.

And those ingredients that had been laid out before... Were they supposed to have been Lou's portion? There had been a lot of it, though, so it was possible they were for preparing the lord's next meals.

I'd eaten it all. I had no way of fooling her now.

I could clean it up; I could cook more food—but I couldn't bring it back to normal. I frantically took a swig of water from a container, then burst out of the kitchen and left before Lou returned.

Please forgive me. I'll eat outside from now on... But thank you for the food—it was delicious.

§ § §

My mutation into a ghoul wasn't all bad. In exchange for the hunger, my strength increased, and now that I'd acquired regenerative abilities, I didn't have to worry about getting hurt during my nighttime hunts.

Most of all, I was ecstatic over the two abilities I'd gained.

Sharpen Nails and Hone Fangs. All they did was extend my nails and fangs, but getting strange abilities like these was enough to make me feel somehow special.

Sharpen Nails was especially handy since it let me alter my fingertips and extend and retract my nails at will. They only reached about ten centimeters at most, but they were sharp enough to pierce the tough skin and cleave the bones of beasts, and with them, I didn't need a knife. If I tried, I could cut down

trees and even make sculptures. They were thick yet lightweight, which gave me pause, but they could maybe parry a sword. My freely extendable and retractable nails were another convenience—I didn't know how it worked exactly, but I kept them put away when I wasn't using them.

They might not have been very important abilities in the larger world of the undead, but it felt wonderful.

I would meaninglessly extend the nails to play—to train with them. I wouldn't be able to use them at will without practice. And for some reason, I could gradually extend my nails farther and farther.

Today, I was once again grinning, enjoying my new ability in the underground room, when suddenly I sensed someone approaching. My senses had been sharpened upon mutating into a ghoul. I wouldn't make any idiotic mistakes like before.

I quickly returned to my usual position, put my hands at my sides, and wore a serious expression.

As expected, Lou entered the room.

Cleaning again? What a hard worker.

In fact, she might have been visiting more frequently than the lord, even, who only came here when it was time to hunt.

As I was thinking about that, Lou, with much fear but no indecision, walked over in front of me.

Her dark eyes stared up into mine. Her dry lips hesitated, then opened.

“.....Did you...steal food?”

“.....”

...No, I didn't.

“The kitchen...was a huge mess.”

“.....”

...It wasn't me.

“Did you eat...the master's food...and mine, too?”

“.....”

I kept up my stare of feigned ignorance without looking away.

It was delicious, and I'm grateful for it.

“Are you...playing dumb?”

“?!”

I—I am not!

I was startled, but Lou's expression quickly darkened again.

“Flesh-men can't move on their own. At least...they shouldn't..... Wait.”

Lou's gaze fell to the hands at my sides—more precisely, to my fingertips.

Damn... I'd forgotten to shorten my nails. They weren't fully extended, but they were clearly longer and sharper than usual.

“.....Were your nails...always this long...?”

“.....”

Yeah, they were...

I didn't think Lou had been watching me enough to notice the length of my nails.

She didn't have any proof, though, so she left the room, her head cocked askance. After confirming she was gone, I relaxed. Putting my nails back to normal, I let out a big sigh.

I knew I was making all kinds of silly mistakes, but apparently I'd underestimated her too much.

I'd been careful up until now, but I needed to really take the caution up a few notches.

After carving those words into my mind, I decided to exercise and try to loosen up my body, which was stiff with tension.

Despite the many twists and turns, I'd avoided the worst possible outcome. On the lord's orders, I'd be going to the town of Enge with Lou on an errand. It had been a long time since I'd felt the sun, and now it stung a bit, but it felt great.

An undead's life—a life without pain—was enjoyable. Part of me wished it would go on forever, but the difficult thing was that it wouldn't.

I talked to Lou many times, but she never gave a real response. Every little thing she did spoke to her fear of me. I'd deceived her plenty of times already, so that came as no surprise, but I hadn't been tricking her because I wanted to. I was never going to disparage her or do anything like that again, so her lack of a reply left me just a little lonely.

As fellow underlings of the lord, I hoped we'd be able to get along.

I kept talking to her, even though she wasn't responding, and eventually, sounding fed up with it, she asked softly, ".....Were you...deceiving me...the entire time? So that you...could kill the master?"

"...I wasn't deceiving you."

Lou ignored me and continued, her tone accusatory. "Were you reading a book?"

".....No."

"Were you playing with the skeletons?"

".....No, I wasn't."

"...D-did you...did you mess up the k-kitchen...and eat my food...and the master's?"

".....I...I didn't eat anything."

"Rrgh..."

The terror left Lou's face for a moment as her expression changed. She seemed angry.

When I really thought about it, of course she was angry. I quickly lowered my head. "Yes, I ate it. It was...really good."

“.....I...I see...”

Lou’s clenched fists were trembling, but she managed those couple of words anyway.

