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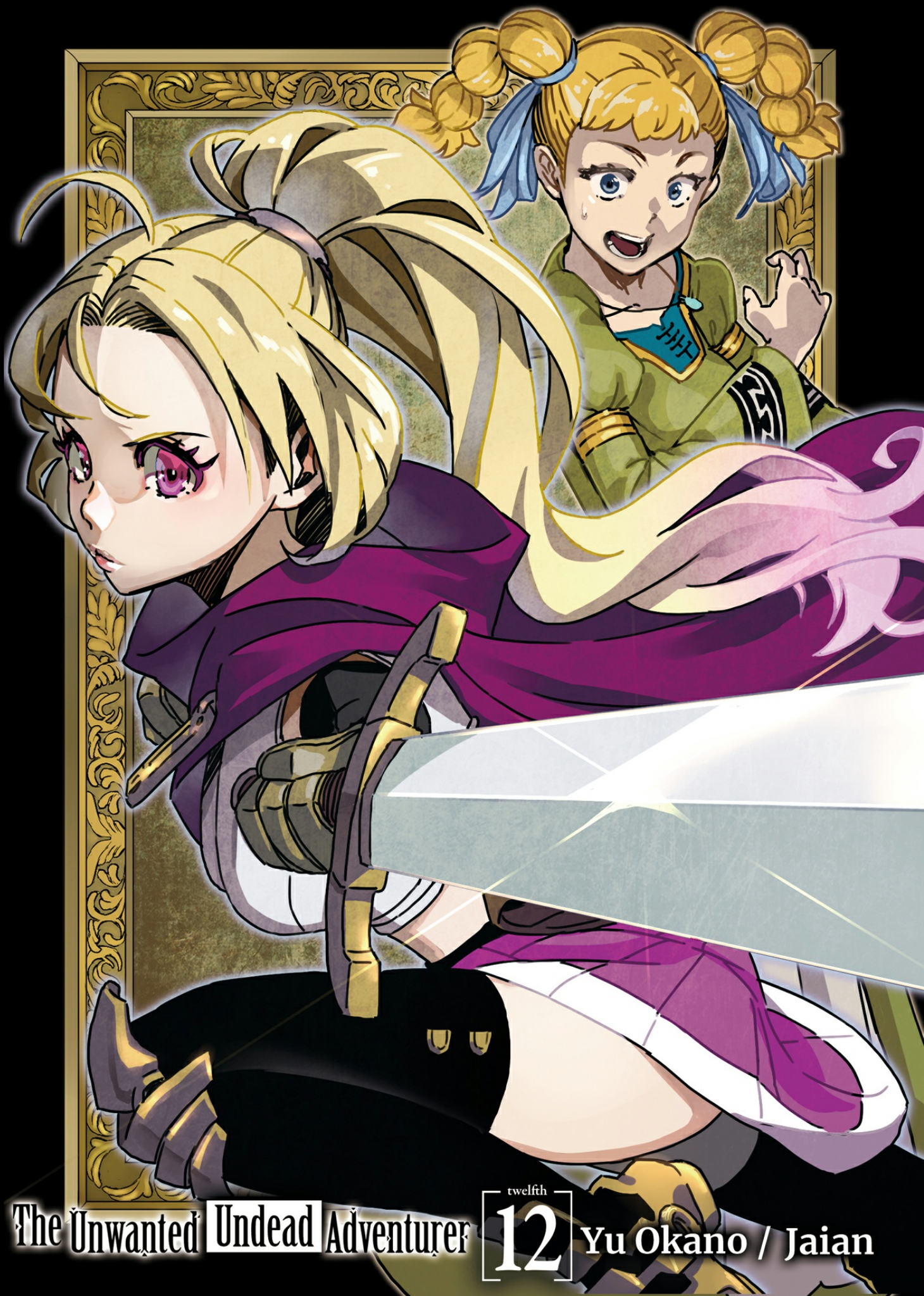
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Author  
Yu Okano  
Illustrator  
Jaian

# The Unwanted Undead Adventurer







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12

Yu Okano / Jaian





“You look  
like you’re  
the leader of  
this lot.”

—A battle in the dead of night.

A character with short blonde hair and red eyes, wearing a purple cloak and armor, is shown in a dynamic pose. The character is looking towards the right with a slight smile. The background is dark with some light rays. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“Do your job  
properly now, okay?  
I’m expecting big  
things from you.”



twelfth  
**12**

# The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

**Author** Yu Okano

**Illustrator** Jaian





## Characters



**Sheila Ibarss**

A guild receptionist.  
Privy to Rentt's secret.



**Lorraine Vivie**

A scholar and Silver-class  
adventurer. Assists Rentt in his  
undead endeavors.



**Rentt Faina**

An adventurer striving to  
reach Mithril-class. Turned  
undead after falling prey to a  
dragon in the dungeon.



**Edel**

A monster called a puchi suri  
who lived under an orphanage.  
Became Rentt's familiar after  
drinking his blood.



**Alize**

A girl living in the orphanage.  
Dreams of becoming an  
adventurer. Apprenticing  
under Rentt and Lorraine.



**Rina Rupaage**

A novice adventurer who helped  
Rentt and dragged him to town  
after he became a ghoul. Now  
Rentt's vampiric servant.



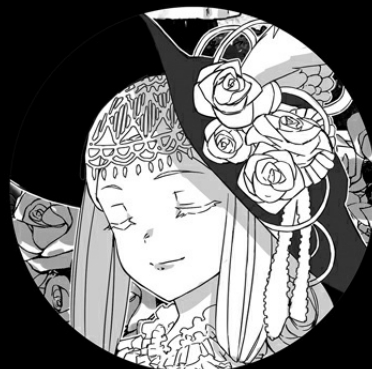
**Wolf Hermann**

The Maalt guildmaster.  
Recruited Rentt to his guild.



**Isaac Hart**

Serves the Latuule family.  
Powerful enough to conquer  
the Tarasque Swamp.



**Laura Latuule**

The head of the Latuule  
family. She collects magic  
items as a hobby. She  
requested that Rentt  
periodically deliver dragon  
blood blossoms to her.





### Nive Maris

A Gold-class adventurer and vampire hunter. The closest adventurer to reaching Platinum-class.



### Gharb Faina

Rentt's great-aunt, a medicine woman, and a mage.



### Capitan

Chief hunter in the village of Hathara. Expert spirit user.



### Wilfried Rucker

A Mithril-class adventurer who wields a giant sword. Helped Rentt when he was young.



### Jinlin

Rentt's childhood friend who dreamed of becoming an adventurer. Killed by a wolf.



### Myullias Raiza

A saint in the Church of Lobelia blessed by the spirits. Can manipulate divinity, and specializes in healing and purification.

### Summary

Rentt, an adventurer stuck in Bronze-class, turned undead after he was eaten by a dragon. He eventually evolved into a ghoul and, with Rina's help, sought shelter with Lorraine in the city of Maalt. After meeting Jean Seebeck, the Grand Guildmaster, in the royal capital, Rentt heads for Maalt with him in tow. Meanwhile, back in Maalt, Rina, who has no confidence in herself despite her diligent training, accepts a solo commission at Isaac's suggestion...



# [ C O N T E N T S ]

Chapter 1: An Increase in Saints and the Return to Maalt

Chapter 2: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 1

Intermission: Lorraine's Choice

Chapter 3: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 2

Chapter 4: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 3

Chapter 5: Maalt, Sweet Maalt, and a Visit to the Blacksmith

Chapter 6: A Certain Request





# Chapter 1: An Increase in Saints and the Return to Maalt

Lorraine and I weren't particularly surprised by Elza's proclamation. After all, divinity was pretty much the only factor that Lorraine, Elza, Lillian, and I had in common.

The issue, however, was how we should respond. Not that it was *that* much of an issue, really—possessing divinity didn't have to be any kind of big secret. We could just be straight with her.

Divinity wielders were rare, of course, and hardly the kind of people you bumped into on a regular basis when strolling through a city's streets. Still, the fact that a bronze-piece-a-dozen low-rank adventurer like me actually had the blessing of divinity—even if it was extremely weak—was proof enough that it was well within the realm of possibility for a real nobody to possess it.

So why had I purposefully been evasive with Elza, you ask? Well, that was because I was afraid I'd be exposed as a monster.

I couldn't ignore the very real chance that I would be found out, no matter how small that chance might be. There was also the danger that someone would assume I could hear Pochi talk because we were *both* monsters—Sister Mel had thought that he was one, after all. But since that didn't seem to be the case, being honest probably wouldn't be an issue.

Speaking as an adventurer, though, I still wanted to keep my divinity under wraps as much as possible. It was a power that could become my secret trump card one day—but on the other hand, it wasn't as if there weren't already a decent number of people in Maalt who knew. I mean, *I* had been the one to tell those people to begin with, since I'd figured at the time that my dregs of divinity would never rise to that level. But my hypocrisy aside...

"Yeah, I have divinity," I said. "A long time ago I repaired an abandoned shrine near my hometown, and the divine spirit that dwelled within it blessed me—

probably on a whim. It's not really anything to boast about."

My divinity *had* grown to the point where I could wield it in combat, but I figured there was no particular need to give out that information.

"Very interesting," Elza said. "Lillian and I received ours from Pochi. Although I imagine you'd already guessed that, considering that the same thing just happened to Mel."

She didn't seem especially surprised that I possessed divinity—a reaction I owed to divinity's general reputation. It wasn't as though having it was bad in any way.

Being found out as a monster, however, would be a totally different story—albeit a very *short* story that ended in a swift execution.

"My thoughts *did* go in that direction, yeah..." I said. "But why did you and Lillian receive yours as children and Mel only a short time ago? Is divinity really something that can just be handed out so freely?"

Lorraine and I had received our own divinity on a whim too, but we could save my concerns about that for another time. Since it looked as though Pochi had blessed Mel because Elza had requested it, that would imply that Elza was able to bestow divinity unto anybody she pleased—and that was *definitely* a big deal. I, at least, had never heard of anything like that happening before.

My conjecture, however, was soon overturned.

"No, Pochi had been planning to bless Mel all along," Elza explained. "Lillian and I were actually secondary, or something like that. However, after Pochi blessed us and we started to understand him, he told us to protect Mel. We didn't understand what he meant by that at the time, but once Lillian and I started receiving invitation after invitation from various religious organizations, the meaning quickly became clear. Did the same not happen to you, Rentt?"

"No, not really," I replied. "I was probably spared that because of where I lived."

In short, unlike monsters, who were discriminated against and hunted down, divinity wielders were coveted by religious organizations in general. Any unaffiliated wielders would be hounded by recruiters as a result. In my case, my



divinity was awfully weak, and while I'd had no problem talking about it, the subject only ever came up in certain situations, like when someone asked me what I was doing when I purified water. The knowledge that I could use it just hadn't really spread around.

Of course, there was also the undeniable and sad truth—since I'd been a solo adventurer at the time, I just hadn't had any friends to talk to anyway...

Normally, however, if it came out that you could use divinity, you'd experience exactly what Elza and Lillian had gone through.

Another major reason that hadn't happened to me was probably because Maalt wasn't a particularly active hub for religious groups. If you squinted, you could maybe say that the Church of the Eastern Sky was *kind* of active there, but that was about it. Because of Maalt's location out on the frontier and various other factors, the people there cared more about improving their own capabilities than they did about religion.

But here in the royal capital, things were different. The Church of Lobelia being very in-your-face was one example of just how different it was, but even the Church of the Eastern Sky here was far more pushy than it was out in Maalt.

If word got out that you were a divinity wielder, you'd practically be drowning in overzealous recruiters.

"There was quite a big fuss around Lillian and me," Elza said. "But since we were here at this Church of the Eastern Sky orphanage, the director at the time protected us...for a while. Eventually, that became difficult, and the director advised us to decide the shape of our own faith by picking an organization to join. After that, Lillian and I both joined the Church of the Eastern Sky."

If they had become adventurers, they would have been able to travel the world and leave such bothersome complications behind. But I figured that both Elza and Lillian were the type to cherish the connections they had made, such as the one they had to this orphanage. Cutting ties and leaving it behind had probably been impossible for them—and maybe the orphanage director had recognized that too. Since Pochi had asked them to protect Mel, they couldn't have gone far from the orphanage anyway.

Given that, joining the ranks of the Church of the Eastern Sky had likely been

their best option. Its teachings were moderate and gentle, so it wasn't a bad choice in that sense either.

Not to imply that organizations such as the Church of Lobelia were bad or anything—it was just that they had a lot of members who were ambitious about climbing the ladder or felt quite strongly that they had a duty to spread the teachings of their religion.

That could be a little scary sometimes...

“We thought that the same would happen to Mel eventually,” Elza continued. “After all, she was originally intended to be the blessing’s main recipient. Pochi actually made several attempts after he blessed Lillian and I, but we stopped him for the reason I just explained: we were worried about the constant invitations that would come knocking at her door. Mel also said she wanted to become this orphanage’s director one day, so Lillian and I thought it best to hold off on it for a while—at least until we grew capable enough to protect both her and the orphanage. After some thought, Pochi eventually agreed with us.”



“Pardon me if I’m prying too much, but why did Pochi want to bless Mel?” I asked. “The fact that he blessed you and Lillian with divinity first and then asked you to protect her seems to imply there was some awfully important motivation behind it, but...well, I guess that’s kind of what divinity is supposed to be, actually.”

Cases like Lorraine and I, where someone received divinity for no particularly special reason, weren’t exactly uncommon, but if you were to ask why gods and divine spirits blessed people with that kind of power, most would say that it was because those who were blessed had some kind of important role to fill on behalf of the gods or the world. If you looked at the various myths and legends that were still told to this day, you could find examples of stories where divinity wielders achieved some kind of great feat and had their names carved into history. Some of those accounts even featured the exact instructions that the gods had directly given to these wielders, laying out the duties they were supposed to fulfill. That was all in the distant past, of course, and it was difficult to say how many of those stories had actually happened, but the fact that



they'd stuck around to be told today likely meant that they had at least a grain of truth buried within them.

Given all of that, it seemed reasonable to assume that Mel had some kind of role to carry out too. It didn't seem like her case was similar to Lorraine and mine, where we were blessed because we performed an offhand good deed.

To begin with, if Pochi truly was a divine beast, then—while this might be rude of me to say—instead of a run-down orphanage like this he could be at any random church of his choosing, and they would more likely than not treat him like royalty.

Nevertheless, he had remained by Mel's side. I figured it wasn't that farfetched to suspect that there had to be a reason for that.

After a moment of thought, Elza said, "I'm afraid I don't know the details myself; Pochi won't answer if you ask. It must be some kind of restriction that applies to gods, divine spirits and beasts, and other beings like that. They do say that the gods cannot influence the world of man beyond a small degree, after all, and that's why they bless us, bestow prophecies upon us, and influence us to establish religions...although I get the feeling that human egoism sneaked its way into that last one."

I didn't know if a high-ranking member of the clergy should really be going around making such cynical remarks, even as a joke. Then again, considering the reason Elza had joined the Church of the Eastern Sky in the first place, she likely wasn't fully and utterly devoted to the religion from the bottom of her heart anyway—though I wouldn't go so far as to call her a nonbeliever either. And besides...she kind of had a point.

"Still, since it had something to do with Mel, I did my best to find out," Elza continued. "I *am* of a relatively high rank in the clergy, after all. I made use of the resources I had available and followed all sorts of leads. After considering the results...my conclusion is that the world may be about to enter a time of great upheaval."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Lorraine interjected, leaning forward. It seemed that Elza's words had caused her curiosity to get the better of her.

"It appears that many more people have been receiving special blessings of

divinity, just like Mel did. The majority are kept secret by their respective religions, countries, or organizations, of course—but there are enough whispers going around that those with the right ears have been able to hear them. Divinity wielders are absolutely vital to religious organizations like ours, but while they are rare, the average number that any given organization has on its roster has generally remained stable over the years. However, recently that number has been increasing at a rate that cannot be ignored, and as I mentioned before, some of them wield divinity at a potency a cut above the rest.”

So the number of individuals who possessed divinity was increasing, huh? I supposed that Lorraine and I were included in that statistic. Was it because the bar for whom the gods could bless had been lowered? The fact that it was happening at all seemed to suggest that there must be some reason behind it—something that the gods were going out of their way to take measures against.

Now *that* was a scary thought.

“When you say that these special individuals have potent blessings, how potent are we talking?” Lorraine asked.

“Let’s see...” Elza said. “Using myself as a point of reference, I am capable of covering an entire town in a rite if so inclined. Normally, that degree of ability would place me in the highest rank of divinity wielders. However, among those who have been appearing recently...the strongest of them can apparently cover a midsize province—midsize for Yaaran, at least. Does that give you an idea of the difference in scale?”

A town versus an entire *province*? Possessing the strength necessary to cover the former was astonishing enough, but even so, the difference was stark. And from what Elza had said of her own abilities, did that mean that Lillian had once been capable of the same?

In comparison, my divinity...well, if I really pushed myself, I could *maybe* cover an area the size of a house. Please don’t say that was barely worth mentioning—it *had* grown stronger, after all. There were just too many monsters in this world of ours.

And when it came to Lorraine—her mana reserves aside—her divinity was



even more lacking than mine. She was probably limited to the size of a single room. It did seem as though her divinity was growing though, which gave me the uneasy suspicion that she would overtake me before long...but I would put off thinking about that until the time came.

“That...would put it on the scale of a military asset,” said Lorraine. “And if it was a recovery-type divinity, that alone could serve as sufficient grounds to invade another country.”

“Indeed,” Elza agreed. “It would be entirely possible for tens of thousands of soldiers to carry out an assault while their wounds are continuously healed and all of them would come out of the experience alive. There are concerns, of course, about how long said divinity wielders can maintain their rites and whether an increase in scale results in a decrease in effect...but there is no denying that they possess astonishing power. Such individuals would be dearly coveted by any country or organization—don’t you agree?”

This topic was beginning to scare me. If I worked hard, would I be able to wield such power one day?

Yeah...I really doubted that.

As unfortunate as it was, divinity wasn’t the kind of power that increased just because you tried hard enough. I *could* do that for my spirit and mana though, with this monster body of mine.

Well, in the end, if you wanted to get stronger, you had to start by working on what was possible.

“And...do you mean to say that Mel’s divinity is on that level too?” Lorraine asked.

“I suspect it is,” Elza said. “While it appeared to be nothing special right after she was blessed, it will gradually become more potent from here on out—though not without effort, of course. She will have to undergo training in order to learn how to control and use it properly. Otherwise, it will be dangerous to her.”



“I get the overall picture now,” I said. “But why tell us this?”

“Large or small, every individual who possesses divinity has some manner of role to fill,” Elza said. “But when it comes to how we choose to live and what we choose to strive for, humanity is free.”

Interfering with mankind’s free will was not a simple matter, even for the gods. They could watch us, certainly—see our deaths, fates, intertwined threads, the paths we ought to tread, our roles, and everything in between. But tampering with those things was not so easy. It was just like how we people found it hard to untangle a complicated mess of string—hands that were too big just weren’t suited to manipulating fine threads that were bound so tightly together.

That was the reason we were free...according to some people out there, anyway. Others held the complete opposite opinion. As for which opinion was correct, well, you’d have to be a god to know that.

I waited for Elza to continue, and she obliged.

“I will use my power to protect Mel. This orphanage too. And, if there is room to spare, the Church of the Eastern Sky as well. As for you, Rentt...could I be so bold as to ask you to lend us your power? Only when you are able to spare it, of course.”

“Oh. So the point you were building up to...was basically just a roundabout way of trying to recruit me?” Once I put that thought into words, everything lined up in hindsight.

“I suppose it was. But while I won’t deny that, I also don’t want to order you around or make you do anything you don’t want to do. I hope that nothing comes of all of this...but I’m almost certain that the future holds *something* in store for us. I don’t mind if it’s only when that time comes, and only if you are otherwise unoccupied. I simply wish for your aid.”

“You’re talking about when we enter that ‘time of great upheaval’ that you mentioned, right?”

“I am. I hope I’m simply worrying over nothing, of course...but I simply cannot bring myself to believe that.”

In terms of things to be concerned about, you couldn’t get much more



abstract than a “time of great upheaval,” but it seemed like Elza truly believed that such a time would come. I could write it off as just another religious activist proselytizing, of course. You know how it goes: “The world is ending, so do what you can now to secure happiness in the next life.” From a certain point of view, Elza wasn’t saying anything much different from that.

However, the things she was trying to protect—Mel and this orphanage—were specific and tangible. What Elza was doing was actually different from the usual religious solicitation where they fanned the flames of your anxiety in order to pressure you to join.

“But...why are you asking me?”

“Because you can use divinity, Rentt. Ah, and it isn’t just you, of course. I’ve been asking the other divinity wielders that I’ve come across, both as a representative of the Church of the Eastern Sky and as Elza the individual. But I brought you two here in particular because you’re Lillian’s acquaintances, and I believe that I can trust you. I must admit, I’ve never been so straightforward about recruiting before...”

To sum up, she was spending more time on me than she usually did and being more open in order to build a degree of trust.

There was no need for me to feel like I owed her any kind of great debt, of course, but the information she’d given me was certainly interesting. If a time of great upheaval really did come along, it would definitely be a great time to make a living as an adventurer. And as a monster myself, the increase in powerful divinity wielders was helpful information. Me and my vampiric servants weren’t affected by divinity, but the same couldn’t be said of Laura and her people, like Isaac for instance. Learning about this now would allow me to give them a heads-up, at least.

I kind of had the feeling that they already knew though...

After taking everything into consideration, I figured it’d be okay for me to feel like I owed Elza a little. I exchanged a look with Lorraine—between us two, that was enough to pass as consulting each other—then turned back to Elza.

“I understand,” I said. “I can’t promise you that I’ll be available, but if you’re okay with that, just let me know when you need me. Is that okay?”

“Of course! I don’t mind at all.” Elza bowed her head. “I know full well how unreasonable my request is. It’s just...I want to do everything I can for Mel’s sake, and the orphanage too.”



After engaging in further discussion for a while, we left the orphanage behind us.

Mel had seemed to be having a lot of fun talking to Pochi. She had even done it in front of the kids, strongly insisting that “Pochi *can* talk!” but all she’d received in return was the children staring at her as though she had gone mad. That must have hurt her feelings, because then she’d said, “I-I’ll prove it to you! Pochi, turn around three times and bark!”

Pochi, however, had simply given her a side-eyed look as he walked away from her and plopped down for a nap.

I remember thinking that the children’s gazes had grown colder after that.

Mel had then run over to Pochi and begun exaggeratedly shaking him as she screamed, “Why, Pochi?! Why are you doing this?! I know you can understand me! Why are you ignoring me?!”

“Woof...”

*What a pain.*

That was as much as I’d managed to hear coming from behind us as we left the orphanage. It seemed fairly safe to assume that Pochi’s secret wouldn’t be getting out anytime soon.

Then, when we reached the abbey...

“Oh! Mother Elza! Everyone, Mother Elza’s back!”

One of the Church of the Eastern Sky’s priests began shouting as he pointed in our direction.

“Gah! N-Not good! I need to find somewhere to hide!”

Elza’s head turned left and right, searching our surroundings, but unfortunately, it was already too late. In no time at all, we were surrounded by

Church of the Eastern Sky priests with all escape routes cut off. One of them stepped forward, grabbed Elza's arm firmly, and began pulling her along.

"Come now, Mother Superior. It's time to return to your duties."

"W-Wait! Not yet! I still have things to do!"

I was fairly certain she had finished everything, actually. As Lorraine and I observed her plight, another priest ran over to us.

"You have our deepest gratitude for accompanying Mother Elza today. I'm sure it must have been quite the ordeal. Should you need anything, please feel free to return to the abbey and allow us to express our gratitude—and apologies—for today. Now, pardon me."

After a deep bow, the priest ran back to rejoin the net of people that had trapped Elza inside it.

"Are all the bigwigs in this city like that, you think?" I muttered, not mentioning a certain underworld organization chief but definitely thinking about him.

"The people in charge are like that wherever you go," Lorraine said. "Don't bother getting your hopes up."

It sure was a rough world out there.



All of a sudden, I awoke.

We had returned to the inn, after which I had decided to get as much sleep as my body would let me in preparation for the journey back to Maalt tomorrow.

When I looked outside, I saw that it was still the middle of the night. Even in the royal capital, that meant that it was dark and quiet. There was nobody in the streets except for the occasional wandering drunk. The light of magical tools shone through the night here and there, but their illumination was nothing in comparison to the surrounding darkness.

The night was deep, dark...and to me, it was warm and gentle.

I plunged into it.





My undead body allowed me to see clearly over long distances as though it were the middle of the day, no matter how dark it was. Was that because the night was its intended home? Because its purpose was to find a young maiden out on a stroll, capture her, and drink her blood...?

I didn't know.

Because Lorraine offered her blood to me regularly, my urge to drink it was extremely weak—to the point you might not even think I really needed to consume humans to live.

But maybe I really *didn't* need to. At least by Nive's judgment, I wasn't a vampire. But what was I, then?

My body found the act of drinking human blood pleasurable. What kind of monster did that describe...?

I didn't know—and that fact made me afraid.

Thinking about it, I had come quite a long way.

I used to think all that awaited me was an unremarkable death in combat somewhere near Maalt, but looking back, I'd come to the royal capital and spoken with royalty, the chief of an underground organization, and an abbess of the Church of the Eastern Sky—all individuals who stood so far above who I was in the past that I would never have been able to reach their feet.

My strength had grown, and I was now making the push for Silver-class, which had once been nothing more than a foolhardy dream for me. If I kept on running along with this momentum, it felt as though I could reach any height I wanted.

I knew that was likely just hubris on my part, though. After all the people I'd encountered, the one thing I had come to understand was that in the end, I was still nothing more than a weakling. I didn't even feel anywhere close to catching up to Lorraine, who was always standing by my side.

And all this after I had gained both a monster body and the means to grow stronger. When all was said and done, I was hopeless through and through. As I

walked alone through the empty city streets, I submerged myself in those negative thoughts.

I knew that worrying about the future was pointless; all I could do was put my all into improving and wait for the chips to fall as they might. Still, I wanted to ruminate over it thoroughly, shake the feeling off, then face tomorrow in a better mood—that was why I was wandering the city alone.

“Don’t you think you’ve dropped your guard a little *too* much, friend?”

That was also why even after the voice reached my ears, I was slow to react.

Before I could even so much as say “Huh?” I was already flying through the air. Then, I felt the throbbing pain in my chest and realized that someone must have sent me flying with a blow.

“Oh, now that’s a surprise. You’re one of *us*. I was thinking you might serve as a decent meal, but I suppose that’s not going to happen now.”

I wanted to ask what my attacker was talking about, but my voice wouldn’t come out of my mouth. Just as I was wondering why that was, I realized that there were wheezing sounds coming from the vicinity of my throat.

“Ah, sorry about that. I figured it’d be bothersome if you screamed, so I went ahead and opened up a hole.”

When I put a hand to my neck, there was nothing there. All the flesh had been ripped away. But it seemed like my head and body were still connected, so that was nice, at least...uh, if you can even call that “nice.”

Well, whatever the case, what the heck was going on? Why was this person attacking me out of the blue? Who were they in the first place?

After taking a closer look, I saw that my attacker was a very odd-looking man. He was wearing a gentleman’s suit, carried a walking stick...and had a lump of my flesh hanging from his mouth.

I realized that was how he must have ripped it out. Talk about weird eating habits—there was just no way I tasted any good.

“You seem surprised, but a lot more put together than I’d expected. Are you that confident that you won’t meet your end here? You didn’t even notice me

before I dealt you such a serious wound... Ah, perhaps you're expecting your 'parent' to come save you? I'm afraid there's no point in waiting for that. I can end this in an instant."

The man immediately maneuvered through the air, came to a stop right in front of my eyes, and opened his mouth wide. With a loud, skin-crawling sound like a massive rush of water, his entire body shifted into a deep blackness darker than the night and melted together to form a single, huge mouth.

That gave me a pretty good idea of what the man was, but knowing that didn't improve my situation. Was this it for me? Was this where I met my end? Panic boiled forth from within me. I grasped for any method I could use to escape, but none came to mi—wait, no.

There *was* something I could do.

I just had to *match him at his own game*.

The moment that thought occurred to me, my body also melted into the darkness.

I had used Splintering.

I fled from the space where the giant mouth was about to chomp down and avoided the man's attack.

"That's a strange Splintering you've got there...not that I'm in a position to talk. Still..." The man released his own Splintering, then pointed a finger at me. "Dehisé."

Suddenly, it felt as though I was being squeezed in a vise from every direction at once, and my Splintered body was shoved inward toward a single point.

I tried to resist, but the difference in our strength was just too significant. It was like an ant trying to fight back against an elephant—I was completely helpless, unable to do anything but be compressed smaller and smaller...

"Splintering is useful to be sure, but there are any number of ways of dealing with it. Was your parent's tutoring perhaps not thorough enough? Well, I suppose that even if you had known, you still wouldn't have been able to do a thing given the difference in our ability."



Crap. He was completely right—I couldn't do a single thing. Did I have *anything* else I could try?

I supposed I could attempt to blow myself up with divinity-mana-spirit fusion. Desperate as it was, I couldn't think of anything else. If this was how I was going to meet my end, then I wanted to at least make an attempt at a parting shot. It was better than just helplessly waiting to die.

I steeled my resolve, and—

“Hmm?!”

Suddenly, the pressure that was crushing me vanished, along with all sight of my assailant. Where had he gone?

I managed to drop safely to the ground, whereupon I quickly looked around, but I couldn't see any sign of him.

Instead, I saw...

“Mr. Rentt—are you all right? I'm terribly sorry for being late.”

It was the coachman who had brought us to the royal capital—in other words, a vampire servant of Laura's, which put him way higher than me on the strength scale. I'd heard that he was a lesser vampire, but from the look of things that had been a lie. Isaac must have sent him along with us out of concern.

But that wasn't important right now. Not compared to...

“Who *was* that just now?” I asked.

“That was my master's enemy,” the coachman replied. “I've been chasing him since I sensed his presence, but it appears that you ran into him first. Still, you can rest assured—it appears that he noticed me approaching, and he's already left the city.”

“Laura's enemy, huh...? Is it okay if I ask who that was?”

“Of course. The individual you saw just now was a grandchild of the vampire king, Arc Tahadu. He possesses strength far beyond that of an ordinary vampire. It is good that you are safe.”

While the coachman looked relieved, his words just made me want to know

more about *him*, since he was strong enough to drive off the vampire he'd just described. Whether he sensed my unasked question or not, though, he continued.

"It appeared that your encounter was a simple coincidence rather than him seeking you out in particular, so I don't believe you have anything to worry about at the moment. If you do happen to run into him again, however, please flee or inform me or another of my master's vassals if you can. Now then, do have a good evening. I shall see you tomorrow."

After bidding farewell, the coachman vanished into the darkness. He managed it so adeptly, in fact, that I had already lost track of his presence.

The same thought that I'd had several times that night ran through my head again.

"I'm...so weak..."

I had to work harder.



"Hmm? You seem kind of different," Lorraine remarked as soon as we saw each other the next morning. We had planned to have breakfast together in the inn's dining room. "Did something happen, Rentt?"

Something *had* happened, actually. Last night, I had been attacked by a vampire of considerable power, had been unable to stop it from tearing out my throat, and experienced the bitter taste of my own powerlessness.

Nevertheless, I was, objectively speaking, unharmed. After all, Splintering didn't leave any physical wounds behind after I used it. Regardless, Lorraine had still noticed that something was different simply by looking at me. Just as you might expect from a scholar, she was sensitive to the changes that occurred around her.

After spending a moment to consider how I should respond, I decided to describe everything vaguely enough that eavesdroppers wouldn't understand—and also tone down the gore so that it wouldn't spoil the breakfast that we were about to eat.

“I went out for a walk last night since I couldn’t sleep, and I got attacked by some random thug. He really did a number on me.”

I figured that was more or less enough—it kept the story common and forgettable. I could tell that some of the people around us were listening in, but most of them were adventurers. An everyday encounter with a thug wouldn’t be that interesting to them.

Lorraine, however, seemed surprised. “Really?” she asked. “You, of all people? I guess the capital *is* pretty dangerous compared to Maalt...”

She was right, of course. At night, the streets in the capital posed more risk than the ones in Maalt. It was easier to run into somebody strong here too, regardless of whether they meant you good or ill, and on average people here carried more wealth around on their persons. It was only natural that the number of random criminals eyeing your coin purse on the streets would be larger here too.

“Whoa, hey, you came here from Maalt?” came a shout from a nearby middle-aged man who had evidently been listening in. Judging by his garb, he was probably an adventurer. “If you’re from way out in the sticks, no wonder you can’t cut it here in the big city!”

Several other people laughed at his remark in the midst of tucking into their breakfast. I could tell that the man had meant to be pretty demeaning, but since he didn’t know the truth of what had *really* happened, idly sizing up everyone present to see how they would have fared against the vampire actually turned out to be kind of funny.

That thought must have caused my mouth to twitch into the ghost of a smile—a gesture the man who had laughed at us didn’t miss. Talk about keen eyesight.

“Hey, brother,” he said, standing up and walking over. “Were you just laughing at me?”

Before the situation could progress any further, there came the sound of someone descending the inn’s stairs.

“Oh, Rentt, Lorraine,” Augurey said as he walked over to our table. “You’re



already up? Early risers, huh?”

The middle-aged adventurer looked at Augurey in shock before his demeanor shifted entirely. “Wha— Uh, Augu...Mister Augurey! You know these two?”

“I do. Did something happen? Wait, let me guess. You picked a fight, didn’t you?” Augurey amicably patted the man on the shoulder. “I have to warn you: that’s really not a good idea. These two are *way* stronger than me.”

The man stared at Augurey in disbelief, then at me, then at Lorraine. “B-But, you must be joking!” he protested. It seemed that Augurey’s warning hadn’t been enough to convince him. “This guy *just* said that some random thug on the street beat him up last night! How could...?”

“What?!” Augurey exclaimed. “A random thug? Beat *Rentt*? Maybe...maybe I should stay off the streets at night from now on.” He turned to me. “How badly did that thug get you?”

“I couldn’t even put up a fight,” I said. “Not one bit. I was really surprised.”

“Seriously...? I didn’t think the capital was *that* violent. You shouldn’t run into anybody like that on the streets, even in the dead of night... I mean, the knights are always patrolling to keep the peace.”

“I don’t think even your average knight could’ve done anything against the guy I ran into.”

“Maybe I should relocate...”

Our conversation seemed to be taking the wind out of the middle-aged adventurer’s sails. Then, seeming curious, he abruptly asked Augurey, “Uh, so when you say they’re way stronger than you...how strong do you mean, specifically?”

“Well, going strictly by rank, Rentt’s Bronze just like you.”

“Oh, then—”

“He’s already qualified to take the Silver Ascension Exam, though, and I’m expecting him to pass it when he does. If it came down to a simple fight...well, I would never *want* to fight him. It’s not like I would ever have a chance of actually *winning*.”

Both Augurey and I knew that he wasn't talking about skill. What he meant was: how was anyone supposed to beat an opponent who could regenerate themselves endlessly?

Evidently, however, the adventurer took Augurey's words at face value, thinking it meant that I was just plain stronger. He immediately knelt on the floor and prostrated himself before me.

"M-My deepest apologies, sir!" he apologized "I was in the wrong!"

"Uh, don't worry about it," I said. "I don't want you to beat yourself up over this. If anything, well...just promise me that if you meet other adventurers who are weaker than you in the future, you won't do the same thing. It hurts a person more than you might expect..."



Right now I knew I was stronger than this man, so his words were no big deal to me. However, if he'd said them to my past self...while I wouldn't have flown into a rage or anything, it definitely would have cut me pretty deep, and I probably would have trudged sadly back to my room in the inn, sighing all the while.

It was important for everybody to build up resistance to such things, of course—almost like baptizing yourself—but simply having fewer bullies in the world wouldn't hurt either.

That was the thought process behind what I'd said, at any rate, but it appeared that Lorraine was of a different opinion.

"Come on, Rentt," she said. "At times like these, there's no need for you to just let them off with a scolding."

"You think?"

"I do. *This* is how you handle people like him..."

As I watched her, curious as to what she was going to do, Lorraine began compressing mana in her hand, creating a small mass that gradually expanded to become larger and larger.

*Wait, wait, wait. What exactly are you planning here, Lorraine?*

It was obvious that she was only giving the man a scare, of course—I knew that, but I was still a little nervous anyway.

While Augurey and I calmly watched the situation unfold, the middle-aged adventurer raised his head off of the floor in clear panic—his expression was truly terrified. While you couldn't see mana unless you had the right eyes for it, if it was molded together and condensed enough without being purposefully concealed, you could *definitely* feel the pressure—and danger—on your skin. Even that man had to recognize just how dangerous the mass of mana Lorraine had gathered in her hand was.

"I-I'm sorry, really!" he pleaded. "Please, at least spare my life!"

When she seemed satisfied that the man was genuinely scared out of his wits, Lorraine skillfully dissipated her mana. "Just kidding," she said, smiling and



offering him a hand. “Still, a person with a shorter temper really *would* have blown the entire inn to pieces. If you’re an adventurer, you should be more careful.”

The scary part was that it was impossible to tell how much of that really *had* been a joke. The man seemed to realize that too, because as he gingerly accepted Lorraine’s hand, he said, “I-I’m sorry. I-I won’t do it again. Ever!”

Then, he returned to his seat and took up his fork. His hands were still shaking.

Lorraine had kind of overdone it, in my opinion.



“Ha ha...I see. So *that’s* what really happened.”

There was still a little time left before we were to set off on our journey back to Maalt, so in the meantime, I filled Lorraine and Augurey in on the details of what had really happened last night. As expected, they were both surprised that my attacker had been a vampire—especially Augurey.

Given everything, Lorraine was getting quite familiar with vampires as a concept, but as far as Augurey was concerned, the only...friendly(?) vampire that he knew was me, so his surprise was only natural.

“But you’re saying the vampire that attacked you has already left the city...right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “According to the person who saved me, at least...”

I was keeping the identity of that person vague—all I’d said was that they were awfully strong. I suspected that it would probably be okay to tell Augurey the truth, but I knew that I should get permission from Laura first, or at least from Isaac. The coachman was essentially putting himself at risk for us until we left the city, so it was best to keep hush about him in general, even to Augurey.

As for Augurey himself, it would be safer for him to just remain ignorant instead of getting a lot of information that he didn’t necessarily need. Perhaps we could let him into the loop one day though.

“Still, the vampire king, huh?” Augurey muttered. “I’ve heard of him, but I

wouldn't have expected one of his subordinates to be here of all places. I don't mean this in a bad way, but Yaaran's a pretty rural place, as countries go. I doubt there's any fun for them to find here."

I could understand where Augurey was coming from. Yaaran was rather far from the center of the world and didn't have that much political weight to throw around, nor did it boast any particularly unique product or export. In exchange, it was quiet and peaceful...but those were about all the advantages I could come up with.

So why was a subordinate of the vampire king wandering about here? Just to kill time? That...sounded like it might actually be a possibility, considering Laura. Maybe vampires were just like that. After all, eternal life probably got fairly boring. The one who'd attacked me could have just enjoyed traveling as a hobby.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Lorraine asked, clearly curious from a scholarly standpoint.

"I did, more or less," I said, recalling the events of last night. "He—at least, I'm pretty sure it was a man—was dressed like a gentleman with a walking stick and top hat. I didn't see his face. Not because it was too dark or anything—that excuse wouldn't work coming from me anyway. It was more like...it was just hard to see. Maybe he was wearing something that created that effect, or it could have been some kind of spell."

I could see exceptionally well in the dark. Even the faintest glimmer of light—even if it was as dim as starlight—would allow me to see as well as I could during the day when I was human. Consequently, the fact that it was the middle of the night wouldn't have stopped me from seeing someone's face. Nevertheless, I *hadn't* seen it, so there had to be some other reason at play.

"A piece of magical equipment or spell that impairs perception..." Lorraine murmured. "I suppose a subordinate of the vampire king *would* want to keep their identity hidden. Nothing we can do about that. Still, it's good that you made it out of the experience without drawing unnecessary attention, Rentt. The vampire king's in the same weight class as the four demon lords—definitely not somebody whose eyes you want on you. It wouldn't end well."

“You’re right about that. I consider myself lucky.”

While the vampire who’d attacked me had seemed to recognize that I was a vampire, or at least a monster of some sort, I’d avoided the worst-case scenario of him realizing that I was actually a mysterious pseudo-vampiric being who could even wield divinity.

Since I was still weak, it would be easy for someone like him to abduct me, and unlike those stories where a dashing prince would come riding in to save the day, all that awaited me was a horrifying fate in one of the vampire king’s secret hideouts or something.

I felt grateful enough just for avoiding that.

“If possible, I never want to meet him again...” I mumbled reflexively.

Lorraine studied my face and let out a sigh. “You might be asking for too much there. Something about you just seems to attract those kinds of people.”

“I really wish they would stop. I could use the break...”

“Don’t get me wrong, I feel the same way. But as long as we’re expecting them to show up, it’s best if we prepare countermeasures, no?”

“What do you have in mind?” Nothing was occurring to me immediately, but I thought Lorraine might have some good ideas.

“For the time being, how about training your divinity more? It’s supposed to be extremely effective against vampires, after all. I don’t know how well it’ll hold up against the superior ones, but still...”

That much was obvious from how Isaac had acted around the tree that had been shedding divinity. While he hadn’t seemed eager to approach it, neither had it suddenly evaporated him or anything like that.

In short, it seemed unlikely that divinity would be effective enough to kill that subordinate of the vampire king in one blow, but there was no denying that it *was* effective. My divinity really could end up being my trump card.

So long as I didn’t die to that crushing pressure spell that he had used on me first.

Come to think of it...

“Lorraine, can you use the Dehisé spell too?” I asked.

“Hmm? I haven’t heard of that one before. Is that the name of the spell that you said that vampire attempted to crush you with?”

I hadn’t mentioned the specific name of the spell earlier in my explanation, hence Lorraine asking for confirmation.

I nodded. “Yeah. The chant consisted of just the name, but that was what he said. You don’t know the spell?”

“There are a number that can cause a similar effect, but I don’t know one by that name. The most generally used one is Compression, and if you’re looking at ancient spells, Dağata. This is useful information, Rentt, thank you. If that spell was potent enough that you couldn’t do anything against it, then it should prove useful if I can figure out how to cast it myself. I’ll have to do some research on it...but first, I need to determine which language branch it stems from...”

Lorraine gradually sank into her own thoughts, muttering to herself about ideas and hypotheses.

“Well...at any rate, I’m glad you’re okay, Rentt,” Augurey said. He knew as well as I did that once Lorraine grew absorbed in the topic of magic nothing you could say to her would get through. “And I guess today’s the day we say goodbye. You’ll be heading back to the capital before long though, right?”

“I don’t really want to make a habit of coming and going all the time, but yes, I definitely will be,” I said. “There’s the whole thing with the princess, after all...”

“Did that turn out to be a problem, then? I suspected it would.”

“A bit of one,” I agreed. “It would be nice if Jean tidied it up nicely for us, but I get the feeling it’s not going to be so simple.”

As for why—well, it was because of the half-elves’ prophecy. No matter how much of a big deal Jean was, prophecies handed down by the gods were no easy thing to avoid getting tangled up in.

“The whole thing has me worried, to be honest...” Augurey said. “But getting

the chance to see you two again makes me nothing but happy. I'm going to improve my skills before we next meet, you hear? I want to be strong enough that I'll at least be able to do *something* if a subordinate of the vampire king pounces on me."

"Yeah. I'm going to do the same. But until then, this is goodbye."

Augurey and I exchanged a handshake. Both of us had floated around at the bottom ranks for a long time, but even so, I felt the conviction that we were both growing stronger well up within me.