It seemed she was willing to forgive me.

Maybe she figured nothing would come of yelling and shouting at me.

“.....Are you going out at night and exercising in the hall?”

“.....”

I quietly lowered my gaze. It looked like she knew everything.

It was really embarrassing, thinking I’d be able to keep it all from her. My walks after returning from hunts at night were very enjoyable, and the main hall, with its size and all the handrails to hold, was the perfect spot for a workout.

.....The nervousness about it hadn’t lasted very long. That happened, when you did the same thing every day. But I’d only exercised in the hall one time, and it wasn’t like I was going outside at all *every* day.

I shrunk away, and Lou averted her gaze before muttering, almost to herself, “You can do whatever. Just...don’t get me involved.”

“...”

“That’s...the end of the conversation. What we need to do...is finish our job...quickly...and head back.”

Lou’s voice was frail, but it had a note of stubbornness to it.

Well, I wasn’t rebelling because I *wanted* to. And I did think that if I had safety and freedom, I wouldn’t mind remaining under the lord forever.

But unfortunately, there was no outcome where she and I could coexist. I was too wicked. I wanted to survive at any cost, but I didn’t have a normal future ahead of me—far from it.

Necromancers were detested by all who existed, and they had far too many enemies. If his existence was revealed, nations and towns would send hunting

teams after him, and he could potentially lose if he was to fight another necromancer.

Above all...there were the Ender Knights. The disciples of the light, the band of heroes—those who obliterated the darkness. They were the oldest, most ancient of humankind's guardians and the mortal enemy of necromancers. I'd never met any, of course, but their relentless fighting style was said to be like heavenly judgment itself.

And if Hak's information was correct, they would already be a stone's throw away.

The encyclopedia I'd read had made sure to include a section on the Knights as well.

The positive energy wielded by the Ender Knights is the polar opposite of the power possessed by the undead. In exchange for their power, undead created by necromancers have many weaknesses, and one could call the energy enveloping the Ender Knights the greatest among them. It fills up any undead's abyss, purifying corrupted souls extremely efficiently.

I was probably an outlier. I'd never heard of an undead who had kept memories from their previous life.

What would the Ender Knights think if they knew I existed? Would they decide I was pitiful and therefore overlook me?

I wanted to believe that. I wanted someone to save me. They were heroes—messengers of justice. Even if I was an undead on the outside, I was human on the inside, and it wasn't my fault I'd turned into an undead.

It was a temptation that was hard to fight against.

But at the same time, I knew it was impossible.

I looked at Horos's miserable slave.

If she asked the Ender Knights for help, they would most likely save her. She was just Horos's servant, and if she was to bring them information on him

(though the slave collar would put her in intense pain for it), they were sure to treat her warmly.

Me, however, they would not save. I was too dangerous now. While I was harmless on my own, the existence of a humanlike undead with memories from his past life would wreak chaos throughout the world.

Even if they learned of my situation and knew it was true, they wouldn't hesitate to kill me. Because as long as something was an act of justice, they'd have no reason not to carry it out.

Reborn as an undead, I no longer had any allies.

That was a very sad truth, even though I had predicted it some time ago.

The lord who created me, the Ender Knights who were humankind's protectors, and most likely my family from my past life—they all would silence my will, my volition, and trample on it.

But the tears wouldn't flow. Not because I was undead—but because I was already prepared to keep on living in solitude.

I looked at Lou, who was so scared of the shadow of her master.

Even a lonely life was far better than dying alone, unable to do anything about it.

I would clear the frustrations of my old life. There were so many things I wanted to do. I wanted to go around and see the rare things, the entertaining things in the world, and ultimately die with a smile, knowing that my life had been a fun one.

Why else would I have been brought back to life—and through wicked mystical arts, at that?

Giving a little smile, I said softly, "Yeah... Let's finish up and get back. Before the lord grows impatient."

BONUS SHORT STORY II

The Melancholy of Lou Doles



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The Melancholy of Lou Doles

Looking back, Lou Doles's life had always been in darkness.

Her birthplace no longer existed. Apparently, it had been engulfed by the flames of war and destroyed, but she'd never learned the details.

She didn't know what her parents looked like, either. The earliest thing she could remember was being all alone in the world—as a slave.

There had been many like her, and she'd probably been lucky to have survived at all.

Or maybe she would have been happier to die ignorant. Still, the first people who had taken her in had been merchants, and it was at least fortunate that she was able to learn some things from them.

That had probably been the highlight of her life. Lou was a commodity to be sold. And to sell her for a higher price, they'd made her learn many subjects, starting with reading, writing, and household chores. Almost no freedom had been afforded to her, but she'd been treated rather decently for a slave.

And then, through a series of events, she passed through many people's hands, eventually coming to Horos Kamen.

She didn't actually remember much of the time right after she'd been sold. Her instincts had probably refused to let the memories stay.

The dense presence of death had made her emaciated, and working far from human settlements had driven her to loneliness. The only silver lining was that Horos didn't see her as anything but a slave. If he'd actually treated her like a test subject, the hell awaiting her would have been even worse. And the chances of that had certainly not been low.

Lou obeyed orders without thought. That was her sole responsibility. Sometimes she assisted with forbidden experiments, and other times she went to dispose of corpses.

The necromancer Horos Kamen was a fearsome man. He proved his darkness in every facet of his life. Many a knight, mercenary, and sorcerer had attempted to slay him, but he had bested each one. Lou had witnessed the creation of wicked monsters several times as well. Horos was the strongest of all.

No matter how many years passed, Lou never got used to the lord's dark powers.

She had, most likely, been no more than a mediocre person. She could neither go forward with her life nor run away.

She was altogether powerless. And she never grew one bit, whether from lack of nutrition or because she lived in darkness for so long.

After a time, Lou had stopped letting the painful emotions show on her face. It was her method of self-defense. But that obviously didn't mean she'd stopped feeling them.

If anyone was to learn about her situation, they wouldn't sympathize with her. Whatever the reason, she was now allied with an enemy of the world, and that made her the very same.

She'd had a vague sense that a miserable fate awaited her. She was constantly terrified of death.

She'd committed crimes. Already, her soul was thoroughly corrupt. However she died, it wouldn't be pleasant.

...And the end had come quickly and easily.

The catalyst had probably been that terrible ghoul. She'd seen many undead that Horos had created in the past, but that ghoul was clearly not normal. He had intelligence. He had the ability to reason. And he was calm.

He was too human. He'd used Lou to try to destroy Horos, their master.

He'd evoked fear. But everything was over and done with now.

Lou's end had been much, much more normal than she'd imagined it.

A silver arrow had pierced her chest, and all strength had left her body. There had been no pain.

The last thing she'd seen was the face of the beautiful Ender Knight who had tried to save her.

Lou could see a prayer for her in the girl's expression.

And she could say, for certain, that she had held no grudge toward the Knight.

Lou, who had known about the Ender Knights, forgot her fear in that moment—it had been a long time since she hadn't been afraid—and felt at peace.

Which was why Lou was quite surprised when she found herself looking down at her own corpse.

Her body was very light—probably because she'd been released from the confines of her flesh. She glanced down and saw she was transparent, wearing a loose, white dress she'd never worn before. She could soar into the air just by thinking and pass through walls and floors.

It all made her feel strangely cheerful.

Lou had a certain degree of undead knowledge, having served as Horos's slave and listening to his mutterings for so many years.

The souls of the dead who harbored powerful grudges would turn into wraiths if they were corrupted by a necromancer, and if they bore other regrets from life, they would become ghosts. Lou didn't remember Horos ever casting any magic on her, so she must have been the latter. Her appearance made perfect sense in that light.

But why...? I don't have any regrets.

As she floated down the thoroughly familiar hallway, mulling it over, she noticed that the hallway, which had been so dark she couldn't properly walk in it without a light, now appeared to be bright as day.

Ghosts were extremely weak undead beings. Even necromancers couldn't see them without using magic. She probably wouldn't have to worry about Horos Kamen finding her.

She thought about it. If there was any lingering regret within her that she herself hadn't realized, it was probably that she wanted to see what became of the Ender Knights who had killed her.

For a moment, she hesitated, but she was already dead. There was nothing else she needed to fear at this point.

With a twirling flutter of her dress, Lou flew, as though sliding, in the direction the Knights were headed—to the hall in which Horos Kamen waited.

That which was occurring in the hall was a battle unlike any Lou had ever seen.

The Ender Knights boasted even more strength than she'd expected. All of those who had attacked Horos in the past had been victims of overwhelming defeat, but this fight was on a different level entirely.

The Knights' power was *real* power. And Horos was serious as well. This undead creature he controlled—a wicked black dragon—was stronger than any Lou had seen, and light burned it away, over and over again.

In a stroke of poor luck, the dragon's breath passed right by where Lou was as she watched the battle.

She yelped reflexively but felt neither pain nor heat. She quickly checked herself over, but her dress didn't have a single tear. That was when she finally came to the realization.

Unlike wraiths, who had power, ghosts had extremely scant ability to interfere with the world. That basically meant she wouldn't be affected *by* the world, either. Neither the Ender Knights nor Horos seemed to realize she was there.

After that, she felt like she was watching a play.

Lou cheered on the Knights with a passion in her voice she hadn't experienced in so long.

Lou didn't resent Horos, but that was because she'd lost all her will to rebel after so many years living with him—she certainly wasn't obeying him because she liked to. She didn't have a duty to support him even after her release.

The battle looked to be a draw. Horos was destroyed many times, but each time, he came back to life. But the Ender Knights weren't backing down, either. A ribbon of light that glowed like the sun mowed through the dragon and incinerated Horos.