"You think he'll show up?" I asked.

Lorraine and I were near the entrance to the royal capital, on a thoroughfare that many wagons and carriages used to enter and exit the city, or as a temporary stop. Scheduled carriages to dungeons and all sorts of other places left from this gate, and part of me wanted to just hop on one and see where it would take me.

Such thoughts would have been unthinkable for my past self. I had simply lacked the necessary amount of strength. The vast majority of the dungeons that one could travel to directly from the royal capital were exceedingly dangerous. Coming all this way just to delve into a dungeon on the same level as the Water Moon Dungeon would have just felt like a waste, and besides, it had always been the dangerous ones told of in stories that I had aspired to challenge someday.

But if I had tried that while I had been human, chances were that I would've died the moment I set foot in any one of those dungeons, so all I'd been able to do was hold back my tears of frustration and give up.

These days, however, I was confident that I wouldn't die just upon setting foot into one, at least. I mean, even if I was crushed to a pulp, I was capable of simply regenerating myself.

That's cheating, you say? Well, yes, it is. Still, even without such unfair tricks up my sleeve, I was relatively certain that I wouldn't immediately be killed, naturally. More than likely I'd be able to make a certain amount of progress



before being forced to give up and turn back.

“Well, even though we left a time and place to meet with the guild, he *is* a rather carefree person,” Lorraine said. “It’s probably best if we don’t get our hopes up and kick back while we wait.”

As for who “he” referred to, we were of course talking about the person whom we had come to fetch in order to bring him back with us to Maalt: the Grand Guildmaster for Yaaran, Jean Seebeck.

If I wanted to get more specific, I would also add that he was the chief of an underground organization with its roots spread deep across the whole city. In short, he held the reins both above and below the table—definitely not somebody you wanted to make an enemy of.

Maybe that was hypocritical of me to say, since we *had* made him our enemy once already, but that had ended without incident. Due to the mess of complications that had created the situation in the first place, he hadn’t actually pursued us with anything close to all the means at his disposal.

If he had, then even with this body of mine, I wasn’t sure what would have become of me.

After we waited for a while, impatience nipping at our heels...

“It appears as though he has arrived,” said the young man who served as our coachman.

While you would usually think that Lorraine and I would notice that first, being adventurers, this young man was the very same individual who had saved me yesterday from that monstrous vampire. Of the three of us present, he was undoubtedly the strongest.

The Latuule family temporary hire agency was indeed an outstanding repository of talent.

In fact, they were probably higher up than Jean on the list of people you shouldn’t make enemies of...

“Sorry! Sorry I’m late,” the man in question apologized as he walked over. He was dressed in plain clothing, and if he’d kept silent and dropped his gaze to the

ground, I would bet almost nobody would have been able to pick him out for who he really was.

That wasn't to say, however, that the quality of his attire was inferior in any way. Quite the opposite, in fact: it all looked to be of exceedingly fine make. From the faint traces of mana that I could sense, I realized that all of it was magical as well—and if I, a monster, could only barely detect it, then that meant that a regular person wouldn't be able to pick up anything at all.

Lorraine would be able to, of course, given her magical eyes. Sure enough...

"You're dressed like you're about to head off to war..." she said.

"Saw right through me, did you?" Jean said, smiling. "Well, I'm definitely not planning on joining any wars, but it pays well to be careful. I told you back at the colosseum, but there's a lot of conspiracy surrounding Maalt's dungeon—as well as the Tower and the Academy. Who knows when danger might rear its head, or what form it will take?"

Jean Seebeck was the individual who supervised the entirety of the guild across Yaaran. No doubt any number of people were after his head. If we wanted to avoid being dragged into that while we traveled with him, we'd have to watch our step with particular care.

"I suppose you're right..." Lorraine said. "But that reminds me, why are you late? When we informed the guild of the place and time this morning, they told us they'd make sure you arrived on time."

While we'd hashed out the general details of our departure back at the colosseum, we'd also gone to the guild this morning to leave more specific instructions, just to be certain. Strictly speaking, however, that had just been a secondary task. Our main purpose in going to the guild had been to pass along a message about the vampire that had attacked me last night to a particular individual who I honestly really didn't want to be contacting.

That is to say, it was for Nive.

Since an in-person meeting had been impossible, it truly had just been a message, one basically along the lines of "A really strong vampire appeared in the royal capital but suddenly ran away for some reason, so I don't think it's in

the city anymore.”

The rest of the work—that being actually *getting* the message to Nive—was up to the guild’s contact network.

I wasn’t sure if she would show up to the capital and turn the whole place upside down, or if she’d just ignore the message since the vampire was already gone, but...

*No, I guess she wouldn’t just ignore it, huh?*

Nive was not the type to let something go until she had investigated it thoroughly with her own eyes and ears. I was fairly certain that she’d show up here sooner or later.

I dearly hoped that wouldn’t coincide with when I next came here...but past experience proved that it would be just my luck if that did happen. It was probably pointless to get my hopes up.

“Hmm? Well, I had a lot of work to take care of first...” Jean said evasively—and then, he abruptly looked behind him.

“Grand Guildmaster! Where are you?!” yelled a voice from the same direction. “Surely you don’t mean to leave unaccompanied?!”

Jean pulled his hood up over his head. “All right now, let’s get a move on. It’ll be a pain in the behind if they find me.”

“They’re searching for *you*, aren’t they...?” I asked. “There’s enough space in the carriage for others. We should go tell them—”

I made to head over, but Jean swiftly grabbed my arm. “Idiot!” he hissed. “Having attendants breathing down my neck the whole time will spoil my long-awaited travel plans! Come on, let’s go!”

*What are you, a child?* is what I wanted to say, but it seemed impossible that it would get through to him. Instead, Lorraine, the coachman, and I exchanged looks of equal resignation and promptly began preparing the carriage for departure.

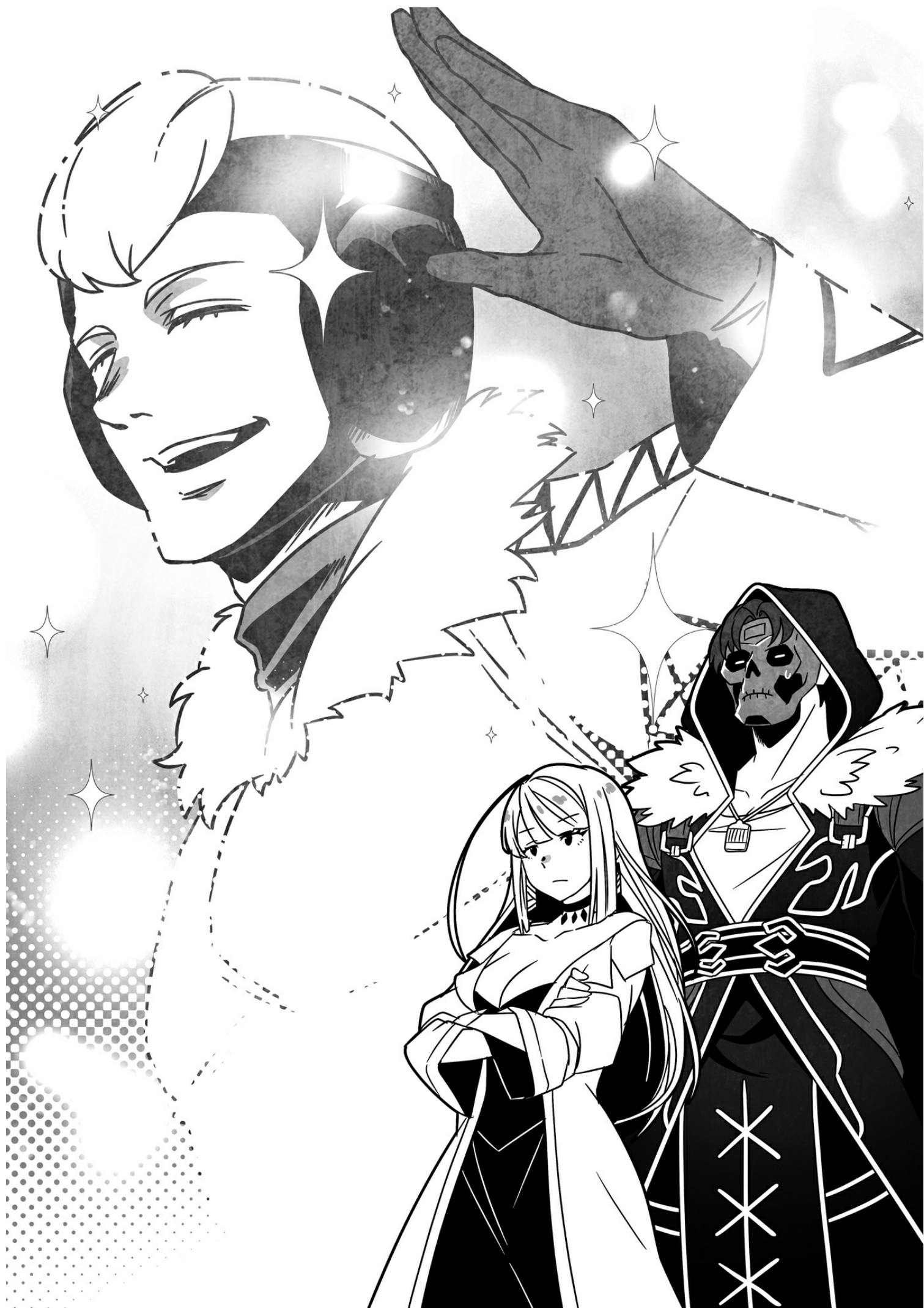
Even if we set out stealthily, there was always the inspection at the city gates. A person as famous as Jean was sure to be recognized there, so for the time

being, it would be fine if we simply departed.

That's what I thought, anyway...

"So long, my little staff members," Jean muttered, giggling to himself as he peeked out of a gap between the carriage's curtains. "I'm off to have a nice little vacation in Maalt!"

If I said that the sight of him didn't make me feel uneasy, then I would probably be lying.





## Chapter 2: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 1

On the outskirts of Maalt, there was a large manse situated with a sizable estate. This belonged to the Latuule family, and currently, there were three individuals in the garden. From the way two of them were engaging in strenuous exercise with the third standing nearby observing, it was obvious that they were undergoing some manner of training.

As for who these individuals were...the overseer was Isaac, a servant of the Latuule family, and the other two were Rina and Alize.

“That should be enough. You may rest.”

The two girls immediately dropped to the ground at Isaac’s words, panting heavily.

“Can’t...breathe...”

“I’m...exhausted...”

From the pair’s appearance, it was clear that they were truly worn out. However, as Isaac studied them and stroked his chin, he said, “But we’re only just getting started...”

Rina and Alize immediately went pale.

“Just kidding,” Isaac said, laughing. “Your persistence is quite admirable for a novice, Rina—and as for Alize, I’m impressed by your willpower, given your age. To tell you the truth, I thought you two would wear yourselves out a lot faster than you did. If you continue at this rate, I’m certain you’ll become fine adventurers one day.”

The girls relaxed in relief.

At first, Isaac had mainly provided them with magic instruction, but as time went on his lessons had naturally progressed to include the martial arts as well.

While there were various different methods of casting magic, the most common one was manipulating one’s internal mana to sustain the casting, and

this was what Rina and Alize were learning. The other methods involved making use of the ambient mana in one's surroundings or drawing from the mana stored in an object—but at the end of the day, the most fundamental approach was using your own.

However, an individual's mana was a finite resource; casting too many spells would cause it to run out. And while it would recover naturally with time, it usually took several hours for one's levels to return to normal.

As such, since running out of mana had left Rina and Alize with a good deal of idle time, they decided to use that time to learn how to fight. At first, they'd simply repeated the basic exercises and forms they'd learned from Rentt, but once Isaac saw them, he began providing them with advice.

Rina and Alize were both the type of people who had no problem submitting to another's instruction, and they knew from Isaac's magic lessons that he was quite skilled, so they were more than happy to accept his guidance.

Eventually, Isaac started to suspect that they were growing bored of practicing sword swings over and over again, so he added more exercises to their training regimen. These days, they capped off their training sessions with a sparring session against Isaac himself. Overall, Rina and Alize's capabilities had improved considerably ever since Rentt and Lorraine had departed from Maalt.

However, Rina and Alize themselves did not realize how much better they'd gotten. This was because in their sparring against Isaac, it always took them around the same time to lose. Naturally, since it would be a problem if this demotivated them, he made sure to sprinkle in regular compliments at appropriate times during their training.

There was a limit to how much good that could do, however, and evidently that limit had been reached.

“Have I actually gotten any stronger...?”

Rina's murmur had been a truly quiet thing, meant for herself and spoken so softly that almost nobody would have been able to overhear—but the keen senses afforded to Isaac by virtue of being a vampire allowed him to catch it. In fact, his hearing was so sharp that he was able to notice a pin drop anywhere on the entire estate, if he so wished. Rina's quiet monologue was no effort at

all.

Isaac could not leave this matter be, of course, so he spoke up. “Rina.”

“Oh, um, yes?”

“This is merely a suggestion, but why don’t you try accepting a solo job? Doing so every now and again might help to break the monotony of just training all the time.”

As of late, Rina’s mind had been entirely occupied with looking out for Alize after Rentt and Lorraine had left her in her care. She had hardly accepted any commissions at all, and the ones she did take were all minor jobs like cleaning up around Maalt. She’d avoided any that involved heading to the dungeon or required traveling outside of town. This was not out of any dislike for jobs like that, but rather because Rina was so delighted to have her very own, first-ever apprentice—of sorts, anyway—that she was practically inseparable from Alize and wanted to spend every day supervising her.

As such, Rina’s response was...

“But...”

Her next words would likely have been “I can’t leave town because I need to look after Alize”—or yet more likely “I *want* to look after Alize”—but the young girl in question cut in first.

“You should go, Rina! Don’t worry about me! Didn’t you mention that you’re tight on money these days anyway?”

“Huh? Did I?”

Rina *had* been low on coin recently, as a matter of fact. Compared to how she’d been in the past, the types of commissions she was able to take had broadened considerably, and her skill at identifying herbs had improved to the point where she didn’t have to go on long forays outside of town to find and pick what she needed. As a result, she was a long way away from needing to live on her day-to-day earnings like she had always done in the past.

However, Rina’s finances were still not ample enough that she could purchase any luxuries without a degree of uneasiness, and if she did not take a proper,

well-paying monster-slaying job on occasion, she would end up penniless. Currently, her coin purse was nearing empty. She had no memory of mentioning this to Alize, but she must have muttered about it to herself or something while the girl had been around.

Ultimately, if it came down to it, Rina had no issue with camping outside. With her current body, the darkness of the night was actually soothing, and if anybody attacked her she could use Splintering to make her escape. However, if she did that, there was a chance that vampire hunters could catch wind and come sniffing around. She couldn't use any of her vampiric abilities in town so frivolously. Though Rina knew from Rentt and Isaac that she apparently wouldn't be judged a proper vampire even if she *was* found out, there was no need to take unnecessary risks. As such, camping outside...wasn't the best option. Perhaps it really was about time she went out and took a hunting job.

Given all that, Rina decided to heed Alize's words.

"Hmm...all right. If you say so, Alize. But make sure you stick to your training properly while I'm away, okay? No cutting corners."

Alize nodded. "Mm-hmm! Of course!"

"There should be no issue in that regard," Isaac added. "Don't worry—I will watch over Alize as long as she's here. Will you be taking your leave for the day then, Rina? If you plan to accept a commission tomorrow, then I imagine you must have some preparations to make."

"Yeah, I probably should," Rina agreed. "Alize...?"





“I’ll head home after a little more training.”

“Yeah? Okay, then. Do your best. And take care of her, Isaac.”

“I shall—to the best of my ability.”



“There,” Isaac murmured after Rina had left. “That should go a ways toward helping her regain her confidence.”

“I kind of already realized, but she really has lost it recently, hasn’t she?” Alize asked.

“Indeed. Likely that’s because she feels that she hasn’t improved by much. I would worry for you too, Alize, but it seems that you don’t share the same doubts.”

“It’s because I do chores at the orphanage every day. That usually takes a lot out of me, but recently I haven’t been feeling tired at all. I figured that meant I’d gained some stamina.”

“I see. I suppose Rina must feel the way she does because doesn’t have a benchmark like that to measure her progress against. Her training’s a good deal harsher than yours, so I believe she goes straight to sleep after she returns to her room at the inn.”

“You...can be really merciless once in a while, Isaac.”

“Ha ha. I’m *always* merciless.”

“Huh? Really? But when we’re just talking like this, you’re so kind. And cool! I bet you wouldn’t have any trouble finding a wife if you wanted.”

“As a servant of the Latuule family, I am occupied with my duties...but enough of that topic for now. Let us return to your training. Since you called me merciless, I’ll be pushing you a little harder than usual, all right?”

Alize groaned, before reluctantly saying, “*Okay*...I’ll do my best.”



“A commission, huh...?”

Although Isaac had suggested that she take one, Rina still felt hesitant. It wasn't because she was afraid of the work or anything. Far from it, in fact: with all the training she had been doing recently, she quite strongly wanted to accept a pile of jobs so she could really feel like an adventurer again.

Nevertheless, she was dragging her feet because she was convinced that her abilities hadn't *actually* improved. It would be a different story if her party members Raiz and Lola were with her, but they were still recuperating. Injuries caused by vampires harmed the spirit as well as the body, so it was going to take a little more time for them to make a full recovery. Still, it would also be detrimental if they stayed cooped up all the time, so every few days, they met up and took a simple job together. Nothing more than that, though.

If Rina was going to accept a proper commission, she'd have to do it alone, or work with people other than Raiz and Lola.

When she arrived at the guild, she stood in front of the commission board. As an adventurer, the only jobs she could accept were of the lowest rank, rated for Iron-classers like herself. If she'd been with Raiz and Lola, their party could also accept Bronze-class jobs, because those two had passed the Bronze-class Ascension Exam—with Rentt, in fact.

When it came to Rina by herself, however...

Well, she didn't have enough merit to her name that she could accept that level of job yet. She needed to put in the work first.

In Rina's mind, since she had gone on Bronze-class jobs before—albeit with a party—she'd thought the guild would let her attempt the Ascension Exam, but they were strict about that. It was fairly easy to sign up for the Bronze-class exam in the royal capital, though, so maybe that was more of a Maalt thing.

If it *was* just Maalt, there was always the option of going to the royal capital to take the exam there, but that then raised the question of whether or not she could actually pass it, and she was uncertain in that regard. But perhaps “uncertain” was underselling it; in truth, since she couldn't have any confidence in her own abilities at all at the moment, she reached the conclusion that she would likely fail.

In the end, her only option really was just to put in slow and steady effort.

*“You should have more confidence in yourself, Rina.”*

Isaac had said that during training. However, Rina thought that compared to herself in the past, she *had* gained a degree of confidence in her own abilities. It was just that everyone around her was so skilled and amazing.

Rentt Faina, skilled in not just combat and adventuring, but pretty much everything else too.

Lorraine Vivie, who was first class as both a mage *and* a scholar.

Isaac, who despite firmly proclaiming himself to be a simple servant of the Latuule family, was skilled enough in combat that he could easily wipe the floor with Rentt and Lorraine combined.

Laura Latuule, whose sheer presence even when asleep possessed unfathomable gravitas.

Alize, who despite her age was improving her command over magic at a rate much faster than Rina had when she’d started.

No matter who Rina compared herself to, she found herself coming up short. She didn’t think anyone could blame her for thinking that way—though she did realize that her point of view *was* a bit overly pessimistic, so she tried not to let it get her down too badly. Nevertheless, she still felt some resistance to being told that she should have more confidence. She didn’t think she deserved that.

“Are you perhaps unsure which commission you should take?”

When Rina turned to see who had spoken to her, she was met with a woman she knew: Sheila Ibarss, an employee of the Maalt guild and someone who was aware of Rentt’s secret. Rina had also heard that the guildmaster Wolf knew about it as well, but she hadn’t discussed the matter with either of them yet. The opportunity simply hadn’t come up, and there was a time and place for such things.

However, Rina was fairly sure Sheila knew about her “situation” too. From the look of things, Sheila had come over out of concern for her.

“Oh, Sheila—um, no, it isn’t that I can’t pick...”

“Hmm? Is that so? But you’ve been standing here staring at the commission

board for quite a while now.”

“I just had something on my mind... It’s not a big deal, though. I mean, you know how amazing Rentt and Lorraine are, right? I suddenly found myself thinking about where I stood in comparison to them, and, well...”

Sheila nodded in understanding. “They have been particularly impressive as of late, haven’t they? But that reminds me—they’ve been teaching you, right?”

Rina’s relationship to the pair could perhaps be most strongly defined by her special status of being Rentt’s vampiric kin, but there was no doubt that she was also his disciple, and he was her instructor. From the uncertain way that Sheila had asked, it appeared the latter fact hadn’t left a strong impression on her, but it wasn’t as though she’d forgotten entirely. Even if it had slipped her mind, it would have been entirely reasonable to have done so: guild employees heard hundreds of minor tidbits of information like that one every day. Perhaps Sheila was the type to genuinely just remember them all.

Rina realized that her admiration must have shown on her face, because Sheila tilted her head slightly to the side.

“Is something on my face?” she asked.

“No...I was just thinking that when it comes to amazing people, you certainly count too.”

Sheila’s eyes widened and she hurriedly began shaking her head. “Oh, no, not at all! I’m really quite ordinary, so please don’t count me in with the likes of them! In fact, Rina, I would say that you’re more—oh! But I didn’t mean that in a bad way, of course!”

By “bad way,” she likely meant that she hadn’t wanted to imply that she felt negatively about vampires. Rina knew this already from the way that Sheila hardly treated Rentt any differently despite knowing what he was. Part of that was because she knew him, though—it seemed unlikely that Sheila had any particular fondness for the random vampires out there prowling the world.

Come to think of it...would Laura and Isaac fall into that prowling vampire category? Did Sheila know about them?

Rina resolved to confirm that kind of thing more thoroughly with Rentt when

she next got the chance.

“No, *I’m* the normal person...I think,” she said. “An acquaintance of mine has been kind enough to train me recently, but I don’t feel like I’ve gotten any stronger. It makes me wonder if I’m really doing the best that I can...and that’s actually the reason I’m here today. They suggested that I come and accept a commission.”

After Rina bared her worries and frustration to Sheila, she nodded firmly. “I see...so that’s why you were standing here looking so distracted. Very well. If you don’t mind, could you wait here? I’ll be right back.”

Then, she ran off somewhere.



After a short while had passed...

“Sorry for the wait,” Sheila said, returning.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind,” Rina replied. “Where did you go?” She didn’t think that Sheila had any particular business with her, so she was curious as to what the guild employee had gone off to do.

“I was going through the commissions to find the perfect one for you, of course. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but not all of them get posted to the board. Some just haven’t been fully inspected, while others have specifications about the kinds of adventurers they want.”

*So she was looking for something to give me.* Sheila’s explanation wasn’t entirely new to Rina; she had heard about something along those lines before. By “inspection,” Sheila was talking about the procedures that the guild used to check whether or not it could accept the commission at all, whether the client had set an appropriate reward for the job, and whether it was designated as the appropriate difficulty, among other factors.

As for specifying what kinds of adventurers could take the job, that often involved requesting that candidates fit into certain categories, such as age, gender, and whether they were a swordsman, a mage, or some other profession—among other things. It could get quite specific.

Since not just anybody could take these commissions, most of the time it was up to the guild employees to pick out suitable adventurers and ask them about the job—or at least, that was what Rina had heard.

Still, as a greenhorn adventurer, Rina didn't have much to do with that kind of thing. Only Bronze-classers and above were picked by guild employees for those jobs, so she had never really paid them any mind.

Despite this, it seemed that Sheila wanted to show one such commission to Rina right now.

"Are you sure...?" Rina asked. "I'm still just Iron-class..."

"It's a common misconception, but not every commission that isn't posted on the board has class requirements," Sheila explained. "It's not a rule that Iron-classers can't take them. It's just that jobs which seem like they'd result in a dispute if given to an Iron-class go to Bronze-classers instead—and if the same problem crops up at that rank, then it gets passed to Silver-class, and so on and so forth. They're...well, they're not the easiest jobs to handle."

Upon hearing that, Rina only grew more worried. She had a hard enough time completing most of the normal commissions she took...would she even be able to handle one like that?

"There...probably weren't any jobs that I'm qualified for, right?" Once Sheila confirmed that there weren't, all Rina had to do was go back to the board and pick one that seemed relatively doable. *Whichever one I select would definitely be easier than any of the unposted jobs. Sheila really should have just hurried up and gotten that over with to begin with,* Rina thought.

However, Rina's expectations were overturned when Sheila said nonchalantly, "There were, actually, which is why I came back over." She paused. "Why do you look so dismayed...? I know I might have made it sound a little intimidating, but there's no need to be so fretful. If it's you, everything will be fine."

As Sheila encouraged the uncertain Rina, she handed over papers with the details of the commissions she had picked out. There were two, which caused Rina to tilt her head in confusion.

"Two...?" she asked.



“I thought it would be best if you had a choice. And with only two, there’s not *too* much to decide, right?”

“Thank you...”

Rina was on the verge of tears at Sheila’s kindness, but pulled herself together—crying would be far too pitiful—and studied the two sheets of paper, comparing them.

At the end of the day, Rina earned her bread as an adventurer, which meant that at times like these, she considered her options seriously.



One job involved serving as a porter for a Bronze-class adventurer who needed someone to carry their things for them during a delve into the Water Moon Dungeon. Since the client was a Bronze-classer, they apparently wanted an adventurer of the same rank, if possible. In any case, their goal was to do a preliminary exploration of the Water Moon Dungeon, and they would be grateful for the help.

Although the job seemed promising, it was slated to last for three days, during which they would have to camp inside the Water Moon Dungeon. That was not an easy ask by any means, which is probably why it hadn't been posted on the board.

Mentally, Rina discounted the job for the most part. While she had no problem with taking a three-day job, she wasn't confident that she could handle herself for such a long time in a dungeon. There were safe zones where monsters didn't appear of course, and those would be the places they made camp, but it was still no good. She had to gather more experience in dungeons before she attempted a job like that...

With that option eliminated, she studied the second commission: a merchant's request for a bodyguard. The client was a young woman, and she had specified that she wished to hire a female adventurer.

The plan the merchant described in the commission details was to visit several villages around Maalt, where she would sell various necessities that people needed for their daily lives. Then, she would use the money to purchase local specialties and bring them back to Maalt, where she would sell them at the marketplace. The scheduled length of this commission was also three days, and from the route described on the paper, they wouldn't be traveling through any areas with any particularly strong monsters.

That did not discount the possibility of something unforeseen happening, of course, such as a powerful monster that shouldn't have been there suddenly showing up in the area. However, if worries like those were enough to stop an adventurer from taking a commission, then none of them would ever accept any work at all. Wanting a guaranteed degree of safety was one thing, but get greedy for anything more and you'd never make it in the adventuring business.

After all, risking danger was quite literally part of the job description. It was natural to avoid it where you could, but that didn't mean you could run from it entirely.

The conditions of the job also seemed promising: lodgings during the journey were provided at the client's expense, and the pay was fairly decent.

"Have you decided which one you'd like?" Sheila asked.

Rina nodded, handed the papers back, and indicated the latter one. "I'm thinking of accepting this job."

"All right. Hmm, I agree that this is probably the better choice. And since the female client wants a female adventurer, you'd be doing the guild a favor by accepting it too..."

It was often said that the profession of adventuring did not discriminate when it came to gender, but it was the truth that there were more male adventurers than female ones—something that was perhaps only natural, in a certain sense.

In the end, it boiled down to brute physical strength. While there were many female adventurers who were far stronger than their male counterparts because of the mana or spirit they used to enhance themselves, before such factors came into play, the truth of the matter was that the profession was just not especially appealing to many women. When it came to swordsmanship, the majority of the people who knocked on the doors of training halls and academies were male. That wasn't the case for magic, but mages in and of themselves were far rarer, and thus only made for a small percentage of adventurers as a whole.

As such, female adventurers were well worth their weight in coin—especially if they were unusually competent. If Rina were to be asked whether she should be counted as one of those valuable individuals, she would shake her head and deny it, but she was also just glad to be helpful when she was needed.

A short time elapsed, during which Sheila brought the commission over to the reception desk and completed the necessary procedures for Rina to accept it.

"There you go," Sheila said. "The job's now yours. Since the time of departure is up to the adventurer, you should meet with the client today and inform her

that you've accepted the job, as well as discuss any preparations."

"Got it!" Rina replied cheerfully. "I'll go right away!"

Sheila watched her go as she departed the guild. "The client *is* a little fussy..." she murmured to herself. "But I'm sure it'll be fine. Probably..."

These ominous words did not reach Rina's ears.



"I hope it's not someone strange again..." Dorothea muttered.

Dorothea Merrow was a merchant, and she was currently lying on the bed in the room she had booked at an inn, staring at a stain on the ceiling that vaguely resembled a person's face. As for what she meant by "strange," she was referring to the male adventurer she had hired as a bodyguard a month ago at the guild in the provincial town of Zahak, to the west of Maalt.

Like all merchants, Dorothea's work was closely intertwined with the individuals known as adventurers. Merchants made their livelihoods by traveling from city to city and village to village, selling daily necessities, stocking up on local specialties, and selling them for a profit. As such, the most vital factor in their work was the safety of the roads they traveled.

The results of their trade were vital too, naturally, but a dead merchant obviously could not enjoy the fruits of their labor.

While there were a few high-stakes daredevils who risked their lives for the promise of great wealth each time they set out, Dorothea, at the very least, was not one such individual. She would not go so far as to say that she would *never* consider such a venture—she knew that one had to take chances like that at least once in one's lifetime—but for better or worse, she was not currently faced with an opportunity that forced her to make that decision, and neither did one seem to be coming her way anytime soon.

Right now, her plan was to earn a slow but steady profit, save up a decent amount of capital, and eventually own her own store in a decently sized city. Everything else she could deal with afterward.

This goal was what had driven her to set off on her own as a merchant

independent from her father, who was of the same profession, two years prior. She had put a lot of hard work into her goals—none of which had prevented her from running into trouble just the other day.

The male adventurer she had hired a month ago had looked down on her, his client, for being a woman, and had raised his fees accordingly. Under normal circumstances, that would be grounds for canceling the commission outright. However, he had only broached the topic halfway through their scheduled journey, meaning canceling then and there would have directly led to Dorothea's life being at risk. As such, she'd had no choice but to agree to his terms.

Upon the completion of the job, Dorothea had lodged a complaint with the guild, but—to everybody except the adventurer's chagrin—since she had formally agreed to his terms and he had followed all the correct procedures, the guild's hands were tied when it came to doling out any kind of punishment.

Thinking back, the man *had* been oddly specific and detailed about the exact terms of the commission before they had departed. As it had turned out, after discussing the *potential cases* where his fee would be raised and putting that into writing with her, he had taken that to the guild and informed them of their “agreement” prior to their departure, twisting his words when she wasn't around to object.

After that, Dorothea had then figured her next option was to bring her complaints to the man himself—but before she had even realized that was what she needed to do, he had already skipped town and was nowhere to be found.

The only conclusion Dorothea could draw was that he had planned all of this from the start. In a way, the adventurer had actually done an excellent job for what he'd set out to do.

Needless to say, the whole situation was exceedingly irritating. However, left with no other recourse, all Dorothea had been able to do was write it off as a stroke of bad luck and move on.

Of course, in her two years as an independent merchant, she had weathered similar trials before. Many, in fact—and because of that, she thought that she

was cautious when it came to watching out for such tricks. Unfortunately, this time around, the result showed that she just had not been cautious enough.

Dorothea recalled the words her father had given her when she had told him that she wanted to go independent, mumbling them under her breath.

“‘It’s a difficult thing for a woman to be a merchant’...”

Now, Dorothea knew what he had really meant by those words—he hadn’t been trying to stop her at all. But that was what she’d thought at the time, and it had resulted in a quarrel. In the end, she had left home on bad terms with her father, and had not been back ever since.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to see him. The truth was, she didn’t think she had the right to face him after what she’d done. When her father had said what he’d said, he had been talking about how female merchants faced trouble—just like having their protection fees raised—far more often than a male merchant did.

Dorothea was decently acquainted with a number of male merchants who were her peers, and whenever she spoke to them of her troubles, they would reply with unfortunate stories of their own. However, she experienced them much more frequently than they did, and she’d been cheated out of far more exorbitant amounts of coin.

In the end, people simply looked down on her because she was a woman. That was the conclusion she had been forced to draw, and it was one she wholeheartedly believed. Nevertheless, she had no intention of abandoning her career as a merchant—rather, the adversity only motivated her more.

She wanted to achieve her goals despite—no, *because* of what she had to go through, and each time she ran into another such obstacle, those feelings of hers only strengthened. Furthermore, just because she had gone through a rough time didn’t mean she couldn’t learn from it.

Still, that didn’t mean she was exactly in the mood to hire a male adventurer for her very next job, which was why she had asked for a fellow woman to accompany her. Dorothea knew that there were far fewer of them around compared to their male counterparts, and that meant it wasn’t feasible to make this a regular habit. If she wanted to smoothly keep to her sales schedules, she



could not make unreasonable demands.

However, given everything, for this particular foray, she was prioritizing her own peace of mind.

There was no guarantee that female adventurers wouldn't try to pull something on her either, though. A merchant's worries were inexhaustible. As such, all Dorothea could do was pray that someone decent would come along—hence the words she had muttered to herself alone in her room.

Then, there came a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Dorothea called out, sitting up and moving over to the edge of her bed.

The door opened to reveal one of the inn's staff. “You have a guest, ma'am. She claims she's an adventurer who accepted your commission...”

*So she's arrived.*

This time, Dorothea resolved to be meticulous with her negotiations so that she did not end up being cheated. Bracing herself for the struggle to come, she stood up and made her way down to the hall on the first floor of the inn that served as a dining room and rest area.

*Here goes nothing.*



Dorothea headed toward the hall feeling as though she was about to face down a ferocious monster, but was quite surprised by what awaited her when she arrived. That was because the hall, which was furnished with numerous sets of tables and chairs, was only occupied by a single person.

That sole person had to be the individual who had accepted Dorothea's commission. But, well...

There was no getting around the fact that she was clearly younger than even Dorothea herself.

Immediately upon seeing her, the girl seemed to infer that Dorothea was her client. She stood up from her chair and walked over.

“Um, pardon me, but would you happen to be Dorothea Merrow?” she asked with a smile.

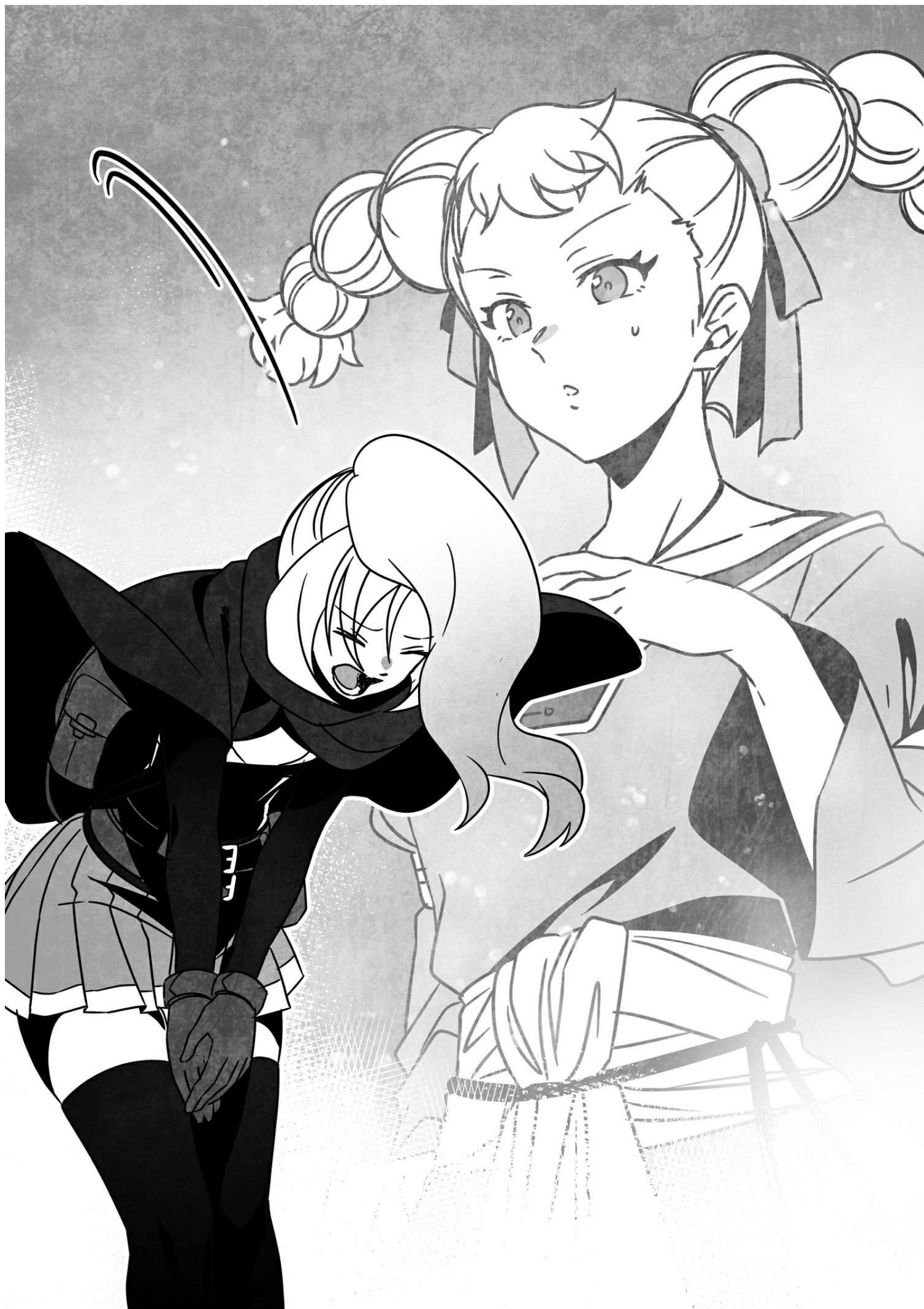
Dorothea desperately forced the frozen cogs of her mind to begin spinning again. “Y-Yes, I am... Did you...accept the job I listed?”

“I did! My name is Rina Rupaage, and I’m an Iron-class adventurer. It’s a pleasure to meet you—and to be working for you!”



*An Iron-class adventurer.*

Dorothea’s first reaction was surprise. The commission she had listed involved bodyguard work for her merchant caravan, which by necessity required a certain degree of ability.



More specifically, in this case, “ability” really meant “strength.” Given the route that Dorothea planned to take, she needed her bodyguard to be a Bronze-class adventurer at least, and she had made sure that was clear to the guild when she’d submitted her commission.

Then again, now that she thought back on it, her exact words had been closer to something like “anyone weaker and I would feel uneasy.” The guild employee had also said that they would take her requests into consideration and make the appropriate adjustments where necessary. They’d also explained that since Dorothea wanted to prioritize a female adventurer, there was a chance that her desired class wouldn’t be available.

Dorothea hadn’t been keen on that, but she *had* agreed to the terms. In short, since there hadn’t been any suitable Bronze-class female adventurers around, this girl had taken the job. To be perfectly honest, Dorothea didn’t mind that at all—but she *did* think the job might prove difficult for a single Iron-classer.

Still, for all that it could be haphazard and easygoing at times, the guild would never send out someone truly incapable of completing the job they had taken. Considering that, Dorothea wondered if this girl was actually pretty tough. It wasn’t as though class was always a completely accurate representation of an adventurer’s strength, and there were plenty of capable individuals whose classes just hadn’t caught up to them yet. After all, if they didn’t make the express effort to go out, build themselves a good record, and *then* undertake the Ascension Exams, their class wouldn’t go up.

Perhaps this girl was one such individual. Then again, she really did just look like a regular girl...

*Maybe I should turn her down...?*

Dorothea’s doubts must have reflected in her eyes, because the girl was quick to speak.

“Um, I’m sorry...” the girl said, a little self-deprecatingly. “I guess you wouldn’t really feel safe with me, right? I get that.”

For some reason, the girl’s—*Rina’s*—lack of confidence made Dorothea rather

angry. It wasn't Rina herself that irritated her, though. As someone for whom being belittled and having her abilities questioned was a daily occurrence, Dorothea saw herself in Rina.

Then, Dorothea had a sudden realization: *When I'm face-to-face with customers and business partners, I act just like this. That's why they look down on me.*

Even though none of that should ever matter—it wasn't gender or age that was important, but what you were capable of.

*And the same applies to adventuring classes.*

"No, that isn't it," Dorothea said, spurred on by that thought. "I was just surprised. You're much younger and more delicate-looking than I'd expected. While I'd be lying if I said I'm *not* uneasy...the guild sent you because they believe you can fulfill the terms of my commission, right? In that case, it's fine."

Some of Dorothea's irritation leaked out into her tone, making her words less polite and more brusque than she'd intended. Rina, however, just smiled at her.

"Delicate? Me?" Rina asked. "You know, I haven't been able to put on any muscle no matter how much I eat recently... And I really want to, so I've been eating a *lot*..."

Dorothea had to stop herself from blurting out, "That's *the part you comment on?!*" Instead, she said, "Now you're making me jealous... I put on everything I eat."

She was being mostly serious. Perhaps it was because she took her meals at irregular times due to the nature of her work, but it didn't take much food at all for Dorothea to put on weight. That was a good thing for a merchant, since it meant they could travel for longer on smaller amounts of supplies, but as a woman...well, Dorothea honestly *was* envious of Rina's ability to eat whatever she wanted, as *much* as she wanted, without gaining weight.

"You think...?" Rina asked. "I'd much rather have what I eat end up exactly where I want it to. No matter how hard I try...things are looking pretty bleak..."

Now that she mentioned it, Dorothea couldn't deny that Rina was a bit on the scrawny side, physically. However, she was still young. Who knew what the

future could hold for her? Dorothea was about to tell her that it was early to give up just yet, but Rina spoke before she could.

“Oh, we’ve kind of strayed from the main topic, haven’t we? Um, I came here to discuss the details of the journey we’ll be making. Do you have time right now, Dorothea?”

“S-Sure...” Dorothea replied. She nodded, swept into Rina’s momentum, and the pair sat down at a table.

Dorothea couldn’t get a good read on Rina. At first, she’d thought the girl lacked confidence, but now it seemed that maybe she had the determination to take everything at her own pace. Her intuition, however, did tell her one thing.

*Traveling with her seems like it’ll be fun.*



“...And that’s the rough plan for the route we’ll be taking. As for when we depart, I’d like to go as soon as possible. If it’s okay with you, that would be as early as tomorrow.”

After Dorothea finished laying out the plans she had made for their journey, she waited expectantly for Rina to answer her question. After taking a brief moment to think, the girl did just that.

“I don’t mind leaving tomorrow...but I would suggest taking a detour so that we don’t get close to the area around Tute Mountain. Also, I think using the Radha Highway would be better than using the Farga. The rest of the route seems fine though.” She even suggested some route changes for good measure.

For a moment, Dorothea almost lost her cool, wondering what an amateur would know about trade routes. A part of her assumed that Rina was making unnecessary suggestions to try and show off the fact that she was a proper adventurer.

However, when she took a better look at the girl’s expression, she didn’t see a trace of that jumped-up eagerness. Rina was the picture of composure.

The sight cooled the blood rushing to Dorothea’s head, and she decided to first ask Rina for the reasoning behind her suggestions.

“Can I ask why? Both of those routes are the shortest option for where I want to go, and I’ve used them many times before. If we go with your suggestions, it’ll add a whole half day to the journey.”