And then, Lou noticed something.

She couldn't see that ghoul, End, anywhere. Had he still not returned?

He was smart, so maybe he was waiting for the Ender Knights to exhaust themselves.

She doubted he'd already been destroyed. Despite being a newborn, he had tricked the cunning Horos Kamen and even launched a surprise attack on him. And he had guts.

Lou thought End was a frightful man, but she didn't harbor a grudge against him. She had hated him, once, but that was in the past. And unlike Horos, he'd never threatened her.

At the end, they'd even made a promise. She was uneasy thinking about whether he'd keep it, but it *had* given her a tiny bit of hope in those few days after they'd made it.

And then, after thinking it through as she floated lazily in the air, her eyes flew open.

Wait. Now that she was a ghost, she *could* check to see if he carried through on his promise. Maybe that was why she'd turned into a ghost—because her heart still had one regret. But she hadn't turned into a wraith.

Lou was sure that, after all this was over, her soul would be called to heaven.

She wasn't afraid of it. If he didn't make her a grave, she'd come back to haunt him—that was how calm she was, to be able to consider such things.

The dragon's roar and Horos's angry shouts reverberated. Then, there was a flash of light.

The mansion that Lou had maintained for so long—that had entrapped her for ages—was collapsing.

She watched it fall to ruin, feeling her chest tighten.

The battle ended shockingly easily.

Horos, who Lou had always feared, that person she had thought invincible, that sorcerer who had obliterated numerous enemies in the past, was wiped out at the hands of the Ender Knights.

It was the result of a fierce contest, of course. The Knights' faces had looked just as desperate as Horos's had, and by the time the fight was over, the sun—which had been directly overhead before—was now well on its way to sinking below the horizon.

The winners were utterly exhausted, too. And yet the death of Horos, that absolute existence, came as a shock to Lou.

She couldn't even move. When she'd finally come to, the Knights had already left.

Lou knew how much Horos had toiled for this ritual. She didn't know what it was for, but he'd put almost all of his funds and time into it.

But now not even a scrap remained of Horos, the one who, even from an outsider's point of view, had harbored such a deep, powerful tenacity.

It seemed unlikely he'd become a ghost like Lou. Was that because the Knights had destroyed him? The air drifting toward her from the hall, which had always been so muddy and cloudy, seemed somehow pure now.

Perhaps this was what people meant when they claimed that even the prosperous inevitably decayed.

Either way, there was no doubt Horos had perished.

Now there was no more chance of Lou's soul being bound again.

With that strange feeling of floating off the ground, she flew toward her corpse.

§ § §

"I'll make you a grave."

That monster had said it with a somehow somber expression.

“I promise you. The lord would never bury you if you died, so I promise I’ll make you a grave and bury you so that you can rest in peace. I’ll make sure he doesn’t try to control you with necromancy—if I’m still alive, that is.”

End was a good actor. He’d deceived Horos once, and it had even gotten Lou herself punished.

But there was something in those words she felt she could trust. The look on his face didn’t seem like it was lying.

Maybe it was just because Lou *wanted* to believe him, but before realizing it, she’d already agreed. That was when she finally came to fear not her own death, but for the first time, what would come after.

She’d gotten a paper and pen, like End had asked. They’d been easy to find. Her master wasn’t interested in anything but his research, and Lou had permission to go in any of the other rooms besides his laboratory. She used a pen and paper to make orders for food, too, so they’d been well within reach. She hadn’t been able to get End to tell her what he’d use them for, but he seemed to like reading, so maybe he was going to use them to study or something.

In any case, she’d collected the items, which meant it was time for End to keep up his end of the promise.

He wouldn’t be able to if he’d been purified, of course, but she’d deal with that if it turned out to be true.

When she thought about it now, though her vision had been clouded by all the terror, that ghoul’s situation was just as miserable as Lou’s own. In fact, his might have been worse, given that his soul had been toyed with after his death.

Lou’s corpse was where it had been before. But it was buried under rubble, most likely knocked over by the evil dragon’s breath, and she could only see a little bit of her white skin.

Horos’s mansion was fairly large, and it was all a wreck now, so it would probably be difficult to find her.

That wasn’t good. At this rate, her body would be abandoned here, and she’d rot away without anyone ever knowing.

Being buried in a grave was a dream within a dream. She hastily reached out to move the rubble, but her fingertips passed right through it without catching on anything.

She wondered if there was any way she could give End a sign, but she couldn't come up with anything. There wasn't anything a mere soul like her could do. Her presence was probably even thinner than the air itself.

What would happen to her if she wasn't buried?

For now, she didn't feel any pain, but she couldn't quite tell, since she'd only just become a ghost.

At a loss, she suddenly spotted a familiar figure in the direction of the forest.

Unconsciously, her face softened, something it hadn't done in a long time.