Dorothea wasn’t exaggerating in order to shoot down an amateur’s opinion either—that was the plain truth. Furthermore, the longer their journey took, the more risk there was of being attacked by monsters or bandits. It was basic practice to make one’s journey as short as possible.

Rina’s response, however, surprised Dorothea. “That was true up until yesterday,” Rina said. “But not anymore. There’s been a report that harpies have come to roost on Tute Mountain. They do this every year, but they’re a month early this time—likely because of the warm weather we’ve been having. I’m afraid to say that you’d only end up as feed for their hatchlings if you went that way, so it’s best to use a different route. As for the Farga Highway, you know about the bridge that it crosses, right? Apparently, it crumbled, so anyone trying to travel along the highway would be forced to turn back and go around instead. I mean, I’d get paid more in that case, so if you want to do that regardless, I guess I wouldn’t stop you...”



Dorothea was frankly astonished by Rina’s explanation. As for the reason she felt that way...

“It’s not that I doubt you...but is that really true? I thought I’d put quite a lot of effort into keeping up with information about my route, and I didn’t hear anything like that.”

While Dorothea was a minor traveling merchant, the sort that you could find anywhere, she *was* a legitimate member of the merchant’s guild. As such, she also had access to their information network. On top of that, she always made sure to talk with the other merchants around her about any changes in the local area. And even despite all of this effort, she hadn’t heard anything about the information Rina had just given her.

Rina nodded. “It’s probably because the news hasn’t really spread yet. I mean, I only heard it because I talked to the people who live near those areas.”

““Those areas’?”



“Yes. People from villages near Tute Mountain and the Farga Highway.”

“How did you...? Don’t tell me you went to the trouble of going all the way out there already?”

“Oh, no, of course not. It’s just, Maalt’s the biggest town in the region, right? People from smaller villages come here every now and again to pick up daily necessities; especially the villages where merchants like you don’t visit often. I see quite a lot of them whenever I go to the market, and at this point, we’re basically like acquaintances who chat every now and again.”

“I see...”

Indeed, only someone based in this specific town could use such a method of gathering information. While Dorothea could certainly talk to those same people if she went to the market, she wouldn’t know who lived where and how much faith she could put in their words. In the end, she’d only end up with information that was of questionable reliability.

However, since Rina was actually based in Maalt and talked to these acquaintances of hers regularly, she could separate the good information from the bad. It wasn’t foolproof, of course, but then again, neither was the information provided by the merchant’s guild.

As if to prove that point, Dorothea then asked, “Can we trust those reports?”

Rina replied, “I can’t say they’re *definitely* accurate, but I do think they’re trustworthy, yes. Of course, as I said earlier, I’ll go along with whatever you decide, so...”

So the final decision fell to Dorothea. Likely enough, all Rina wanted to do was share knowledge she thought would be necessary.

*Hmm. What should I do?*

When it came to your everyday merchant, most of them would probably choose to put their faith in what they’d learned from the merchant’s guild and proceed as they’d initially planned. After all, the guild’s information network was tried and tested, and even though it slipped up every now and again, it was fundamentally trustworthy on the whole.

In comparison, an adventurer's knowledge of the situation could be suspect—though that was really something that had to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes trusting an adventurer's word had led merchants to rare opportunities and massive fortunes. Other times, it had led them to the exact opposite.

In short, it was all or nothing.

Dorothea knew that she in particular was extremely vulnerable to such gambles. However, at the very least...unlike the adventurer she'd hired a month ago, Rina didn't seem dishonest to her. In fact, if Rina had only wanted to increase her retainer fee, all she would've had to do was keep quiet and proceed with Dorothea's plan. They would have been forced to turn back and take detours, adding even more days to their journey, which she could have used as grounds to ask for a larger payout. Dorothea wouldn't even have blamed her for that—in fact, she would have agreed to the increased payment. It was only fair, after all.

However, Rina hadn't done that.

*Doesn't that mean that I can trust her, then?*

That didn't mean that Dorothea could completely place herself in Rina's hands, of course, but she could at least place her faith in the information she had provided...right?

"Okay..." Dorothea said. "I'm going to trust you. Let's alter the route. We'll take a detour around Tute Mountain and use the Radha Highway."

Rina's smile was nothing but honest. "Oh, great! I wasn't sure if I'd be strong enough to keep you completely safe from a whole harpy flock on my own..."

Now *that* was a scary thought—one that called a question to Dorothea's mind. "Just asking, but...what would you have done if I'd chosen to go near Tute Mountain and the harpies had attacked us?"

"I would've fought to the best of my ability, of course. Well, to begin with, you *can* pass by harpies without any issue so long as you don't kick up a particularly loud fuss...but it's just a problem of numbers, really. When harpies settle in an area to roost, they form flocks in the hundreds, so there's a limit to

how much I could really do against them alone. I probably could have managed to deliver your final mementos to the merchant's guild though."

"Meaning...in a scenario like that, I would die?"

"We probably would've chosen to turn back once we saw a huge harpy flock, so I don't think it would ever have reached that point. But if you had insisted on forcing our way through, I can't say the possibility is exactly *low*..."

*I suppose you never know where a pitfall might be waiting for you...*

Dorothea knew that Rina had nothing to do with that, of course—in fact, it seemed like she would have done her absolute best to protect her. Regardless, Dorothea was certain that if she had run into a flock of harpies, she would have turned back just as Rina had said, so it never would have come to that anyway.

There *were* merchants out there who would have tried to force their way through, however, which is why Rina had said what she did. The young adventurer knew that there was really nothing to be done for clients like that.

Still, hearing about the possibility of her own death spoken about so casually by a girl who looked like she would never even harm a fly made Dorothea feel as though she had caught a glimpse of what made Rina a true adventurer—someone who was constantly fighting alongside the looming specter of death.

Then, a sudden question occurred to Dorothea. "Come to think of it, when you say you would have delivered my final mementos...were you implying that you were confident you *wouldn't* have died?" Taking Rina's words at face value, that would seem to have been what she was saying.

"I suppose so..." Rina replied. "Yeah, I don't think I would have died."

Her casual tone *had* to imply that she trusted in her own capabilities. If she could be so confident against monsters, then even if she was an Iron-class adventurer...

Well, maybe the guild had sent Dorothea the perfect candidate for her needs after all.

"I see," she said. "I'm glad we were able to have this discussion. I get the feeling that I'm quite lucky you were the one who accepted my commission."

“Does that mean...?”

“Yes, consider yourself formally hired. I’m counting on you.”

“Of course! I’ll do my absolute best!”

## Intermission: Lorraine's Choice

"You picked up an unusual magical item?"

I, Lorraine Vivie, found my curiosity piqued by the words that Rentt had just uttered after returning home.

Naturally, being an adventurer who made a living from delving dungeons, Rentt came across magical items on a daily basis. However, the only dungeons he could challenge around these parts were the Water Moon Dungeon and the New Moon Dungeon, and the varieties of magical items that could be found in those were long since fully documented.

Rentt was more or less capable of identifying such trinkets, and even if he wasn't, he could always bring it to the guild, where they could identify most things that he couldn't.

However, he sometimes ran into some exceptions—and today appeared to be one such occasion.

"Yeah. Here, take a look. Well, I said it was unusual, but it just looks like a regular 'Mirror of Youth.'"

Rentt turned the mirror to me, whereupon I saw myself of ten years ago looking back at me. That really took me back—I'd only just come to Maalt around that time.

"It looks like one to me," I said. "Is there something strange about it?"

Rentt shuffled over, and his reflection joined mine in the mirror. It wasn't his monster self, of course, but the Rentt of ten years ago, back when he'd still been human. When I turned aside to look at the real thing however, I still saw a man in a skull mask.

Mirrors of Youth did not actually return a person's youth. This was all they did: show you a reflection of your younger days. It was interesting as curiosity, but since there were married noblewomen out there who could become obsessed with the mirrors—or distressed by them—they were considered items

to be handled carefully.

“Keep looking. It should happen soon enough,” Rentt said. “Oh, there it goes!”

I turned my gaze back to the mirror. “Wow. What? But I’m not moving...”

My younger self was waving her hand, and so was the younger Rentt. However, neither the real Rentt nor I were moving.

“I’m not wrong about this, am I?” Rentt asked. “The guild’s appraiser said it was a regular Mirror of Youth, but it can’t be...right?”

“Of course it isn’t. Those only show you your past self; the reflections in them definitely don’t move on their own. Where did you get this...?”

“Just on one of my regular trips to the Water Moon Dungeon. I fought a pack of goblins, and one of them dropped it. I know Mirrors of Youth don’t fetch much, but I brought it back anyway thinking I could trade it in for a silver...and *that* happened when I was looking at it on the way home. Talk about a surprise.”

“The Water Moon Dungeon, huh? If that’s where you found it, I suppose it’s not all that weird...”

The mysterious person Rentt had once encountered was based there, after all. It was also in the Water Moon Dungeon that Rentt had obtained his powerful robe and the Map of Akasha which wrote itself. Consequently, it would make sense to find other unusual items lying about in there.

“That’s what I figured,” Rentt agreed. “Anyway, I brought it here hoping you could look into it, as well as tell me how much I could sell it for.”

“I don’t mind having a look, but as for the price...I’ve never even heard of an item like this. I suspect you could sell it for a fortune, but if you want an exact figure, I couldn’t—wha?!”

Something absolutely shocking occurred right in the midst of our conversation: the Rentt in the mirror had gotten closer...and reached his hands *out* of the mirror to grab us.

“What in the—?!”

“Hey, isn’t this kind of a bad sign...?”

The very moment that Rentt and I uttered those inane lines, we were pulled completely into the mirror.



“Ow...”

I shook my head and looked around. I must have bumped it on something, because it hurt slightly—but it didn’t seem that serious, so I let it be while I took in my surroundings. Or at least, that had been my intention...

“There’s nobody here...not even Rentt. In fact, there’s nothing around at all...”

I was surrounded by a completely empty void. Yet for some reason, I could still put my feet on the “ground,” as well as see myself with no issues.

I didn’t know what was going on, but I began to chant a light spell, hoping to make use of a little illumination before I tried anything else. However, the magic fizzled out.

“What...?” I mumbled to myself, confused.

Then, I heard voices echoing from out of the darkness.

*“I told you, that’s wrong!”*

*“How should I make it, then?! This is perfect!”*

It sounded like an argument. When I turned my gaze in the direction of the voices, I noticed I could see into a room that hadn’t been there before. The room was spacious, as though it belonged in a mansion, and it contained an enormous number of books—as well as two individuals who were facing each other. One appeared to be an elderly mage, while the other...

“That’s...me. When I was younger...”

It looked like my seven-or eight-year-old self. But though I could see the resemblance, her expression was rather cheeky, as though she was fully convinced that she was a hundred percent in the right at all times.

*I suppose I was like that back then, wasn’t I?*



I remembered the elderly gentleman—it was my old mentor, under whose tutelage I had learned all things magical and academic. In other words, someone deserving of my respect...not that I had shown an ounce of it at the time. I wondered what he was up to these days. I assumed he was still alive somewhere, at any rate. He wasn't the type to just keel over and die.

As for what he and my younger self were arguing about...

"If I remember right...we were arguing over how I'd made my wand. And next, I..."

*"Stupid, stubborn old man!"*

My younger self hurled the wand at the old man. The next moment, he focused a dense swirl of mana into his hand and launched it back toward her as a spell. It was unbelievably quick work—almost superhuman—and I doubted that I would be capable of it even today.

I wanted to tell him not to cast such a spell at a child, but there was no point. It grazed my younger self's ear, and she passed out as the spell pierced the wall behind her.

*"Which one of us is really the stubborn one here? Good grief, child..."*

After gently checking that she was not seriously harmed, my old mentor repaired the hole in the wall and used a spell to carelessly hurl my younger self onto a bed.

"I think it's both of us, honestly..." I muttered, unable to hold myself back.

The next moment, the view changed. This time, it was...

"The administration office in the First University..."

Now, it was the place where I used to work.

I saw myself sitting in my old chair, looking bored. Scholars came and went constantly, giving me reports that I had somehow dredged up the motivation to listen to. However, their faces were utterly featureless. No matter how hard I tried to recall what they looked like, I couldn't remember.

I supposed that meant that these scenes were based on my memories—the things I didn't remember were vague and unclear.

I approached my younger self to get a better look at her desk and saw a number of reports, the details of each of which were clear and precise. In conclusion, I definitely remembered *those*.

Back then, I hadn't looked at people. I'd only had eyes for knowledge.

Now that I was aware of that fact, it felt like I was being confronted with exactly how blind I'd been to my surroundings back then.

Things were different these days, though—and that was because I knew that being confronted with my past didn't have much of an effect on me.

The scene continued to play out. A young female scholar entered through the door and began relaying some manner of report to me. Unlike the others, her features were distinct. I did know who she was: my past subordinate.

*"Lorraine, aren't you exhausted?"*

*"Not really...more importantly, have you finished compiling the report I asked you to? Also—"*

*"Don't worry, I'll have it all done soon. You prioritize taking it easy for once. Why not go on a trip somewhere from time to time, just as a break from work?"*

*"I...don't need anything like that."*

*"Honestly...well, if you ever do want a break, just let me know. I'll figure out a way to help you budget the time."*

*"Sorry to make you worry, but really, I'm fi—"*

*"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Don't forget to let me know, okay? Whenever you feel like it."*

The woman left.

*"A break, huh...?"* my past self muttered when the door closed behind her subordinate.

A single sheet of paper fluttered off the desk. On it was a variety of information about frontier towns and the rare materials in those areas that couldn't be found elsewhere.

That's right...back then, I got curious about those materials and...

*"I'd like to go one day, but my hands are full right now. One day, though..."*

Hmm? I didn't remember ever saying that. In fact, I recalled saying...

"I suppose I *will* take a holiday."

I whirled around, surprised by the voice from behind, and came face-to-face with my child self looking up at me. When did she...?

"Right...that *is* what I said," I agreed, trying to keep my composure. "I still remember. Then I went to Maalt...and met Rentt."

"But aren't you curious about what would have happened...if you hadn't done that?" my younger self asked.

"Hmm? A little bit, I suppose, but..."

My child self snapped her fingers, and a flood of information rushed into my head: a rapid procession of the actions I likely would have taken if I'd never gone to Maalt.

I saw myself conducting research into multiple fields at once, achieving meritorious results in all of them, and getting promoted. In the end, I sat in the chair of the university's director, respected by all the scholars around me.

That *had* been what I'd wanted once. If my past self had seen this, she would have declared it her goal without any hesitation. But now...

"In here, you can have it," my child self said. Her voice had taken on an ethereal quality, and it seeped into my thoughts. "You can live out that same dream as many times as you want."

"All that glory..." I murmured. "As many times as I..."

Having my theses recognized, lauded, and praised—then being promoted because of them? That would certainly feel good. There was no denying that it would be fun, in a sense.

Back then, as I worked toward that dream, I felt something in my heart that was close to satisfaction—no, *completion*. So repeating a life like that, over and over, might not be such a bad thing...

"Still, that doesn't hold a single bit of charm for me now."

My child self stared at me, shocked. “What? Why? The hypnotism should already have started to take effect...”

“I *knew* it. I’ve been feeling something strange ever since I got here, like a lightness in my head... You’re a monster, aren’t you? Not a magical item. You’re so rare that I didn’t realize at first, but you’re a Specular Fiend. You lurk in mirrors and make the reflected world your own... The illustrated examples of you in books are much more sinister, so I suppose that’s another reason I didn’t figure it out. I certainly didn’t expect you to use a Mirror of Youth as a disguise.”

Now that it had been exposed, the form of my child self melted away to become a hideously emaciated goblin-like figure. It bared its teeth, reached out with its claws, and leaped at me.

“Thank you for the nice dream,” I said. “It was fun.”

I stepped past the Specular Fiend in one smooth motion, drawing the sword from my hip and slamming the hilt into its head as hard as I could. Cracks began to spread all over its body, growing larger and larger, before...

*Crack!*

With a loud shattering noise, the void world broke apart.

Before I realized it, I was in the living room of my own home, with the broken remnants of the Mirror—no, of the Specular Fiend—at my feet. Rentt was next to me.

“Me?! A Mithril-class adventurer?! But—huh? Wait, where am I...?”

Evidently he had fallen for the Fiend’s trick. However, since I had killed its main body, he had returned along with me.

“That was an illusion...” I told him. “Don’t tell me you didn’t figure it out?”

“No...I did,” he replied. “It was just that I was having so much fun I figured I could enjoy it a little bit longer. I guess I’m back now, huh...?”

He sounded disappointed. So he had purposefully allowed himself to be tricked, despite knowing what was happening? Talk about dangerous.

Not that I was really in a position to talk. I’d essentially been doing the same thing for about half the time.

“So, what did you see, Lorraine?” Rentt asked. “In my illusion, I became Mithril-class.”

“Me? I had a dream where I became the director of my university.”

“Just a dream? If you tried, I bet you could actually make that happen.”

“It wouldn’t be *impossible*, sure, but I’ve no particular inclination to do it. I quite like my life the way it is now.”

“Some would say you’re weird for thinking that.”

“I don’t want to hear that from *you*.”

From then on, it was business as usual. Over dinner, we had a fun time talking about our experiences inside the mirror. In addition, analyzing the illusion that had been placed on me gave me a starting point for the creation of a new spell, so all in all, it had been a very satisfying experience.

*If I could have one wish, it would be for days like this to last forever.*

The choice I’d made that day had led me to the life I led now—and for that, I would always be grateful.

## Chapter 3: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 2

“Ahh. So you’re working hard to become a merchant that your father can be proud of?”

It was nighttime, and while the sky was a brilliant panoply of stars, the only two figures seated by the crackling campfire below were Dorothea and the adventurer she had hired as her bodyguard—Rina.

A day had elapsed since they’d departed from Maalt. The pair had spent much of the journey so far talking, and they were now quite comfortable around each other.

Although there was usually a certain kind of tension in the air between a merchant and their adventurer bodyguard, the relaxed manner in which Rina carried herself had borne fruit in this particular case. No such tension had developed between her and Dorothea. Naturally, Dorothea recognized that beneath Rina’s gentle demeanor there was a sharp, quick-witted adventurer, so she had not wholly relaxed her guard, but the fact remained that they had established quite an amicable relationship.

“That’s not the only reason, of course,” Dorothea said. “But yes, I suppose that’s my current goal. My father manages a moderately large establishment in Mystera, you see. One day I want to have my own store that’s just as impressive, if not more.”

Mystera was a provincial city quite far from Maalt, farther west than even the royal capital. Nevertheless, it was much larger and more prosperous, and the merchant companies there competed with each other fiercely. It also boasted a large population thanks to the frequent movement of people and goods to and from the nations to its west, and one could find products from a diverse array of cultures there.

Accordingly, it was easy to imagine just how much effort was required to go from owning nothing but the clothes on one’s back to managing one’s own store in such a city. Dorothea’s father had not originally been a merchant—

merely an apprentice from a small village sent out to learn the trade. Though he had been able to read, write, and do arithmetic, Dorothea knew that the hardship he must have gone through to reach his current position must have been great.

“You can do it! I know you can!” Rina encouraged Dorothea. “As long as you work hard and don’t give up, your dream *will* come true!”

Dorothea’s usual reaction to such hackneyed words would have been to scoff, saying, “And what do you know about my dream? That’s a lot easier said than done.” Yet the adventurer had been so honest and guileless that she couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Pfft! Ha ha! I suppose you’re right. I’m in the middle of putting in that effort right now. It’s just, I don’t know when it will ever pay off. Sometimes, people tell me I’m aiming for the impossible...but *nothing’s* impossible. Right?”

“Right! You never know what’s going to happen in life. A dragon could suddenly appear in front of us right now—and somehow leave a few of its scales behind. Wouldn’t *that* be a boost to your capital!”

“I seriously doubt that would happen...but you’re right, I can’t say it’s *completely* impossible. If I had a stroke of good luck like that, it would take me leaps and bounds closer to my dream.”

“To be fair, I guess it could also just attack us on the spot.”

“That...seems the more likely possibility, yes. I think rather than count on miracles, I’ll just keep making slow and steady efforts.”

“That’s definitely the right way to go about it. Oh, actually, I’ve been meaning to ask. You mentioned earlier that...”

The topic changed, with Rina asking Dorothea about the various troubles she had encountered in the past. The merchant told her everything—they had plenty of free time as they were just watching over the campfire—beginning with the adventurer she had hired the previous month and going further back to describe more incidents than she could shake a stick at.

While it had only been two years since she’d set out on her own, adding up the stories as she talked made her truly appreciate just how much she had gone



through. She wrote all of that off as just the facts of life, however—everything that had befallen her had happened because of her own inexperience or because others had looked down on her for being a woman.

Rina, however, tilted her head to the side, looking confused. “I don’t know about you, but that sounds like a bit too much to be normal. Even if you’re a fledgling merchant and people treat you poorly because you’re a woman...it shouldn’t be *that* frequent.”

“You think? Isn’t that just how it is, though? Didn’t you go through a lot when you started your career as a female adventurer, Rina?”

“I can’t say I didn’t run into *any* of that stuff...but it was never as frequent as what happened to you. Besides, in my case, my biggest problem was that I simply couldn’t make enough money. Things are different these days, but I used to always worry about the cost of my daily meals and lodgings.”

“That’s surprising. You have such a good eye for herbs and materials. Shouldn’t that have been enough for you to get by?”

Since Maalt was on the frontier, that meant immediate access to the natural bounties of the forests and mountains that surrounded the town. As such, one could find many materials and ingredients that were rarely seen in big cities. A simple example was useful plants: it was common to find herbs that would go for expensive prices in the city just growing on the side of the road as you trundled along in a wagon.

In fact, Rina had done this quite frequently throughout the day. With her keen eye for flora, she had picked out many examples of such herbs despite the scenery passing by quite quickly as she rode on the back of the wagon, saying such things like “*Oh, that’s arcante grass,*” or “*Look at all those dewdrop herbs. Aren’t they pretty?*”

Though Rina hadn’t suggested that they stop the wagon to go pick them, Dorothea had done it herself. Since they had a travel schedule to keep, they couldn’t do so too frequently, but she recognized it as an opportunity to stock up on products that weren’t available in big cities for when she headed there down the line.

Thus, after discussing it with Rina, they began harvesting the useful flora that

they came across throughout their journey. Most of the time, this just meant that Rina would promptly hop over and gather everything while Dorothea waited. Though she had offered to go help, the adventurer had insisted that working alone would be faster. Dorothea actually started to feel guilty, wondering if the pay they'd initially agreed upon for this job was really worth all the extra things Rina was doing, so she decided to give a part of the profit she made from selling these herbs to the young adventurer later.

Although Rina had said that she didn't mind, Dorothea had her pride as a merchant to maintain. It was only proper to compensate the person who helped you to acquire your stock. Also, Dorothea expected she would likely hire Rina again in the future, so establishing a good relationship would be beneficial.

All of which was to say that Rina's eye for flora was quite impressive—hence Dorothea's puzzlement over why she had been unable to earn a living for herself.

"I only learned how to do that relatively recently," Rina explained. "Back when I really didn't know anything, somebody was kind enough to teach me all sorts of skills. It was thanks to him that I became a proper adventurer."

"Ah, so he was your mentor."

"Exactly. The thing is, he's the type who easily gets dragged into trouble, and I kind of got pulled in along with him. So— Oh, what's that? I guess you might not be so different from him, Dorothea."

Rina turned her gaze toward the forest, where there was a flash of movement. Dorothea was quick to pick up on the meaning of her words.

*Twang!*

An object flew through the air toward them—and was promptly knocked to the ground by Rina's sword. Dorothea realized that she hadn't even seen the young adventurer move, but Rina was already standing between her and the edge of the forest.

Rina took a dagger hanging from her waist and threw it into the trees. Shortly after, there was a strangled grunt.

"Wh-What is it?" Dorothea asked.

“Bandits, if I had to guess,” Rina said. “It seems like they only have one archer, so there probably aren’t too many of them. It shouldn’t take me long to deal with them, then. Please return to the wagon. There’s nobody nearby at the moment, but if anything happens, yell for me and I’ll come running. All right...I’ll be back soon.”

Rina ran off, disappearing into the forest.



There were many days in a person’s life that were just plain unlucky, Guster thought.

The thing was, you didn’t tend to notice until you were already in the thick of it. In fact, he had woken up this morning feeling grateful for his recent streak of good luck. However, if he had the ability to turn back time—specifically to, say, about a week ago—then he was pretty sure he would have chosen differently.

These were the thoughts that ran through his mind as death hunted him down through the forest.

*Yeah. A week ago. That was when this all started.*

Guster led a group of ne’er-do-wells based in the vicinity of a village called Muga, which was a little distance away from Maalt. Muga mainly functioned as a waypoint for people to spend the night when traveling the frontier, so it saw a great deal of traffic from merchants who had their eyes on obtaining the valuable materials and ingredients that nature provided around these parts. For miscreants like Guster, it was an excellent hunting ground in which to find juicy prey.

Of course, merchants who belonged to large companies always had groups of hired adventurers guarding them and so were generally untouchable, but that was not always the case for everyone else on the lower to middle end of the scale. While these smaller merchants understood the necessity of hiring protection, there were those who went without regardless, gambling their chances on big profits, as well as those who lacked the connections or means to hire reliable adventurers, forcing them to travel with less than adequate protection.

It was these merchants that Guster generally targeted. What was more, his group was well-balanced. It was formed around a swordsman—Guster himself—and included an archer and a mage, so they were able to carry out their “work” quite efficiently.

Naturally, they also made sure never to draw too much attention; it wouldn’t do to have the authorities on their trail.

Their efforts paid well, and each member of the gang now had a pretty pile of coin stashed away. One more string of profitable jobs and they would have enough capital to head to the city and set up their own store, purchase a small house in the countryside, and live the easy life—or go whatever separate ways they pleased. Since Guster and his group had originally been destitute villagers, they had no particular love for the bandit’s life. They had only taken it up out of necessity, and once they had made enough, they would move on.

Regarding this particular job, Guster and his companions had been drinking at a tavern when a man walked over to their table.

“Good evening, gentlemen.”

Guster’s first thought had been that the man seemed shady. However, his instincts honed from many years of banditry also recognized that the man was very well-off. Everything on his person seemed expensive, and he carried himself with the unique bearing that the wealthy tended to have.

Guster also knew that such people were sometimes wont to give out large amounts of money on a whim. As such, he had decided to hear the man out—unaware that this marked the beginning of his own end.

“Need something, pal? Me and my friends ain’t necessarily inclined to listen to strangers without a little *incentive*, if you catch my drift.”

No sooner had he spoken than a large pouch was tossed onto the table with the telltale *clink* of coin.

Guster was neither hard of hearing nor of reasoning, of course. He had swiftly—although not *too* swiftly, since he didn’t want to come across as desperate—snatched the pouch up and examined its contents: a frankly unbelievable number of gold coins.

With that much money, even split evenly between the group, they would all be able to retire from the bandit life on the spot. Then common sense caught up, and Guster examined the stranger silently. He knew that such a well-paying job would naturally incur an equivalent amount of risk.

“I’m not asking you to do anything particularly difficult,” the stranger had said. “I just want you to give someone a little fright—a female merchant. Do make sure not to kill her, however.”

The stranger had gone on to explain that said female merchant was an acquaintance of his, and that it had been two years since she had taken up the merchant’s life. However, she had not been doing well, and her future prospects—or lack thereof—were quite clear. And while he had attempted to convince her of this, she had only replied with a blunt refusal.

As such, the stranger said that he’d been left with no choice but to dampen her enthusiasm in other ways, so he’d attempted many different methods of interfering with her business. And yet, none had worked, which was why he had come to Guster and his companions.

“If she managed to push on despite all that, doesn’t that actually mean she’s a good fit for the merchant life?” Guster asked incredulously.

“But then I won’t be able to—!” the stranger exclaimed, before cutting himself off. “Ahem. Pardon me. I did not intend to raise my voice. I have my reasons for doing this—hence the considerable amount of money I’m offering you. I’m not asking you to *kill* her. Not too bad an offer, is it?”

Guster and his companions mulled it over. It was impossible to tell how much of the stranger’s story was true. However, given the nature of their work, it was fair to say that their “clients” *never* told the entire truth anyway. If that was enough to make his gang hesitate to take an offer, they never would have gotten anywhere.

The main issue was simple: how dangerous would the job be?

“If this merchant woman has at least two bodyguards who are Bronze-class or above, we won’t take the job,” Guster said. “If those terms are agreeable to you, then we can move on to discussing specifics.”

The actual truth of the matter was that Guster and his group were entirely capable of fighting two Bronze-classers on even footing. They likely could have scraped by even against three. However, there was no telling how such fights would end up for certain. If they wanted to feel safe and come out the other side unharmed, then one adventurer of Bronze-class or lower was the best-case scenario. Regarding Iron-class adventurers, Guster and his group could probably handle five, but it still wouldn't be a sure thing.

This would be their final job. All of them wanted to finish it safely and part ways with a smile. As such, the terms had to be as beneficial as they could get away with.

Perhaps that would have caused the stranger to leave and try to hire someone else, but if that were to happen, then so be it. When it came to this line of business, managing risk was the be-all and end-all. Anyone who forgot that would end up dead in a ditch by morning, and it was because Guster and his companions had *not* forgotten that they had survived this long.

After Guster waited a while for the stranger's response, it eventually came.

"That prudence is exactly why I wish to hire *you*. I believe you are capable of keeping a secret, and I trust that you will get the job done to the letter. Speaking of which—regarding the terms, I have no issue with your condition. I doubt she has the funds to hire that much protection anyway; she'll have one Bronze-class adventurer with her at best. If she *does* have two or more, I don't mind if you simply keep an eye on her and do nothing more. As for your compensation, you can keep everything in that pouch in *either* case. Now...do we have a deal?"

The terms were clearly very favorable for Guster and his companions. Nevertheless, they made sure to take the time to discuss the matter among themselves regardless.

Afterward, Guster gave his reply: "All right. It's a deal. What's your name, strange— No. I guess it's better if I don't ask, right?"

The stranger smiled. "You guess correctly. I look forward to your success, gentlemen."

The two had then exchanged a handshake, and after the stranger provided

Guster and his companions with information on the female merchant, they parted ways.



It should have been the perfect opportunity. After Guster and his companions confirmed that the female merchant—Dorothea—had hired an adventurer in Maalt, their reconnaissance at the guild had paid off with the information that her bodyguard was an Iron-class adventurer. Furthermore, when they had looked into said adventurer, they learned that she was a rookie who had seemed unable to even make ends meet as of late.

However, would hiring just that one adventurer really be any guarantee of safety? If Dorothea understood the general capabilities of Iron-classers, then chances were she would take on additional bodyguards, so Guster and his companions had carefully maintained their watch over her.

In the end, Dorothea had been satisfied with the single Iron-class adventurer that she'd hired and departed from Maalt the very next day.

Guster and his companions considered themselves lucky—they had been prepared to face a single Bronze-classer at the very minimum. This was truly the *perfect* opportunity.

On the other hand, if it had been two Bronze-classers or more, Guster and his gang could have simply done nothing but surveil the target and come away with the same amount of pay, which would have been perfect in its own way.

After this job, however, Guster and his companions planned to retire from this line of work, part ways, and settle down somewhere. Rather than leaving a client with a grudge to settle after they'd done a half-baked job, it was best for their own peace of mind to cleanly carry out the details of the work they had been hired to do.

That was perhaps disagreeable logic from the perspective of their target, but Guster and his companions looked out for themselves first and foremost.

The world was a harsh place. While what little conscience Guster had left deep inside was busy commiserating with his mark, telling her that she ought to blame the whims of life for her troubles, he kept quiet in his hiding spot within

the forest. Eventually, he gestured with his hand, giving the signal to the archer stationed on a tree branch above with an arrow nocked and at the ready.

Currently, their two targets were eating. Mealtimes were when travelers were the least aware of their surroundings, meaning it would be almost impossible for them to avoid the sudden shot of an experienced archer. Even if they were able to manage that feat, it would leave them flustered, and six people suddenly bearing down on them would easily be enough to overwhelm a single bodyguard.

That was all it would take. Guster and his companions weren't underestimating their target, of course—this was simply what their experience against countless Iron-class adventurers in the past had taught them.

A Bronze-classer would have been a different story, but it wasn't at all difficult to guess the skill level of an adventurer who'd been stuck at Iron-class for a while, especially if they weren't even good enough to support themselves. Someone like that couldn't possibly stand up to Guster and his companions.

Thus, their plan was foolproof.

The archer drew back the string and fired at his target: the merchant woman.

The reason he hadn't aimed at the adventurer was, quite simply, insurance—in the event that everything else went badly, injuring the target would fulfill the minimum terms of the job they'd been hired for. Additionally, aiming at a bodyguard's client restricted their options and movements. In short, it would make the entire skirmish easier for Guster's side.

Or at least, that had been the plan.

*Clang!*

The arrow that the archer had fired was knocked out of the air. As for who had done it, the answer was obvious: the adventurer who had *just* been sitting down by the campfire. Before anyone had realized, she'd placed herself between the archer and the target, determined the arrow's trajectory, and struck it down mid flight.

"Guster! She— Ack!"



Just as the archer was about to inform Guster of what was happening, he let out a strangled grunt and fell from the tree where he'd taken up his position. A dagger sprouted from his chest in what was clearly a fatal blow.

"Impossible! She shouldn't have been able to see through the darkness!"

Despite the words he was uttering, Guster recognized that she clearly *had* been able to see—her throw wouldn't have been so accurate otherwise. An Iron-classer shouldn't have been capable of such a feat—or at least, that was what his common sense suggested. Nevertheless, the experience he'd accumulated from the harsh life he'd led told Guster that the situation before his eyes was reality.

That being the case, he had to adapt at once. Before he could second-guess himself, he was already gesturing for his companions to attack the adventurer all at once. It was unlikely they would all escape unharmed—their archer was already down after all—but that was no longer something he could afford to be concerned with. Guster had realized that their opponent was strong enough that an all-out assault was their only chance.

But his realization had come too late. The adventurer, whom he had *just* seen on the fringe of the forest, had vanished from sight. The darkness around him began to fill with shouts and screams.

She was picking them off one by one.

Holding his sword at the ready, Guster scanned his surroundings, breaking out into a cold sweat. He couldn't see her. He couldn't even *sense* her. Never before had he fought an opponent who'd blended in with the darkness so well. Just what had he gotten himself into?

It was too late now, though. He couldn't go back to before he'd taken the job, no matter how badly he wanted to.

"You look like the leader of this lot," a voice said beside his ear.

Before he could whirl around, something struck the back of his neck, and everything went black.



Dorothea wondered what was happening. She couldn't see anything from her current position, and all she could hear was the occasional scream coming from the forest. She hoped Rina was okay.

Peeking around the edge of the wagon's canvas, Dorothea examined the forest. She wasn't sure how much Rina could do against the bandits. Since Dorothea herself only really knew the basics of self-defense, she hadn't been able to gauge the young adventurer's ability.

However, Rina's casual confidence in declaring that she would go after the bandits could only mean that she thought herself capable of handling them—which would mean that Dorothea had no cause for concern.

And yet...she was still hung up on Rina's appearance. She couldn't help it—the adventurer truly looked like nothing more than a delicate young girl.

Thus, when the screams stopped and all was silent for a while, one perhaps couldn't blame Dorothea for considering the possibility that Rina might have lost to the bandits.

Dorothea decided that she would have to get the wagon moving right away if the bandits came charging out of the forest, so she kept a close eye on the tree line. The figure that appeared from the darkness after a short while, though, had her eyes widening in surprise.

“Oh, Dorothea! Don't worry, it's over!”

It was unmistakably Rina, dragging something heavy along the ground behind her. While the girl herself was entirely unharmed, some blood from her opponents had splashed onto her cheek. All in all, the scene was very surreal.

“It...looks like everything went fine out there,” Dorothea managed to force out.

Rina seemed entirely unfazed by the whole ordeal. She pulled the object she was dragging forward and gestured to it. “Yep,” she said. “I also caught this guy; he looked like their leader. I'd like to change locations and question him a bit. Would that be okay?”



After moving a short distance away from the site of the ambush, Rina tossed Guster forward onto a patch of ground.

“When you say ‘question him,’ you mean an interrogation, right?” Dorothea asked. “Can you do that?”

She’d asked this because interrogation was a skill that required a decent amount of know-how. Most captives were disinclined to spill their secrets—hence why the concept of an interrogation existed in the first place. As someone who had only ever pursued the path of a merchant, however, Dorothea had no skill or experience in such a field.

In a similar vein, Rina didn’t look like someone who was well-versed in it either. It was already apparent that she was much stronger than her appearance suggested, but that didn’t necessarily mean she was practiced in interrogation—and neither did Dorothea want to think that she was.

The idea that someone with Rina’s appearance and demeanor was actually a heartless sadist who lived for forcing captives to spill their secrets...well, that was just plain scary.

That being said, if she *was* capable of it, any information she could obtain from the bandit would be exceedingly useful, so Dorothea knew she had no grounds to protest.

All this to say: Dorothea had put a lot of thought into her question.

“Well, all of his companions are now lying around in the forest as monster food,” Rina said. “Given how disadvantageous his situation is, he shouldn’t have any reason to be tight-lipped with his secrets. It shouldn’t be too hard to get him to talk. Still...since I’ve never actually interrogated someone before, if it doesn’t work out all we can do is hand him over to the guards in the next town. That should buy us some goodwill at least.”

Dorothea was relieved—all in all, Rina’s suggestions were perfectly reasonable and proper. She couldn’t express this to the adventurer’s face, of course—it wasn’t as though she could just *say* she had been worried about her being a heartless sadist.

However, Dorothea also thought that expecting their captive to talk was

wishful thinking. Nevertheless, all they could do for now was try.

Rina began to shake the unconscious man awake. “Hello? Hello? Please wake up.”

The relatively gentle way she was going about it was probably a reflection of her intrinsic nature. She really *didn't* look like the kind of person capable of wiping out a group of bandits in such a short time.

The man blearily opened his eyes, catching sight of Rina's face. “Ngh...ugh... Wh-Where am I? Who are...?”

“I'm Rina, an adventurer. What's your name?” First up was to ask for his name. In situations like this, though, there were many captives who wouldn't even give up that much. Unexpectedly, however, the man answered obediently.

“My... My name is Guster...”

Judging by the man's unfocused eyes and the fact that he had just awakened from unconsciousness, Dorothea wondered if he was currently unable to tell if this was reality or a dream. If that was the case, it would be best to ask him everything they wanted to know before he fully came to his senses.

They did just that. Rina continued to question Guster, and the man provided them with all that he knew. When they were finished, his head slumped and he passed out once more.

“I think I see what's going on now,” Dorothea said, astonished. “Evidently someone's targeting me, though I don't know who. Does this mean that everything that's befallen me until now has been the fault of whoever's going after me...?”

Rina nodded. “Sounds like it. I *knew* it—it's just not normal to run into trouble so frequently. That aside, though...we still don't know who hired Guster to do this. Do you have any guesses?”

“Let's see...it would have to be a person who's somehow inconvenienced by me continuing to be a merchant, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“The thing is...I'm not exactly big or important. Who would bother going this

far over me?”

“What about your father? You said he wasn’t keen on the idea of you becoming a merchant because he said women weren’t suited for it, right?”

Dorothea was struck by surprise. She hadn’t even considered that; she’d assumed it was unthinkable. But most of all, she was surprised that Rina had conceived of the possibility.

“No...I really don’t think so,” Dorothea replied. “True, my father was against me becoming a merchant, but he did accept it in the end. After all, if he’d truly been so opposed to it, he could have just confined me to the house. That was what he planned on doing at first, and there were even talks of arranging a marriage for me. He thought that if I were married, I wouldn’t have had a reason to leave.”

“He went to all that effort, but still accepted it in the end? Didn’t you say that your last meeting ended in an argument?”

“It *did*...but he didn’t try to stop me from preparing to go out on my own. I told him that I would definitely establish a company bigger than his one day and then left town...but he could have kept me confined to the house anytime he wanted, or had me seized before I left. The fact that he didn’t...well, I took that to mean that he accepted my decision, albeit half-heartedly.”

“So it’s less about what you said, and more about understanding each other, huh...? I guess if that’s true, then it probably isn’t your father who’s after you. Keeping you confined at home would be a much more reliable method than hiring people like Guster here...”

Rina frowned, deep in thought, but after a moment, she looked up. “Well, it doesn’t seem like just thinking about it will get us anywhere,” she continued. “Let’s call it there and move on.”

“P-Pardon? Are you sure the best thing to do?”

“Well, not really. There’s every chance we could run into more trouble like this. It’s just...”

“Yes?”

“It’s just that now it’s up to you and how you feel, Dorothea. We can head for the next town or outpost, hand Guster over to the guards, and ask them to look for who hired him...but I don’t think they’ll find whoever it is that easily. From here on out, Dorothea, you’ll have to keep facing these kinds of risks. Even if you return to Maalt and just stay put for a while, that will remain true. So...you only have two options here—quit being a merchant temporarily or risk the danger.”

Dorothea realized that Rina was completely right. So long as the culprit remained free, she would keep having to brave the kinds of troubles that had befallen her so many times in the past. But since whoever was behind this apparently wanted to make her quit being a merchant, chances were that if she ceased her business for a time, the harassment would pause too. As such, she *could* always just sit tight and wait for the culprit to be caught.

However, Dorothea had no intention of doing any such thing.

“I’ll keep going,” she said. “There are so many people out there who would struggle to obtain the daily necessities they need without me. I know I’m just a small-timer, but I still have pride in my work. So...”

*So will you protect me?* was what she wanted to say, but that was not an easy request to make. An increased risk for Dorothea meant increased risk for Rina too, and the young adventurer had nothing to do with Dorothea’s personal circumstances. Even if she were to increase Rina’s pay, a refusal would be the most likely response. However...

“Okay,” Rina said casually. “In that case, let’s stick to the travel schedule. If anything happens, I’ll keep you safe.” She then bound Guster so that he couldn’t move, tossed him into the wagon, and hopped on. “Let’s go, Dorothea.”

Apparently, Rina didn’t care one whit about Dorothea’s personal circumstances. Upon realizing this, gratitude welled up within the merchant’s heart.

“Right,” she said. “I’m counting on you, Rina.”



As far as Rina was concerned, her journey with Dorothea was fun. The merchant was well-informed on a diverse range of subjects, so their conversations ensured they never had a boring night together. Furthermore, while she had been a little prickly at the start—just like the guild had said she would be—the more Rina got to know Dorothea, the more she realized that it wasn't part of the merchant's fundamental nature at all, but a result of everything she'd suffered while pursuing her chosen profession. In short, Dorothea had been dragged into what would usually be an absurd number of disputes and scams, and she had become convinced that they had arisen from her own inexperience and gender. Who could blame her for becoming more guarded and critical of her surroundings?

And despite everything, Dorothea still hadn't stopped trying to believe in people—as evidenced by the fact that she had willingly hired Rina, who was but a simple Iron-class adventurer. So while Rina had only taken the commission because she had wanted to gain confidence in herself, she resolved to do her absolute best to repay Dorothea, who had been so kind to her.

Naturally, this repayment involved making use of every skill she had under her belt. Obviously she would be putting her adventuring skills and swordsmanship to work, but Rina also had the magic she'd spent a lot of time honing recently.

Those skills, however, were something that were common across all adventurers. In terms of what the individual known as Rina could offer, well, she did have a few special qualities of her own—the foremost among them being the abilities granted to her by virtue of being a monster.

At first, that had been limited to a simple boost in stamina and mana relative to the amount of human blood or flesh she consumed, allowing her to work for longer periods of time. However, due to the training she'd undertaken at the Latuule estate, the effects of that boost had been improved. She hadn't trained anywhere where Alize had been able to see, of course—she'd always had her lessons in the middle of the night.