It was End. He'd survived. Her master had died, yet End didn't have a scratch on him, and he was approaching the mansion's remains.

What tenacity—what shrewdness.

That jet-black cloak was what he'd worn when they'd gone to the town together. He didn't look like much of an undead, walking so calmly under the sunlight like that.

Lou had gotten used to floating. She gently glided over to his side.

He must not have been able to see her after all. Even if she went in front of him, he never looked her way.

But he was coming to the aftermath of destruction. It could have only been for one reason.

“Over there! My body is over there!” she cried, knowing that her voice would be unheard and that her pointing would be unseen.

End strode purposefully toward Lou's corpse, eyes darting around the ruins.

“...I can smell it from this direction.”

“?! No, it doesn't! It doesn't smell at all!”

After saying things that made Lou extremely displeased, End arrived next to the corpse.

He easily lifted a huge mound of rubble with his slender arms and dug out Lou's body.

Now that she could see her corpse in the sunlight, it looked like she was sleeping peacefully. The corpse was almost unharmed, too, despite being buried under debris, and even the silver arrow sticking out of her chest that had killed her gave off a somehow mystical air.

End looked down at her body silently for a few moments, then said, in a voice full of deep compassion, "As promised...I'll make you a grave. And I'll even pray for you, so you can rest in peace. See? It was a good thing you made that pact with me."

"....." Her words caught in her throat. And then the emotions she'd been holding in this entire time came flowing out.

Wiping her tears, Lou simply nodded several times, filled with gratitude.

She felt deeply fulfilled for the first time in a long while. End's hands were precise from start to finish, with consideration for the deceased girl, making that unease she'd felt right after the promise seem like a lie. As it did to the fear she held for him in the past.

"Sorry about this. I don't really know the proper way to bury people... I was buried once myself, but I don't remember it. Oh—I should take this off."

"It's okay... Thank...you... Thank you!"

Lou had never expected she'd be laid to rest in an actual grave.

End pulled the arrow out, unheeding of the damage it did to his own body, wiped off the dirt, and even removed the slave collar for her. And then he put a flower there, too, even though it was just something that had been growing nearby.

The gesture alone was enough for Lou. She cried and couldn't stop.

After his final good-bye, End buried her body deep in the earth.

Lou was satisfied. The promise had been kept. She had no more regrets.

For the first time, she gazed into End's face without fear.

His face looked young—much younger than Lou had ever seen it before.

He had uncommonly white hair and dark eyes. He wore a plain black cloak, which had belonged to Horos, but he was still distinctively End. He was probably only in his midteens—certainly younger than Lou, at least, who was twenty.

What would he do now?

End was her savior. Considering all that had transpired, she wouldn't need to worry, but she felt a little bit anxious.

End had returned in spite of the dangers to fulfill his promise. He'd prayed for Lou. In that case, Lou would pray for him from the heavens, for his future, which was sure to be full of ups and downs.

End briefly gazed at the spot where Lou was buried, then went back to the mansion and brought a large stone.

Did he mean for it to be a gravestone? His spelling was a little off, but he did carve Lou's name into it.

“That’s...enough. Thank you... Please, run away...”

Lou was certainly happy about it, but if he stayed too long, the Ender Knights might return to take care of any unfinished business. The chances were slim, but if End was discovered, he would be in big trouble. And she would have a new regret.

Unaware that Lou was watching with suspense, End frowned. He tilted his head to the side and muttered, “...Looks lonely with just the first name.”

“?!”

Huh? ...Wait—hold on!

The unexpected event bewildered Lou, and she panicked.

She'd never told him her last name.

End affixed a name to the gravestone. It was a last name but not one Lou had ever heard before.

“No! That’s not the right name! It’s not my name! Whose name even is that?! How dare you look pleased with yourself—”

Unfortunately, End couldn't see her red-faced, jumping around, complaining to him.

Sure, she hadn't made any detailed requests when they made the promise, but he'd carved some random name just because the grave "looked lonely"! Where was his common sense? She needed to know what that name was, or else she'd never rest in peace.

Ignorant of her, End offered a reverent prayer.

A few moments ago, Lou would have broken into tears, moved at the sight, but now that an unknown last name had been added to her makeshift headstone, the only things coming out of her mouth were objections.

Her name was one of the very few things Lou had ever owned.

"Put it back! Fix it! Why did you have to go and do that?! Stop! Who are you praying to?!"

Speeding around and around, she flew at End, but like before, she felt nothing in response.

Right now, in this moment, Lou wanted so badly to come back to life and complain to him.

Now she knew that he was careful and considerate but had an age-appropriate sloppiness only when it came to odd things.

She'd always vaguely recognized as much from the very beginning.

His conversation with Senli, the young woman from the Ender Knights, utterly aggravated Lou.

Lou had been surprised when Senli had suddenly returned and spoken to End, but her anxiety had already dissipated. All she could do was desperately make retorts.