Because of the body Rina now had, sleep was no longer as necessary for her as it used to be, meaning she could remain awake for several days on end without any issues. It also wasn't a problem for her to spend the time people usually spent asleep to undergo strenuous training. Rina had learned much

during her nightly lessons, and one of the nonmonstrous skills she had picked up was how to fight against multiple foes by herself. What she'd gained from those training sessions had helped her greatly when the bandits had attacked her and Dorothea the other day.

As for her training partners, they consisted of the combatan—er, the *servants* of the Latuule family, Isaac included. Rina shuddered just remembering the intense training sessions—everyone had come at her with lethal force. They hadn't *actually* intended to kill her, of course...but at the time, facing down their naked bloodlust, she had been truly convinced that she was going to die.

The servants of the Latuule family were one and all exceedingly capable. If they had fought seriously, Rina was sure that any one of them could've ended her life in a heartbeat. They had wielded all manner of weapons with familiarity and cast a vast array of different spells at her, and while any injury they incurred recovered in an instant, they didn't rely on that. Instead, they simply overwhelmed her with pure fighting skill.

That begged the question of how exactly Rina was ever supposed to win against people like that, but since it was all just training at the end of the day, they had held back enough that she still had a chance—which *wasn't* to say she had an easy time of it. Quite the opposite, in fact—they constantly attacked her in ways she could only barely guard against or avoid, and if she let her focus waver for a single moment, they'd deliver the finishing blow.

All in all, her nighttime training at the Latuule estate was the harshest thing Rina had ever experienced in her entire life. Still, Rina had improved by leaps and bounds thanks to it, so facing formidable opponents was no longer enough to make her lose her cool. After all, no matter who she faced, comparing them to Isaac and the rest did wonders for her morale. It was hard to be intimidated by most opponents after what she'd gone through.

Case in point, the bandits from the other night—compared to how well Isaac and the other Latuule servants could hide themselves, the archer in the trees might as well have been out in broad daylight—in more ways than one, since Rina's eyes allowed her to see clearly in the dark. As for the others, since they'd been fighting in a dark forest, none of them had been able to see as well as she could. It had been like facing opponents who were blindfolded. In the end, she



had whittled down their numbers, then incapacitated the one who had looked like their leader with a bite to the back of the neck.

If Rentt had done the same—and done it intentionally—then whether his victim was human or monster, he would have made them his vampiric kin like he’d done to Rina. She was not capable of that quite yet, though she *was* capable of controlling her victim’s actions to a certain degree—a technique she had learned from Isaac. When he had been teaching it to her, she’d practiced with small animals that he captured; the battle against the bandits was her first time using this technique on a human, but it had gone pleasingly well. Guster had obediently answered all of her questions, and for the next few days he would likely obey Rina’s orders.

So while Rina had told Dorothea that there was nothing more she could do for her, that hadn’t been strictly true—but it wasn’t as though she could tell the merchant about her monstrous abilities. Rina wasn’t sure her plan would bear fruit in any case. Rather than giving Dorothea any cause for premature celebration, Rina figured it would be more beneficial to teach the merchant what she knew about spotting suspicious characters and seeing through fraudsters. Dorothea was by no means negligent in that regard, but as an adventurer Rina was better versed in the ways of ruffians and bandits. If she imparted such knowledge to Dorothea, the merchant would likely run into less trouble in the future—or so Rina hoped.

“Rina, we’re almost there,” called Dorothea from the driver’s seat of the wagon.

“Oh, right!” Rina called back. She was under the shade of the canvas, and she understood Dorothea’s words to mean that they were almost at the next outpost town. With her in the wagon’s interior was a tightly packed array of goods for sale—and Guster, the bandit leader whom she had captured. His eyes were fixed on Rina, but they showed neither resentment nor any indication that he was planning on making a break for it. Since Rina was controlling his mind, he couldn’t have entertained such ideas even if he’d been capable of thinking them up.

“Do your job properly now, okay?” Rina said to him cheerfully, smiling. “I’m expecting big things from you.”

Guster, of course, gave no response.

It was a very bizarre exchange indeed, and if Dorothea were to see it, she would likely shrink back in fear. It was a good thing that Rina had no intention of showing her anytime soon—or at all.



The guard station in the outpost town that Rina and Dorothea arrived at sported a basement that didn't match the small building aboveground. It was built from sturdy stone and split off into compartmented segments, some of which had iron bars and served as cells.

A minor outpost town like this one almost never made use of its jail. At most, it served as an overnight holding area for drunk townsfolk to cool their heads after the guards had broken up some inane dispute or other at the tavern.

Today, however, was different. On the guard station's front doorstep was a genuine ne'er-do-well in the form of Guster, the bandit whom Rina had captured just the other day. After she and Dorothea had arrived in town, they had handed him over to the guards, explained that someone had hired him to attack them, and requested their help in finding the culprit.

Bandit appearances in and of themselves were rare in this region, let alone criminals with such complicated circumstances, so the guards had been rather flustered as they took custody of Guster. In a rather anticlimactic turn of events for them, however, he hadn't put up any resistance at all.

For all that the countryside was relatively quiet, it still saw bandits or murderers around two or three times a year. Whenever such criminals were handed over to the guards, they were all but certain to resist. Even when they didn't do so physically, their eyes would clearly burn with anger and defiance.

However, *Guster's* eyes were empty—to the point that it was actually scary. Then again, maybe “empty” wasn't quite the right word. Rather, it was as though they were...focused on some kind of dream.

“He's like a drug addict...” muttered one of the guards. He had once worked in the city, but after losing his temper with a superior at a drinking party, he'd been sent out to the sticks.

Well, the guard reasoned, at the end of the day Guster was a bandit and a criminal, so it wouldn't be too surprising if he had dabbled in drugs too. That would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything that seemed off.

Satisfied, they took Guster down into a basement cell and proceeded to keep a close eye on him. In this town, bandits and robbers were usually executed by beheading or crucifixion after their crimes had been clearly proven. In towns with better-maintained and established roads, criminals were usually not treated in such a manner—they could be sent to larger settlements to await a sentence from a judge appointed by the local lord.

However, this region was as rural as it got. There was a highway of sorts, but it was hardly safe enough to facilitate the transport of a criminal, something which did not have much practical benefit anyway. As such, the sentencing of criminals—as well as carrying out that sentence—was the responsibility of the individual who held the most authority at the local guard stations, and took place inside the towns themselves.

Given this, Guster usually would have been executed on the spot. However, there were extenuating circumstances. Since he had been working under someone else's orders, it was necessary to launch an investigation, meaning his sentence was suspended for the time being.

This would go on to serve as the catalyst for the incident which happened to occur that very same night...



“Ugh...where am I...?”

Guster slowly opened his eyes, blinking away the fog clouding his head. Upon doing so, he saw that he was surrounded by stone walls and iron bars. On the other side of the latter stood a person dressed as a guard, no doubt serving some manner of watch duty.

*Why am I here?*

Guster thought back to what had happened and was quick to grasp the situation. He was here because he had attacked a traveling merchant, and her bodyguard had turned the tables on him. They must have handed him over to a

guard outpost somewhere.

He immediately wondered what had happened to his companions but suspected he knew the answer already. Given their line of work, the rest of his gang must be dead by now. The fact that he was here alone probably meant that everyone else had been abandoned in the forest with debilitating injuries—or worse.

That particular area of the forest served as the stomping grounds for a fair few kinds of monsters, all of which would have been drawn to the heavy stench of blood from a group of injured and incapacitated humans lying on the forest floor. By morning they'd all have been monster food.

Guster hoped that at the very least they had died *before* being eaten. The thought that they might have been devoured alive sent a shudder down his spine.

He also wondered why he alone had been spared...but thinking back, he remembered that someone had said something just before he'd blacked out: *"You look like you're the leader of this lot."*

In short, they must have kept him alive to get information from him. That explained why he wasn't in a monster's belly right now.

Still, this was only a temporary reprieve. Guster knew he was headed for the proverbial gallows regardless. There was a zero percent chance that he'd receive any other sentence—banditry was just that grave a crime. Well, perhaps *zero* chance wasn't quite correct—he'd heard that sometimes bandits were sentenced to a life of hard labor mining for ore. Compared to that, maybe dying was preferable—but *anything* probably beat being eaten alive by monsters, as had been the likely fate of his companions.

That aside...Guster sure was hungry. He really wanted something to eat.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouted, trying to get the attention of the guard beyond the bars. Perhaps his efforts would be in vain, but if he was going to die anyway, why not try? It couldn't hurt.

"What?" the guard asked warily, turning around.

Guster was puzzled. The guard's expression wasn't irritated or displeased like

he had expected. Rather, the man looked like he'd seen something peculiar.

*Is my face really that strange?* Guster had the sort of unshaven, unkempt features that any stereotypical bandit might have, and while he wasn't conceited enough to consider himself handsome, he didn't think he was particularly odd-looking either.

Still, he was grateful enough that the guard had seen fit to turn around.

"I'm hungry," Guster said. "Could you give me something to eat? Oh, and water too, if you have it."

The guard studied him for a moment. "Seems like you've gotten ahold of your senses again. I suppose we *do* need to have you fit for questioning later, so why not? Here."

The guard took a hunk of hard-looking bread and a cup of water from the table next to him and passed them through the iron bars of the cell. For a brief moment, Guster considered the idea of grabbing the guard's hands, snatching the key, and making a break for it...but only for a moment. Even if he were to get out of his cell, he was fairly certain they were underground. He'd only be caught by the guards who were almost definitely stationed up above, and that would be that. There was no sense in doing anything so pointless.

"Thanks, chief," Guster said. He obediently accepted the bread and water, ate, and drank, figuring that if he could keep his physical strength up, a chance might come along for him to make his escape.

Guster thought about being sentenced to manual labor in the mines...and decided that he probably *did* prefer that to dying. Turning over a new leaf was an exercise in futility at this point, but he resolved to at least survive for as long as he could manage.

A while after he had finished eating, as he was leaning against the stone wall of his cell to conserve his energy...

*"Who are yo— Gack!"*

*"Get back! Damn it, get— Guh!"*

Guster heard yells and shouts coming from above. The guard on watch in the

basement heard it too and ran up to investigate, but did not return.

After a short while passed, Guster heard the sound of someone descending the stairs. He wondered briefly whether whoever it was had come to save him before banishing the notion—Guster had nobody who would come to his rescue like that. Nervous, he awaited the intruder in his cell...and was surprised by what he saw.

“Hello. You seem well,” said the man who had hired Guster. There was another person behind him wielding a staff—probably a mage of some sort.

“Why are *you* here?” Guster growled. “We failed. What’s the use in... Ah. Here to silence me, are you?” The realization made Guster curse his own rotten luck. The man must have been surveilling him and his companions the entire time.

However, the man only tilted his head slightly to the side. “Well...I suppose that *is* one of my objectives, in a sense. I can’t exactly have you confessing everything, so I did come to prevent that. Having said that, it’s not as though I intend to kill you. I was hoping to have you put in a little more work for me, you see. If you can manage it, I’ll help you escape somewhere nobody will find you. I’ll even throw in a second round of pay.”

Guster was shocked. “That’s not a bad offer, but...’fraid to say that I can’t see myself doing much at the moment. That adventurer was pretty skilled. There were six of us, and she got us all.”

“But ultimately she’s just an Iron-classer, no? My companion here was keeping an eye on your fight, and that adventurer seemed to possess excellent night vision. On the other hand, you and your men were essentially sitting ducks...but the conclusion to be drawn is that she had a magical item. If you fight her during the day, it’s very likely that you’d be able to defeat her with no issue.”

So the mage standing behind the man had been watching the fight? Thinking back, Guster realized that the adventurer girl had moved well and hunted them all down despite the darkness. But while explaining that away with a magical item seemed to make sense, he couldn’t help but feel that something else was at play.

Guster didn't voice his doubts, however. He knew that if he did, there was every chance that the man would leave and let him rot in his cell.

"Sure, okay," Guster said. "I'll do one last job. Why not? I'm a dead man walking as it is, anyway."

"You have my gratitude. Now then..." The man retrieved a ring of keys from his breast pocket and tried them on Guster's cell door one by one. Finally, he found the correct one—with a *click*, the door swung open, and Guster was a free man once again.

"What happened to the guards upstairs?" Guster asked warily.

"Well, since it's nighttime, there were only three—including one who came running from down here. Currently they are all enjoying a nice nap."

"Did your mage friend do that?"

"Indeed. But this is neither the time nor place to be standing around chatting. Let us be off."

And so, Guster, the man, and the mage left the guard outpost and the town behind them as they headed into the night.



"Here you go, Miss Dorothea!"

In a village deep in the mountains, three children in shabby clothing dashed up to Dorothea. One of them held out something for her to take, and upon closer inspection, she saw that it was a collection of herbs and flowers. Someone from the big city would have assumed that these children were just playing make-believe.

Dorothea, however, knew better. "Oh, well done," she said, praising the child. "Zima herbs and poltorin flowers... Why, I think I'll buy both. I'm afraid this is all I can give you though, since it's not a large number of herbs. Is that all right?"

She handed three copper coins to the children, who accepted them with delight, split them equally, and ran off.

"Sure, those are zima herbs and poltorin flowers, but isn't three copper still a bit much for how much they had?" Rina asked. "If I'd been buying from a street

stall, I wouldn't have settled for paying anything more than one copper."

As it turned out, Rina kept her purse strings surprisingly tight. Then again, she *had* said that she'd struggled to even scrimp up enough for lodgings when she'd first started out as an adventurer, so perhaps it was a habit from back then.

Incidentally, zima herbs prevented wounds from festering, while poltorin flowers had multiple uses, including as an ingredient in perfume. But while both had a broad range of applications, they were available in relatively large quantities in this region—hence their low market price.

"You might be right about that," Dorothea said, answering Rina's question. "But I can fetch two silver for these if I go to the royal capital."

"That amount would include the labor cost of you making that whole journey though, wouldn't it?" Rina asked. "It doesn't mean there's any particular reason to buy them here at a higher price."

"Of course there's a reason. If I were buying from adults, I would buy them at the market price too. But I wanted to teach those children about the value of money, as well as the joy of commerce...and also, give them a little pocket change to spend. Even in a small village like this, there are times when it's better to spend money than barter."

"The joy of commerce... Is that why you're a merchant, Dorothea?"

"In a sense it is, I suppose. If these children learn from a young age that obtaining items of worth will allow them to sell them for a higher price later, that will help to develop their eye for value. For example, the zima herbs and poltorin flowers they sold me just now were plants I asked about the last time I came to this village—I wanted to know if they grew around here. The children remembered that, looked for them, and picked them for me."

"What good kids."

"Right? But they didn't pick them because they were good children—they did it because they knew they could be exchanged for money. When they grow up, there will come a time when they'll have to think about the value of the crops and produce they grow and discern which will fetch them a higher profit."

"I guess you're right. Most crops in smaller villages are grown for



consumption, but now they might consider growing herbs and other plants that they can sell for higher prices.”

“Yes, exactly—commodities. That’s not something that you can do just anywhere, but this region *does* have a lot of flora that’s unique to it. Some of those are materials I want too, so sometimes I suggest the idea to the adults...but as you might expect, they’re rather stubborn. Even if I tell them they can sell a new kind of produce, they keep on clinging to the same crops and methods they grew up with. But if I plant the idea in these children while they’re young, maybe it’ll bear fruit one day.”

“You have a habit of planning for the really long term, don’t you...?” What Dorothea was suggesting would require years, if not decades, to show any results. Nevertheless, if it really did end up working, then perhaps it wasn’t a bad idea from a long-term perspective.

Maalt and its surroundings abounded with all kinds of plants, including ones with unique properties and highly effective medicinal herbs that couldn’t grow anywhere else. Much of what was out there still hadn’t even been discovered yet, and there was no doubt that useful specimens were included among that number.

If such plants could be cultivated in large quantities and harvested, it was not beyond the realm of impossibility to make a vast fortune almost overnight. Such a feat was easier said than done, of course, and about as reliable as trying to win the lottery, but merchants were people who lived a life of drawing lots every day—and that was *especially* true for traveling merchants and peddlers.

In addition, while Dorothea’s plan was a long-term investment, it also didn’t require much capital to set into motion. She lost nothing from putting in the effort.

Furthermore...

“Miss Dorothea! Can we see what you have?!”

Upon setting up a wooden stand in front of the wagon and laying out a number of goods atop it, a continual stream of villagers stopped by to make purchases. Included among them were girls and boys of a similar age to the children who had just sold Dorothea their herbs, clutching copper coins in their

hands.

Since Rina was originally nobility, she had received a certain degree of education and was capable of doing the kinds of calculations necessary for the purchase and sale of goods. Once Dorothea had discovered this, she'd asked Rina to help with sales.

Although Dorothea had offered an increase in pay for the extra work, Rina had just thanked the merchant for her kindness and declined, saying that it basically counted as part of her bodyguard work.

"When you have the opportunity to squeeze a profit, you should," Dorothea had teased her.

"Well, if I go too far, it'd just leave the other person with a grudge," Rina replied. "I'd rather avoid that. Moderation is important in all things, right?"

"I...suppose that's true as well."

"That's exactly why you didn't press too hard about the deal earlier, isn't it?"

Rina was referring to the trade that Dorothea had negotiated with the mayor earlier in the day. While she had been purchasing some grain from the village, she'd noticed that the scales had been tampered with and pointed it out in a roundabout way in order to get him to correct it. Specifically, it had been the scale's strings and measurement markings that had been altered—both extremely fine and delicate parts—so Rina had been impressed that Dorothea was even able to notice.

That wasn't all: Dorothea had also purchased a number of wine casks, but the amounts inside the casks had been misreported. Upon opening them to check the contents, they had discovered impurities had been added to the wine to make the casks seem fuller than they were.

While Rina's monster senses had allowed her to smell the guilty consciences of the mayor and the village's treasurer as soon as she'd entered the room, she hadn't been able to discern exactly *what* they were hiding. It was only when Dorothea pointed out that they had misrepresented the wheat and wine that she had finally understood.

"Something along those lines," Dorothea said. "That kind of thing happens

every day, so...”

“But just like you told the mayor earlier, tampering with the scales like that is seriously illegal,” Rina replied. “Are you sure it was okay to just let them be?”

A village’s produce scales were supposed to be strictly managed, and tampering with them was a grievous crime. Since these measurements were the basis of a country’s economy, any foul play could result in serious negative effects. It wasn’t even unheard of for the perpetrator of such an act to be sentenced to the hangman’s noose—hence Rina’s concerns that letting the village off without consequences might be a bad idea.

Even just taking the wine into account, the capacity of casks was also usually specified and regulated. Even measurement errors as small as failing to account for evaporation, or the “angels’ share,” were not acceptable.

“The people in villages like this don’t really grasp that idea too well. Part of why I discussed that with the mayor earlier was because I wanted to explain to him just how big of a risk they were taking. I don’t think they’ll do it again. So while I’m not exactly *forgiving* them, there’s also no point in dragging a retinue of soldiers out here to dole out punishment, right? That wouldn’t benefit anybody.”

“Hmm...I guess that’s what you’d call a ‘gray area,’ huh?”

“Ah ha ha! I suppose so. If they try again, I’ll have to think about what to do—but for the time being, we just need to wait and see.”

Dorothea was much more adaptable as a merchant than Rina had thought—and that realization only strengthened Rina’s conviction that most of the troubles Dorothea had faced until now were the result of somebody else’s intentional interference.

On that note, it seemed that the “somebody” in question had fallen for Rina’s trap. One of her monstrous skills was the ability to sense the location of someone she had bitten to a certain degree—and over rather long distances too. Right now, she could tell that Guster was now in an entirely different place from the cell he had been in earlier.

In fact, he was approaching Rina’s location...

Well, Dorothea was seeing to her own work. It seemed as though it was about time for Rina to see to hers.



“There are talks of arranging a marriage for you.”

When my father summoned me to his study and abruptly told me of the news, I, Dieg Esol, second son of the Esol family, thought I had been granted a new lease on life.

As for why I’d thought that, it was because the marriage in question was not to the daughter of just some small-time merchant. Instead, I was going to marry the daughter of the head of the Merrow company, which vied for the position of the largest firm in the city of Mystera.

Their main competition was, of course, my family’s business: the Esol company. And as for who currently held the superior position, it wouldn’t have been inaccurate to say it was us.

Nevertheless, the future was never certain. Considering the question of overall trends, then compared to my family—which was a long-standing business of great age in Mystera—the relatively new rising star that was the Merrow company definitely had the edge. I knew that my father had been worrying that they would overtake us for quite some time now.

And now, he was telling me to marry our business rival’s daughter.

That would only mean one single thing: *I* would have the final say over the trade competition that was playing out in this city of Mystera.

I was shocked—truly shocked. Never in my entire life had I been granted such a golden opportunity. My misfortune in that regard was not tempered by having been born the son of a major merchant—because I was in fact the *second* son. It was my older brother who would one day inherit everything.

If my brother had been less able than me, then perhaps that would have been salvation of a kind. I could well imagine a world in which I gladly assisted him as his right hand or advisor—a world in which I was allowed a faint sense of superiority which would nevertheless be overshadowed by our unbreakable brotherly bond.

However, the reality was that my brother was a hundred times more talented than me, and there was no field in which I was his match—including as a merchant.

Under our father's guidance, my brother had steadily accumulated knowledge and competency, and in what felt like the blink of an eye he was already attracting major clients and partners on his own merit. Our employees adored him, and he was always kind to me, his younger brother... In a sense, he was the ideal sibling.

That was exactly why I detested him.

If only fate had at least been kind enough to make me a *complete* incompetent, I believed that I would have simply bowed my head and obediently followed my brother as he charted his course. However, the sad truth was that I too had a talent for being a merchant, meager as it was. Though I was slower than my brother by several years and my results never matched his, the work I did for our company was rated highly in its own right, and I'd managed to climb to a vital position in our business through my own ability rather than the influence of my father.

Perhaps it would have been better if I had failed.

Regardless, it was because of my success that I found myself unable to ignore the greatest obstacle to my ascension: my brother.

If only he did not exist, I would have been able to inherit our family's company.

That singular thought hung over me constantly, pressing down upon my shoulders. Anyone would call it a foolish thought. They would laugh and declare it was absurd. I would have said the same. Truly.

Yet I was not a spectator to my life but an actor in it...and I could not shake the dark emotions that clouded my vision. As the years went by, my resolve to eliminate my brother—by any means possible—only hardened. I was convinced that, since I knew my brother and father's plans better than anyone, I was capable of it.

Then, on the very brink of putting my plans into action, my father informed

me of my arranged marriage.

I saw this as salvation. I, who had resolved to murder my own family, had been given a second chance. Even I, the most irredeemable son in the world and the most foolish brother of all, still possessed the vestiges of a human heart within me. I had retained enough emotion that, if it were possible, I did not wish to lay a hand on my own flesh and blood.

If I were not held in the clutches of my own good-for-nothing greed, I would want to stand side by side with my brother and father as we brought our company to greater heights. I detested my brother, but I also loved him. That was why leaving our business to take the helm of an equally matched company would be my salvation.

And yet...

"I'm sorry, young Dieg. I couldn't stop her. My daughter...ran away to be a traveling merchant."

The Merrow Company's director bowed to me as he apologized. Beside him, my father looked as though he did not know how to handle the situation. After some thought, however, he addressed the Merrow Company's director.

"Well, there's nothing to be done, I suppose," he said. "Much needs to line up for an arranged marriage to occur." He turned to me. "Dieg...it's unfortunate, but such is life."

My father placed a hand on my shoulder. I could feel the kindness and comfort that he was trying to convey. The Merrow Company's director looked truly apologetic too—I could see it in his eyes.

I myself agreed with my father; there was nothing to be done. Such was life.

According to the Merrow Company's director, his daughter had left stating that she wished to become a traveling merchant. Though he had planned to gradually instruct her in preparation for inheriting their company, she had apparently possessed a more adventurous spirit than he'd realized. Hence why she had left: she had wanted to test her own ability.

I understood her feelings well. I imagined that the dark emotions I bore toward my brother and the wish I had to leave were felt by her too, though hers

must have been directed toward her father. If she had remained in her father's company, she would never have been able to step out of his shadow. Thus, she had mustered her courage and left.

She had managed what I was not capable of doing. I had only managed to step forward into the unknown after my father had suggested the possibility, guaranteed that my current position would be maintained, and laid the groundwork for my future opportunities. Anything less certain I had not possessed the courage for.

As such, respect welled up within me for the director of the Merrow Company's daughter.

"There's no need to apologize," I told him. "While it is unfortunate that your daughter and I will not be able to marry, I greatly admire her courage in discarding her status as the heir of a major company to make a name for herself on her own merits. I have no intention of dishonoring that resolve with a minor thing such as a betrothal to my undeserving self. So please, consider this matter settled. And, if I may be so forward, I pray that your daughter finds success in the path she has chosen."

"You are a fine young gentleman indeed, young Dieg," the Merrow Company director replied. "I had looked forward to you marrying my daughter and inheriting my business with her. I truly am sorry."

He bowed deep and low.

It was only afterward that I realized that it might have been for the best if I had requested that both directors allow me to quit the Esol Company and begin anew as an employee of the Merrow Company.

However, now it was too late. During the year and a half that had passed, the director of the Merrow Company was blessed with a son. The gap between the siblings' ages was only a possibility because of his mother: she was the director's second—and younger—wife.

Naturally, his birth meant that the matter of the Merrow Company's succession was set in stone.

I was at peace with that. Though there might have been a future where I was

that successor, the opportunity was already in the past. The possibility no longer existed, so it would only be a waste of effort to feel envy. In any case, most of the cruel emotions within me had been washed away when I'd seen my father and the Merrow Company director look truly apologetic from the bottom of their hearts.

Yet...for a reason I knew not, darkness once again began to stain my heart.

When had it started? No matter how hard I tried to remember, the fog wouldn't clear. What did come to mind, however, was the image of Amapola, the woman currently by my side.

Amapola was a traveling mage who served as my right-hand woman...but when had we begun working together again? As hard as I tried to remember, the answer continued to elude me.

Regardless, she, the failed bandit Guster, and I were currently on the trail of the daughter of the Merrow Company's director: Dorothea.

I was convinced that if I could only force her to retire from the traveling merchant life, she would return to Mystera and become betrothed to me, whereupon I would inherit the Merrow Company. But...no, that was ridiculous. I couldn't do tha—

My head hurt terribly.

I...I... What happened to me?



## Chapter 4: Meanwhile, the Apprentices... Part 3

At the third village along their journey, they followed a similar routine as they had in the previous two, with Dorothea purchasing various plants and ores from the children. Her negotiations with the mayor went smoothly—unlike the first village—with the only problem being an inconsistency in the final sale price because of a lack of information on the mayor's part. He was actually quite grateful when Dorothea pointed it out, because the price he had initially given was cheaper than her suggested offer.

While Rina's frugal side had surfaced upon hearing the mayor propose such a low price and she had seen no reason not to make the best of the opportunity, Dorothea had explained that doing so would be shortsighted. Although it would have resulted in a larger profit for that single transaction, Dorothea's dishonesty could have been exposed when other traveling merchants stopped by later on, or if any of the villagers saw the price of goods in a larger town, which would have left them feeling resentful toward her.

According to Dorothea, it was best to deal in good faith as much as possible and build relationships based on mutual trust in order to avoid any of that.

Rina found herself agreeing, recalling that although Rentt wasn't a merchant himself, the adventuring knowledge he'd shared with her had contained similar advice: *"When traveling to remote areas, you shouldn't take advantage of the locals' ignorance for a onetime gain—like trying to cheat them out of a gold coin just for hunting a few goblins, for example."*

That advice applied to merchants and villages too—in fact, when it came to dealing with other people in general, the foundations were the same no matter what, Rina thought. She had learned a lot from helping Dorothea with her sales.

As for the merchant herself, she had spotted a particular plant among the materials she'd purchased from the children, and that had sparked an idea—one that she began putting serious thought into. Upon asking the children where they'd harvested that plant, they had happily agreed to show her and

began leading the way into the forest.

“This way!”

The forests in this region were relatively free of monsters, and most of the ones that could be found there were of the slow variety. Nevertheless, the woods were still no place for children to be wandering around alone. Since the villagers had been uncomfortable with the idea of Rina being the children’s only guard, they had needed to ask one of the village’s hunters to tag along in order to be allowed to go at all.

To a regular person, an adventurer’s strength might as well have made them a monster, even if that adventurer was only an Iron-class like Rina. Generally speaking, even if a village was confident in its ability to put up a fight against any threats, no amount of effort put in by even their strongest residents would ever put them above roughly the level of an experienced Iron-class adventurer. So while having such an individual act as a bodyguard would entirely guarantee the safety of her charges in a region like this one, that did not mean the villagers would actually *trust* an adventurer—hence the village hunter who was accompanying them. And although the hunter—a man by the name of Zein—probably wouldn’t contribute much in a fight, he was more familiar with the area and thus could act as a guide. All in all, having him along was beneficial to everyone involved.

“Really, though, is this grass *that* valuable?” Zein asked as they walked through the forest. “We see it growing here and there around these parts, but never really give it a second thought.”

“Until just a short while ago, it was worthless,” Dorothea explained. “But ever since they discovered it could be used in a new type of monster repellent, there’s been a steep increase in price. The alchemist guilds are keeping the production method close to their chests, of course, but there’s no mistaking that this grass is now a valuable commodity—especially since I hear the new repellent’s the most effective one yet. It’s been big news in merchant circles—though the final product is expensive enough that someone like me doesn’t have the leeway to use it much of the time.”

“No kidding! Just goes to show that news doesn’t really get out here to the

sticks. First I'm hearing of any of this."

"It really was very recent. Apparently, the inventor was actually an alchemist from Maalt, though their name hasn't been publicly revealed. Use of the repellent's been spreading through the Lelmudan Empire, and it's only just beginning to catch on in Yaaran, so it's no wonder you didn't know. Feel free to spread the news around—this area's basically in the same region as Maalt after all."

As Rina listened to their conversation, she suddenly recalled a certain alchemist with strong ties to both Maalt and the Lelmudan Empire. Not too long ago, she had seen that very alchemist sprinkling some sort of green liquid onto the samples of Rentt's skin that she'd been cultivating on her work table.

*"Look, Rina. Isn't it fascinating? They're shivering and trying to escape."*

Rentt's cells—which apparently remained alive even when separated from him—were capable of movement, and would reassimilate if they came into contact with him again. This was the case with Rina's too, ever since her monster-ification at least, and it was also a property of vampires in general. However, unlike her cells and that of other vampires, which crumbled and turned into an ashlike substance if separated from the body for too long and in small amounts, Rentt's remained alive for long periods of time.

According to Lorraine, that made them fascinating subjects for experimentation. Since they were far too unique for the results they produced to be applied more generally, though, she had also used Rina's cells, and those of the local monsters too.

During the particular experiment that Rina was recalling, Rentt's cells had wriggled around on Lorraine's work desk, trying to escape from the green liquid. If she remembered correctly, Lorraine had also said...

*"I think I could develop a monster repellent using this..."*

That meant the alchemist whom Dorothea was talking about was...

But then *that* would mean that Lorraine had greatly affected the economies of multiple nations all by herself.

Rina hardly dared believe it, but she knew her guess was probably the right

one. She resolved to throw any more thought about the matter out of the metaphorical window. Lorraine and Rentt were ridiculous like that—there was just no point thinking too hard about it.

“We’re here!” said one of the children in a voice that rang out through the forest.

Evidently, they had arrived at their destination.

“Incredible...” Dorothea breathed. “The ground’s covered in afto grass.”

Afto grass was the name of the plant used in the new monster repellent. Rina recognized it—she had seen large amounts of it growing in the flowerpots in a certain alchemist’s room. It had distinctive green blades that opened up like a flower, with vertical veins running down their length.

Upon getting a little closer, the grass’s characteristic scent hit Rina’s nose, and she wrinkled it in slight distaste. Dorothea, Zein, and the children didn’t seem to mind it though—indeed, they seemed to like it.

“What a pleasant scent,” Dorothea remarked. “You wouldn’t imagine that this repelled monsters at all.”

*Ah, Rina thought. I guess I’d count as something a person would want to keep away, huh?*

That depressed her a little, but she was quick to make her peace with it. She just took it as proof that the effect worked. Recalling that this area had a low monster population, she wondered if that was because of all the afto grass that grew around here warding them away.

“Right, I suppose we should start harvesting,” Dorothea said to the children as she rolled her sleeves up and began plucking grass. “I’ll buy up what you gather, everyone, so let’s get to work.”

Zein looked like he was wondering what he should do, so Rina provided him with a suggestion.

“While they’re busy with that, let’s keep watch.”

Even though the area rarely saw any monsters, there *were* still ordinary animals around. A wild boar was just as much of a threat to the children.

Zein gave Rina a nod, and the pair took positions and began keeping an eye on their surroundings.



The after grass harvesting was proceeding smoothly.

That being said, it was less of a “harvest” and more of a “selective picking.” Rather than wiping the whole area clear of the plant, they were leaving spaces between the clumps they plucked and making sure not to take too much.

Even Rina knew why they were doing it that way—Rentt had made sure to instill in her the importance of moderation when it came to harvesting jobs. Plants that were valuable, vital to the balance of vegetation in the area and so on, grew in certain places for a reason. If they were picked clean, it would result in all sorts of problems. Additionally, it was shortsighted on the part of the adventurer, since it could mean that the next time they took the same job, the plants would be nowhere to be found.

*“A smart adventurer knows several different harvest locations and rotates between them, taking care not to pick too much so that what’s left can grow back to the usual amount reasonably quickly.”*

And while Rina had wondered whether she should explain that to Dorothea and the children when they had begun picking the grass...

“You can’t take too much, okay, Miss Dorothea?”

“Yeah! Otherwise it won’t grow anymore!”

...the children seemed to have that part well in hand already.

“Gathering herbs is a simple enough job that we let the kids help too,” Zein said, noticing that Rina was impressed. “In case you were wondering where they learned that stuff. Well, part of why they learned so well is that they want to show off their knowledge to others too, so...” Zein smiled wryly.

Rina looked over to the children and saw that he was right—as they taught Dorothea what they knew, they seemed very pleased with themselves. The merchant appeared to recognize that too, because she took deliberate care to feed their motivation rather than take the wind out of their sails.

“That’s a good point,” Dorothea said, rubbing the children’s heads affectionately. “I didn’t know that. Thank you.”

“This is something I’ve thought for a while now,” Rina said to Zein, “but people who make an honest living from their own hard work are amazing, whether they’re adults or children. Even after I became an adventurer, it took me a long time to understand the worth of that.”

The hunter looked surprised. “Really? I was actually going to say that *I* was impressed by *you*.”

When Rina tilted her head in confusion, he continued, “I mean, you knew the proper way to walk through a forest—and not just that, but also how to keep your own footsteps silent, how to avoid tiring yourself out when traversing areas thick with roots, which plants are useful or edible when you’re feeling a little thirsty or hungry... We get other adventurers coming by sometimes, but not many have that kind of knowledge. Maalt’s adventurers in general do tend to be pretty learned, but I’d still say you’re one of the best I’ve seen. You could switch over to being a hunter today and still do well for yourself.”

Rina felt a little embarrassed to be complimented so directly, though one of things that Zein had said had piqued her interest. “You said ‘Maalt’s adventurer’s in general,’” she remarked. “Does that mean you’ve seen adventurers in other regions, then?”

“I have indeed. When I was younger, I lived in a village farther west, near the royal capital. Thanks to that, I dealt with a lot of adventurers from there coming out on jobs, but, well...they weren’t the easiest people to be around, if you catch my meaning. Sure, their skills were the real deal, but they didn’t know a lick about the ways of folk like me who live off of the forests and mountains. Had a lot of rough times because of that.”

Rina was somewhat surprised. Since she’d originally moved to Maalt because she couldn’t cut it in the royal capital, she had just assumed that adventurers hailing from the latter location *had* to be both strong and multitalented. Surely they wouldn’t be able to make a living otherwise.

However, it seemed that wasn’t necessarily true. From what Zein was saying they were definitely strong, but that strength didn’t necessarily come part and

parcel with knowledge or skills.

In all fairness, Rina hadn't had much contact with adventurers in the royal capital at all before she had gone to Maalt, so she hadn't known what the actual state of things was. While it might have been a different story if she'd been able to form a fixed party with others and go from there...nobody had wanted her back then, which was part of why she'd given up and gone to Maalt.

In Rina's opinion, that decision had paid off. She'd learned a lot, and she suspected that if she had stayed in the royal capital or gone anywhere else, chances were high that she'd be a corpse on the side of the road by now.

She hadn't expected to end up as a monster, naturally, but that was its own can of worms. It beat dying any day, though, and her new body was extremely convenient; as matters stood, she had no problems with the whole "being a monster" thing at all. She did want to go back to being human again one day, but it wasn't a burning desire or anything—if she found out that it was impossible, she wouldn't mind just shrugging and giving up.

"Well, the royal capital *is* the big city," she said. "Adventurer or not, it's probably pretty rare for people from there to know much about country life."

In fact, a lot of aspiring adventurers in the royal capital—whether graduates from swordsmanship schools or alumni from the Academy—were young men and women from well-to-do families. Rina herself was a daughter of nobility, and when she had first become an adventurer there she hadn't known the first thing about village life.

"I suppose that's just how it is," Zein agreed. "On the other hand, while Maalt's a proper town, it's still out here in the countryside. It makes sense that there'd be folk with the right knowledge there, even if they don't know as much as you. Makes them easy to hire, which makes life here just that much nicer."

Evidently, adventurers from Maalt had a good reputation. While part of that was no doubt due to the efforts of Guildmaster Wolf, the lessons Rentt had imparted to the town's rookies over the years must have had quite the impact as well.

*Rentt and Lorraine are just the type of people who make everything around them easier by simply existing,* Rina thought sagely.

Suddenly, she sensed a presence in the area, and her thoughts turned away from the casual conversation she'd been having.

"Hmm..." she murmured. "Looks like they finally decided to show up..."

Zein gave her a questioning look.

"There's a...*monster* approaching us," Rina explained. "I'll go deal with it. Could I ask you to stay here and continue keeping watch?"

"Eh? Really...? Wouldn't it be better if I came along?"

Despite Zein's offer, Rina knew she couldn't ask a simple village hunter to go that far—and it wasn't necessary for him to do so anyway. In fact, his presence would actually *cause* problems.

"No, it's fine," she said. "Protecting Dorothea and the children is our priority. But since monsters are my area of expertise, you should be the one to stay with them."

Zein considered that for a moment before saying, "Got it. Leave it to me—I'll keep everyone safe."

"I'm counting on you," Rina said. Then, she said off at a relaxed stroll toward the presences she could sense in the distance.



After progressing some distance into the forest, Rina suddenly stepped into a clearing. The area was circular, open, and ringed by tall trees, evoking memories of a colosseum she'd once seen.

Standing in the clearing was a single, clearly suspicious woman, clad in robes that gave her the appearance of a mage.

"So you noticed my little signal," she said upon seeing Rina. Her voice was quiet and sultry, and what little of her face wasn't concealed by her hood revealed bloodred lips, curved in the shape of a crescent moon.

Rina did her best to feign ignorance so as to not give anything away. "You let me notice you on purpose?" she asked.

"Indeed. I saw from your fight against Guster that you possess a considerable



amount of skill for an Iron-classer. The ease with which you dispatched your enemies in pitch darkness obviously wasn't just the result of your magical item. Without good senses and battle instinct, you couldn't possibly have pulled that off. So I suspected that if I were to unleash my bloodlust here, you would come."

*Ah. So that's what she thinks I did,* Rina thought. While Rina's night vision was far better now than it had been when she had been human, allowing her to see just as well as she would have during the day, it was different enough that it had still required training to get used to. Even if she'd had a magical item that allowed her to see in the dark, using it would have also required practice.

Magical items and tools meant mana expenditure, among other things—all factors one had to keep track of on top of everything else going on. And without good battle instincts, it was difficult to time their usage well.

From what this stranger was saying, she evidently believed that Rina had been able to defeat Guster and his companions because she possessed a magical item that let her see in the dark—which was *kind* of half right, from a certain perspective.

That wasn't the only thing Rina had gleaned from the stranger's words, however. "You're after Dorothea too, aren't you?" she asked.

"Naturally," the woman said. "I need her to return home as soon as possible. I don't suppose you'd be willing to convince her for me?"

"I'm afraid not. What connection do you have with Guster, anyway? According to him, his employer was a young man..."

It was possible that the woman could have disguised herself as a man when hiring Guster, but Rina doubted that was the case. She was simply too...feminine—the type of person who carried herself in such a way that even if she were to cross-dress, most would still only be able to see her as a woman.

The stranger proved Rina's suspicion with a shake of her head. "That wasn't me," she said. "Dieg was the one who hired Guster."

"Dieg?"

"Yes. The son of a distinguished merchant family from Mystera. Though, as

he's their second son, he won't be inheriting the company barring *exceptional* circumstances. Incidentally, there were talks of him marrying little Dorothea two years ago. Her father's company is also extremely influential in Mystera. Were you aware of that? In any case, the point is that Dieg was *this* close to obtaining Dorothea's father's company."

"Even assuming I believe you...Dorothea's nothing more than a traveling merchant right now. You won't gain anything from going after her."

"That's not an issue—not as long as she gives up on all that, returns to Mystera, and marries Dieg. While she's gained a little brother during these past two years she's been gone, he's still very young, of course. If something...unfortunate were to happen to her father, the fate of the company would naturally fall into the hands of Dieg."

"And by 'something unfortunate,' you mean...?"

"Well, who can say? Whatever it is though, I'm sure it'll be an *accident*. Something life-threatening, perhaps. Fate plays the most unexpected tricks on us sometimes, doesn't it?" The woman chuckled lightly. The implication in her words was as clear as day: she was going to cause that "accident" to occur on purpose.

"Do you think I'm just going to stand by and let you do that?" Rina asked.

"Are you saying you'll stop me?"

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying. Do you think I can't?"

"Hmm...I wonder. I think I'll go with 'no, I don't think you can.'"

"What makes you so confident?"

"Well, where do you think Dieg and Guster are right now? And have you spared any thought for why I might have lured you here?"

With that revelation, the woman's lips curled into a grin.



"Why, if it isn't Dorothea... Hello. It's been a while."

In the clearing where a few grasses grew, a man familiar to Dorothea greeted her

in an exaggerated fashion. His refined bearing and demeanor betrayed his privileged upbringing, and the shrewd look he wore suggested he was used to being quite competent in what he did.

“Dieg...?” Dorothea asked. “Don’t tell me *you* were the one who’s been targeting me...”

Standing beside Dieg was Guster, the bandit whom Rina had defeated—and who should have been in the custody of the guards they’d handed him over to. Currently, Guster was holding one of the children hostage with a knife to the neck—which was why Zein the hunter had yet to make a move. The situation was a complete standoff.

Given the circumstances, it was immediately apparent who Guster’s mysterious employer was. While Dorothea had never even considered Dieg as a possibility, thinking back, everything *did* line up. He had plenty of motivation.

*He wants to inherit the Merrow Company.*

If he injured Dorothea in just the right way, she would be forced to retire from the traveling merchant life and return home, after which she would have to marry. And the most likely candidate for her partner would be none other than Dieg. After all, he was a talented businessman, and Dorothea’s father held him in high regard—which was exactly why there had been talks of them marrying two years prior.

In the end, Dorothea had fled Mystera, and the story had ended there...or so she had thought.

Evidently, it had not ended for Dieg.

“‘Targeted’?” Dieg said. “What a hurtful way to phrase it. All I want is for you to come home...and your hand in marriage. Oh, don’t worry—I won’t force anything unpleasant on you. We can simply grow the Merrow Company together. Doesn’t that sound wonderful? This might not be apparent, but I have quite a high opinion of you. No ordinary person would discard her life as an heiress where she wanted for nothing in exchange for a completely fresh start as a traveling merchant. With a spirit as strong as yours, you’re capable of anything you put your mind to...which is why you should join hands with me.”

“If I’d been inclined to do that, I would have done it two years ago. And besides, who would ever say yes to an obvious threat like that?”

“Hmm. I see. Then perhaps I should show you the strength of my commitment. Guster, let’s give Dorothea some time to think. Every minute that passes, please cut off one of that child’s fingers.”

Guster grunted an affirmation. He looked unwell.

“Wha— Stop!” Dorothea yelled. “Don’t! What happened to you?! You were never the sort of person who’d do something like that!”

“And just what do you know about m— *Ngh...*” Dieg clutched his head in his hands, interrupting his own furious tirade. “No, you’re...right? What am I...?”

In that moment, Zein the hunter, sensing that everyone was distracted, nocked an arrow to his bow and drew it back, aiming for Guster.

However, the bandit was faster. He pulled a dagger from his belt and threw it at Zein.



When Rina didn’t reply, only sheathed her sword, the woman’s grin grew wider.

“It seems like you understand that you’re going to die here. Rest assured, however—you have my word that Dorothea won’t be meeting the same fate. She has to be kept alive, after all. Although...I suppose if we have to hurt her a little in the process, so be it!”

The woman punctuated her words by launching a blade of wind from her hand: silent magic, a considerably difficult skill. And while the spell itself was of the weak variety, it still possessed enough potency to kill a person.

Since the spell also wasn’t particularly large, Rina evaded it by leaping to the side.

“Oh, you *are* as good as I thought,” the woman praised Rina. “Still, I wonder how long you’ll be able to keep that up?!”

One after the other, the woman cast spells at Rina. Most mages usually needed to take short intervals for rest in between continuous casting to avoid

fatigue, but apparently she lacked that particular flaw. No doubt part of that was because the spells she was making use of weren't particularly demanding in terms of physical stamina and mana.

Nevertheless, their lethality was *not* in doubt.

The woman weaved her spells with dexterity, gradually cutting off Rina's escape routes. Close dodges became nicks and scratches—and then finally a blade of wind scored a large gash across Rina's leg.

"Ah!" Rina cried out and stumbled to the ground. The woman didn't miss the opportunity, using it to close the distance. She drew the dagger at her waist and held it aloft over Rina.

"Farewell," she said. "That was rather fun."

Before she could bring the blade down, however, Rina swiftly drew her sword from its sheath and thrust it at her.

"*Ngh!* You—!"

The woman was obviously surprised that Rina had dared to counterattack despite knowing there were hostages. Unable to dodge in time, the sword sank deep into the woman's abdomen, dealing what was clearly a mortal wound. Her expression distorted in pain, and she glared at Rina hatefully.

While the wound was fatal, she was not dead yet. Rina gripped her sword, ready to make the wound bigger, when...

"Don't get cocky!" the woman screamed, slamming a kick into Rina that sent her flying back several meters through the air.

The blow had so much physical strength behind it that it seemed impossible that it had come from a female mage. Still, Rina was able to land safely on her feet instead of being sent tumbling across the ground. She felt a brief moment of gratitude for the training she had undergone with Isaac and the other Latuule family servants. Without it, she likely would have slammed into a tree and crumpled then and there.

When Rina looked back over, she saw that the woman—who now sported a large gash on her stomach—was breathing raggedly, her face twisted in a look

of fury.

“Now you’ve done it!” she screamed. “I won’t hesitate to kill the little heiress if it comes to that, you know!”

Since the woman’s companions—Dieg, her employer, and Guster—were with Dorothea and the others right now, she was obviously threatening to have them killed in front of Rina, regardless of whether they were hostages or not.

Nevertheless, Rina’s expression remained passive in the face of the threat. Instead, she simply asked a question.

“I’m just asking in case, but...”

“*What?!*”

Rina tilted her head inquisitively to the side in a very cute gesture for a young girl to make. “You don’t *know* do you?”

“What?” the woman replied confusedly.

“Oh, good,” Rina said, not providing an explanation. “I was a little worried. Right, it’s my turn now...”

She dashed forward across the ground, sword held in a steady grip as she closed in on the woman. One clean swing and the sword met its mark, cleaving the woman’s head from her shoulders...until the headless body snatched up the decapitated head and jumped a good distance backward.

Then, the body placed the head back into its original position—whereupon the neck wound cleanly healed itself.



As Rina watched on, not relaxing her guard, the woman smiled victoriously.

“Do you get it now?” she asked. “I’m not human. No matter how many times you kill me, it doesn’t matter. You don’t have a chance of winning.”

“Is that what you think...? I see.”

Rina gave a short nod, then launched back into her offensive. Head, arms, legs—Rina severed the woman’s appendages from her body countless times, and countless times the woman regenerated her wounds.

To someone who didn’t know any better, it looked as though there was no end to the woman’s regenerative ability. Perhaps, their hopes crushed by how futile it seemed, they would have given up on the effort partway through.

Rina, however, *did* know better. She couldn’t *not* know.

Eventually, the end finally came.

“H-Huh? Why? Why isn’t it healing?! H-Heal, damn it! Heal!” The woman stared at her own left arm, her expression rapidly going pale.

It wasn’t reattaching to her body.

Although Rina didn’t know what kind of life the woman had led, she suspected that she hadn’t experienced anything like what was happening to her now.

Most people, upon realizing that their opponent was a monster who wouldn’t die even when beheaded, would choose to give up or run. Alternatively, someone with powers like these could use the moment when their foe was basking in their supposed victory to attack them from behind, or even pretend to be dead in order to escape the situation. All in all, such advantages meant that they would always have the upper hand.

However, this time, the woman had been unlucky enough to run into Rina.

“What’s wrong?” Rina asked, smiling.

“M-My body! It won’t heal!” The look on the woman’s face was one of despair. “Why?! Th-This has never happened before!”

“I guess that means you’ve never really been in a fight like this, huh?”



“Wh-What...? What do you...?”

“Simple. Our ability to regenerate isn’t limitless. The more fatal wounds we suffer, the more our reserves are eaten up. And once we run out, that’s it: no more healing. It’ll come back with time and rest, though.”

As she spoke, Rina’s own injuries were regenerating. There was already no trace left of the large gash that had been across her leg earlier.

Comprehension finally dawned on the woman’s face. “You...you’re a vampire too...?”

“Honestly? I couldn’t tell you. Well...not that it really matters to you anymore.”

“Huh?” The woman’s head flew from her neck, her expression still confused. A moment later, she began to scream. “No! *No!* I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I...! I...!”

Evidently, she had recognized the fact that her head was no longer capable of reattaching itself to her body.

Rina pinned the headless body to the ground with her sword, then caught the woman’s head and set it down. “So, what made you take control of Dieg and do all of this?” she asked.

Vampires had the ability to bend people to their will. Aside from the method Rina had used on Guster, they were also capable of using a charm ability to brainwash their targets.

And that was exactly what she suspected this woman of having done to Dieg.



“I...already told you,” the woman said. “I wanted to make Dieg the company director.”

It was clear from her face that she was still hiding something. That wasn’t a slight against her acting ability—it was just that it was difficult to remain composed when your headless body was pinned to the ground and all you could move was your face. Looking panicked in such a situation was inevitable.

As if to prove that point...

“While I don’t think you’re lying to me, that’s the *means* rather than the *end*, isn’t it?”

Faced with Rina’s unrelenting questioning, the woman appeared to give up. “Fine!” she said resentfully. “But you already know, don’t you? You’re a vampire too! You know how hard it is for us to survive! I *had* to do what I did!”

For a vampire, putting on a human face and effortlessly maintaining their life in human society like Rina, Rentt, and Isaac and the others did was far from an easy feat. Usually, vampires were found quickly and exterminated on the spot.

The fact that so much more deliberate effort was put into the eradication of vampires compared to ordinary monsters was a testament to how dangerous they were. After all, if left alone, they would stroll through society looking the same as anyone else until they sank their fangs into your neck and made you one of them, continuously increasing their numbers. To top it off, their main source of food was humans, and they could live forever. Anyone who thought it was a good idea to leave beings like that alone could quite reasonably be accused of insanity.

From the opposite perspective, however, that made it exceedingly difficult for vampires to live anywhere. It meant that even if they didn’t attack humans and lived a secretive life with the help of a blood donor, vampire hunters would still come knocking at their door.

In all likelihood, there wasn’t a vampire in existence who wasn’t sick of the whole situation.

And in regards to the headless woman currently present, there was another outstanding issue—which Rina proceeded to point out.

“You’re a stray, right?”

“A...‘stray’?”

The woman looked unfamiliar with the term—which in and of itself made the answer clear.

She was a so-called stray vampire, something that Rina had been almost fully confident in ever since the woman had demonstrated that she hadn’t been able to sense Rina’s control over Guster.

As for what had tipped her off, it was the fact that a vampire's servants possessed that vampire's unique mark—one that only other members of their species could recognize. In the case of renowned vampires, this mark represented them and the coven or house that served under them. Isaac had taught Rina how to apply the mark of the Latuule family—that is, the coven led by Laura—and had given her permission to use it.

Rina had asked if it was okay to do such a thing while Laura was asleep, but Isaac had assured her that his master had entrusted him with the right to do so. He had also said that he was fairly certain Laura would not have denied Rentt or Rina permission to use the mark either.

That being said, applying the mark took a decent amount of practice, which Rentt hadn't gone through. Rina, however, had learned it alongside the rest of her training.

And she had applied it to Guster—though the currently headless woman hadn't noticed it.

Isaac had explained to Rina the possibility of such a thing: namely, the possibility of "stray" vampires.

"Among vampires, a stray is one of us who doesn't belong to a coven, house, family, or similar group," Rina explained. "Some vampires create progeny on a whim, but then abandon them to their own devices instead of fulfilling the duties of a progenitor. Most of those progeny don't end up living for long. They're ignorant of everything a vampire should learn, and the only thing they can do is fumble around in the dark as they try and figure it out for themselves."

"Fine. So I don't have a vampire family or anything like that," the woman said. She was pouting, and her expression seemed slightly sad. "But so what? What's your point?"

"That's why you took control of Dieg, isn't it?" Rina asked. "You wanted to make him the company director, then use that as cover to live under his protection."

All in all, the situation wasn't particularly complicated. The woman had stirred up all of this trouble because she had wanted to secure herself a place to

belong. It didn't even necessarily have to be Dieg; as long as they had the influence to serve as cover and protection, anyone would have suited her needs just fine. It was probably only a matter of chance that she'd picked Dieg—and perhaps he had been susceptible to her control too.

"I did," the woman agreed listlessly. "What's so wrong about that? It's the only way I can survive. I'm sick of living on the run. No matter where I go, no matter how quiet and careful I am, in the end..."

Evidently, the woman had lived through her own share of harsh trials. Nevertheless, that wasn't an excuse for what she'd done—even if it was likely true that she'd had no other recourse.

Not for the first time, Rina felt confronted by the reality of how difficult it was to live as a monster in the human world. It wasn't a new revelation to her by any means, but perhaps she now understood it more deeply than before. After all, Rina had been fortunate enough to have protection from the very beginning. If things had lined up slightly differently, however, she could easily have ended up just like this woman—and so could have Rentt.

It was simply a matter of luck.

Rina found herself feeling the slightest twinges of sympathy. The only problem now was what to do.

"Okay," she said. "I understand your situation now. There's nothing more I want to ask. So..."

Rina trailed off, but the woman's imagination must have filled in the next words for her. "W-Wait!" she screamed tearfully. She looked terrified. "Don't kill me! I don't want to die... I don't want to die!"

While part of Rina wondered—perhaps inappropriately, given the circumstances—just how exactly a severed head was managing to scream, the rest of her was deliberating over what to do. The easiest option would just be to kill her, but then that would leave no evidence that a vampire had even been here, since they disintegrated into nothing upon death.

Should she spare her and bring her under her control...?

That was as far as Rina's thought process got before a presence suddenly

appeared behind her.

“Are you perhaps in need of assistance?”



For a moment, Rina was shocked—she hadn’t sensed anyone in the immediate area at all. When she realized that she recognized the voice, however, she turned around, relieved to see who was standing there.

“Isaac,” she said. “Don’t scare me like that...”

“My apologies. That wasn’t my intention, but I suppose I *was* a little abrupt, wasn’t I?”

Indeed, standing behind her was none other than Isaac, the butler of the Latuule family. As always, his expression was pleasant and composed—which, given the circumstances, Rina thought, might have been somewhat inappropriate in and of itself. After all, he had just caught her in the midst of smiling as she talked to a severed head whose body she had pinned to the ground with her sword—as perfect a description as you could get for the word “lunatic.”

Then again, perhaps for Isaac things like that were just an everyday occurrence.

“That aside, you seem to be in need of assistance,” he said, approaching Rina and the severed head—and looking entirely unruffled by both. “That was why I showed up, at least. I hope I’m not inconveniencing you.”

“While I really want to ask *how* you knew I needed help, there’s probably no point in bothering...” Rina muttered. “Yes, I could use some advice. I don’t know what to do about—ah, let me explain what happened first.”

Though she suspected that Isaac had a good idea about pretty much everything, Rina gave a general account of the whole situation from the top.

When she finished, Isaac nodded. “In that case, why don’t I take her in?” he suggested. “After she confesses to her crimes, I can provide her with a safe place to live where she will be watched over.”

“Is that all right? She’s done some pretty bad things...”

Even just this single incident had resulted in the deaths of all of Guster's companions. It was easy to guess that the woman could not exactly say she'd never killed a person before. Then again, it also seemed as though she'd really had no other choice in order to survive, which was the thing that made Rina unable to make up her mind.

Isaac smiled wryly. "When it comes to sins such as those, I haven't lived a virtuous enough life to pass judgment on others. At the very least, however, I can say that she possesses a far more principled personality than stray vampires usually do. I imagine she won't be a problem after a little discipline has been instilled in her."

Isaac evidently surmised that Rina was skeptical of the stray vampire's claim, because he continued. "Generally speaking, once a person becomes a stray vampire, they lose control over their hunger after a few days and go on an indiscriminate hunt. They can wipe out an entire village in the span of a week in their search for human blood. Naturally, that makes them prone to discovery and extermination. This lady, however, seems to have survived quite a long time despite being a stray." Isaac turned to the decapitated head. "Pardon my rudeness, miss, but may I ask how old you are?"

"A...bit over seventy..." the woman answered obediently.

"Oh my. Surviving for so long without being found is in itself quite an achievement." Isaac turned back to Rina. "She must have kept her bloodthirst in check as much as she was able, consumed as little blood as she could manage, and lived life like any other ordinary human. Otherwise the vampire hunters would have had the last laugh. But then, I don't have to explain any of this to you, do I, Rina?"

"Yeah..." Rina murmured.

Even though they hadn't really talked much, the face of the vampire hunter Nive Maris—an unhinged individual of the highest order, even among adventurers—quickly came to Rina's mind. If she'd had someone like *that* after her, there was no way she would be making it as far as seventy years old. Even ten days seemed like a lot to ask.

"In short, this lady is an extraordinary individual, Rina," Isaac continued. "I

imagine that if she had remained a human, she would have lived a life of great integrity. Given how this affair has played out, I understand if you find yourself unable to forgive her, but I nevertheless consider her to be of a rare kind. If the Latuule family takes her in and provides her with a quiet life, the idea of being reckless and attacking people won't even occur to her." He turned to the severed head as though to emphasize his point. "Isn't that right?"

Rina suspected that only Isaac's master and people like Rentt would be able to turn the man down when faced with the kind of pressure he exuded at times like these. And sure enough...

"O-Of course," the woman's head agreed. She looked uncomfortable, and cold sweat was trickling down her brow. "But...is that really going to be okay? I don't want to die...but I can't say I wouldn't understand if you had to kill me either..."

"Well, I'm quite certain that I have more sins on my conscience than you do on yours," Isaac said. "I'd invite karmic retribution if I didn't at least give you a second chance. In any case, it's also true that we simply can't have you disintegrating into nothing here. Without your testimony that you were controlling Dieg, he'll feel wretchedly guilty. Won't he, Rina?"

"Yeah," Rina agreed. She turned to the decapitated head. "Even in the worst case, I was thinking of becoming your progenitor and bringing you under my control that way..."

Who a vampire's progenitor was could be changed—and Isaac and the others had taught Rina how to do it.

"Well, I can't say that I would recommend doing that with a vampire who's lived as long as her," Isaac said. "Since it involves a battle of ego and mind, there's a chance you might have lost."

"Oh, is that why you decided to show up?" Rina asked.

"It is indeed. Now then...for the time being, I suppose I shall become her progenitor instead. First, let's get her head reattached."

After picking the woman's head up, Isaac pulled Rina's sword free from the headless body and handed it back to her. Then, he placed the head back in its

original position and Splintered, wrapping her body in his darkness.

A few seconds passed, and then the woman's injuries were all healed.

Rina was impressed; she hadn't known that you could heal another vampire's wounds like that. While regular healing magic did work on vampires, any that derived from divinity would purify them instead. She had been wondering what vampires did when missing body parts, but evidently there were methods of fixing that which she wasn't aware of.

"I-I'm healed!" the woman exclaimed happily. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. "My body... I'm... Thank you!"

*She must really not have wanted to die*, Rina thought absentmindedly, before immediately realizing how obvious that was. Evidently, becoming a monster had dulled her own sense of the value of life and death.

That probably wasn't a good thing. She resolved to be more serious about that topic in the future.

"Oh, it's nothing worth thanking me for," Isaac said. "I will, however, be expecting you to do the work demanded of you. Will that be acceptable?"

The woman nodded, readily agreeing to Isaac's reminder. "Of course! If you can really provide me with a place where I can live, then..."

"You may rest assured in that regard. I will be taking you to the safest place in the entire world for vampires. Now, there are a number of things I need to fill you in on..."

Before Isaac could continue, however, the woman interrupted him, looking worried. "Um, first...is everything okay where Dieg and Guster are? Shouldn't we...?"

Evidently, her assumption was that the two were currently causing trouble for Dorothea and the others.

Isaac turned to Rina. "What do you think?" he asked. His expression, however, made it clear that he already knew.

"It won't be a problem," Rina replied. Her own expression was entirely unfazed.





When Guster threw the dagger at Zein, the last of Dorothea's hope flickered out. As a hunter, Zein was hardly an unskilled combatant, but the bandit's movements had just been so much faster. The dagger flew straight toward Zein's neck—

*Clang!*

—but the very next moment, she heard the sound of the dagger being deflected from its course.

“Guh!” Guster grunted in pain and sank to the ground as the arrow Zein had fired met its mark.

“Wh-What's the meaning of this?” Dieg hissed, clearly just as confused as Dorothea was.

All Dorothea had managed to see was that something shadowy had deflected the dagger headed for Zein, and that Guster's body had locked up before he could fully step out of the arrow's path. But while both were exceedingly strange occurrences, as far as she was concerned they were both unmistakably strokes of good fortune.

Guster looked to be completely out cold, and Dieg didn't seem to have any means of fighting. The bandit's child hostage, freed from his captor, ran over to hide behind Dorothea and Zein. The hunter kept a nocked arrow trained on Dieg—a silent warning to stay put.

The tables had been completely turned.

“Dieg,” Dorothea said. “It's over. Give it up.”

“I...can't,” he told her. “I need to...marry you and...become the director...of...”

Before he could continue any further, he stiffened and collapsed as though all the energy had left his body. Dorothea looked at Zein, wondering if he had fired an arrow and she had just missed it somehow, but the hunter shook his head. He was just as taken aback as she was.

“For the moment, I'll check if he's really out cold,” Dorothea said,

approaching Dieg. “Keep your guard up.” Examining Dieg’s face revealed that he was clearly unconscious: the whites of his eyes were showing. What was the meaning of this?

Just as her confusion was coming to a head, however...

“Dorothea!” called a voice.

She turned, and there was Rina, accompanied by two people she had never seen before.

Though Dorothea was still wondering what in the world was going on, she breathed a sigh of relief. With Rina here, they’d be fine...even if Guster woke up.



“Is that true...?” Even after hearing the story from Rina, she still found it difficult to accept. “But then, that means Dieg...”

“It is,” Rina confirmed. “This person...well, this *vampire* was controlling him. He’s not actually a bad person, right?”

“He isn’t,” Dorothea agreed. “Back when I was still in Myстера, he had a reputation as a capable and kind young man. He wouldn’t have been able to inherit his family’s company because he had an older brother, but everyone was convinced he’d find success regardless of whether he continued to support his brother or tried to establish a business of his own. That’s why there were talks of him marrying me and taking over my father’s company.”

Rina hummed in interest. “So if you hadn’t become a traveling merchant, you would have been happy to marry him?”

Dorothea was silent for a few moments. “Always direct, aren’t you? Well...I suppose I would have been. After meeting him and talking, I thought we’d be able to do quite well together. Still, my urge to try making it on my own was just that much stronger. I did feel guilty for leaving though.”

“I guess things just didn’t line up right, huh?”

“That’s just how it is sometimes—especially with life and marriage. That aside...is Dieg all right? After someone’s been dominated by a vampire, don’t

they become undead too?”

Dorothea’s question was answered by none other than the young man whom Rina had called her tutor. Apparently he had been handling a commission in the area by chance when he had crossed paths with her. Isaac, as he had named himself, moved in a way that showed no sign of weakness and had an air of elegance about him at all times.

In Dorothea’s mind, *he* fit her mental image of a vampire much better than the woman with her arms bound behind her back, but that was a rather rude thing to think, so she brushed the idea away.

“That only happens in cases where a vampire bites a person and injects them with some of their own blood,” Isaac explained. “There are no signs of any such wounds on Dieg, so he should be fine. Since he passed out, as you so kindly informed us, and that was likely around the time we defeated Amapola—that is this lady’s name—it would line up with the usual reaction most people have after being released from a vampire’s charm. Someone who had become one of the vampire’s undead servants would have remained conscious.”

In short, if Dieg had actually become undead, he would have been capable of acting independently of his master Amapola. A simple charm effect, however, would result in a temporary loss of consciousness once lifted and a full recovery when the victim woke up.

Case in point—after a short while, Dieg’s eyes blinked open. “Ugh...where...am... Dorothea? Is that you...? What did I...?” He looked unable to comprehend the situation at first, but evidently his memories gradually returned along with his consciousness. “Dorothea...I’m sorry. I know this is difficult to believe, but it appears that my senses took leave of me at some point... I never wanted for any of this to happen...”

“It’s fine,” Dorothea said, sighing. “I know. More importantly, are you hurt anywhere? Your father and brother would be terribly cross with me if anything happened to you.”

Dieg let out a weak chuckle. “I rather think they’d disown me instead, given all that’s happened...but what’s done is done. I just wish I knew what could possibly have driven me to do all this...” The young man looked lost.

“Actually...” Dorothea began.

Dieg’s eyes remained wide throughout her entire account of the situation. When she was finished, he nodded in acceptance. “So that’s the whole story...” he murmured. “Certainly it *did* all begin after I met Amapola. It felt as though I was gradually losing myself.” He turned to the vampire in question. “Amapola—why did you do it?”

Despite the fact that he had been enslaved, the young man’s expression did not appear resentful when he asked his question. If anything, it was a little bit sad.

A similar look flashed across Amapola’s face for a moment, but she did not answer.

Silence reigned for several moments before Isaac broke it. “Regardless, it’s clear what happened now. I intend to bring her to a town large enough to handle such matters and have her crimes properly judged there. Does everybody find that acceptable?”

Everyone present agreed, and with that settled, they returned with the children to the nearby village.



Once they reached the village, it was time to decide their next course of action.

That being said, it was already the final stop in Dorothea’s journey. Her original plan had been to make a gradual return, stopping in outpost towns and such to sell the goods she’d purchased in the villages she’d visited along the way, and there was no need to deviate significantly from that. Amapola’s presence meant that they now had to head to a decently sized provincial town nearby that wasn’t on Dorothea’s planned agenda, but that was it.

They could have simply returned straight to Maalt, but this way was faster—and besides, the provincial town had been Isaac’s original destination in the first place. As such, he accompanied them on the trip, but this didn’t seem to bother Dorothea at all. In fact, since Rina kept praising Isaac’s strength, she thought of it as gaining another bodyguard. Dorothea even offered Isaac payment for this,

but he turned it down, stating that her allowing him to ride upon her wagon for free would be payment enough. She suspected that he just didn't want for coin in the first place.

They arrived at their destination in good time, whereupon they promptly handed Amapola and Guster over to the guards and explained the circumstances. Rina noticed the guards begin to move a little oddly after Isaac gave them a certain *look*...but she figured that was a topic best left untouched. She had a good idea of what he'd done anyway.

A brisk trial occurred that very day. Amapola was taken away to be executed, and her ashes were handed over the day after as proof. As for Guster, he was sentenced to manual labor in the mines.

Normally, such matters would never have proceeded so quickly...but it was not hard to guess that Isaac had played a hand in that.

Dorothea and Dieg, who had both been detained for a day to give their statements, had been shocked to find out that the execution had already happened. Still, it wasn't *impossible* for trials to go that fast, so they simply chalked it up to the fact that Amapola was a vampire. After all, if vampires weren't dealt with swiftly, they were often quick to escape and increase in number.

"So this...is Amapola..." Dieg murmured, studying the jar of ashes.

"How did you meet her, anyway?" Dorothea asked.

"Well, my memories are vague...but I think I crossed paths with her as she was running away from something in a back alley. She looked to be in distress, so I invited her into my home for a meal."

"What, so you were hitting on her?"

"No! I wasn't... Well, I suppose it *does* sound like that doesn't it? Regardless, everything afterward is hazy."

"That must have been when she took control of you. Still, it's good that this all concluded without either of us getting hurt."

"Maybe not in a physical sense, but...I'm certainly going to be disowned. How

am I going to live from here on out?”

“You don’t know for sure that you’ll be disowned. Save the thinking for after you explain the situation to your father. And if you *do* get chased out...you can deal with that when it happens.”

“You’re awfully optimistic, aren’t you? I should learn from your example...”

While the pair were busy with their conversation, Isaac spoke to Rina, who was at the edge of their group. “Now then, it’s time I made my departure,” he said. “Convey my regards to everyone else, won’t you? I wish you the best on the rest of your commission.”

After a moment of consideration, Rina asked, “What happened to Amapola in the end?”

“She was ‘executed,’ of course.”

The tone of Isaac’s voice made it obvious that he was lying—he had probably smuggled her away somehow and arranged matters to make it look like she was actually dead. He must have decided that was the safest option, given the possibility of vampire hunters picking up Amapola’s trail. Even Nive would have to give up if her quarry was executed and reduced to ash, most of which had been buried in the earth.

Then again, Rina wouldn’t put it past Nive to dig the ash up, sniff it, and declare that it didn’t *smell* like a proper vampire. Nevertheless, she had faith that Isaac had taken such fanaticism into account. She doubted there was any cause for concern.

After a brief while, Isaac made his departure. Shortly afterward, when Dorothea finally realized that he was no longer with their group, she asked Rina where he’d gone.

“He had something urgent to take care of, so he left,” Rina explained. “He told me to tell you that he was sorry, and that he sends you his regards.”

Dorothea and Dieg both accepted that readily, likely because they recognized how deep into their conversation they had been. They apologized for not noticing, and just like that they set off back to Maalt.

Their journey was peaceful and quiet, and they didn't encounter a single problem. Dieg wasn't going to be putting any more sinister plots into motion, and Amapola wasn't around either. The journey was so trouble-free, in fact, that Dorothea seemed to take it rather badly.

"I...really went through a lot, didn't I...?"

Apparently, this was the most peaceful trip she'd had in the entirety of her two years as a traveling merchant. Still, she didn't appear to think that the hardship she had gone through had been pointless. According to her, "It was a good experience in the end."

When they arrived in Maalt, a pair of unexpected individuals were waiting for them at the guild.

"Father?!" Dorothea and Dieg cried out simultaneously.

Indeed, it was their fathers—the directors of the Merrow and Esol Companies. The look in Dorothea and Dieg's eyes was clearly asking why they were there.

"Dieg," his father began. "I noticed that you were getting involved in some rather odd business, so I came to stop you. As it seemed to involve young Dorothea being in danger, I informed Rudo, and he decided to come along too." Rudo was Dorothea's father, while Dieg's father was named Jude.

Dieg's face went pale upon hearing his father's words, but nevertheless, he proceeded to explain the situation to the two men. After he had finished, they both looked noticeably surprised.

"He's never been one to tell extravagant lies," Jude eventually said to Rudo. "So I'm inclined to believe him. But I must still offer my deepest apologies for the fact that he exposed your daughter to danger. I will be sure to punish—"

Rudo interrupted with a shake of his head. "No, there will be no need for that. I doubt anybody would have been able to resist the vampire's control, much less simple merchants like us. Punishment should not be a concern. And in a sense...it seems that my daughter has grown as a result of young Dieg's actions." He turned to his daughter and smiled. "Dorothea. You've gotten much harder since the last time we saw each other."

“*That’s* what you say to the daughter you haven’t seen in two years?” Dorothea said incredulously. “Not...that I suppose I mind.” She turned to Dieg’s father. “Uncle Jude, I have no wish for your son to be punished. He might have been the cause of much hardship for me over the past two years, but all of it allowed me to learn just how difficult the path of a traveling merchant can be.”

Jude looked uncertain. “But...are you certain about that?”

“Um, Father,” Dieg said. He looked as though he were summoning up his courage to speak.

“Yes...?”

“Regarding my punishment...please dismiss me from the company.”

“What? But why? Both Rudo and Dorothea are saying they’ve forgiven you. While it would be shameful not to accept *any* consequences, of course, we all know that you weren’t in control of yourself. There’s no need to go as far as dismissing you.”

“No, there is. This was all the result of my own naivety and careless actions. So...please—and I’ve just thought of something else.”

“Oh? And that is?”

“Like Dorothea, I would like to start from the beginning as a merchant, with nothing but my own skill. To see how far I can go.” Dieg glanced at the young woman in question.

Dorothea’s eyes widened. “Dieg...are you sure?”

“Yes. Besides, if I stayed in the Esol Company, someone would eventually use these events as a pretext to slander us. My dismissal would be the best thing for the company. Fortunately, I have an amazingly talented brother. They’ll do just fine without me.”

“I see... In that case, I suppose it would be all right. Say, Dieg—why not join up with me, then?”

“I—what?”

“I know you said you wanted to start over from the beginning, but it’s not easy being a traveling merchant. How does joining me and learning the basics



from your senior sound?”

“No—well, you have a point, but...are you certain? After all the danger I put you through...”

“Someone else forced you to do all of that. Besides, two years ago I thought running a business with you sounded fun...and I still do.”

“If you say so, Dorothea, then...I humbly accept.” Dieg turned to Rudo and Jude. “It seems my path has been decided, Father. Director Rudo, forgive my impertinence, but may I ask for your permission in this matter?”

Rudo’s expression passed through a myriad of emotions. It couldn’t have been an easy decision, giving his blessing to his only daughter to set off on a journey alone with a man. Still, that man in question had almost been betrothed to her once, and there was a certain air about the two of them that made it feel like everything would turn out all right.

“I...suppose that’s fine,” Rudo finally said. “It appears that the future we dreamed of two years ago is back on track to come true, Jude.”

“Fate is a strange mistress indeed,” the other director agreed before addressing his son. “Well, Dieg, if that is what you have decided, then you have my blessing. Come, we shall return to Mystera and make the proper arrangements.”

After briefly discussing the matter further, everything was settled. Dorothea granted Rina the final approval to report the commission as successfully completed to the guild, and the young adventurer promptly did so.

“Thank you. I don’t know what I would have done without you,” Dorothea told her. “Truly. I shudder to think what might have happened to me. I’ll likely be in Maalt again in the future, so I’d like to commission you again when the time comes. When it does, I’ll be in your care.”

“Likewise,” Rina replied. “A lot happened, but it was fun, and I learned a lot from you about being a traveling merchant. I don’t think next will be anywhere near as hectic as this commission was, so I’ll make sure to give you a discount!”

With that final joke, the two young women parted ways.



Now that Rina had more or less taken care of all the necessary things, she set off on her final task: reporting to the Latuule estate.



“Welcome, Rina. May I presume that you’ve put everything in order?”

As always, the one who greeted her at the entrance was none other than Isaac. She wanted to know exactly how he had gotten here, since she and the others had left first after parting ways with him, but he was the sort of person that made pondering such questions a waste of time. Instead, Rina discarded the thought.

“Yes!” Rina said. “Pretty much everything worked out peacefully with no loose ends. All thanks to you, Isaac.”

Dorothea and Dieg had set out to be traveling merchants together with the blessing of both of their parents—definitely a smooth conclusion to events as far as Rina was concerned. And since Dorothea would no longer have to face excessive danger or hardship during her travels, she had nothing to worry about in that regard either.

That wasn’t to say the young merchant wouldn’t face *any* hardship at all, of course, but that was unavoidable given her profession and far better than having someone actively out to get her. Rina earnestly prayed that Dorothea and Dieg would one day be able to establish their own company and find success.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Isaac demurred. “You owe it to your own efforts, Rina. Moreover, now that you’ve completed a commission on your own, you finally understand, don’t you? Just how much you’ve grown, I mean.”

Rina realized from his words that he’d been able to tell how insecure she had been feeling about her own strength as of late. “I do, yes,” she said. “I’m sorry for worrying you. It was just that everyone around me was so amazing that it made me feel like I wasn’t much in comparison.”

“I believe you’re not giving yourself enough credit there, but I *do* understand how one could come to that conclusion after being around Rentt and Lorraine. Still, you must also realize that the difference between their experience and yours is great. Rentt has over a decade of diligent training over you, and Lorraine is an expert who received an education specifically for individuals gifted in magic. It is no surprise that you would be unable to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in such a short amount of time.”

“When you say it out loud like that, it makes so much sense... I guess I just didn’t really think of it that way. I suppose my impatience was getting to me. During the job, I realized how much stronger I’d gotten compared to my past self, and I feel like I can see things for what they are a bit better now. I still have a lot to improve...but I think I’ve definitely made progress too.”

“Should I take that to mean that you are glad that you went?”

“Definitely—and on top of everything, I got to meet Dorothea. I think I’ll take more solo commissions from here on out, just every now and then—at least until Raiz and Lola recover enough to do regular adventuring work again.”

Although Rina’s two party members still hadn’t healed from their injuries, they had come far enough along that they’d probably be able to start working again soon. The day when they would be able to accept commissions as a full three-member party wasn’t far off. Rina wanted to be fully confident in herself before that time came.

“Be careful not to overdo it,” Isaac cautioned. “But that *does* sound like a good plan.”

“I’ll be careful,” Rina agreed. “Oh, come to think of it, what happened to Amapola?”

“Ah! Right. Come on out, Amapola.”

A shadowy silhouette formed at Isaac’s side, quickly morphing into the shape of a person. After a few seconds, Amapola was standing there.

“You summoned me, Master Isaac?”

Instead of the robe Rina had last seen her wearing, she was clad in the maid attire worn mostly by the other female servants of the Latuule family. Evidently, she had been well and truly hired on. Furthermore...

“That was Splintering just now, wasn’t it?” Rina asked. “You already know how to do that?”

Rina’s surprise was understandable—Amapola hadn’t been capable of that when they’d fought not long ago. If she had been able to Splinter, the fight would have proved much more difficult. Her inability had also served as proof

for her being a stray vampire. Yet now, she had pulled it off without a problem.

“She has spent a long time as a vampire,” Isaac explained. “Essentially, she already had the foundations down. After some trial and error, she proved to be a quick learner. If we continue with her training, I daresay her strength will improve quite rapidly. Of course, such is the duty of a Latuule family servant.”

Although Isaac was unreserved with his praise, Amapola’s expression looked slightly sick.

*Her training must be really rough,* Rina thought. “Hang in there, Amapola,” she encouraged.

The woman nodded, still looking ill. “I’ll try...”

“Come to think of it,” Rina said, a thought suddenly occurring to her. “Why did you target Dieg anyway? I mean, I know you wanted to control someone influential to secure a safe place that you could live, but surely it would have been easier to dominate Dorothea, right?”

“You...can say some pretty horrific things, despite looking like you wouldn’t even hurt a fly.” Amapola sounded astonished, but her expression quickly turned into acceptance—she had probably just remembered exactly how badly Rina had beaten her. “Our charm ability is highly effective on people with darkness in their hearts, but weak against those without. Because of his talented older brother, Dieg had always had an inferiority complex. By amplifying that, it was a simple matter to take control of him. Dorothea, however, didn’t have much in the way of those emotions within her.”

*That makes sense,* Rina thought. When she’d first met Dorothea, the traveling merchant had been quite wary, but the more they had talked, the more that had faded to reveal the optimistic and straightforward young woman beneath. It was news to her that such people were hard to control...but she still thought that Isaac could manage it.

That kind of thing was probably where the difference in a vampire’s ability really shone through.

“Was that the only reason?” Rina asked.

Amapola considered the question for a moment. “Well...I suppose some small

part of me wanted to cheer Dieg on. He gave me food and shelter when I was running from a vampire hunter, so I wanted to help him achieve his desires. Looking back, though, I realize that I went too far...to say nothing of the methods I used. Desperation has a tendency to undermine all sorts of plans and intentions..."

The woman's eyes were focused somewhere far away as she spoke. She must have felt terribly cornered by the desperation she spoke of.

"Are you going to live here from now on?" Rina asked.

"Yes, as a servant of the Latuule family. I still haven't met the mistress, though..."

"Well, she *is* asleep. I'm sure she'll wake up sooner or later...right?" Rina directed that last part at Isaac.

The man nodded. "Naturally. However, only Mistress Laura herself knows whether that will be tomorrow, in a month, in ten years, or a hundred."

Rina thought that was a little *too* long, personally—but then again, that was probably just how vampires were.

## Chapter 5: Maalt, Sweet Maalt, and a Visit to the Blacksmith

“We’re finally back...” Lorraine murmured, when she saw Maalt’s gates through the gap in the carriage’s curtains. “I know we didn’t actually spend that long in the royal capital, but it feels like it’s been ages.”

I felt the same way. Maybe it was because we considered Maalt our home—our base of operations, so to speak. Hathara was my *home*, home, strictly speaking, and Lorraine’s was somewhere in the Lelmudan Empire, but it was here in Maalt that we had built lives for ourselves. Perhaps it was only natural for us to feel so much nostalgia even after only leaving it for a little while.

“You think anyone’s changed?” I wondered aloud. “Well, even if they have, it can’t be that much.”

“You do hear stories about people leaving somewhere for a year or two and coming back to find out their acquaintances have had children and such,” Lorraine said. “But we were gone for less than a month, so I doubt anything’s changed. Though, since I imagine that the Academy and Tower have been running about doing their business, we might find that there have been other kinds of changes...”

The Tower was the country’s magical research institution, and the Academy was its educational one. They existed in many places, not just Yaaran, and while their names varied, most people just referred to them by those names. No matter which country you went to, in the Academies and Towers you would find future leaders of nations being educated and research groups who were indispensable in the pursuit of uncovering the secrets of magic.

And people from those two organizations were currently staying in Maalt in immense numbers.

As for why, it was because of the dungeon that now existed right below the town as a result of a relatively recent incident caused by a vampire. Dungeons



were natural resources—kind of like ore deposits, if ore deposits could spew out various monsters, treasures, and materials—but they were also mysterious ones, and nobody could say exactly how they were formed.

Although some parts of dungeon interiors looked like man-made stone passageways or the interiors of buildings, others resembled vast open biomes that you would find in the outside world, and it seemed like the only explanation for their existence was that they were given form by no less than a god.

Because of this, there were a number of tangled and complicated theories regarding dungeons, and many countries and their research institutions conducted research into them. Nevertheless, nobody had managed to reach the truth yet.

Then, a dungeon had suddenly formed in Maalt.

Newly formed dungeons were a rarity on a worldwide scale, and they were often in places that were hard to get to. Therefore, they represented opportunities for knowledge that every research institution around would give an arm and a leg to study—hence why crowds of people from the Tower and the Academy had swarmed into Maalt, an influx of people that was practically halfway to being an invasion.

Lorraine and I had run off to the royal capital to escape all the hubbub, so we didn't know what things were like in Maalt currently. Still, it wasn't difficult to imagine that there had been some changes. I dearly hoped that there wouldn't be any disputes or conflicts that I'd have to deal with, but from what I'd seen before we'd left, it hadn't escalated beyond minor squabbles between the adventurers that the Tower and Academy had hired as bodyguards. There probably weren't any major problems lurking around, so I could rest easy for the time being. Hopefully. Maybe.

"Still, a new dungeon, huh? I'm interested to find out why it formed, but I also just wanted to go for a regular ol' delve. You two have been in before, haven't you? What was it like?"

The man directing this question at Lorraine and I was none other than Jean Seebeck, the Grand Guildmaster of Yaaran. He was supposedly getting up there

in age, but physically he was fit and healthy, and the light in his eyes was sharper than that even of Wolf, Maalt's guildmaster. I didn't need especially keen senses to see that if I were to face off against him, it wouldn't even make for a proper fight. While I wouldn't die even if my heart was skewered or my head was crushed, Jean Seebeck was the type of man who made me think that didn't even matter—he would find a way to extinguish my existence in no time flat anyway.

From that perspective, we sure had brought somebody dangerous with us back to Maalt...but it had been at Wolf's request, so all the responsibility was on him if something went wrong. No matter what Jean did, my hands were clean. Yep.

That being said, Jean wasn't the apathetic type when it came to his country or the people who lived in it. In fact, he cared about others, and the general policy he lived by was to maintain peace and order. That was why he had gathered so many individuals with unique abilities in one place, and why he'd served as the chief of an underground organization that held the reins of the royal capital's underworld. So there was probably no need to worry about him doing anything dangerous or out of hand at all...

"Hmm...when we went in, it had just barely formed," Lorraine said thoughtfully. "It was really quite unpleasant. How should I put it... It was like entering a person's internal organs. The walls were almost fleshlike."

"Definitely," I added in agreement. "I caught more and more glimpses of stone and mud walls peeking out as time passed, but as Lorraine said, it was all fleshy at the start. If that's why people support the theory that dungeons are living creatures, then I'd say that's pretty convincing evidence."

Jean laughed. "Fascinating. I'm really looking forward to seeing it; you don't get to see many new things when you get to be my age. What are the dungeon's monsters and magical items like?"

"We left before either could start showing up," Lorraine said. "You'll have to see for yourself."

At the time, Lorraine and I had had our hands full with the conflict against the vampire Shumini and his thralls, so we hadn't had the time to explore the

dungeon itself and discover its unique monsters and magical items. Even after the incident, we had only taken a quick look from the entrance, so we still had yet to do a proper delve into the place. As such, we were looking forward to doing some exploration of our own, if we could be granted permission.

“I see...” Jean mused. “Well, I suppose it would spoil the fun if you two simply told me everything there was to know about it. I’ll just have to take a look for myself!”



After alighting from the carriage we headed for Maalt’s adventurer’s guild. On the way, I asked Jean about the guildmaster—that is, Wolf.

“You were the one who gave Wolf his position, right?”

I was fairly certain that was how the story went, anyway. It was quite well-known that Wolf had been about to retire from adventuring to a quiet, secluded life in the countryside, but Jean Seebeck had put a stop to that.

Jean nodded. “I did indeed. Back then, he was on the brink of ascending to Platinum-class...but that was before suffering such grave injuries to his eyes. He wasn’t getting any younger either, so that was when he began to talk about retirement. In no time at all he had everything ready and a foot out the door. I scrambled here from the royal capital as fast as I could to stop him. ‘Sure, injuries like yours make *being* an adventurer a tough ask,’ I said. ‘But with the years and experience you’ve got under your belt, why not switch to a role where you can prop the profession up instead?’ And wouldn’t you know it, it worked out: Maalt’s guild has a great reputation these days. Back before Wolf became the guildmaster, it wasn’t much different from any other one out there. If that doesn’t mean that appointing him was the best decision I could’ve made, then I don’t know what does.”