"Were you...her friend?"

"No... We were...family."

"No, we're not!!"

What was this man even saying?

Lou clenched her teeth, but her words would no longer reach him.

The two of them had eventually managed to compromise, but she had always feared End, and he had tried to use her for his own means. Her feelings for him were a little different again now that he'd kept his promise, but at the very least, their relationship hadn't even been a friendly one, much less a familial one.

End would have known that, too, but he was putting on such an overblown act that you had to laugh at it. Plus, the Ender Knight lady, who appeared somehow unsophisticated, seemed to buy it hook, line, and sinker.

“Stop it! Don’t make up strange stories about me!”

It really got on her nerves that she hadn't cared about any of this in life. She raised her voice in emotion for the first time in a long while.

“But now she's finally at peace. She wouldn't have had any future, even if she'd stayed Horos's slave. Deep down, she wished for death. I didn't have it in me to save her. You and your friends did, Senli.”

“I am *not* at peace! I can't rest in peace unless you put the name on the gravestone back the way it was! Stop making this into some heartwarming story!”

“Sure is inconvenient having an undead body at a time like this. I feel so sad, but I can't cry.”

“Give me a break! You've never been sad in your life! Hey! Senli, not you, too! Don't let his blatant lies play with your emotions!”

It had been surprising to learn that End still had the memories from his life.

But he was still an impostor, after all. And he'd been the one who had summoned the Ender Knights. In other words, everything about this situation was all his fault.

“Lou helped me. Horos Kamen was plotting to conduct a terrible ritual. If it went much longer, he may have commanded me to attack the living. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. It was good luck that you and the Ender Knights had come to a nearby town. I retained my humanity thanks to that.”

“I didn’t know about it! I didn’t help you willingly! Stop trying to tie a neat little bow on what happened!”

She didn’t resent having died. It had been a long time since she’d last shouted like this. It was much more comfortable now than her life had been, but that was another matter entirely.

End was a monster, through and through. He’d deceived not only Lou but even Horos.

If he still had his memories from when he was human, he must have been like that when he was alive, too.

“Senli, don’t let him trick you! He’s a scoundrel!”

“Fortunately, nobody lives in this forest. I plan to carry out the rest of my life in peace, watching over Lou’s grave. I can hunt animals for food, so that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“That’s not your plan at all! You made such a show out of sucking the blood off your fingers right in front of me!”

“Thank goodness... I’m sure Lou is happy, too.”

“Well, I’m *not*!”

Alas, she’d never thought her voice going unheard, or having a body without flesh, could be this irritating.

Her desperate objections fell on deaf ears, and eventually Senli left. End resumed his tasks not a moment later.

He went back to the ruins of the mansion, found a bag in the rubble, then filled it with various things.

Lou was baffled. He’d been so shameless, and now he was going to break his promise with Senli and run away. His movements weren’t hesitant. It was so sudden it was almost refreshing. There wasn’t a trace of wickedness on his face.

“At least fix my grave before you leave! Keep your promise! Whose last name is that supposed to be anyway?!”

What happened after that was a tumultuous series of events. She had certainly predicted that such things would happen to this boy, but not to this extent.

Horos Kamen had revived (albeit as a wraith) and tried to possess End.

And just when she thought End had fought the threat off, this time the Ender Knights arrived.

Forgetting her earlier anger, she watched End's battle, flustered all the while.

She couldn't deny being mad that he'd done something strange to her grave, but she didn't want him to *die*.

It seemed End had a much odder fate in store for him than Lou.

"You can do it! I believe in you!"

She thought she would pass out when she saw him reduced to just a head. It was a far grislier manner of death than her own. Perhaps he was an intolerable undead, but he couldn't have had committed crimes worthy of all this being done to him.

She'd tried lying over her buried corpse to test whether she could make it come back to life, but it unfortunately didn't work.

All Lou could do was encourage him in her voice that he would never hear.

Lou was relieved when Senli returned, and when the young woman offered him her neck, Lou couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Don't you think it'd be better to just quit while you're ahead? You're definitely gonna get killed."

Without a mind for Lou's worries, End advanced even farther.

He risked his life, detested by all, and still never stopped. He went to where the Ender Knights were and blustered. His voice was unhesitant, but even the timid Lou could see he was scared.

And yet—he had an amazing power of will. To plunge on even through terror, in situations where anything could happen, and he would die... His survival

instincts certainly didn't seem like the kind an undead would have.

Lou now had a small regret.

She wondered if the world was really wonderful enough to want to survive. She wished she'd tried just a little harder. The vitality in End's actions was enough to make her think that way.

But it was all over now. Even End had an ally. She didn't know what would happen going forward, but if End had Senli—the one who had tried to save Lou from the brink of death—by his side, things would be fine.