Jean’s words sounded heartfelt. I thought about the time frame in my head: Wolf had become the guildmaster probably...more than a decade before Lorraine and I had become adventurers.

I hadn’t been around to know what Maalt’s guild had been like back then, but I suspected that it had been in a pretty rough state. In general, your average guild—for better or for worse—leaned toward a policy of autonomy and

individual responsibility for its local adventurers. That is to say, while they wouldn't take from you, they wouldn't help you out either.

You'd think that would be perfectly fine—and it was, at least for people who were used to working within such a system—but guilds applied that policy to the freshest of rookies too, and that was where the problem lay. A rookie didn't know much about monster species and body parts, much less how to carve them up for harvest; neither were they very educated about plants and materials in general.

The outcome was obvious: they would accept an Iron-class commission under the impression that it would be simple, then fail horribly. And that was one of the *better* outcomes—often, they simply died.

The obvious question was, “why has nobody done anything about it?” to which the answer was, “because for a very long time, this had just been how things were done.” Upholding it was tradition.

“It,” in this case, meant an adventurer's freedom. The entire foundation of the profession was that it was bound by nobody's fetters. It was a catchy ideology, and because it existed, there was a not-insignificant number of adventurers who interpreted it to mean “nobody can give us orders!”

It wasn't always just the lower ranks espousing that belief either; there were even guildmasters who thought that way. It made trying to change the system difficult, because what you were trying to change was a significant part of the guild's very foundations.

Under Wolf's guidance, however, that sort of thing had been cleared out of Maalt. This resulted in a culture of open communication, and the guild's support helped foster a positive desire for self-improvement—not just in rookies, but relative veterans too.

Jean must have appointed Wolf because he'd believed him capable of establishing such a culture, and Wolf had proved to be up to the task. It was a wonderful thing, and both of them deserved their share of the credit.

Me? All I did was teach some of the basics to a few of the rookies. I hadn't gotten anywhere near a position where I could have introduced top-down reforms. Of course, I didn't think my contribution had been totally useless, but

there was no doubt that the reason those efforts had helped at all was because Wolf was this town's guildmaster.

"If other towns had guildmasters who understood adventurers like Wolf, it would lower the rookie mortality rate," I mused. "It'd increase the quality of harvested materials too. I'm pretty sure there'd be no downsides. I guess it's easier said than done though, right?"

Jean considered it for a moment before replying, "We—the Yaaran guild, that is—*are* gradually changing our way of thinking in that regard, but it's difficult to extend that momentum outside of the kingdom. Then again, overextending ourselves would just result in the project petering out. These things need time—and slow, steady effort. Establishing our footing—in the royal capital, I mean—comes first...but that's still no easy task. I'm not sure if you've heard, Rentt, but there are even Silver-classers in the capital who can't tell the difference between any but the most common of herbs."

"So if an herb is even slightly obscure, they won't know what it is?" I asked. "Like the difference between earthen wildparsley and wildparsley blooms?"

Jean's face scrunched up. "Nobody would blame you for mistaking *those*. Even professional herbalists mix those up in person after a close inspection."

"Maalt's rookies can tell them apart though," I said. Well, the ones I'd taught could, at least.

Jean's eyes flew open wide. "What? You're pulling my leg."

"No, really. Actually, isn't it really bad if you *can't* tell the difference? Earthen wildparsley is a high-class delicacy, but wildparsley blooms cause *paralysis* if eaten."

"I mean, you're not wrong there, but..."

"And if you can tell them apart, wildparsley blooms have their own uses too. They're potent enough to even affect decent-sized monsters, so you can extract the juice and apply it to your sword."

Jean looked at me incredulously for a few moments before saying, "And you're telling me that Maalt's *rookies* do that? That's terrifying. I feel like I've been out-assassinated."

Though Jean had called it “terrifying,” wildparsley bloom extract wouldn’t *kill* a person, and the human system purged it relatively fast. Even if you messed up and injured yourself with a weapon coated in it, you’d be okay as long as you had allies around. I’d made sure to drill into the rookies I’d taught that they shouldn’t use it when they were alone, so they’d probably be fine. And by “drill,” I meant that I’d had them test the extract on themselves so they could experience what the paralysis felt like. That way, they had a firsthand understanding of how dangerous it could be—and I said as much to Jean.

“I take it back,” Jean muttered. “*You’re* what’s terrifying. I’m starting to think that scary mask of yours really suits you...”

Shortly afterward, we arrived at a certain building, and Jean came to a stop. “Ah!” he said. “We’re here.”

It was Maalt’s adventurer’s guild. I wasn’t surprised by the fact that Jean had recognized it—he had mentioned that he’d come here before. Then again, guilds looked more or less the same everywhere you went, since they were built for the same purpose.

Apparently there were some special exceptions out there, but I had never seen them. If I journeyed to distant lands one day, then maybe I’d get that chance...

“Right, let’s head inside,” Jean said. “You’re both coming too, right?”

He strode toward the building, and Lorraine and I followed suit. The commission we’d accepted was to escort Jean to Wolf, so our work as adventurers wasn’t over until we’d fully satisfied the requirements of the job.

But of course, that was just common sense.



“Let’s head over to reception first,” I said. “Then...”

*Then they can inform Wolf that we’re here,* was what I had been *about* to say, but Jean was already marching straight toward the guildmaster’s office, leaving us behind. He gave off the impression that he wouldn’t bother listening to anybody.

“U-Um, excuse me! Excuse me!” Sheila was evidently working today, but despite her initial attempts to stop him, she froze when she saw his face and murmured, “Wha...? N-No way... Are you...?”

Jean halted for a moment and huffed in amusement. “Pardon my intrusion. Don’t worry—none of the responsibility for this will fall on you.” He resumed his march and soon disappeared onto the next floor.

Sheila, who had been rooted in place as she watched him go, still wasn’t moving. Lorraine and I dashed over to her.

“Sheila, are you okay?”

“My condolences, Sheila...”

Our words seemed to bring her back to life. “That...” she eked out. “Th-Th-Th-That man...is he who I think he is?”

I nodded. “Jean Seebeck, Grand Guildmaster of Yaaran. We brought him here from the royal capital.”

“I knew it...”

Although Sheila looked dejected, she also seemed relieved—likely because she had been feeling responsible for letting Jean march his way past without confirming his identity. To be fair, his very presence had been intimidating, and she *had* seemed to recognize his face.

“Have you met him before, Sheila?” Lorraine asked.

“In a way...” the guild receptionist confirmed. “Regular guild employees like myself go to the royal capital sometimes for training or seminars. I’ve only seen him from afar a handful of times...but once would have been enough to remember. The way he carries himself...it’s not something you can forget.”

“You’re right about that...”

Even when he was just standing still, it felt like some kind of vitality or drive roiled off of Jean Seebeck in waves. Lorraine and I were well aware that that was just his public face though; we knew he could go unnoticed any time he wished. He never would have been able to lead an underground organization in the royal capital otherwise.

In circumstances like these, however, it was more convenient to be open about who he was. It opened doors and allowed people to recognize him...like Sheila had just now.

“In any case, he’s a guild official, so there should be no problem letting him through,” I said. “Would it be all right if Lorraine and I go after him? We need to report to Wolf.”

“Of course,” Sheila said. “By which I mean, I’d really rather not go to the office right now, so...please, go ahead.”

Her last words had sounded a little pushy. I couldn’t really picture what a meeting between Wolf and Jean would be like, but evidently, it wasn’t something a regular guild employee wanted to get involved in.

I suspected not getting involved was indeed the smart thing to do, and Lorraine probably thought the same. Still, we had a report to make, or else our job wouldn’t count as complete...

Sighing, we chased after Jean.



“Wolf! It’s been too long!”

By the time Lorraine and I caught up, Jean had already thrown open the door to the guildmaster’s office and strode in boisterously with a smile.

“Looks like we were too late...” I muttered.

“Well...it’s not as though they’re going to start trying to kill each other, right?” Lorraine pointed out calmly. “It should be fine. It’s probably not too different from the director of a company paying a surprise visit to one of its branch managers.”

That was a good way of putting it, and if it really was the case, then no problems should arise. Then again, that description didn’t account for the fact that Jean seemed to be a natural-born troublemaker.

I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been hoping our arrival and report would be quieter than this. Alas, what was done was done.

Lorraine and I entered the office after Jean, and we were greeted by the sight



of Wolf with a hand to his brow, a pained expression on his face. It was a rare look on him—he was usually always imposing and dignified—and it sent a pang of guilt through me for what we'd unleashed upon him.

Wolf glanced in our direction. I wouldn't say there *was* a reproving look in his eyes, exactly, but I will say that I averted my gaze and pretended not to notice. I even whistled, albeit silently.

Lorraine might have even whispered, "You're not fooling anybody," but that was no concern of mine.

"Grand Guildmaster Seebeck..." Wolf said. It sounded like he had to force the words out of his mouth. "I must admit that I had not expected you to arrive so...promptly..."

Jean smiled broadly. "I saw through your scheme, my good man. You sent these two along to fetch me so you could say that you *technically* made the effort, didn't you? I bet you thought my staff would refuse and you could put it off for longer. But too bad—for I am here!"

"You...are indeed. I had thought that since Rentt and Lorraine were unfamiliar faces in the capital, it would have been difficult for them to get a direct meeting with you..."

From the sound of things, although Wolf had hired us to do the job, he'd been hoping for us to tell him that we'd been turned down. Since it was probably closer to an internal message than strictly a guild job—pretty much all he'd done was say "bring him over"—then failing to accomplish it wouldn't have resulted in lowering our ranks or anything like that, so Lorraine and I wouldn't have faced any negative consequences.

But as it had turned out, we had run into several unexpected turns of events and became deeply embroiled in a pretty tangled mess of circumstances...which had resulted in us succeeding in escorting Jean here. I couldn't blame Wolf for not being able to foresee that.

I wondered if Wolf knew that Jean was the chief of a shadow organization. I couldn't be sure, so it was probably best to assume that he didn't for the time being and choose my words accordingly.

“Can we consider this job completed now?” I asked, interrupting their conversation momentarily.

“Yeah...” Wolf said. “You may. I’m honestly impressed that you handled it though. How did you even meet him?”

“It’s a long story... Honestly, I think we could have managed it just by asking. When we told the guild employees that it was a request from you, they pretty much gave us the royal treatment.”

“What...?” Wolf looked perplexed.

“I figured that you’d be sending someone along soon so you could claim you ‘tried’ to invite me to Maalt,” Jean explained. “So I left strict orders that any messages from you were to be passed on to me—no exceptions.”



Wolf heaved a deep sigh, recognizing that he had been read like a book. “You haven’t changed a bit,” he said. “Well, so be it. You’re here now. Welcome to Maalt.”



“A toast! To you adventurers, to us—the guild that supports you—and to the greatest guildmaster we could all ask for: Wolf Hermann! Drink up, everybody! Cheers!”

A chorus of deep “Cheers!” rang throughout the tavern from the gathered adventurers. To say that all of Maalt’s adventurers were in attendance would be a slight exaggeration, but it wasn’t too far from it. Almost every adventurer who wasn’t out on a job was present for one reason and one reason only: to welcome the arrival of Jean Seebeck, the grand guildmaster of Yaaran.

“When I said he’d have to organize a welcome party himself if he wanted one, I wasn’t expecting him to actually *do* it...” Wolf muttered. He was at the same table as Lorraine and I, and his expression was resigned as he watched Jean lead the tavern in a toast. “That wildcard never changes.”

“Why did you ask us to go fetch him from the capital in the first place, then?” I grumbled, letting a little resentment leak into my tone. “Oh, right. So you could say you made the effort, right?”

“Sorry about that,” Wolf said, dipping his head in apology. “I can’t deny that I was waiting for you to contact me saying he refused. Partly because he’s a nuisance, sure, but mostly I was expecting him to turn you down because he really does have his hands full most of the time. Nine times out of ten he’d refuse a genuine invitation too. If I had known that he was so serious about coming, I’d have followed proper procedure.”

Although Wolf talked like he thought Jean was an annoyance, it didn’t ring quite true. I had the feeling that he didn’t just see Jean as a superior, but someone he was indebted to as well. I was sure part of him was likely happy to see Jean again after so long.

“True, he must have a lot of *different* responsibilities to handle...” Lorraine mused. “When we left the royal capital, he had to shake off the guild

employees and leave in secret. I wonder if they'll be okay back there..."

From the look on his face, it seemed like Wolf had realized something. "Do you two...know about his 'work'?" he said in a low voice.

I assumed that he was talking about Jean's shadow organization. Lorraine and I nodded.

"Some of his associates got sent our way," I said. "It was a...*unique* experience. Had to go through the wringer a number of times afterward because of it."

"We did have some fascinating encounters though," Lorraine pointed out.

Understanding dawned in Wolf's expression. "Ah...so *that's* how you met him. I'm impressed that you even made it out alive."

"It wasn't *as* bad as it could have been," I admitted. "Not that I'd put my hand up if someone asked me to do it again though. They seemed to be having some internal troubles, so they didn't come at us with everything they had."

Jean's organization had been embroiled in an internal power struggle when they'd come after us, which had resulted in faulty intelligence and a botched job. If they'd made a coordinated attempt on our lives, I doubted we would have ever made it back to Maalt alive. In short: we had been lucky.

"Sounds like a real mess..." Wolf paused to mull it over for a moment. "Suppose I'll get the full story from Jean later. You know, I still can't believe he skipped out on the employees back at the capital to come here. I can practically hear the complaints I'm going to get the next time I visit headquarters. My stomach's aching already..."

"You could always foist all the blame onto him," Lorraine suggested. "In fact, why not take the initiative on that? You could apprehend him and ship him back to the capital, or even just report on his whereabouts and take the credit for locating him."

"That *would* put me in the clear..." Wolf muttered, nodding to himself. "Everyone in the guild knows how impossible he is to keep in check, especially the employees in the capital. They'd likely be grateful enough just to get an update on where he is. Hmm... I guess that's what I'll do." He looked up at

Lorraine and I. “On another note, there’s news you two might want to hear. Something interesting happened a little after you departed Maalt.”

“Oh? What was it?” I asked.

“You know about the new dungeon that formed underground here, of course...”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it turns out another one was found, down along the Ete Highway near the village of Mors.”

“Really?!” Lorraine exclaimed. “Are you sure they didn’t misreport it?!”

She sounded surprised, and I could also hear a note of disbelief in her voice, which was only reasonable. Dungeons were rare enough that discovering them was far from an everyday occurrence, and often it turned out that someone had simply gotten the wrong idea about an ordinary cave. If a cave was large enough, monsters would use it as a nest, and certain kinds of people often stashed away their loot in them too. The end result was often hard to differentiate from a genuine dungeon.

“Apparently, the person who found it—a Bronze-class adventurer who was on a goblin-hunting job in Mors—saw the dungeon while it was expanding,” Wolf explained. “The phenomenon’s about as rare as the formation of an entirely new dungeon, but you *do* see it sometimes with dungeons on the smaller side. The adventurer in question had seen another dungeon before, so they were adamant about their discovery. They even explored the shallower strata a little and came back with a magical item to show for it—one that was confirmed to be so-called dungeon junk. So while I suppose I can’t say for certain that it’s a dungeon...it’s looking pretty likely.”

“Dungeon junk” was a category of magical items sourced from the dungeon with no clear purpose. They likely had *some* kind of use, but had so far proved beyond the ability of human intelligence and creativity to puzzle out, so they were treated as simple curios. Pretty much every dungeon had them, so in a way, they served as proof that a particular location was indeed a dungeon.

There was always the possibility that the Bronze-class adventurer had taken

dungeon junk from somewhere else to pass off as a new discovery, but chasing down every offhand suspicion would never get us anywhere. For the time being...

“You’re looking into it, right?” I asked.

Wolf nodded. “The folk who aren’t here today are out confirming the report. We should hear from them soon enough.”

“I can’t wait...” Lorraine murmured. It sounded like she was speaking more to herself than either of us. “A new dungeon nearby, right after one forms in Maalt? Maybe that theory was onto something...”

“Theory?” Wolf asked.

“Mmm. To be precise, it’s not so much a theory as just something my old mentor used to mutter to himself about sometimes. The gist of it was that he suspected dungeons could give rise to *other* dungeons nearby.”



“Dungeons birthing other dungeons?” Wolf’s brow knit in doubt. “Sounds like an old wives’ tale to me.”

“It does sound somewhat absurd, doesn’t it?” Lorraine agreed. “Still, don’t you ever wonder sometimes? There are more than a few places in the world where dungeons can be found in clusters, even though you’d think that the distribution should be more even. It’s almost as though they’re animals forming a herd...to paraphrase my old mentor, that is.”

“That’s just...y’know. The conditions in those places make it easier for dungeons to form, don’t they? I’m no expert, so I forget the details of the theory, but it’s something about the ambient mana and topography combining into the specific circumstances that a dungeon needs to form. Seems a reasonable enough explanation to me for why dungeons can be found in clusters.”

Despite his claims, Wolf was pretty learned on the subject. There was a decently sized subset of adventurers who boasted that academic topics were pointless to them, since their profession was based on pure physical strength. While Wolf might have looked like the perfect spokesman for those types, he

was actually quite the intellectual.

“That’s the most popular theory these days, yes,” Lorraine agreed. “And it makes sense—in fact, I was a proponent of it myself. But with this new dungeon in Maalt and the discovery of another nearby so soon afterward...well, I can’t bring myself to believe that they’re unrelated. If this new dungeon formed recently—especially if the time frame is right after Maalt’s underground dungeon was formed—then it makes me think my old mentor might have been right.”

“I can’t fault that logic,” Wolf mused. He didn’t look fully convinced, but it seemed as though he at least thought there was something to the theory. “Still, it just seems so...well, what do you think, Rentt?”

“Me? I wonder...” I thought about it for a moment. “I’d believe either theory, to be honest. Even just in this particular case, it could also be that the conditions you mentioned for dungeons to form happened to line up in this area during the past few months.”

Despite my words, I was leaning more toward Lorraine’s opinion—but that was only because I knew from Laura that the dungeon under Maalt had been created by magic rather than forming naturally. If another one had formed near Maalt soon afterward, then it seemed only natural to assume a cause-and-effect relationship.

Wolf wasn’t aware of that though, and it would be too complicated to explain, since I’d have to keep the details vague. Besides, I couldn’t deny the possibility that Wolf’s theory was correct either. It was entirely possible that a dungeon forming underneath Maalt *had* created an environment that made it easy for others to form nearby.

I had the feeling that asking Laura would be enough to put the whole question to rest on the spot, but she was still asleep. Then again, even if she wasn’t, she probably wouldn’t be so free with her answers anyway. She always gave off the impression that she preferred to keep to herself, as though she wanted others to try and figure things out on their own and would only step in to help as a last resort. What was she—my mother or something?

I’d be too scared to ever say that to her face though...



In any case, to my surprise, both Wolf and Lorraine nodded in agreement with my words.

“That’s a definite possibility,” Lorraine said. “Whatever the answer is, it remains to be seen. It could even be something else entirely.” Her expression sobered a little. “Either way, though...”

“Either way...?” Wolf asked, sounding puzzled.

“There’s a possibility that other dungeons will be found around Maalt in the near future, and not just by Mors village. It looks like your workload is only going to increase from now on, Wolf...”

To my ears, Lorraine’s words sounded like an omen of doom for Wolf—and judging by the realization dawning on his face, they were.

“I hadn’t considered that possibility...” he said. “You’re absolutely right though. Why is all of this happening in *Maalt*, of all places? It’s supposed to be a peaceful little rural town...”

I wondered that too. It really seemed like bizarre events had been happening to me nonstop ever since I’d become a monster. Was this my fault? Surely not...

Actually, I was technically the first victim in all of this. That probably put me in the same boat as Wolf when it came to being a magnet for bad luck.

In my case, though, a lot of good had come with the bad. Although I was a monster now, that meant that every bit of training I did resulted in measurable physical improvement. Thinking along those lines made me realize that this situation wasn’t all terrible for Wolf either.

“It’s not such a bad deal, is it?” I said. “It could end up increasing the guild’s income, and a new dungeon means a chance to acquire new materials and magical items. Sure, it’ll increase the guild’s workload too, but...”

Dungeons were like a rich vein of ore waiting to be mined. The profit they promised was exactly why so many people delved into them. And if a rich vein of ore suddenly popped up next to a town, people would think it was a gift from a god.

Wolf, however, seemed to have something he valued over materialistic

desires. “What’s the point in my income increasing if I lose all my time off in the process?!” he exclaimed. “Still...an increased workload means that every guild employee’s going to have to chip in. And I mean *everyone*.”

He was staring right at me as he spoke, but I had no idea what—oh. I...I’d forgotten, but I was functionally a guild employee right now, wasn’t I? But...but...

“I have the right to refuse, don’t I...?” I said.

“Sure,” Wolf agreed. “Feel free to do that. Abandoning the rest of us to work without sleep or rest would be so *kind* of you, Rentt. I don’t mind, of course...but the other employees might end up being so busy they can’t even go home. Sheila might even cry...”

“You’re playing dirty and you know it,” I complained. He was clearly trying to guilt-trip me into being unable to refuse.

However, it seemed that I was mistaken in that assumption—at least partially. “I’m joking,” Wolf assured. “I *would* appreciate a little help when things get really rough though. I’ll probably ask Jean to send some people over from the capital as a last resort, if it comes to that, but that’ll still take time.”

“Well...if that’s all, then just let me know when you need me.”

“Will do. Thanks.” It seemed that business was over, because Wolf switched back to small talk. “Come to think of it, will you two be working again starting from tomorrow?”

“I plan on taking tomorrow off,” I said. “There are a few things I need to settle, but none of them are guild jobs.”

First, I had to deliver a letter to Lillian, the director of Maalt’s Second Orphanage. After that, well, the weapon that I’d ordered had to be ready by now. I’d go pick that up...and then probably do some dungeon delving or find a commission to take. Essentially, I was back to business as usual.

Actually, not *quite* business as usual. There was one more thing I needed to take care of—well, *wanted* to. Not immediately, but soon.

“Wolf,” I began. “When’s the next Silver-class Ascension Exam? I actually

became qualified to take it recently...”



Thankfully, both Lorraine and I managed to avoid waking up with hangovers the next day. That was no surprise on my part—with my body, I couldn’t get hungover if I tried. After all, alcohol counted as a type of poison.

As for Lorraine, she’d always been able to hold her liquor, and she rarely drank more than she could handle. She could even use magic or divinity to heal herself if things got really bad.

That being the case, the day saw the two of us walking through the streets of Maalt together. We had a number of errands to take care of.

“Hmm...a month from now, in the mining city of Welfia,” Lorraine said to me as we headed toward the orphanage. “That’s a little far.”

She was talking about the Silver-class Ascension Exam that Wolf had told us about the previous night.

“Nothing I can do about that,” I said, shrugging. “The capital’s one thing; people take the Silver-class exam there all the time. Maalt, on the other hand...well, do you really think I’d be able to wait a whole year?”

The gist was simple: although the Silver-class Ascension Exam took place every month or so in the royal capital, it was a different story here. While Maalt was a decently sized town, it was still a rural frontier settlement. We didn’t see many people capable enough to make it to Silver-class in the first place.

As a result, Maalt held the exam much less frequently than the capital did. When I’d asked Wolf last night, he’d told me that they’d just recently had it, which meant that the next would be in a year. Then, after I’d told him that I couldn’t wait that long, he’d told me about the mining city of Welfia.

As its title suggested, Welfia was a city based around the largest mines in Yaaran, and it was a cornerstone of the kingdom’s economy. Obviously, that made it much larger than Maalt. Additionally, Wolf was apparently acquainted with the guildmaster in Welfia, and he’d recommended that I go there if I wanted to take the exam early, since they were trustworthy.

The exam would be taking place a month from now, and it took five days to reach Welfia from Maalt by wagon—a week, if you gave yourself a little leeway. In other words, I had plenty of time to make it out there. There was no issue with signing up for the exam either—registration was open at Welfia’s guild until the day.

Incidentally, the reason they held the Bronze-class Ascension Exam frequently even in Maalt was because there were always people making the jump up from Iron-class. The sharp drop in numbers for the Silver-class exam just went to show how difficult attaining that rank really was. Most adventurers ended their careers at Bronze-class; being stuck there wasn’t a problem unique to me.

That being said, in my case, I had been particularly stubborn when it came to letting the issue go. A decade-long period of stagnation would have sent any ordinary adventurer home, into a different line of work, or left them with the resigned resolve to make a living from Bronze-class jobs for the rest of their lives.

I hadn’t been able to come to terms with any of those options—which is a fancy way of saying that I had just been a plain old fool. Still, that idiocy had led me to where I was today, so I had no regrets.

“I suppose a year *would* feel too long, given that it’s a step toward achieving your dream,” Lorraine said. I could hear the sentimentality in her voice. Now that she had mentioned it though...

“I’m starting to get the feeling that the wait wouldn’t be *that* bad,” I said. “A year isn’t that long compared to how I spent the last ten...”

“No, it’s good that you’re eager. Don’t overdo it though—this is just a single step. You’re still a long way away from Mithril.”

“I know, but please don’t say that out loud. My resolve will waver...”

“Waver? After all this time? Please... Oh, we’re here. I’m starting to get used to this door knocker.” Lorraine gently lifted the knocker in question and hit it against the door several times. “Oh...?”

To our surprise, the knocker stayed firmly in place—a notable change from how it usually came off—and produced a high, clean sound with each rap.

“What in the...” Lorraine began, but she was interrupted by the door swinging open to reveal Lillian.

“Oh, if it isn’t Lorraine and Rentt,” she said, before taking notice of the surprise in our expressions. “Is...something the matter?”

“No, well...the knocker seems different today,” Lorraine said.

Lillian’s eyes lit up in recognition. “Ah! We were starting to get fed up with it, so we finally fixed it,” she explained. “Well, I say ‘we,’ but it was Isaac who did it when dropping Alize off one day. He was very quick.”

Evidently, Lillian had become properly acquainted with Isaac. From the description alone, a sister of the Church of the Eastern Sky becoming acquainted with a vampire sounded like a recipe for trouble, but from the story she’d just told us, their relationship was probably closer to a pair of friendly neighbors.

To be fair, I’d dropped by the orphanage back when I’d been a ghoul, then a thrall, and many times since, so I was in no position to speak. I’d just have to pray that Lillian didn’t end up being corrupted toward evil while I wasn’t looking.

Of course, the Church of the Eastern Sky was relatively lenient. They weren’t like those religions with doctrines that were basically “thou shalt kill all monsters,” so a little fraternization was probably fine.

I doubted things would have gone so smoothly if she’d been a part of the Church of Lobelia. I wanted to avoid *those* people as much as possible—one of the reasons being that *Nive* had ties to them.

Still, Isaac had fixed the orphanage’s knocker...?

“He really can do anything, can’t he?” Lorraine muttered.

It sounded as though she’d been talking to herself, but I agreed completely. You could say that was just a matter of course, given Isaac’s personality coupled with how long he’d lived, but that did nothing to take away from the amount of effort he put into improving himself day after day. You really had to respect his skill.

After all, it was a cursed knocker. No matter how much adhesive Lorraine and I had used on it, it had always come off. Maybe the problem had been our half-baked insistence on using the adhesive in the first place?

Well, honestly, the reason we'd treated the repairs so carelessly was probably that it would have felt a little sad to finally see the knocker stabilized. I could have fixed it any time I wanted. Now, though, it was time to say farewell to the knocker of old...or not.

Either way, a sense of sadness stirred in our hearts.



"I see... So Elza's doing well..."

Currently, we were seated on the couch in the parlor, chatting with Lillian. Three cups were placed before us on the table, filled with black tea; one of the orphanage's children had brought them in earlier. It hadn't been Alize, and when we'd asked after her, Lillian had told us that she was with Isaac. It sounded like they'd been diligently undergoing the training that we had asked Isaac to help them with.

That being said, apparently Rina was out of town on a commission at the moment, so Isaac was training Alize by himself. The two of them were probably stronger than I was at this point.

*Ha ha ha. Just kidding...I hope.*

I was really jealous of people who were blessed with talent.

*Just kidding again.*

"Yes. Mel and Pochi are doing well too," Lorraine said. "They asked us to pass along their regards. They felt lonely when you never replied to their letters."

Lorraine was the one who'd received the request from Lillian—I had just tagged along—so she was giving her the report. That being said, I'd come along to the orphanage because I'd thought that Lillian would want to hear about how Elza, Mel, Pochi, and the children were doing.

"You went to the orphanage?" Lillian said. "I see... I'm glad to hear that everyone's doing well, truly. I suppose I never did reply, did I? I was always

worried that it would get them in trouble...”

“Trouble?”

“I was reappointed to Maalt due to some complicated internal circumstances in the clergy...” Lillian explained. “Essentially, I was demoted. I thought that having close ties to someone like me would negatively affect them. After all, they run an orphanage. What if their funding was cut off?”

Ah, of course. The orphanage that Mel ran was an institution of the Church of the Eastern Sky, meaning that was the source of their funding. I didn’t know the details of Lillian’s history, but if she had had a bad reputation with the Church, the higher-ups could very well cut off her sympathizers.

Even if that wasn’t as likely as Lillian thought it was, her concern only demonstrated how much Lillian cared about the orphanage where she’d grown up.

“I don’t think that will be a concern anymore,” Lorraine said. “Mother Elza even said there was a chance you might be recalled back to the capital. Ah, right. I have a letter from her.”

“Oh? Is it...?”

“Yes, she asked us to bring it to you. Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Lillian accepted the letter. “Do you mind if I read it here?”

“Not at all.”

Lillian broke the seal, the divinity that flowed from it proving that it had perfectly served Elza’s purpose: preventing anybody but Lillian from being able to open the letter.

Lillian’s eyes scanned over the letter. It didn’t take her long to finish, and when she did, her expression relaxed, as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

“If it’s all right, may I ask what it says?” Lorraine asked.

“Of course,” Lillian said. “Though it’s nothing much. It just says that everyone’s doing well and that matters have calmed down within the Church, so she can recall me if that’s what I want. And that even if I don’t want to

return, I can always visit too.”

It sounded like Lillian didn’t have to worry about the higher-ups in the Church of the Eastern Sky anymore.

“Do you plan on returning?” Lorraine asked.

Lillian shook her head. “No. Perhaps I would have, a long time ago, but now...this is where I belong. I do plan on visiting though. And I’ll have to send a letter to Mel too.”

Lillian had no intention of leaving this orphanage behind to return to the capital. Elza and Mel would be sad about that, but it was the choice Lillian had made, so they’d probably accept it. They were still close enough to visit each other, after all. And when they did...

“If you find yourself in need of an escort, please look no further than us,” Lorraine said. “Naturally, if you believe our capabilities to be lacking, then feel free to hire other adventurers too.”

I was pretty sure she was joking with that second part.

Lillian chuckled. “Of course. I’ll be counting on you when that time comes. As for your capabilities...I may not look it, but I’m quite handy in a fight myself. If we’re attacked by monsters that you find difficult to handle, have no fear—I’ll protect us.”

Her words took me by surprise. I sensed that she wasn’t completely joking either. A little of her divinity had spilled over—enough for me to tell how refined and potent it was. The divinity that Lorraine and I possessed was barely worth mentioning in comparison. No wonder Elza had such high expectations for her future.

Of course, the amount of divinity a person had wasn’t the only factor in determining how capable they were in a fight, but any undead would be easy pickings for her, and the healing and purification she could contribute would make her an invaluable asset regardless.

“Oh, right,” Lillian said, looking troubled. “She also wrote about the stroll you enjoyed together through the city. It sounds like she caused you some trouble... As her childhood friend, I apologize on her behalf.”



Elza must have included her sneaky excursion out of the abbey in the letter.

“Not at all,” Lorraine assured. “We had fun too; honestly, it was quite beneficial. Oh, here—we bought these for you.”

Lorraine handed over the gifts we’d purchased in the capital: long-lasting confectionaries and black tea. The former was for the orphanage’s children, of course, while the latter was from a brand which Elza had told us Lillian liked.

“Oh, are you sure?” Lillian said hesitantly. “I was the one who made the request of you...”

“Both you and this orphanage have done a lot for us,” Lorraine said. “Don’t think of this as a gift for a client, but as a token of appreciation for a wonderfully helpful neighbor.”

Lorraine was being sincere—by now, we both had deep ties to this orphanage. Our relationship would continue into the future too, so staying on good terms would benefit everybody.

In the end, Lillian accepted the gifts happily.

We would later on hear that the confectionaries had vanished as soon as she had handed them over. No surprise there—when it came to having an appetite, the only creatures that rivaled legendary monsters were children.



“Hey, Clope! Are you in?”

After we’d left the orphanage, I’d headed for the Three-Pronged Harpoon—the blacksmiths. It looked like Luka was out at the moment, so I yelled toward the back to see if Clope was around.

Incidentally, Lorraine had gone home, saying that she wanted to sort the books she’d purchased in the capital as soon as possible. I had no idea when she’d found the time to shop. She didn’t have any business at the blacksmiths like I did, so there was no particular issue with us splitting up for the moment.

She *had* told me to show her the weapon I’d be picking up later, but I’d tested out the prototypes a number of times before and she’d seen them then, so neither of us were especially bothered about keeping to that promise.

“Hmm? Oh, if it isn’t Rentt!” Clope poked his head out of the back of the shop. “Back from the capital, I see.”

The fact that he’d heard me likely meant that he hadn’t been smithing. He was the type of man who wouldn’t even pause his work if you were screaming at him...though it would probably be more accurate to say that he would be too focused to hear you in the first place.

“Yeah, I got back just the other day,” I said. “Oh, here. I picked up a gift for you.”

Clope accepted the large leather pouch that I handed to him and squinted dubiously into it for a moment before his expression broke out into a grin. “Oh! These are mighty fine materials. Can’t get ’em anywhere around these parts either.”

Lorraine and I hadn’t been sure what to get Clope, but when we’d asked Augurey...

*“He’s a blacksmith, so he’d be happy to get raw materials, right? Tools might be good too, but I’d bet he’d prefer to pick his own. Incidentally, there are a few commissions here that could be just the thing...”*

He’d gone on to introduce us to several hunting jobs targeting relatively rare monsters that didn’t appear anywhere except in the vicinity of the capital. In the end, we’d accepted all of them...

That was a good thing in the sense that we’d had plenty of materials left over after handing the jobs in—but looking back, I felt as though I’d spent all of my time in the capital serving as Augurey’s workhorse.

Given how much trouble I’d landed him in though, I don’t think I had any right to complain.

“Lorraine and I hunted them down with Augurey,” I explained. “They’ve all been properly processed too. There should be no issues with the quality.”

“Oh? You met up with Augurey? Now *that’s* a name I haven’t heard in a while. If you see him again, tell him to drop by every once in a while.”

Augurey used to be a customer of Clope’s, after I’d introduced him to the

blacksmith.

“Will do. I’m not sure when that’ll be, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Thanks. Now, what business did you have with me toda— Well, I s’pose I shouldn’t even bother asking, eh? You must be here for *this*.”

Clope fetched a cloth bundle out from the back of the shop, carrying it with gentle caution. I didn’t have to open it up to know what it was: it was the sword that I’d commissioned him to make, forged from mana iron, the magic crystal of a tarasque, wood that had been infused with my divinity, and my own blood.

It...sounded kind of strange when I listed all those ingredients out like that. Still, Clope wouldn’t have done a shoddy job.

I’d tested out the prototypes many times before, but materials like mana iron and tarasque magic crystals didn’t exactly grow on trees, so the test runs had been made with regular iron, plus the divinity-infused wood and my blood, in order to get a feel for the final product.

Naturally, as far as Clope knew he was using vampire blood that I’d obtained somehow, not my *own*.

The end result had been that the infused wood had made it harder to break the prototypes by charging them with divinity—and it strengthened that as well. Meanwhile, my blood had given the test blades the ability to ever so slightly drain the stamina and mana of anything they cut—how fitting for a vampire. The effect was pretty nice—Clope had been surprised, since apparently such powers were extremely rare. Still, it really was minimal, so it wouldn’t give me an infinite reservoir of energy to draw from or anything. Maybe Laura’s blood could create a crazy weapon like that...but I bet she wouldn’t give it to me. Besides, I doubted I’d even be able to wield the result.

As for the mana iron and tarasque magic crystal, it remained to be seen what effect they had, but I was eager to test it out.

“What’s the craftsmanship like?” I asked.

Clope puffed out his chest. “It’ll be sure to satisfy you—that I can guarantee.” He paused for a moment. “Well, if I were being honest, I would’ve liked to use even better materials, but that’s never *not* the case with smithing. It’s the best I

could've made it with what I had.”

“I’m looking forward to trying it out. Do you mind if I do that right away?”

“Go ahead. We have to see how much divinity it can handle, as well as what happens when you add spirit and mana to the mix. That’s the important part; if it doesn’t work, then I’ll have made it for nothing.”

Blacksmiths were relatively well acquainted with how mana, spirit, or divinity worked individually, as well as the fusion of mana and spirit. However, when it came to divinity-mana-spirit fusion, the majority of blacksmiths had no experience with tools for such people at all. Hardly anyone possessed all three in the first place.

As such, all Clope and I could do was proceed through trial and error. It had seemed to have proved successful: the experience he’d gained from repeated testing of the prototypes had shown as he’d become more familiar with the weapons. Throughout the process, I’d been able to feel the energies flowing through the blades more smoothly each time.

“I hope I don’t break it,” I joked.

“Y-You’d better not!” Clope yelled. He sounded genuine. “If you feel you’re about to, stop channeling energy into it right away, got that?!”

Given that I’d broken several prototypes, his caution was warranted. I hadn’t *intended* to break them, of course, but divinity-mana-spirit fusion was no easy feat. Controlling it was still beyond me—just when I thought I’d pulled it off, it fell apart, and just when I thought I’d stopped, it kept going. Such occasions were frequent, and each and every use was unbelievably exhausting.

There was no denying that it was the ace up my sleeve—a strike powerful enough to smash through almost any defense—but it was a mixed blessing, since failing to pull it off meant that I’d have the tables turned on me.

I wanted to practice the technique more, but no weapon ever lasted long enough...hence why I was excited to see what this sword was capable of.

“Well, all I can do is my best,” I said. “If it doesn’t work out...”

“If it doesn’t work out...?” Clope repeated.

“Then...I apologize in advance,” I joked.

“Hey!”

Chuckling, I headed for the courtyard, where I would be able to put my new weapon to the test.



When I reached the courtyard, I unwrapped the cloth bundle that I’d taken from Clope. The most fun part of having equipment specially made for you was the moment when you laid eyes upon it for the first time. With all the prototypes I’d tested, I already had a rough idea of what the final product would be like, but that did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm. I pulled back the last fold of cloth to reveal the sword in all its glory, and...

“Oh! I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting this...”

“You bet you weren’t,” Clope said, sounding smug. “Though, to be fair, I didn’t expect it to turn out like *that* either. I think it’s because of the wood infused with your divinity. I’ve seen weapons made from holy trees before, and some of them looked similar.”

He was referring to the unique pattern on the blade. Holding it by the hilt, I saw that it extended along the sword’s entire length, a grainy imprint that was reminiscent of a tree’s age rings. Strictly speaking, however, the pattern itself wasn’t incredibly unique.

Clope was evidently following a similar line of thought to me. “You can get that kind of effect without using holy trees,” he said. “The difference here lies in how sturdy it is. I made a small knife to test the material, and it was five times more durable than a regular one—*but* it didn’t sacrifice suppleness in the process.”

I swung the blade lightly as a test, and to my surprise it *bent like a branch*. It was as though I wasn’t wielding a blade of solid metal at all, but one of those segmented whip-swords—albeit one on the stiffer side. Nevertheless, it didn’t remotely give off the impression that it was going to snap.

“Interesting...” I remarked. “It’ll probably take some time to get used to though.”

“Nothing you can do about that except put in the effort,” Clope said. “But if the flexibility really isn’t your cup of tea, I can reforge it.”

“No... I’ll try it out a few times first. I might take you up on that offer if it doesn’t seem like I’m getting anywhere, but I already get the feeling that it’ll work out.”

“Good to hear.”

“Still...the coloring’s a little...well...”

“Evil-looking?”

“Yeah...”

The pattern on the blade was all well and good, but there was no way to describe the color other than “evil.” Was that because it was made out of my blood...? The sword was tinged red in several places and looked so sinister that you could practically hear it yelling “More blood! *More blood!*”

“Well, that’s fine, isn’t it?” Clope said. “It suits you.”

“Is...that a good thing...?” I asked.

With my skull mask and this weapon, I looked more like a bandit or assassin than an adventurer. I couldn’t exactly deny that it *did* fit me, but that was a different question altogether from whether it was an appearance befitting an adventurer...

As I pondered that, Clope said, “I guess how it looks doesn’t matter. What’s important is how it feels to use. Let me see how it cuts.”



Clope brought out several logs and dummies made of varying materials ranging from wood to metal to straw. Then, he set them in place around the courtyard. I figured that the different materials were meant to help me get a better feel for the weapon, since it was rare to see a sword as flexible as this one.

“All right, here goes...” I said.

I began cutting through the dummies one by one. At first, I didn’t channel mana into it, relying on pure strength and technique to get a feel for the blade.

Clope had been right to feel confident in it; I could already tell that it was a quality sword, and it cut extremely well. I managed to bisect the dummies wearing metal armor, and what it did to straw and wood wasn’t even worth mentioning.

I checked the blade for any nicks, but didn’t find a single one. When I examined the metal armor, I saw that the parts I’d cut through were slightly jagged, which matched up with the resistance I had felt. The strength afforded me by my monstrous body had probably allowed me to brute force straight through.

Still, that was just fine. I had never wielded a sword that could cut this well.

“How is it?” Clope asked.

I nodded. “I like it. The flexibility isn’t bothering me as much as I thought it would. In fact, I think it’s actually improving the cutting ability.”

“Good to hear. Still, to think the sword is that effective without channeling any kind of energy into it... Maybe you two are a good match?”

Clope was a decent swordsman himself, but apparently his attempts with the blade hadn’t been as successful as mine. I figured the part about us being a match was reasonable—the sword *was* partially made out of my blood, so in that sense maybe it really was my personal weapon. Perhaps that was why it cut excellently even without me needing to pour any mana into it.

There were examples of personalized weapons like that in the world. The simplest and most straightforward kinds were sacred swords or spears that



chose their wielders, granting them immense power when they used the weapons in question. Maybe this sword worked in a similar way.

“You...don’t think it’s a magical sword, do you?” I asked.

“Who knows...?” Clope shrugged. “Though I will say that as a blacksmith, being able to forge such weapons would be an incredible blessing.”

Sacred swords and magical ones tended to be found in dungeons rather than forged, and when they *were* made, it was only by blacksmiths whose names were renowned throughout the lands. Clope was definitely talented, but whether he was capable of such a feat was an open question.

“You can’t tell the difference?” I asked.

“With some, you can. A lot of them you can’t, though. That’s why you can run across them randomly at street stalls and such every once in a while. You’ve heard stories like that before, right?”

I had, in fact. The variation I’d heard featured a lucky adventurer who’d picked up what later turned out to be a magical sword for dirt cheap at a street vendor. It had given him the ability to defeat stronger and stronger monsters, and eventually he had climbed his way up to Gold-class—or Platinum-class, depending on who was telling the story.

I’d heard another story about a guy who’d gone through a similar thing, except it was a strange cursed mask—which wasn’t lucky at all. Well...I suppose it wasn’t *too* unlucky, since he was still alive and kicking...

“I guess if I want to know for certain, I’d have to go to the God of Appraisal,” I mused aloud.

“That’d do it,” Clope agreed. “There *are* other ways, though.”

“Such as?”

“A big-name blacksmith would be able to tell, for one... In any case though, let me think about that part. You should keep trying it out.”



Next, I decided to try channeling spirit into the sword. Of the three energies I had available to me, spirit was the one that I’d always relied on the most even

back when I was human. At that time, it had been thanks to spirit that I'd become strong enough to finally kill skeletons and slimes.

In hindsight, I sure had come a long way. These days I could cut through monsters like that with pure physical strength. I still couldn't manage that against superior species and unique variants, but at least those wouldn't mean instant death when I ran into them. That was a big enough difference on its own.

The vampire I'd run into in the capital didn't count...

"Hey, what are you spacing out for?" Clope called out.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking."

"Well, there's no hurry, I suppose. I've finished setting up more dummies, so give it a go."

I refocused myself and began channeling spirit into my sword. As soon as I did...

"It doesn't look any different..." I muttered.

There were a decent number of weapons out there in the world that changed appearance if spirit or mana was channeled into them. The idea definitely tickled my fancy, so I would have liked my sword to do the same, but it seemed that my hopes—which albeit hadn't been that high—had been dashed.

Still, those kinds of weapons tended to give away their capabilities, which made them difficult to use. The fact that my sword stayed unchanged was likely better for any future fights I might be getting into.

For the time being, I attempted a simple practice swing.

"Huh. I see. So that's how it changes..."

"Is something different?" Clope asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It feels like the flexibility has...*worsened* a little."

"Really? I can't see the difference, myself."

"I only channeled a small amount of spirit, so you'd only notice it if you were swinging the sword. If I channel some more..."

My suspicions were proved correct: the more spirit I channeled into the weapon, the less flexible it became. In short, spirit equaled rigidity.

I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It would maybe improve the sword's cutting ability, but I was worried that it would also make it more susceptible to snapping or chipping. If that led to me breaking it, Clope would cry. I deliberated over whether or not I should continue testing it out.

"Hey, if it breaks from regular use, that just means I made a defective product," Clope said, his tone frank. "Go ahead—see how it is."

That only made sense. Clope hadn't forged the sword to be a decoration, so if this was enough to break it, he wouldn't have any cause to get mad at me.

I nodded and started cutting. As I'd expected, I had no issues slicing through wood and straw. Even with how stiff the sword had become, I doubted that would be enough to leave any chips or scratches. After checking the result of the cuts, I saw that they were much smoother than before—though I'd already suspected that would be the case.

"Now...how about *metal*?" I grunted as I sliced through the armor-clad dummy.

The weight of the sword hadn't changed, so it was still easy to swing. However, the recoil was different now that it was less flexible, so I would have to put a lot of effort into getting used to that.

I had been slightly apprehensive about testing my sword on the armor-clad dummy, but the weapon hadn't even met any resistance as it cut through. And so...

"Everything looks fine," Clope confirmed, after running over to check the blade of my sword. "No scratches."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Just like the wood and straw dummies, the slash through the dummy's metal armor was smoother than when I hadn't used spirit, and there was no sign of damage on the sword, which was excellent. If it could cut this well, it would be useful for piercing through to the cores of amorphous monsters like slimes.

Hunting slimes was still a good source of side income for me...

“I guess that makes mana next.”

As Clope swiftly set up the next round of dummies, I began channeling mana through the sword, whereupon I began to feel something strange.

“Is this...?”

It was as though I could feel something in the ground, like the earth itself was an extension of my limbs. As a test, I tried moving the phantom sensation, and...

*Whump.*

A section of the ground in the courtyard bulged upward like a tiny hill at my command.

I tested the phenomenon out several times and each time observed the same effect—evidently, channeling mana through my sword gave me the ability to manipulate the ground—or, to be more precise, the dirt and sand. It seemed fairly useful for tilling fields...

Well, I wasn't lacking for fertilizer, so if I retired from the adventuring life to become a farmer, I'd probably be hailed as an agricultural god. As I idly followed that silly train of thought, Clope came over, his preparations finished.

“That's probably the effect of the mana iron we used, since it was soaked in the Earth Dragon's mana,” he said, watching me play with the ground. “You see similar things happen sometimes when you make a good weapon out of materials from monsters with a close connection to rock or earth. The ability itself isn't that rare. The question is: how potent is it?”

I knew about these kinds of weapons too; elemental ones that could spit fire or ice and wreath themselves in it. It was essentially like a mage casting a spell, except all you needed to do was channel mana through the weapon.

As Clope had said, it wasn't that rare. You could buy such weapons off the market—if you were willing to part with half of a king's ransom, that is. And even then, it was hard to say whether a lot of the weapons were worth it. As such, I didn't have much experience with using them.

“How potent it is, huh?” I said. “I guess I should channel more mana into it

and find out.”

I had only used a small amount of mana to start with as a test. If I upped that amount, it might be able to improve the effect.

When I put the attempt into practice, I was proved right: the amount of earth and sand I could manipulate increased with my mana output, and I even managed to form stone projectiles out of thin air. There was a great deal of freedom in what I could do, and that meant a wide array of options in combat.

Still, the mana consumption rate was a little worrying. I’d have to spend even more time practicing with the sword to get used to all the different ways I could use it.

I was starting to get worried that I’d never be able to wield it properly.



Next up was divinity. Shaking off my apprehensions, I channel the divine energy into the sword. Appearancewise, it now looked like it was coated in hazy blue flames. However...

“Have you tried using divinity yet?” Clope asked.

Although he was watching me, it didn’t sound like he could see what I could. It didn’t take me long to figure out why: the flames were produced by divinity. Thinking back—reluctantly—to when the insane vampire hunter Nive Maris had forcibly showered me in divine flames, the people without divinity hadn’t been able to see them. In short: the flames that were coating my sword right now were likely of the same variety.

Of course, back when I had learned the fundamentals of using divinity, I had been taught how to make it visible for those who couldn’t see it. I put that technique into practice to show Clope.

“Oh. The blade’s...burning?” he remarked.

“Looks like it,” I said. “I...don’t think it’s actually hot though.”

I couldn’t feel any heat from the blade even though I was wielding it. Touching it didn’t feel any different either.

“Want to try touching it?” I asked Clope.

He looked hesitant at first, since even though they were insubstantial, they were clearly still flames. However, his curiosity won out in the end, and he slowly reached his hand out toward the sword.

“You’re right...” he muttered. “It’s not hot. Flames of this color should be scorching...”

That was exactly the kind of thing a blacksmith would say. It had to be pretty strange for a person who was so used to working with fire to touch what looked like a live flame and not feel anything from it.

It made me wish that he’d been there to see when Nive had set me alight. He would’ve found it amusing—or terrifying—for sure. Of course, I never wanted to undergo such an experience again if I could help it, but maybe I could make an exception if it was for the sake of scaring Clope a little.

“Still, it doesn’t feel like anything in particular has changed,” I muttered, as I evaluated the sword. “The flexibility’s the same, and I don’t get the sense that I can manipulate anything... Guess I’ll start by testing how well it cuts.”

I settled into a fighting stance, then began cutting through the dummies with my flame-wreathed sword using the same motions as I had used with my earlier tests.

“It cuts better, but it’s only as much improvement as I would have gotten from channeling divinity through a regular sword...” I noted. “What’s the point of these flames...?”

I worked over the question in my thoughts. The sword cut well enough through the dummies; I had no complaints in that regard. A regular sword’s sharpness and durability increased if you channeled mana, spirit, or divinity into it, and this sword followed the same principle, though better. Furthermore, using mana and spirit created unique effects that were easy to intuit.

Divinity, however...

Well, I couldn’t get a feel for what it was supposed to do. It was different *somehow*—that much was obvious from how differently it reacted to divinity compared to a regular sword—but I couldn’t place it. If it turned out that the flickering flames were only there for decoration, I suspected I’d start feeling the

slightest urge to snap the weapon in half. Clope would get mad, though. In fact, he'd probably cry if I so much as mentioned the idea, so I figured I'd keep my mouth shut about it. I explained my thoughts about the sword, leaving that part out, and Clope answered with a question.

"You can't think of *anything*?"

He was probably trying to stir up some kind of inspiration that would lead me toward connecting the dots. After some thought, an idea came to me.

"It might be a bit of a stretch, but I've seen a saintess employ a similar power before..." I said. "Maybe these flames can burn vampires? Not that we'd have any way to test that here..."

I was, of course, talking about Nive and her holy flames. The ones wreathing my sword were a lot smaller in scale, but they did resemble hers. It seemed a reasonable enough assumption that they would have the same effect.

That being said, I had no way of testing it out *here*. It didn't work on me, after all; divinity didn't in general.

If Isaac or anybody from the Latuule household had been around, I could perhaps have asked them—but if the result was what I expected it would be, that came with the chance of extinguishing their existences, and I would rather die than do anything that would give the Latuule family cause to hold a grudge against me.

Still, if he was around, Isaac would probably be able to tell just by looking. I'd have to show him when I next got the opportunity.

"Yeah, one doesn't exactly step out for an afternoon and come back with a vampire to test swords on," Clope agreed. "But if you think it'll work on them, then would it work on undead monsters too? You could try it on the skeletons in the Water Moon Dungeon."

"Good idea," I said, nodding.

When Nive had used her holy flames on me, she had been extremely eager about how they would burn me if I was a vampire specifically. Originally, though, divinity's ability to purify made it effective against all undead in general. It wasn't farfetched at all to imagine that the flames wreathing this

sword would be too.

In that case, it should have an obvious and apparent effect on skeletons. Luckily, the Water Moon Dungeon had been my stomping grounds for years, and I knew it like the back of my hand. There was a strange being who resided there, sure, but I figured I'd be okay as long as I didn't delve too far in.

In fact, although I had gone several times since our last meeting to try and meet her again, I had never been able to reach that strange room. The mysterious resident in question had spoken as though there was a proper route to get there, so there probably was...but for now, trying was likely futile.

Whatever the case, I decided that I'd have to go skeleton hunting sometime soon.



All in all, I now had a rough grasp on how to use the sword. The only thing left to try was mana-spirit fusion and divinity-mana-spirit fusion. Both techniques put a lot of strain on a weapon, but in exchange, they gave you access to significant destructive power that could serve as a trump card.

It was thanks to those combinations that I'd made it this far, edging out victories against opponents who'd had the upper hand against me. And with my body's unique constitution that let me "die" any number of times in a fight and be fine, I was now somebody who could last longer than a few seconds against a much stronger opponent, if not necessarily put up a real fight.

It was also very reassuring to know that I had the option to pretend to be dead when a situation *really* became hopeless. If the absolute worst-case scenario ever occurred, I could simply just play dead for a while before making my escape.

People often said that as a man, there were times you had to stand up and fight no matter what...but my personal motto was that outside of those times, you should make a break for it as soon as you knew you didn't stand a chance.

After all, so long as you had your life, you had hope.

"All right, want to try the next one?" Clope asked, a little after he'd finished setting up more dummies.



I nodded and began channeling mana and spirit into my sword. Although it was something I'd done countless times before, it proved to be just as difficult as always—there was a feeling of pressure, like I was trying to force more water into a leather pouch already on the verge of rupturing. That was probably why a sword with a mana-spirit fusion channeled through it caused whatever it hit to burst apart.

That wasn't the only trick I had up my sleeve these days, however. Instead of just forcing things to rupture, I was also capable of channeling a thin flow of mana and spirit on both sides of my sword's blade, giving it a better cutting edge than if I'd used mana or spirit alone. Regardless, though, I couldn't maintain either of those mana-spirit fusion methods for long.

I supposed I just had to continue training hard and devoting more time to improving myself.

When I finished channeling mana and spirit into the sword, a cursory inspection showed me both that the sword's rigidity had increased and that I once more had the sense that I could now manipulate soil and sand. Channeling spirit alone had made the sword more rigid, and channeling mana alone had let me manipulate earth, so in a way, this was the obvious result of channeling both. However, I had the feeling that the overall potency of both effects was greater than when I'd used spirit or mana alone.

When I tested the blade out, the cut it made through the dummy was exceedingly smooth, and I was able to manipulate a significant amount of earth with finer control. What's more, when I changed the way I channeled my mana-spirit fusion and tried to slice through another dummy, the technique retained its explosive properties.

In short, it was an extension of the same abilities mana and spirit produced individually, but stronger and more consistent.

My thoughts immediately jumped to the idea of defaulting to mana-spirit fusion as my top combat option from now on—but as was always the case with life, that was easier said than done. As I maintained the mana-spirit fusion, my exhaustion increased exponentially. Speaking in specific terms, while ten seconds of usage was only the equivalent of a full-speed sprint, thirty seconds

left me unable to even stand.

“This...is way...too inconvenient...to use...” I groaned.

I hadn't felt this exhausted when using mana-spirit fusion with ordinary blades. It had to be a result of the sword maintaining the boosted rigidity and earth manipulation effects in addition to the better cutting edge. Added up, all of that made for a huge burden.

If I kept trying to use it after thirty seconds, forget the sword breaking—I was probably going to break long before it did. And I was undead. If a regular person used it, would it suck them dry? This sword was definitely dangerous enough that it seemed like a distinct possibility.

“You okay?” Clope asked worriedly, staring down at me lying spread-eagled on the ground as I tried to recover my stamina.

“Yeah, I'm just tired,” I replied. “I'm not injured anywhere.”

“Good to hear. There are more than a few magic swords out there that take something from the wielder to strengthen themselves. I was worried that one would be one of them.”

He wasn't wrong; there were a decent number of swords like that in the world. The thought made me suddenly curious about a blacksmith's point of view on the topic. “Just for reference, Clope...” I asked. “When you think of ‘dangerous magic swords,’ what types come to mind?”

Clope mulled it over for a few moments. “Well, the easiest examples to understand would be the ones which reduce their wielders' life spans,” he said. “The more you use them, the more your life is whittled down, but in exchange, the sword gets stronger as you get closer to death—and that results in things like the wielder going berserk and becoming unable to tell friend from foe. There was a rare one I saw a while back with needles that would pop out of the hilt when anyone picked it up. Those needles would stab into the wielder's hand and drain their blood to enhance the sword's power. It was a rotten thing not worth any decent person's time, of course, but there was no denying how formidable it was. Weapons like that always pass from wielder to wielder, gaining infamy as they go. I bet you've at least heard of the examples I just mentioned, right?”

I had, in fact, heard of both of them. Magic swords which could grant you glory at the cost of dooming you to a ruinous fate were common topics of conversation among adventurers sharing a drink with one another. Sometimes the names of their wielders were mentioned, but the weapons often changed hands rapidly. Those who used them for long periods of time were spoken of as heroes.

In the end, however, even those heroes generally met untimely fates.

Adventurers learned of such things from the stories told by bards and minstrels, and they were always quick to say things like “They reaped what they sowed” or “I could have used it better.” Yet, despite all of the tales, there was never a shortage of adventurers who sought after these magic swords.

The reason was simple. In short, it was just plain old— No, I couldn’t talk like I was a bystander. Back when I had been a Bronze-class adventurer with no future, I had been the same: desperately reaching for my dream, unable to give up on it even though all that lay along that path was despair.

No matter what the era, it was always easy to find those kinds of adventurers. Some of them even managed to find what they were seeking. That was why their stories remained behind in poems and songs—even if those songs were about upstarts walking the path of certain doom.

At the end of those stories, they left their swords behind in place of a gravestone, only for someone else to come along to take it up, ruinous destiny and all, and begin the cycle anew.

Was my sword one of those? If I hadn’t been undead...

I couldn’t know for sure. All I could say was that, for my current self, it was shaping up to be a reliable partner indeed. I was going to master it, no matter what. And if I ended up in a bard’s song one day because of it...

Well, I could only hope that it would be an interesting one.



The final technique that I had yet to test was divinity-mana-spirit fusion. Just in case, I apologized in advance.

“This is the one I’m worried about... Sorry if I end up breaking the sword, Clope.”

Clope was proud of the weapon he’d made. If I ended up shattering it into pieces, I’d feel awful. However, his reply was unexpected.

“I know I tried to talk you out of it...” he said, shaking his head. “But the truth is, if that’s all it takes to break it, then it means I gave you a weapon that wasn’t up to the standards of your order. It would mean I’d have failed in my job as a blacksmith. So don’t worry about it, because the fault would be mine. I just have to trust that the sword will pull through.”

He wasn’t wrong—I *had* ordered a sword capable of withstanding divinity-mana-spirit fusion. But the fact remained that blacksmiths didn’t get customers who made such orders every day. I doubted Clope had much experience in that regard, if any; it was already rare enough to come across someone who could wield all three energies. Even if he “failed,” to use his own word, I wouldn’t blame him at all.

With all that said, there was no denying that I did want a weapon that would let me use all of my strength. The fact that I could wield all three kinds of energy didn’t make me strong or weak on its own, but versatility *was* something that I could use to my advantage. As far as I was concerned, that was something to count my blessings for.

There were opponents whom mana wouldn’t work against, and opponents against whom spirit was ineffective. Divinity was quite powerful against a certain subset of foes, and yet other enemies required special methods of attack, such as mana-spirit fusion or divinity-mana-spirit fusion, to get past their potent defensive capabilities. If I was able to at least put up the beginnings of a fight against *all* of those opponents, then it would be a significant boon to have under my belt as an adventurer.

Of course, no matter what kind of power you were talking about, they were all useless if their wielder couldn’t handle them properly. I had confidence in my adaptability...but I couldn’t let myself become overconfident. I knew I’d have to refine myself with diligent effort.

Such were the thoughts running through my mind as I channeled divinity,

mana, and spirit into my sword. It was hard going—if mana-spirit fusion had been like trying to force water into a bulging leather pouch, then this was like trying to forcibly compress extremely solid ore: no matter how hard I tried, it just seemed like there was a physical limit to how much I could cram in.

The amount of power I was successfully managing to channel wasn't anything impressive—it was probably a tenth of what I had used for mana-spirit fusion, if not even less than that. Since the amount I was actually pouring in was several times that, it meant that a lot of it was going to waste.

Even so, the sheer power I could access just by pouring all of my energies into the same sword would be the strongest weapon in my arsenal. I couldn't give up on trying for it.

“I think...I got it...”

Somehow, I successfully pulled it off—a mix of divinity, mana, and spirit flowed through my sword. Without a moment's delay, I set about cutting my way through the dummies Clope had prepared as quickly as I could. Just maintaining the energy flow was noticeably draining to me.

Upon finishing, I saw that the wood and straw dummies had been compressed to a smaller size—small enough to fit in the palm of my hand—and had fallen to the ground. What's more, they were wrapped in earth and ivy, as though being constricted. Now *that* was something I hadn't seen before.

As for the dummy in metal armor, I could still make out its original outline, including where I had made the cuts with the sword, but it had been badly crushed into a spherical shape. That made it difficult to tell which direction I had made the cut from. Like the wood and straw dummies, it was also wrapped tight in earth and ivy. It looked like an enhanced form of divinity-mana-spirit fusion's inherent ability: compression.

“That's really somethin' else. And the ivy...where are the roots?” Clope scrutinized the ivy with a curious glint in his eye. He followed along the vines, searching, and... “As far as I can see, it's got a tight hold of the insides too. I...think it's trying to get its nourishment from everything that's been compressed. Now *that's* a terrifying thought. Plus, the ivy itself isn't affected by the compression...or maybe it is and just doesn't care. Either way, it's looking

lively.”

“Those dummies are wood, straw, and metal armor though,” I pointed out. “How’s it going to get any nutrition from any of them? It’ll probably wither before long.”

“Well...maybe you’re right. But I’m curious to see what happens when you try that on something living. Whoever’s on the receiving end would get crumpled up and turned into plant feed. What a way to go...”

“I guess you’re right about that...”

Was it because I was a monster from the vampire evolutionary line? Even my *sword* had gained the ability to drain the life of living things for a longer life of its own.

It was hard to say how useful that ability would be though, and it seemed hard to use too. Plus, sprouting a new tree or something with every slash was kind of an iffy ability. When I had channeled divinity into my sword it had done something similar, so this wasn’t a shocking revelation or anything, but still.

I wondered if I could control it to some extent. I probably would’ve posed myself that same question no matter what the effect had turned out to be though—so in the end, it just came down to practice.

Maybe that was the direction I’d take my training in from here on out. Before, my policy had been to take any secondary effects in stride and prioritize raw destructive power, because the lack of it had been the biggest problem I had faced.

However, now that I could genuinely expect to grow in strength, things were different. I’d have to start putting more thought into that kind of thing. For example, leaving a wound that was crumpled up and covered in restricting vines was as good as telling the world exactly who did it. It was easy to imagine what problems that kind of instant recognition could stir up.

Of course, if I simply didn’t enhance the sword, or continued relying on channeling spirit or mana alone to pull me through while only using my fusion techniques when absolutely necessary, I wouldn’t need to worry about any of that. It *had* gotten me this far, after all.

But the only thing that success really proved is that I'd gotten lucky enough to only face opponents who could be overcome using what I had. I could easily see my future foes growing strong enough that those techniques would no longer be adequate. What was I going to do when I came up against one of them and had no choice but to fight?

That was what it meant to climb to Mithril-class...even if I was still a long way away from that.

It was clear that the opponents I faced in the future would be more formidable than my opponents of the past—especially since I was going to be undertaking the Silver-class Ascension Exam. I had fought against foes of that level or stronger with Lorraine and Augurey by my side before, but if you were to ask me to try those fights again alone...well, I definitely wouldn't have the luxury of holding back.

If that were to happen, then—so long as I was still using the sword Clope had made for me—it would be like leaving my signature behind on every opponent I defeated.

And *that* was far from ideal.

It likely wouldn't be a problem most of the time, since I wasn't exactly doing any shady business, but there was a chance I'd be hired for jobs that had to be kept confidential. If I wanted those to go off without a hitch, I needed to be able to control my sword's effects.

Fortunately, I already knew for certain that I could manage the effects of mana, spirit, and divinity when channeling them on their own. Since that was the case, the same should be possible for mana-spirit fusion and divinity-mana-spirit fusion too.

If it turned out to be impossible, I'd have to give up and find another method...

*But for the time being, all I can do is try.*



"By the way, how's the sword holding up?" Clope asked curiously, after I'd thoroughly studied the weapon's effects.

From his point of view, the most important question was likely whether or not the sword could withstand my power. Personally, though, I cared more about finding out what it could do. Clope had held off on asking after its condition—basically repressing his ingrained instincts as a blacksmith—because he had been prioritizing me, the wielder, and what I wanted. Now that I had more or less gone through all the sword’s effects, there was no need to do that anymore.

I checked over the sword’s condition under Clope’s intent gaze. “It’s fine, as far as I can tell,” I said. I was only going by its appearance, but I could at least tell that it was a far cry from the severe damage my divinity-mana-spirit fusion had caused the swords I’d previously borrowed from Clope or bought from other blacksmiths. I’d rendered *those* unusable.

That said, I wasn’t a blacksmith by trade; there could’ve been damage my layman’s eyes couldn’t see. It was very possible that the strain of divinity-mana-spirit fusion caused things like internal fractures in the blade or a sharp drop in its overall durability.

I was familiar enough with swords to be a decent judge of the quality of mass-produced stuff, but it went without saying that this weapon was different. Clope had put his body and soul into forging this one, and the end result was probably close to being a genuine magic sword. I simply wasn’t equipped to properly evaluate a weapon like that.

As such, I handed it over to Clope so that the professional could take a better look. He took it and went through a series of careful examinations: scrutinizing the hilt, peering at the blade, swinging it, and tapping it to check if there were any defects. It took some time, but when he was done...

“Looks like you were right,” he told me. “It’s fine.”

“Can I take that to mean you were successful?” I asked. “That you’ve forged a sword that can withstand divinity-mana-spirit fusion.”

If that really was the case, then I’d be over the moon. Up until now, I’d treated the technique as my final, single-use trump card. If I could use it two times, three, or even more than that, then my options in combat would broaden considerably—that is to say, it would be easier for me to find a path to



victory. Phrased another way, there was less of a chance that I'd be forced to suffer an overwhelming defeat. Since I was hard to kill off in the first place, I was extremely grateful for any options that gave me better odds when it came to taking full advantage of my tenacity in a fight.

"Yeah," Clope confirmed. "That said, I don't know how many times it'll be able to withstand all of that. You're the only guy I know of who can use something as crazy as divinity-mana-spirit fusion. If there were others around, I'd be able to do more testing...but that's wishful thinking, I s'pose. I just don't know a single other person who can use divinity, mana, *and* spirit. Sorry."

Clope's apology sounded heartfelt, and that was a testament to what an upstanding blacksmith he was. Still, no matter how you looked at it, this was on me.

"It's fine, really," I said. "*You're* the only blacksmith who's patient enough to stick with an edge-case adventurer like me. You don't have to apologize." I was being honest about how I felt. Without Clope, I would've had a hard time getting my hands on suitable weapons at all.

"You think so? I can come up with a number of people off of the top of my head whose curiosity would be piqued by an edge case like you. There's probably just something about your type that attracts my type, so *you'd* better not worry about it either. But if you really feel like you *have* to make it up to me, then bring me more interesting things to work on. I'll take everything you'll send my way."

Those were reliable words. With my monster body, there were only so many people I could commission for blacksmith work without reservation. Even though as a pseudo-vampire I looked no different from a person, I lived with the constant apprehension that I could be exposed at any moment. There were precious few people whom I could trust not to turn me in if that happened—or whom I'd let myself be taken for, if they did turn me in—and Clope was one of them. If it was within my ability, I wanted to do something for him in return. That thought spurred my next words.

"I'm happy you feel that way, but I still haven't paid you back," I said. "If there's ever anything I can do for you, just let me know. I'll gather as many rare

materials as you want, among other things.”

I meant it too, from the bottom of my heart. Clope, however, shook his head and said, “Forget about stuff like that. Just keep letting me forge your equipment, and I’m happy. Though...I can’t say I’ll *never* have any jobs for you, so I’ll gladly accept your offer. You’d better not say you forgot about it when I come to collect, all right?”

I grinned at the joke. “If you’re ever in a bind, I’ll *make* time for you no matter how busy I am. No job’s too small, so you’d better not hold back either.”

“Do I look like someone who’d be so miserly and reserved? When the time comes, I’ll be asking you for something *big*, so you’d best prepare yourself!”



After chatting for a while, Rentt went home with his sword in his hand and a pleased look on his face, and Clope’s wife, Luka, returned to the Three-Pronged Harpoon from her trip to the blacksmith’s guild.

“I’m back, dear.”

“Welcome back. You’re later than usual—I was worried,” Clope greeted, then noticed that his wife’s usual smile was gone in favor of a troubled expression. “What’s got you looking like that? Did something happen?”

“Well...take a look, dear...” Luka held out a letter.

Clope took it, broke the seal, and carefully read the contents. When he was done, he nodded. “It’ll be a little difficult to ask him about this after what I just said...but maybe this came at just the right time,” he mused. “Looks like I’ll be taking Rentt up on his offer sooner than I expected.”

## Chapter 6: A Certain Request

The next day, I went to the guild.

Why, you ask? Simple: I planned to test out the new sword I'd picked up from Clope yesterday in the Water Moon Dungeon, and since going without taking any jobs would be kind of a waste, I had come to find one that would let me kill two birds with one stone—the birds in this case being testing out my new weapon and earning some coin in the process.

I wondered if I'd ever shake off my thrifty personality. None of the progress I'd made so far had caused it to change...

"Two liters of slime fluid... Three skeleton magic crystals... Mmm, one of these will probably do."

The monsters that spawned in the Water Moon Dungeon were all bottom feeders: slimes, skeletons, and goblins. There were other types too, but those were the main ones, and it was thanks to them that I'd been able to earn a living back when I was human.

Since I owed them, in a sense, a small part of me wondered if using them as the inaugural opponents for my sword was bad karma or something, but I didn't have much of a choice. That was just the kind of job that adventuring was. Besides, leaving them alone to multiply would just lead to problems.

Depending on where you went in the world, you could find goblins interacting peacefully with humans, but almost every specimen that you encountered in dungeons attacked people on sight. There was no need to show them any mercy...though I would feel pretty bad if any of them turned out to be like I'd been at the start of my monster life.

I wondered how likely that was, and whether any of the monsters I had ever killed had been like me. That line of thought put a damper on my mood though, so I decided to stop pursuing it any further.

"I guess I can take this... Ah." I didn't particularly mind which job I accepted,

so I went to take one for collecting slime fluid, but another adventurer beat me to it.

“Sorry...” he apologized, after we stared at each other for a moment.

“No...it’s fine,” I said.

From the look of things, he had taken the job first and only noticed my outstretched hand after turning around. That being said, it didn’t look like he was willing to go as far as handing it over—he promptly strode away to reception.

I supposed I had no choice now. My camaraderie with skeletons from being members of the same evolutionary line had stayed my hand from proactively using them as a money-making resource, but that courtesy only stretched so far. I reached my hand out for the commission slip...

“Huh?”

“Oh, sorry, mister. We’ll be taking this one, so...”

“R-Right...”

This time, it was a party of three women who beat me to it. Since I didn’t recognize them, I gave them a cursory glance: their equipment marked them as students of the Academy.

Since they’d based themselves in this town to survey the dungeon, more than a few of the students had probably taken up adventuring in the meantime, even though it wasn’t their main profession. I’d heard that a decent fraction of the Academy’s students registered as adventurers and went out on jobs while they were still enrolled. They were rather valuable too, since all of them were mages. As a result, the guild gave them a warm enough welcome. Still, compared to people who were adventurers as their main trade, they were lacking in some respects. That was why the people from the Academy hired local Maalt adventurers when foraying into the dungeon for their research.

The party of women left without a backward glance and headed toward reception. I was at a bit of a loss now that the jobs I had been eyeing had been taken. It didn’t help that I’d left the house somewhat late in the day since I hadn’t been particularly desperate for a job—testing my new sword out on

monsters was my primary goal.

There weren't many commissions left on the board, and the ones that were there didn't match what I needed. They were all jobs along the lines of "I need flowers that only grow on the cliffs of Gist Gorge." And while you could find monsters in all kinds of places, I was fairly sure I remembered that the ones in that area were mostly of the flying variety, and not the skeletons that I wanted to try my sword on.

It was difficult for undead to spawn in the Kingdom of Yaaran in the first place. That was actually a major reason I'd so easily accepted the explanation for it that I'd been given in the royal palace. Dungeons weren't privy to such restrictions, of course—undead spawned in the Water Moon Dungeon on the regular.

Still, undead *did* still show up occasionally throughout the kingdom, which was something I would have known even if Her Royal Highness the princess hadn't told us about it. I encountered them outside of dungeons decently often, such as when we'd run into zombies stumbling out of the woods on our way to my hometown of Hathara.

I toyed with the idea of heading out in that direction for a moment, but they'd already all been wiped out to the last, and it was so far away too...

I supposed it had to be the dungeon after all. My inner coin-pincher protested at what a waste it was to go there without taking any jobs, but sometimes that was just how things worked out. But then, just as I was about to surrender the issue...

"What? What do you mean?! This amount was fine before! How am I supposed to raise it on such short notice?!"

I heard a raised voice from over by reception. When I turned to look, I saw Sheila and a young man who looked to be pleading with her. He was considerably roughed up, his clothes torn; I wondered what had done that to him. Curious, I stayed around to listen to their conversation.

"You're certainly right...but that was the case before a new dungeon formed in town," Sheila said. I could hear from her tone how much she sympathized with the young man. "Maalt's adventurers are currently in rather high demand,

with all the commissions from the Tower and the Academy coming in. With this much as your offered payment, I doubt any adventurers will accept the job. The guild is still happy to process it, of course, but I'm afraid you'll need to temper your expectations when it comes to whether anyone will take it..."

Maalt was way out in the sticks—we didn't have that many adventurers. Despite this, we'd suddenly found ourselves in circumstances where a great many of us were needed. In short, demand was high, and supply was low.

Currently the guild was relatively deserted, as the majority of adventurers were out on jobs. Before the new dungeon had formed, it hadn't been unusual to see adventurers sitting around here in twos and threes, drinking themselves blind.

Some clients would feel the effects of that change firsthand and find themselves unable to afford the hike in the market rate for a commission fee—and it appeared that this young man was one such individual.

I had the option of just ignoring him...but, well, the timing was convenient. I'd been unlucky too, having my commissions taken, so maybe it wasn't a bad idea for birds of a feather to lick one another's wounds...

With that in mind, I walked over to where Sheila and the young man were.



"I couldn't help but hear all the fuss," I said, my expression feigning innocence. "Did something happen?"

"Rentt..." Sheila looked like she had already figured out that I'd been listening in.

The young man, on the other hand, turned a suspicious eye on me, but that melted away when he saw my skull mask and cloak. "Are you...an adventurer? Please, you have to hear me out!"

I was actually impressed that he'd managed to pin me as an adventurer so quickly, given my appearance...

Well, come to think of it, a guy who looked like me loitering around in a guild probably couldn't be anything but an adventurer, huh? A lot of us *did* wear

masks and all.

That aside, the young man seemed rather desperate.

“Master Rivul,” Sheila chided gently. “As a rule, adventurers have the right to decide which jobs they do or do not accept. Please don’t try to strong-arm them.”

Sheila’s warning probably would have been stronger if I hadn’t approached of my own accord, but she seemed to recognize that I had come over with an idea of what was going on.

While clients were an indispensable fact of life for adventurers, that didn’t give them the right to command us to do any task or push us into accepting any job. On those grounds, it was an established rule that clients could not coerce adventurers, and the guild protected us from them to a certain degree.

That protection had its limits, of course, and it was always judged on a case-by-case basis, so things often got hazy. In a sense, though, that was very guild-like.

With all that said, Maalt’s guild was reputable in that regard—probably because Wolf was the guildmaster. It was a blessing to have a capable boss. If only he didn’t send strange jobs my way every now and then...

I could save the contemplation for another time though—right now, I needed to focus on what the young man—Rivul, according to Sheila—had to say.

“Well, I just so happen to have found myself with some free time,” I said. “I got beaten to the commissions I wanted to take...but it doesn’t feel right to leave without any either. I can’t make any promises, but I can hear you out at least.”

Rivul’s desperate expression relaxed a little, and his grin lit up the room. “Really?! Thank you! Thank you so much!”



Rivul and I moved to a new location, taking a seat at one of the tables in the tavern that was attached to the guild. Sheila had told us to call her over if I decided to accept his job and went elsewhere to start on some other work. It

seemed like she had mainly been on reception duty today, but while in the old Maalt she wouldn't have needed to do much else, that just wasn't the case these days. There were piles of work to get through, and it was the responsibility of any free hands to assist, regardless of their department.

No wonder Wolf was trying to enlist my help too—and were those dark circles I'd seen under Sheila's eyes earlier?

I decided to forget about all of that. Any further thinking in that direction felt like it would result in me deciding to help them out. I offered a silent prayer that the guild employees would be able to get time off soon...

"So, Rivul, right?" I began. Since I hadn't heard the specifics, I figured that would be where I'd start. "What kind of job do you want done? It sounded like Sheila—uh, the guild clerk turned it down, or maybe said something about nobody accepting it."

Rivul gave me a strained smile. "Ah, you heard? Yes, that's essentially what she told me. I'm looking to hire someone to eliminate the skeletons that have appeared around my village. I thought I'd find somebody right away, but it looks like I was mistaken..."

### *Skeletons.*

My heart stirred a little. They were just the opponents I had been looking for to try out my new sword. It was a good chance to find out what would happen if I tried to cut them with a divinity-charged blade. I'd hate to find out it had no effect...but if that happened, all I'd be able to do was throw my hands up. At least I'd learn that it was pointless.

In any case, Rivul's story sounded like just the right thing for both of my needs: trying out my new sword and taking a commission. I knew that it wouldn't have sounded so favorable to other adventurers though—skeletons weren't particularly lucrative targets. They were bottom-rank monsters that could always be found in the Water Moon Dungeon, and all you could get from them were magic crystals and slightly tougher bones. There was no real reason to travel any farther out to hunt them.

Still, someone likely would have accepted the job...if it had been before the new dungeon formed in Maalt, that is. Even if it wasn't a sizable profit, the



commission payment Rivul was offering was still much more than what simply hunting skeletons and selling their materials on your own would give you. For a low-ranked adventurer, his job had plenty of incentive.

In Maalt's current state, though, even the low-ranked adventurers were benefiting from the profitable jobs offered by the Tower and the Academy. What would have been a perfectly decent commission in the past just wasn't as attractive now. I didn't think this state of affairs would go on forever, but for the time being, Maalt's adventurers were experiencing a small economic bubble.

As a result, even if Rivul put his commission up, nobody would give it a second glance.

"Well...you were just unlucky," I consoled. "Days like these happen. I'm having something of one myself, really. Just a few minutes ago the commissions I was going to take were all snapped up by other adventurers one after the other. That usually never happens, but that's life for you."

"Maybe you're right about that," Rivul agreed.

We shared a moment of downcast commiseration with each other. Afterward, though, I raised my head. "Still, it has to be some twist of fate that us fellow victims of bad luck met today. That was why I figured I'd hear you out. See? It's not all bad."

"Oh, is that why? In that case, um..."

"Rentt."

"In that case, Rentt, I guess I need to thank your bad luck...though I'm not sure if you'll accept my request or not yet."

"It'll depend on the details. Just knowing it's a skeleton hunt doesn't tell me much. Could you give me the full story?"

"Of course." After a moment, Rivul launched into the beginning of his story. "The village I live...well, *lived* in had nothing special going for it, but it was peaceful and quiet..."



According to Rivul, although his village didn't have much, they weren't utterly destitute either. They always had stores prepared to get them through winter or a poor harvest, and while they never experienced any drastic improvements in their lives, they were happy. Their population numbered fewer than a hundred, and the village only consisted of not even twenty small houses, but they had still been able to get by because of the relatively low rate of monster appearances in the region.

"Where is your village, by the way?" I asked.

"Crask Village is about a day's travel west from Maalt, along the Neris River... Yes, around here." Rivul nodded and pointed out a spot on the map I'd unfurled while he'd been speaking.

I knew most of the villages and towns around Maalt off of the top of my head, but not this one. "I haven't heard of a 'Crask Village' before," I remarked. "And I try my best to stay updated regarding the nearby villages on a regular basis..."

"Nobody from the village really ever goes to Maalt," Rivul explained, after a moment's consideration. "We handle the trade of all of our produce and local specialties through traveling merchants too, so I doubt anyone's really heard of us. We have everything we need, so...I guess we never really dealt with others much. Maybe a little bit with one of the nearby towns, but..."

"Fair enough."

Essentially, they were insular. It was no wonder I'd never heard of them—I was hardly capable of noting down the locations of villages nobody ever talked about.

I was surprised by how close it was to Maalt, but there were towns in that area that were closer, so it made sense that no one from Crask had ever needed to come out this far. Plus, there were plenty of villages out there that were known only to their inhabitants. You couldn't hide a whole town, but a small village deep in the forest? That was another matter.

It was a good thing I'd learned about the place. I made a mental note of it as a possible rest stop if I ever had business in that area.

"I'm impressed you managed to avoid getting browbeaten by traveling

merchants in a situation like yours,” I said. “The fact that you didn’t have to worry about your supplies meant that you managed to cut some pretty fair deals, right?”

Because of the knowledge gap that often existed between small villages and traveling merchants, it was easy for them to fall prey to predatory contracts and unfair prices. So long as no other traders came by, the ones that did had a monopoly on business. The lucky merchants who had several such villages in their grip would then be able to save up enough capital to establish their own company somewhere.

It wasn’t exactly a praiseworthy strategy, but the world was a harsh place. In such situations, it was seen as the villagers’ own fault for their ignorance, whether it was willful or not. After all, at any given time they could travel outside their village and learn the market prices, trade with other traveling merchants, or go to a large town and sell their goods there.

Nevertheless, it was surprising that the people in Rivul’s village hadn’t wanted for much, even if their circumstances hadn’t quite reached abundance. Most communities in a similar position ended up as pickings for the aforementioned merchants, which was why I’d asked my question.

“The merchant who came to us was very honest,” Rivul explained. “We aren’t exactly fools either, so we only discussed prices and conditions after checking the market rates and other things in town. Even taking that into account, the conditions we were offered were quite favorable for us.”

“Hmm. Sounds like you were pretty lucky.”

Well, you did run into people like that every now and then—ones who were honest to a fault. That was why you sometimes saw one-copper jobs being posted in the guild.

“So...” I said. “Your village was attacked by monsters? Skeletons, you said?”

“Yes. At least, the ones I saw were skeletons. It was only the one at first, and volunteers from the village took up arms—er, farming tools, I should say—and managed to kill it, but we soon learned that there were more of them...and before we knew it, it was too late. There were five in the last group we saw—too many for simple villagers to handle no matter what anyone did, so we

decided to abandon our homes. The women and children are taking refuge in nearby villages and towns right now, while the men are keeping watch on Crask from afar.”

Rivul’s story was a common one. There were many species of monster where if you spotted one, you could assume that there were more. Goblins were one such example, and skeletons were another. It was different in dungeons, but that was the way it worked in the outside world.

The reason was that goblins naturally formed packs and increased in number, while skeletons were undead—that is to say, they were the type of monster that only occurred when conditions were favorable in the first place. Therefore, the existence of one was a strong indicator that more were to come.

I couldn’t know why without seeing for myself, but evidently, somewhere in the vicinity of Rivul’s village, those conditions for creating undead had lined up.

They should have posted a commission at the guild as soon as they spotted one skeleton, but still, it had been a wise decision to abandon the village before things got any worse. In most cases, villagers proved unable to take that step, choosing to band together to fight the threat off instead—which usually resulted in them being massacred. Even simple villagers understood how fearsome monsters were, of course, but they often couldn’t bring themselves to abandon the land of their forebears. Human behavior was dictated by more than pure logic.

By comparison, Crask’s decision to abandon their village was smart, and so was their choice to evacuate the women and children. They likely anticipated that should the worst come to pass, they could simply settle permanently in the places where they had taken refuge.

As for the men...well, they probably couldn’t let go of their home so easily. They had likely staked their last hopes on sending Rivul to the guild as their representative.

Regardless, I had gotten all of the important details at this point. The request was specifically to eliminate the skeletons occupying the village, but the issue was that there was a high chance there were more out there. I’d have to investigate the root cause and cut them off at the source...as well as make a

mental note to call for help if it turned out to be more than I could handle alone.

That wouldn't be easy with how busy the guild was, but I could always count on Lorraine, even when all else failed.

"All right, Rivul. I'll accept your request."



"We should get off here, right?" Rivul asked, bringing the wagon to a stop. We were in a town to the west of Maalt that was apparently the closest one to Crask Village. From here, though, we would have to walk—my idea, not Rivul's.

The road to Crask was wide enough to fit a wagon, but with skeletons around, it was better to travel by foot, lest we risk losing it or the horse. I could keep Rivul and myself safe, but I was less sure about the whole wagon and the animal with it. He had told me that some of the men keeping watch over Crask were young, so the benefits of leaving the wagon behind likely still outweighed the drawbacks.

"It's just half a day to the village by foot, right?" I asked.

Rivul nodded. "Yes, but...surely you don't mean to go now, do you?"

I'd accepted his request yesterday, and we'd departed soon after, spending the night beneath the stars. Currently, it was just past noon. If we left for Crask now, we'd arrive there in the evening. It wasn't a good idea to fight the skeletons at night, so the best decision would be to spend the night in town before departing tomorrow...or at least, that was what common sense dictated. I made the exact opposite choice.

"Yeah, I do," I confirmed.

Rivul looked taken aback. "But it'll be dark by the time you get there..."

*Are you going to fight like that?* was left unsaid, but the question was written on his face.

My answer, of course, was a resolute "yes." After all, my eyes saw far better in the dark than an ordinary human—better than living creatures in general, in fact. Fighting at night was actually more favorable for me as a general rule,

since it meant that most living creatures would be basically blind.