Part of her wanted to watch them a little longer, but as a ghost, she couldn't do anything for them. The whole situation with her grave was a shame, but... she couldn't do much about that, either. Lou had died. She couldn't remain in this world forever.

She returned to the forest, then floated around in front of End again.

She said her farewell. Her voice was trembling.

“Thank you. I'll...be cheering you on. Good-bye.”

Lou reached out a hand and touched his cheek. She didn't feel anything, and End wasn't looking at her, but it was enough.

And then, with a single, peaceful smile, Lou turned and climbed her way toward the glowing moon.

May this miserable undead's future be a happy one.

§ § §

“...Um. I've been waiting and waiting, but I'm still here... Now what?”

End didn't answer her quivering voice. He had no reason to—he couldn't hear it.

More and more at a loss, Lou flew behind End and Senli. Her spectral body didn't know physical exhaustion, but her mind wore out all the more for it instead.

In the end, no matter how far she flew, she was never able to disappear. But that wasn't the main issue.

Tears in her eyes, Lou waved her hand in front of End's face—he looked like he was plotting something sinister—and said:

“...You're dragging me with you. Did you...? Hey, did you do something to me?”

It seemed the melancholy of Lou Doles would continue for at least a little while longer.

Afterword

To my new readers, it's a pleasure to meet you—and to everyone else, I'm honored we could meet again. I'm Tsukikage.

Thank you for purchasing my work. It is a book about the undead, with a somewhat dark atmosphere. The protagonist dies from an incurable illness only to be revived by an evil sorcerer's power, and the plot involves him trying to survive in his second life at all costs. He just wants to survive, and yet the whole world is trying to kill him. Ordinarily, it would have turned gloomy, but the main character has a rather easygoing side, so it didn't turn out *that* dark. Even if you're not a horror fan, by all means, give this book a try!

As a personal aside, I've always wanted to try getting into undead-type books, so it was a lot of fun to write this. I hope you enjoy the gorgeous illustrations that Merontomari did—they fit the mood perfectly!

Finally, I'd like to end this with some acknowledgments.

Thank you to Merontomari, the illustrator of this series. I still remember the impact I felt when I first saw the artwork. End, Senli, Lou, the lord—I like them all. I intend to do my best to write material suitable for these illustrations, and I look forward to collaborating with you on this series going forward. Thank you to Wada, the head editor who worked so hard to get this published, along with everyone at the Famitsu Bunko editing department. This little story of mine saw the light of day only because of your combined efforts. I'll be putting my all into my writing in the future, so I hope to count on your support. And most of all, to the readers who have been cheering me on for so long, plus everyone who picked the book off the shelves to read—allow me to use this space to extend my deepest gratitude. Thank you so much!

■NEXT TIME:

After End's narrow escape from the Ender Knights, new difficulties stand in his way!

"End—you must woo that Ender Knight and make her your ally! There is no other path to survival! But not to worry—with my historied romance techniques, it shall be an easy task!"

Senli has absolutely no interest in romance, and End is terrible at it.

Frazzled amid this unfamiliar territory, End finds himself tormented by the lord's illusion, the ghost of Lou, the ever-strict stepfather turned assassin Epe, and Senli's kindly words!

"Go, End! You must be bolder! Fool! Show her what a man you are! Young men these days are so timid. Why, back in my day—"

"...Frankly, you don't know the first thing about a woman's heart."

"End, I just can't give Senli to a jobless man like you. Now perish."

"I'm sorry. I just can't see you like that right now. I can't even consider it."

Will End ever be able to woo Senli successfully?! Stay tuned!

Note: Actual contents may differ from this preview.



Tsukikage!
Esteemed editor!
And all readers!

Thank you so much!!

**I had a great time
illustrating this novel! ♪**

**My favorite character happens
to be Hak!! He's so cute.**

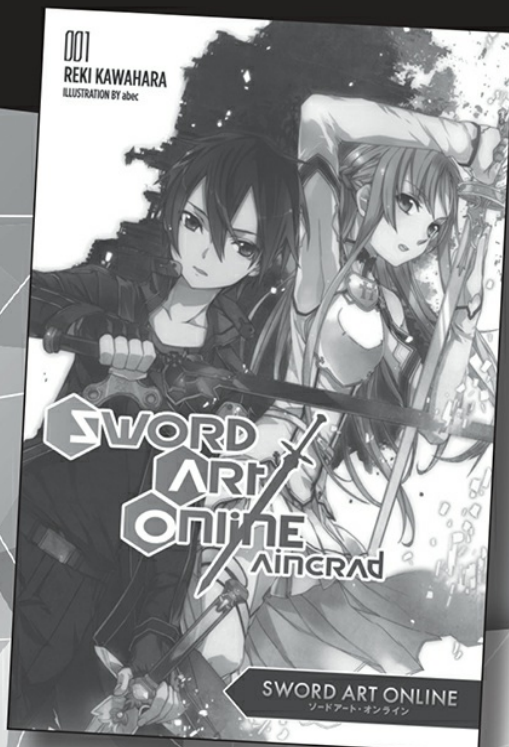



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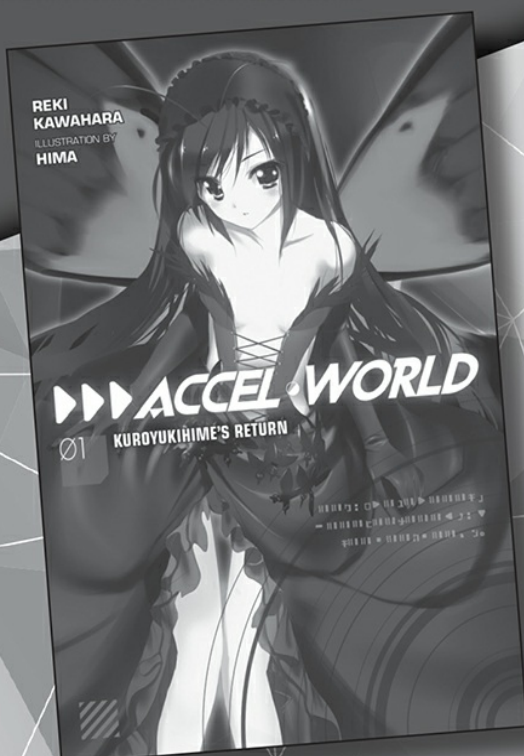
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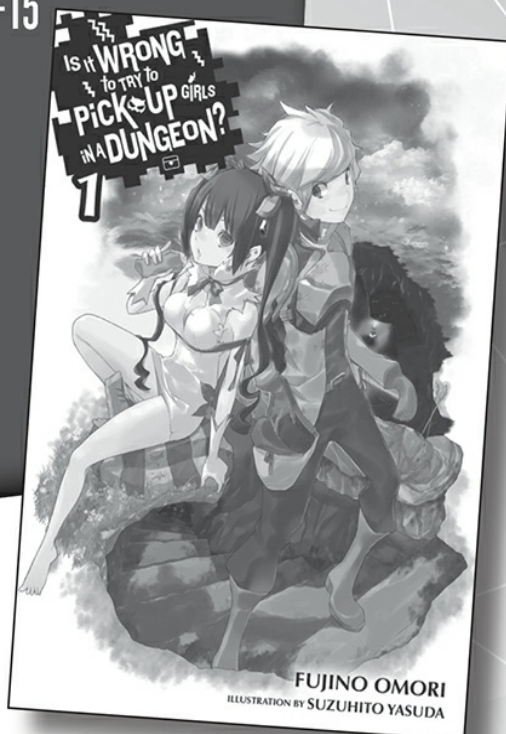
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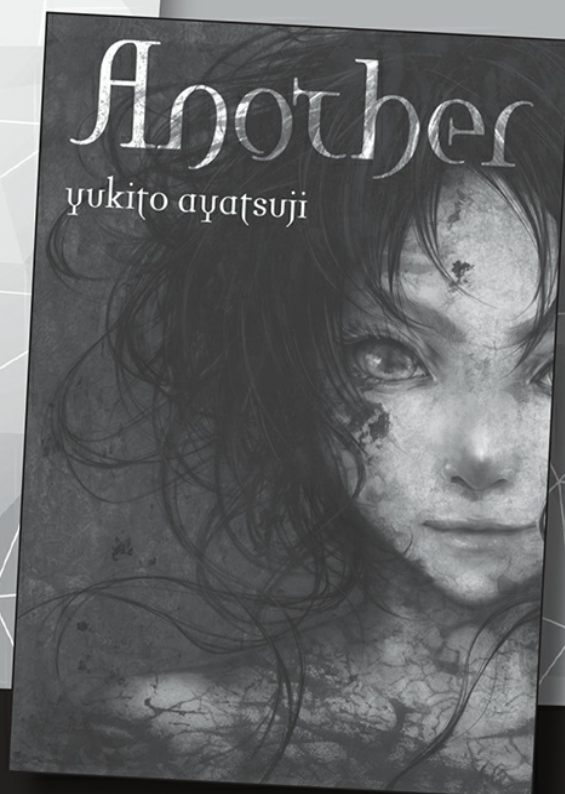
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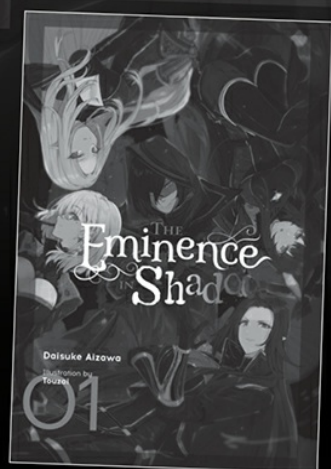
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