That wasn't my plan this time around, though. I had a different reason for wanting to reach Crask as soon as I could.

"There are still men keeping watch over the village, right?" I explained. "I need to get there quickly and make sure they're safe. Well, I'm not sure how reassuring that sounds coming from me alone, but I *am* a Bronze-class adventurer. I figure that's better than nothing."

Rivul seemed moved. "You'd go that far for us?! Thank you! Let's leave straightaway, then!"

"I know it was my idea, but how's your stamina? If you don't think you can do it, we can always leave tomorrow..." I wanted to get there as quickly as possible, but it never paid to be reckless.

Rivul shook his head. "No, I'm fine. I'm safe and sound here; everyone else must be much more exhausted. I want to hurry to them and tell them that everything's going to be okay."

He had to be feeling some fatigue, but he wasn't putting up a front—it did look like he had more than enough stamina left to get to the village.

I nodded. "All right. Let's go."

With that, the two of us left the town.



"They should be around there somewhere..."

Rivul pointed toward an area a little below the small hill that overlooked the tiny village. It had been a good several hours since we had left the nearby town, and a veil of darkness was beginning to draw over the sky. The world was dyed a sharp orange by the setting sun, invoking fear and a vague sense of homesickness.

The spot Rivul had indicated was out of sight of the village—they probably used the hill for surveillance. We approached quietly, and soon enough I saw a group of five men seated near each other. Their clothes were tattered like Rivul's, their faces were stained and grimy, and they looked utterly exhausted.

One of them noticed us—well, noticed Rivul—as we approached and turned toward us. When he recognized Rivul and then saw me, his expression relaxed into a small, tired-looking smile of relief.

When we were within talking distance, an older man—the oldest in the group, it looked like—stepped up and clapped Rivul on the shoulder. “Rivul...you made it back. Excellent work.”

Rivul nodded. “I did. I managed to bring an adventurer with me too. You can rest easy now, everyone.”

That was my cue. “My name is Rentt,” I said. “I’m a Bronze-class adventurer. I’m here because I accepted your request to eliminate the skeletons occupying your village.”

The old man who’d spoken to Rivul gave an impressed-sounding hum. “I’m Jiris, the headman of Crask,” he said. “Bronze, you said? Thank you for coming. A person from the nearby town told us about Maalt’s adventurer shortage, but Rivul had already left by that point. I was worried when I heard that the amount we provided him likely wouldn’t be enough to hire even an Iron-class adventurer.”

Although they had been keeping watch here, they must have periodically sent someone to the nearby town for food and other supplies. It would have been a tough ask for them to sustain themselves completely off only what the forest had to offer.

It sounded like all their information had gotten to them late though, which explained why the amount of money that Rivul had was the going rate from before the new dungeon had formed in Maalt.

“We wanted to gather up as much coin as we could, but most of it is still in the village,” the old man continued. “We gave Rivul almost all of what we had on us, and that was all it amounted to. Yet you accepted and came anyway. You have my gratitude.”

“Well, Rivul seemed rather desperate...” I said. “I was just in the right place at the right time to notice. But please rest assured that I’ll do everything I can to rid you of those skeletons.”

“Such a courteous young man... Rivul, you’ve brought along an excellent adventurer indeed. But you must be tired too. You should rest. You as well, Master Rentt...or will you be commencing your hunt at once?”

“I’m afraid not. The sun is about to set, and since the undead have excellent night vision, it would leave me at a disadvantage. I plan to spend tomorrow morning and afternoon clearing out the skeletons.”

That wasn’t actually a problem, since my night vision was particularly good, but I didn’t want any skeletons straying away from the battle and coming for the villagers. If it came down to that, it was best to do it when they had enough light to escape the monsters.

“Sound reasoning,” Jiris agreed. “Then, when you begin, we shall join you and lend you our assistance.”

I shook my head. “No... I’ll be going alone.”

The other villagers around us started forward. “But it’s our village! We have to do something!”

I could tell from their expressions that they weren’t coming from a place of overconfidence, but rather something closer to self-sacrifice. They wanted to be of use to me somehow, even if only as a shield.

I, however, had every intention of having all of them survive. That being the case, I wanted them to stay put here—but from the look of things, I’d need to think of a way to convince them first...



The next morning, we formulated our battle strategy over a breakfast of preserved foods. Since we were quite close to the village and its current inhabitant skeletons, a bonfire would have been a bad idea; undead, myself included, could see heat sources. The villagers had been able to remain hidden since they’d stayed at a distance and hidden behind the hill, but a bonfire would have created smoke, which was not exactly the easiest thing to conceal.

The villagers appeared to have understood this, which was why all of their food supplies consisted of things like jerky.



I was impressed that they were willing to suffer through watch duty when they could have easily had hot meals any time they wanted simply by returning to town. It wasn't uncommon for a village to be overrun or destroyed by monsters, but in most cases the residents of smaller locations abandoned them entirely and dispersed elsewhere. Not many committed to the effort of taking back their home. Given the financial cost and risk to their lives, it was easier to give up a small village for lost. Nobody could fault such a decision—indeed, it was often the rational one to make.

“Now then, I know you all want to participate in the fight...” I said, broaching the main issue as though I were the chairperson of an assembly. “But...”

“Yes,” Headman Jiris said firmly. “It’s our village. We cannot stay back and let others do everything—we must make a stand!”

The problem was, if they were capable of that, the situation wouldn't have devolved into this in the first place. I didn't want to sound harsh, but the simple fact was that they lacked the strength to accomplish what they wanted. The reason they were bringing it up now, though, was because an adventurer had come along. They wanted to improve their chances of taking back their village no matter what, even if it meant serving as human shields for me.

However, I didn't want them to be so self-sacrificing, and neither was there any need to be—which was why I had put thought into what it was that they *could* do.

“I understand how you all feel,” I said. “But, being completely honest, if you took up arms and fought at close range, you would only get in my way.”

First, I had to get them to understand that part. Being someone's shield was easier said than done—you needed to step in at the right time or it'd be pointless. I doubted any of them had that level of skill, which meant that they would only be obstacles for me. There was even the chance they'd step in between my sword and a skeleton, resulting in nothing but a meaningless death.

I had done nothing but point out the truth, but it must have sounded quite harsh to Jiris and the others. Even so, they were doggedly persistent.

“But...we *have* to do something...!”

I could understand how they felt, however—which was why I had an idea.

“I see you have bows there,” I remarked. “Do you all know how to use them?”

I didn’t know if they were for protection or hunting, but there were bows at their feet, next to the selections of hoes and other farming implements that might have served as makeshift weapons.

“W-We do, more or less...” Jiris answered hesitantly. “Especially Rivul and Zutga there; they’re expert hunters who contend over being the best in the village.”

I was surprised to hear that Rivul was a good hunter, but then again, he *had* been the one they’d chosen to send to Maalt. His stamina and good sense of direction had made him a good pick for the responsibility.

I nodded at Jiris. “That’s good to hear. What about everyone else?”

“We can, yes. Our village...doesn’t really deal much with the outside world, you see. Since we need to be ready to secure our own food in case there’s a need, hunting is an indispensable skill. It’s nothing grand enough to slay monsters, of course...but we can all use a bow, to an extent.”

That made sense—it was hard to be a specialist in a village with such a small population. It was common for everyone to be at least capable of everything, if not necessarily skilled in it.

That quirk of small village life would come in handy today.

“In that case, could I ask everyone to fire arrows at the skeletons from afar?” I asked. “In a group, if possible.”

“From afar...?” Jiris questioned. “But would that really be of any help to you, Master Rentt? Our resolve is true; we can fight against the monsters from the front!”

He was probably thinking that I was giving them that job because I was worried about them, or maybe doubting their courage. Honestly, that was exactly right—but if I said as much, I’d only be met with resistance...so I gave them a different reason.

“Please don’t misunderstand me—I don’t doubt your resolve for a moment.

However, as I mentioned earlier, fighting alongside those who are unfamiliar with combat would impair me. Still, I know that you would not even balk at death in order to take your village back. I took that into account when thinking about what you could do...and I believe becoming decoys is the best option.”

“Decoys...?”

“Yes, decoys. Though skeletons do not possess much in the way of intelligence, they have a rough sense of how dangerous nearby creatures are and can tell whether an opponent is weak or strong. Furthermore, they tend to target the easiest kills first...although that’s generally true of all monsters. Of course, you’re all aware of this, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes...”

The violent topic was taking some of the wind out of Jiris’s and the others’ sails. I would be fine if they ended up getting cold feet, but with what they’d said already, I doubted they were going to take it back, so I continued.

“If I charge into the skeletons, it’s highly likely that they’ll all come for me at once. However, that would make the fight...a little difficult. You said there were five of them, correct? Fighting while trying to dodge all of them at once... I can’t guarantee that there’s *no* chance I’ll lose. But if a few of their number are distracted, then the fight—and the hunt overall—would be dramatically easier.”

“So...you’d like us to fire arrows from afar to draw the skeletons’ attention? And what about the grouping up?”

“That’s to make sure the skeletons all focus in a single direction. It’s easier for me to eliminate them if they have their backs to me. This goes without saying...but this strategy puts you all at an exceedingly high amount of risk. There’s every chance you could die. Even so...will you do it?”

No deaths would be happening at all on my watch, of course, and I was confident I could handle a mere five skeletons at once, but it *was* true that the amount of risk wasn’t zero, so I truly didn’t mind if they refused. The answer that Jiris and the others gave, however, was pretty much what I’d expected it would be.

“Of course we will,” Jiris said. “Let’s do this, everyone!”

At his words, all of the other villagers nodded firmly in agreement.



Although I'd already taken a brief glance the previous night, morning could have brought changes to the situation, so the first thing I did was examine the state of the village from atop the hill. I knew that Jiris and the other men had alternated watches through the night, but in the end, they were simple villagers; even if they had some experience as hunters, that didn't make their night vision any better. I needed to confirm everything with my own eyes.

Just as Rivul had informed me, the entirety of the village comprised fewer than twenty houses with a bit of space left between each. From atop the hill, I could see white figures with sunken eye sockets wandering through the gaps between the buildings. The sight of a village populated only by shambling constructs of bone felt empty, frightening, and surreal. It was like watching the end of the world, or perhaps experiencing a terribly sad dream.

Giving myself over to sentiment wouldn't get me anywhere though. First, I counted the skeletons: one, two...three, four...and five. I managed to find the reported number quite quickly. However...

"There's definitely more than five..." I mumbled to myself. "A bow wielder, a spear wielder...and ordinary skeletons scattered around."

All of this was new information. Jiris was lying prone beside me watching the village too, and when I pointed out my discoveries to him, a look of surprise came across his face.

"You're right—there they are!" he agreed. "But why...? They weren't there yesterday. Everyone was keeping a close watch."

"They must have shown up within the last day... If we leave them be, it's highly likely their numbers will only grow."

"Th-That would be awful! Is there anything we can do?!"

"Regarding the skeletons over there, all we have to do is eliminate them according to plan. The ones wielding the bow and spear are skeleton soldiers, but that's all right. They're more formidable monsters than ordinary skeletons...but they shouldn't pose much of a problem."

Now *those* were words my past human self never would have been able to say. Back then, I'd been weak enough that just a group of skeletons would have forced me to flee. These days, however, I could say something like that and it wouldn't be a lie. That didn't mean I would let my guard down, of course.

"Since there's a bow wielder, though..." I added. "The risk you'll all be undertaking will be even greater. I'll attempt to prioritize that one first, but I can't make any guarantees."

"Of course. We understand." Jiris turned to the villagers behind him, all ready for battle. "You heard him, everyone."

I hadn't accounted for the skeleton soldiers, especially the bow wielder. Ordinary skeletons only ever used rusty swords or daggers, and their skill with the weapons was low, which made their fighting style monotonous and easy to read. Skeleton soldiers, on the other hand, sometimes fought with rational thinking similar to human beings, were reasonably decent with weapons like spears and bows, and had the ability to command lesser skeletons. In essence, they were like party leaders.

A group of five skeletons with two skeleton soldiers was a much more formidable foe than a mere ten skeletons, for example. We would need to proceed with caution.

If I'd been alone, I could have simply charged my way through them all, since I'd be able to survive and recover from any fatal wounds I happened to suffer, but I couldn't do that with Jiris and the others watching, let alone participating like they were so eager to do. I really had to stay on my toes for this upcoming fight...

In any case, I had a good grasp on the enemy's makeup now, and as far as I could see, there were no more out there.

"All right, let's go," I said, taking the lead as I set off. "Stick to the strategy, everyone."

The villagers followed after me quietly, muffling the sound of their footsteps. As one might expect of people who lived their lives in the forest, they were skilled when it came to that kind of thing.



I entered the village alone.

Jiris and the others were keeping an eye on my movements from their position a short distance away from the village, so that they were ready to fire arrows if skeletons jumped out to attack me.

That said, I wanted to try and clean this up without involving the villagers at all first. Despite everything they'd said, that was still the best option in my opinion. Fortunately, the village had a lot of nooks and crannies that served as hiding spots.

I didn't know if they had been ordered to do it by the skeleton soldiers or were doing it of their own volition, but the skeletons were scattered around town, making patrols. If I played my cards right, I could take care of them all one by one.

I hid in the shadows of a house, waiting for the first one to approach.

*Rattle-clack.*

Soon enough, I heard the distinctive sound of bones rattling as they came closer. A quick peek around the corner revealed a skeleton slowly heading my way. It didn't seem to have noticed anything. I could make my move as soon as it appeared in front of me.

Since I needed to kill it in one blow without making too much noise, I channeled spirit into my sword, since it was what gave it the best cutting edge. I could get it just as good with mana, but took a larger input, so if sharpness was all I was going for, spirit was the most logical option.

*A little closer... Just a bit more...and...now.*

I stepped out from the corner of the house where I'd been hiding and moved behind the skeleton, making a clean sweep of my sword into the back of its skull. The blow connected with its magic crystal inside—the source of the power that animated the monster—and with a swift jerk, I pulled it out. Immediately, the skeleton came to such a dead stop that it was hard to believe it had ever been moving, then fell to the ground in a shower of disconnected bones.

That was easy...

I'd made barely any noise. Unlike the pavement of a town like Maalt, the ground here was bare soil, which muffled the rattling. Still, if I just left the bones here, one of the other patrolling skeletons might come along and discover them...

I channeled mana into my sword and used it to manipulate the earth, making quick work of burying the skeleton's remains. I kept it shallow though, so that I could find it later; there was no point in letting usable materials go to waste.

I didn't particularly have a need for them, and they wouldn't sell for that much even if I lugged them back to Maalt, but they could maybe serve as decent construction material to rebuild the village. My walk through the town had revealed that the skeletons had torn it up somewhat. There were several houses that would need rebuilding, and one could never have too many materials when it came to that.

"Right. Onto the next one..."

I hid myself again and headed off to find the next target in my quest to secure more building materials.



I was happy with my second find—as far as I could tell, it was patrolling far away from the other skeletons, which made it the perfect prey. As for what it was perfect *for*, well...that would be for testing my sword, of course.

The first skeleton had been plenty useful as an assessment of how I could use spirit with my new weapon, but the reason I had taken this job in the first place was so that I could see what effect channeling divinity through my sword would have on the undead.

Since I'd encountered several unexpected interferences like the villagers' enthusiasm, I'd thought that I wouldn't be able to try it out for fear of the additional risk it invited. Against a foe this isolated, though, the other skeletons wouldn't notice even if I made a little noise.

I channeled divinity into my sword and waited for the skeleton to approach. The moment it passed in front of me, I leaped out and swung my weapon with

enough raw strength to kill the monster even if the divinity ended up doing nothing.

What actually happened was that my sword swept through the skeleton's body with much less resistance than I'd expected...probably because the parts of the monster that it had made contact with were reduced to ash.

When I'd completed my swing, the end result was that the skeleton had been split vertically in two. The bone adjacent to the cut gradually turned to ash too, the effect spreading, and after a few seconds, all that remained of the skeleton was ash floating on the wind and a single magic crystal.

That was a slight issue, since I'd wanted to use the bones as materials, but since that was more of a bonus to my main objective, I figured it was fine.

It seemed like channeling divinity into this sword resulted in a potent blessing that was highly effective against the undead. I wouldn't be able to say that for sure until I tested it on undead other than skeletons too, and the potency likely varied depending on my opponent, but taking this commission had already proved to be worth my while. After all, I had successfully destroyed a skeleton without making a sound. It had been so effective that I was starting to think I should have used it to begin with.

"I guess things won't play out that smoothly though, will they...?" I muttered to myself quietly. I could tell how much divinity I had expended, and it wasn't shaping up to look like an effective power source in terms of what I got out versus what I put in.

If annihilating a single skeleton took *this* much, then I doubted I'd be able to use it with much frequency.

I didn't have a large amount of divinity to begin with, and what I did have felt like it was growing slower than my mana and spirit were—although to be fair, those were making relatively good progress.

It was a difficult problem to solve. Perhaps the correct decision was simply to base my fighting style on mana and spirit, while only breaking out the divinity for undead and similar foes.

Whatever the case though, I planned to use my divinity to clean up the rest of



the village. The fact that I could use it to take out my foes all but silently made it my best option, and I wanted to try out my sword in a multitude of different ways for the experience it would provide me.

I temporarily withdrew my divinity from the sword, sent a signal to the villagers in hiding, and set off in search of the third skeleton.



“Ahhh!”

From the sound of the scream in the distance behind me, it seemed that the third skeleton had unfortunately found the villagers before I’d found it.

Since they had been rather far away and I’d instructed them not to enter the village if at all possible I had thought they would be fine, but evidently I hadn’t been careful enough.

Still, from what I could see of the situation when I turned, they didn’t look to be in too much danger. While the villagers had been discovered, they were still a good distance away from the skeleton. They had enough time that they were making a clumsy attempt to nock their arrows and fire.

While they were doing that, I ran toward them and forced my way in between a villager and the monster. It looked like it had wandered in from the forest rather than coming from out of the village—I could tell because the only direction that wasn’t being blocked off by somebody was behind it, and none of the crude, person-sized wooden stakes covering the village had been destroyed.

My suspicions that the skeletons had a source nearby was all but confirmed. Wherever the origin was, it was outside of the village, not within it.

Making a mental note to investigate the direction the skeleton had come from after all of this, I channeled divinity into my sword and swung it.

Since I was striking from the front this time, the skeleton tried to fight back, slowly raising its rusty dagger—but there was no way that I was losing to a regular skeleton in speed. My horizontal cut went through the arm it had just raised as well as its clavicle, decapitating the monster. As expected, the parts of the skeleton my divinity-charged blade made contact with crumbled to ash immediately, and the effect spread across its entire body.

Yet again, all that was left behind was its magic crystal, which plopped to the floor. After picking it up, I turned to the villagers.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said.

The villagers stared at me blankly, only just having finished nocking their arrows.

“N-No, we let our guards down too,” Jiris said. “We’ll be sure to do better next time...”

“There’s no need to force yourself to do the impossible,” I said. “Your priority should be keeping an eye on your surroundings. Even if you don’t manage to defeat your foe, as long as you have your life, there’s always a next time. If you die though...that’s that.”

That hadn’t been strictly true for me—I’d died and still gotten a next time—but it took an extreme amount of bad luck to go through the kind of thing I did. Or good luck, maybe? It was difficult to pin it down as either, but in any case, barring very special exceptions, death was final.

Naturally, sometimes you had to put your life on the line when it mattered. But right now wasn’t that one of those times for these villagers. It was essential that they take their village back, yes, but I would handle that part. Their duty was to protect their own lives; backing me up came secondary to that.

If I could fully have my way, I would’ve refused their assistance wholesale, but that was where human emotions complicated things. I didn’t want to disrespect their desire to act. That didn’t mean, however, that would let them do anything reckless.

The slight remonstration in my words so soon after their encounter with a life-threatening situation must have had an effect, because Jiris’s shoulders slumped.

“We’ll take that to heart...” he said. “We’re truly sorry...”



After ensuring the villagers had regained their calm, I had set off to find the next skeleton, but...

“Looks like I’m just going to have to go in there...”

In the center of the village there was an open clearing, likely used for their festivals and gatherings. The villagers and I were currently hiding behind a nearby house, peeking out at the five skeletons that were occupying the clearing. Three were regular skeletons—the ones mentioned in our older information—while the remaining two were the skeleton soldiers that I had spotted this morning.

Just like they had been earlier, the skeleton soldiers wielded a bow and a spear respectively, and they were warily scanning the surroundings. The regular skeletons surrounded them in a protective formation and were equally on alert, if a bit more sluggish in practice.

It wasn’t hard to see why they had formed up like that: it was because of the three skeletons that I had stealthily killed. I doubted that it was the buried bones or leftover ash that had tipped them off, since I had taken measures to ensure they wouldn’t be found easily, but it seemed that they had realized regardless.

They had probably done it the same way a human patrol rotation would have. If they had decided their routes beforehand, that would mean they knew roughly when the patrollers were expected to return—and then they hadn’t. What’s more, it hadn’t happened just one time, but multiple times. The obvious conclusion was that there was outside interference.

There was a large variance in how intelligent individual skeleton soldiers could be. While all of them had a certain degree of martial ability and enough mental faculties to issue commands, whether they were capable of making strategic decisions like setting patrol routes depended entirely on the skeleton soldier in question.

It seemed that the skeleton soldiers we were facing today were of the smarter variety. That tended to mean that their individual combat ability was high too. It was another mark on the “proof that Rentt really is plagued by bad luck” tally. The weaker type of skeleton soldier was much more common...

Still, grumbling about it wouldn’t change anything. And besides, facing stronger foes would make for good experience. Since my body could absorb my

opponent's strength, the stronger they were, the more improvement I would see.

The problem, of course, was the villagers... I'd have to take out the bow-wielding skeleton soldier as fast as I could. While the one with a spear and the skeletons with swords *could* always throw their weapons, even common skeletons understood enough to know that their ability to fight would suffer if they disarmed themselves, so it didn't seem like an option they would take.

It was definitely the bow wielder that posed the biggest danger to the villagers. The problem was how to deal with it. In exact accordance with textbook combat strategy, the archer was in a rearguard position, and since they were in an open clearing, it would be hard to circle around and sneak up behind them.

I thought of just leaving the fight up to chance, but that carried too great a risk—not to me, but to the villagers.

Given the situation though, it seemed like the only option...at first glance. Since it had come to this, I figured that it was time to try a method that I was less familiar with, but thought could work.

The truth was, when I had channeled divinity into my sword earlier, I'd felt a slightly peculiar response—one that had given me an idea. As a test, I passed divinity through my sword again...and the feeling returned. I was pretty sure I could do this.

It would definitely be extremely draining though, so it would be an all-or-nothing maneuver. But that was fine—if I failed, I just had to be prepared to go back to the default plan of cutting my way through the skeletons as fast as I could.

I gave the signal to the villagers behind me that I was about to charge in. Once I saw them nod, I stepped out of hiding and ran straight for the group of skeletons.



Their wariness hadn't just been for show—the skeletons noticed me at once and turned my way, readying their weapons. The bow wielding skeleton soldier

in particular was quick to nock an arrow and fire it at me. It was pretty skilled...but Lorraine's spells were much faster.

Recently, I'd been asking her every now and then to fire point-blank Fotiá Volídas fireballs at me while I practiced dodging or parrying. Compared to that, this was nothing.

Measuring the right moment, I swung my sword when the arrow was directly in front of my face, deflecting it and snapping it in the process. I was at the point where I could parry spells now, to a certain extent. A regular arrow was...not exactly child's play yet, but it *was* something that I could comfortably deal with.

I reached the group of skeletons before the bow wielding skeleton soldier could nock another arrow. They moved to bring their swords slashing down, but before that could happen, I channeled divinity into my own weapon and thrust it as hard as I could in the direction of the skeleton right in front of me.

My aim was true, and the blade sunk into its neck with such ease you'd think it was pulling me in. The skeleton's head went flying.

Normally, I would have then pulled back my sword to make my next move. This time, however, I pushed the thrust yet further—toward the bow wielding skeleton soldier. I wanted to kill two foes in the same maneuver.

Yet the length of my sword wouldn't be enough to close the distance. The skeleton soldier seemed to realize that, because it calmly continued on with nocking its next arrow. The scary thing about skeletons was that they never panicked or seemed to feel fear, even when things became really bad.

The most terrifying thing in the midst of a chaotic fight was losing your composure to the point where you couldn't move as you usually would, but that couldn't happen to skeletons. Sometimes a lack of skill or a disruption in the mana that maintained the connections in their joints made them drop their weapons or fall, and that made it appear like they were panicking...but on an inherent level, they simply didn't possess the capability for such emotions.

Then again, that was just adventurer theory. For all we knew, they really were terrified on the inside. After all, I'd been capable of emotion when I had been a skeleton. It was entirely possible that other beings like me would be the same.

Still, I was fairly certain the skeleton soldier before me wasn't one of those individuals.

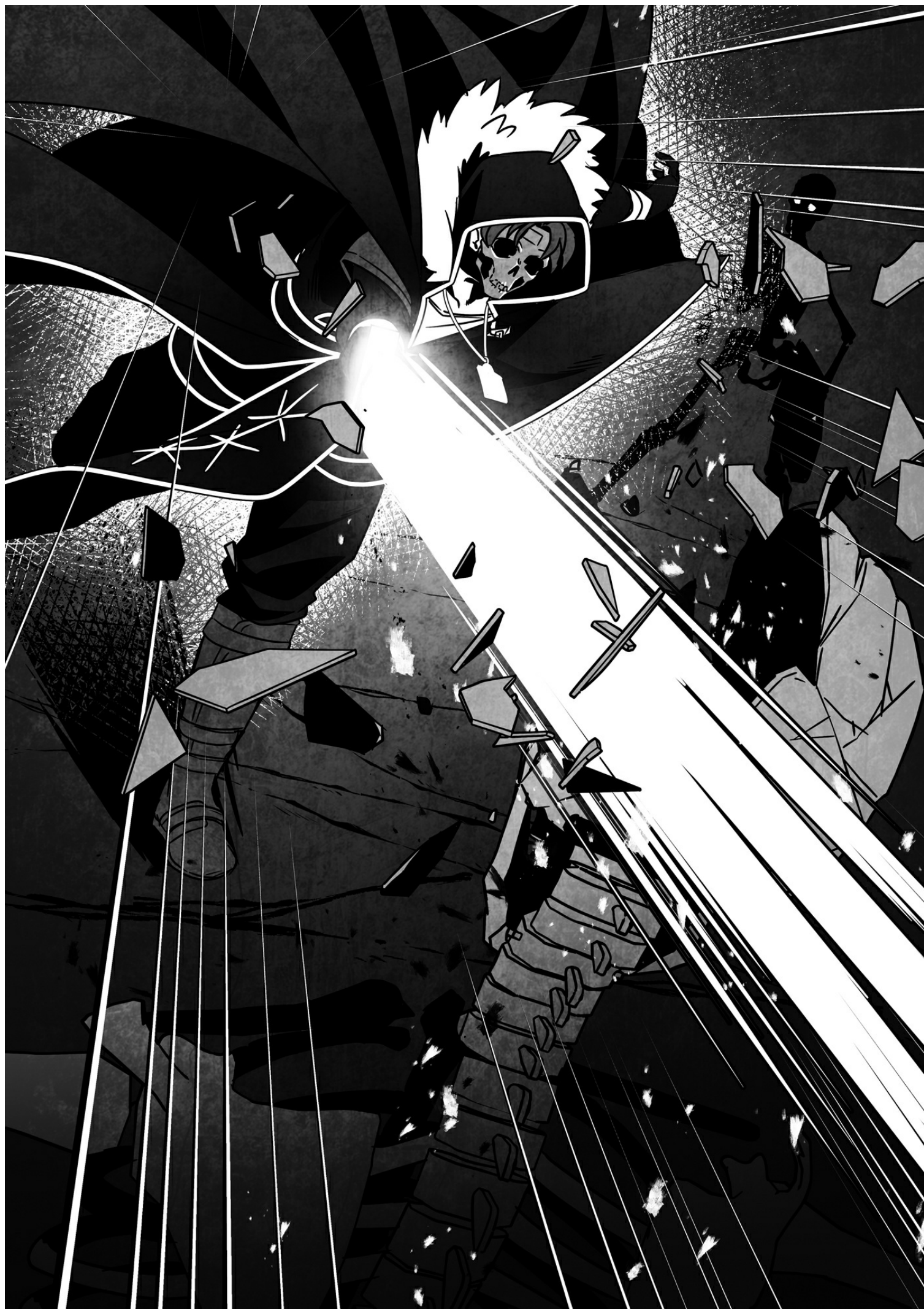
The monster finished nocking its arrow, but a handful of seconds before it could fire it, the tip of my sword—which never should have been able to reach my foe—pierced through the skeleton soldier's skull.



It must have appeared strange to an onlooker. After all, the part of my sword that stabbed into the skeleton soldier wasn't a physical blade. Despite that, the thrust was a fatal blow through the monster's skull, causing its entire body to crumble to ash.

The explanation was simple. I had created a blade made of divinity.

This was the method I had wanted to try: extending the reach of my sword with divinity. I hadn't even considered the possibility when I'd been testing the weapon out at Clope's shop; I'd only conceived of it a short time ago. The moment I tried it out though, I knew that it was going to work.



Since I often saw Lorraine do something similar with mana, it hadn't been a huge leap in logic to wonder if I could do the same with divinity. It really wasn't that far-fetched of an idea—I had even seen Capitan, my teacher in spirit techniques, achieve a similar effect with spirit back in Hathara.

With divinity, it had been as simple as testing it out to see if it worked—and it had.

I wasn't at the point where I could do it with spirit yet, since I couldn't manipulate the shape of that energy as freely, but now that I was capable of doing it with mana and divinity, maybe it was just a matter of time before I got the hang of it and completed the trio.

It would be extremely difficult—since spirit used a person's inner life energy as a foundation, just trying to separate it from your body was hard enough. But I figured it was worth putting in the effort. I'd have to set aside time sooner or later to practice it.

Maybe at a time like this, it would be a good idea to travel to Hathara and ask Capitan himself. He actually *could* do it, so he'd probably be a great help.

Even as those thoughts ran through my mind, my body didn't stop. After confirming that I had taken out a skeleton and skeleton soldier, I decided to pull back a little...which didn't stop me from taking a swing at a skeleton that was still within the reach of my sword as I backed off.

Using divinity was draining, and unfortunately, I was already almost out, so I had switched to spirit for my strike. However, that was still more than enough against a regular skeleton. After all, using spirit had even given the old human me enough strength to smash through a skeleton's skull.

Using old techniques like that was nice. They had a certain reliability to them.

Incidentally, I hadn't struck the head this time, but the chest. There wasn't a problem with that though, because that was where this skeleton's magic crystal was, tucked away as though it were a heart. A skeleton's magic crystal wasn't always in its head.

I recalled Lorraine mentioning once how animal-type monsters generally had theirs in the same places because they possessed flesh, and the location of their



internal organs was fixed to a certain degree. However, that restriction didn't apply to skeletons—since they didn't have any internal organs in the first place, it had been her conjecture that their magic crystals could be anywhere they had open space.

It was true, though, that it was most often in the head for them. Maybe even monsters had an instinct—or perhaps just a general sense—that their most important organs should be placed in the sturdiest parts of their bodies.

But of course, that was all just conjecture.

As the skeleton fell apart in front of me, I stepped back to create more space—but the last skeleton and spear-wielding skeleton soldier advanced, closing in on me. The former aside, the latter's speed wasn't half bad.

However, as if to deter them from their path, a pair of arrows—far from the most destructive of weapons—flew in from the side. But despite the fact that they met their mark and struck the skeleton's head, they simply bounced off with a *clang*, as though they'd collided with a metal shield.

That didn't mean they'd done no damage, however: they'd left chips in the bone. Jiris hadn't been boasting when he'd said their village had good hunters.

The skeleton seemed to recognize that it had been harmed. Its head spun with a *rattle-clack* in the direction the arrow had been fired from—that is, the direction where the group of villagers were standing, bows at the ready. It glared at them with its terrifying empty eye sockets and changed course, preparing to head straight for them at a run.

It wasn't difficult to figure out that it intended to take the villagers out first. It wasn't the most tactical of decisions, honestly—they didn't represent much offensive capability at all. As the one who could kill skeletons in a single blow, I was the greater danger.

The skeleton soldier, on the other hand, didn't need to have been hit by an arrow to understand that the villagers were a lesser threat compared to me. It kept its gaze fixed on me, not tearing it away for a moment, and even gestured for the skeleton to turn back.

However, the skeleton's decision-making ability was poor. It ignored the order

and turned its back to me.

I wasn't about to let such a large opening pass by, of course. I immediately dashed forward and brought my sword down on the skeleton's defenseless back, cleaving it in two. The monster's movements froze as though it was unable to comprehend what had happened. Finally, it twitched its head in my direction—but that was all it could manage before its body collapsed into a jumble of bones.

In the meantime, the skeleton soldier had advanced on me. It tried until the very end to assist the skeleton, but after the lesser monster crumbled in a single blow, the skeleton soldier did an about-face, putting some distance between us.

I doubted that the skeleton soldier had attempted to help the skeleton out of any kind of affection or camaraderie; it had probably just wanted to avoid a reduction in fighting strength. Since it had failed, though, it was now going to come down to single combat, which was why it had fallen back.

The skeleton soldier was exceedingly composed. I wondered if it had been a warrior of some skill in its previous life. There were many reasons why skeletons came to be, but a common one was the bones of a creature that had possessed a higher-than-average amount of mana when it was alive gaining new life somehow as an undead. That was why it was dangerous to leave the bodies of adventurers without a burial, why the guild kept accurate life-and-death records, and why they collected the licenses of dead adventurers and rewarded those who found them.

A prime example was when a person of considerable strength died holding on to a profound grudge or regret. It wasn't unheard of for people like that to turn into undead of formidable strength.

The idea that I was one of those types crossed my mind on occasion, but those who were reborn as undead didn't retain their memories of their previous lives—they became new existences entirely.

I wondered what, exactly, I really was. The answer to that question forever escaped me no matter how much thought I put into it. All I could do was keep battling the monsters before me, and one day return to being human...

If the skeleton soldier I was facing had a consciousness like I did, maybe I

could have asked it for advice. Whether that was the case or not, though, it was still a monster that preyed on people.

Without a shred of mercy, I enhanced my strength with spirit and ran at the skeleton soldier—the last monster in this village. I threw myself at it with all of my remaining strength, and, unable to react to my slash, it could do nothing as I severed its head from its body.

## Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. It's me, Yu Okano. First off, thank you very much for purchasing this book.

That *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* has managed to reach twelve published volumes is something I owe entirely to the publisher, illustrator, manga artist—and most of all, to you, the reader. I am truly grateful.

To be honest, when it comes to afterwords, that's all I ever want to get across. However, for some reason it's supposed to be a two-page thing, so I always have trouble trying to figure out what else I want to write.

The thing that comes to mind first is that I could just write about how I've been recently, but not a lot of interesting things actually happen in my life. One of them is the fact that I'm able to continue publishing books and maintain my writing career, but that's already self-evident to all of you who purchased this book. I don't think there's much point in talking about that, so back to square one it is.

I could also write about what I've been into recently, but that's not interesting either. It's just stuff like diets and cooking.

Part of why I've gotten into cooking is out of necessity: cooking for yourself is just the optimal thing to do when on a diet. However, it's also because of the rising prices of goods and recent tax increase. That makes me want to economize as much as possible, so I cook for myself more often.

I'm the kind of slovenly person who would like to eat out or order delivery for every meal if possible, but unfortunately, because both are quite expensive and I am but a lower middle-class citizen, I can only afford such luxuries once or twice a month.

Having said that, cooking elaborate dishes is a huge pain in the butt, so all I ever make is simple stuff that generally takes fifteen to thirty minutes. Soups are far and away the easiest, since all I have to do is toss in a bunch of

ingredients and stock, so that's all I've been making lately. Bouillon cubes are among the greatest things that mankind has ever invented.

Speaking of inventions, I've been seeing a lot of talk surrounding AI related topics lately. A lot of it's quite scary.

Not too long ago, novelists were among the list of jobs that it seemed like AI couldn't replace, but I feel like it's getting to the point where we can't claim that anymore. On the other hand, I've been trying to learn more about it recently. I feel like if I don't put in the effort to understand such technology, I'll be left behind in the blink of an eye—although the process will probably be more gradual than that.

You know, now that I've written this far, I'm surprised by how much I actually did have to talk about. It was basically just me rambling, but I don't think that's a bad way to fill up an afterword, so this is where I'll leave you.

Finally, I know I'm repeating myself, but thank you for purchasing this book. I am truly grateful.

Hopefully, I'll be able to see you in the next volume.

Until then!

# Bonus Short Stories

## The Dragonfish

“You can let me off here, Rentt,” said a voice from the harness strapped to my back.

Sitting on the small seat of the combination chair-rack contraption that I’d tied to myself was my current client—an old woman by the name of Alvina. The two of us had actually been acquainted for quite a while, but only to the extent of chatting a bit whenever our paths crossed on the street or at the market, so it had been a surprise when she’d come to me about a commission.

“Gotcha,” I said, sitting down and removing the harness’s straps. “Give me a moment... There.”

Alvina stood up and immediately kept on walking.

“H-Hey!” I called out after her. She was moving briskly, so I left the harness on the ground as I followed. I wasn’t overly worried though—this area didn’t have any bandits or dangerous animals, which was why I’d been okay with letting her down at all.

As I chased after her, the vegetation we passed grew thinner and thinner. Then, I abruptly stepped into a large open area, in which there was...

“So this is the lake you mentioned, huh?” I asked.

“That it is,” Alvina agreed. “Look—you can see it, can’t you?”

I could indeed. In the clear waters of the lake was the massive silhouette of a fish. “Is that the ‘dragonfish’?” I asked, repeating the word I’d heard when I’d accepted the job.

Alvina nodded, then narrowed her eyes at me. “Mmmhmm. Didn’t believe me, did you, Rentt? But as you can see...”

“I get it; I get it,” I said hurriedly. “It’s real. Still...are you *sure* it can turn into a

dragon?”

That was the *actual* crux of the issue. I hadn’t been skeptical that some mysterious creature lived out here—that was perfectly possible—and Alvina wasn’t the type of person to lie. However, the reason I’d doubted this fish existed until I’d seen it with my own eyes was that it was apparently fated to someday become a dragon.

I had met a dragon before. Compared to the terror of that encounter and the sheer pressure it had exuded...well, this fish didn’t even have a hundredth of the dragon’s presence.

Alvina must have recognized the direction of my thoughts, because she gave an amused huff. “Heh. I know how you feel. To tell you the truth, I don’t believe that part either.”

“Hey!”

“At the very least though, it’s true that that fish has lived for centuries. It’s mentioned in one of my ancestors’ diaries from ten generations back. And while I wouldn’t go so far as to say we’ve been taking *care* of it for all that time, we do drop by every now and then. I suppose this’ll be the last time for me, though.”

“I see...”

There was a hint of sadness in Alvina’s tone. She had been an adventurer of some renown in her younger days.

This lake was located on the summit of a rocky mountain; you had to scale sheer cliffs if you wanted to reach it. Consequently, no large animals inhabited the area, with the exception of a few bird species. On top of that, because of the mysterious presence of divinity, monsters couldn’t get close either.

Me? Oh, I was an exception. I may have been undead, but I could use divinity, thank you very much!

In any case, while Alvina had once made the climb on her own, her lower body strength had weakened with age, making it impossible now—hence why she had commissioned me to bring her.

“So, what now?” I asked. My job was to bring Alvina here and take her back to

town later, but I figured she hadn't just come for the journey's sake. She must have had some purpose in mind.

"Ah, right...about that," Alvina said. "Could you be a dear and jump into the lake for me, Rentt?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't look at me like that... I wouldn't make that request for no reason. Some of the scales shed by the dragonfish should be at the bottom of the lake. I'd like you to get...oh, maybe three or so for me. I know that wasn't in the job details, but..."

*Please?* her expression finished for her.

Strictly speaking, I had no obligation to comply, but I could never bring myself to say no to the elderly. That, and there was the fact that she'd done a lot for me in the past.

"All right, all right," I said resignedly. "The fish isn't going to attack me or anything though, right?"

"I've dived in before and it's never attacked me. You'll probably be fine."

I stared at her for a moment. "Well, you wouldn't want me hurting it, right? I guess I can just escape if it comes after me..."

"Thanks. I'm counting on you."

I dived into the lake—and the moment I did so, I felt my fatigue drain away. Evidently, it was a natural recovery spring, filled with divinity that facilitated healing. It shouldn't have had an effect on me, as I was a monster...but maybe this place was special in some way. That lent a little more credibility to the claim that this fish would one day become a dragon.

I soon reached the bottom of the lake. There were indeed a number of scales there, glinting in the light. I picked the most beautiful of the three I could find, but just as I made to swim back up to the surface...

"...?!"

I looked up to find myself staring into a pair of eyeballs. It was the dragonfish.



*Is it going to attack me?!*

I prepared myself to beat a hasty retreat, but the fish was exuding a pressure that seemed to make the very idea impossible. My mind raced as we stared at each other. I didn't know how much time passed like that, but eventually, it turned away in disinterest and swam off.

I relaxed in relief, and—

*[O, ill-starred undead. Struggle against fate to your heart's content, but do not fall to greed.]*

I turned in surprise at the voice that had spoken directly inside my head, but the dragonfish had already swam off into the distance.

"What in the world...?" I muttered to myself, after surfacing.

Alvina cocked her head. "Did something happen?"

I told her about what it had said to me—leaving out the part about me being undead.

She nodded. "Hmm. Well, I'm not *that* surprised. Apparently, it spoke to one of my ancestors too."

"Tell me that *before* I dive into a lake with a talking fish..." I grumbled. "What did it say to them?"

"No idea. But since my family made it an obligation to check in here every now and then, maybe it was related to that. That ends with my generation, though."

"It does?"

"Yep. 'Ten generations,' according to the diary." Some exaggerated significance made its way into Alvina's tone. "Who knows? Maybe it was all to bring *you* here."

I wanted to object to that, but it was difficult, given what had happened. Would the fish *really* become a dragon one day? I had no idea if it would—but maybe this encounter had something to do with that.

"Right, it's time we head back," Alvina said. "I'll make these scales into good

luck charms for you and Lorraine.”

“Huh? *That’s* why you had me get them?”

“Yep. The third’s for my grandchild. Now, let’s go.”

“It’s good that you’re eager to leave, but you’ll be making the journey on my back again, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

## **The Flavor of Life**

I had just reached the designated meeting spot for the commission I’d accepted at the guild when suddenly, a voice called out to me.

“Are you Rentt?”

I had arrived thirty minutes early since I hadn’t wanted to keep my client waiting, but it seemed as though he was already here. That made him trustworthy in my book—there were a lot of clients who didn’t respect an adventurer’s time at all.

My client for this commission was a knight clad in silver armor, albeit one who was quite elderly. As I studied him, wondering if he was still on active duty at his age, he gave an amused huff.

“Heh. There’s no need to be so wary,” he said. “My days as a knight are behind me. Passed the reins of the family to my son a while ago.”

“Is that so? I must admit, though, I was surprised that my client was a knight—even a former one.”

“It’s not often a knight hires an adventurer,” he agreed. “Ah, and there’s no need to speak so politely. Since I’m retired, I’m just a commoner with no titles to my name.”

“That’s very kind of you. But...”

“Come now. I’ve heard adventurers aren’t ones to dress up their words.”

Though I was still reluctant, I could only give up in the face of his insistence. “I understa—I mean, got it. Getting down to business, then, you wanted an escort

to Weger Village, right? You don't look like you need one, honestly."

Despite his age, he had a tempered physique and wore his equipment like a second skin. The latter had clearly been with him for a long time, yet the way it sparkled suggested careful maintenance.

"Oh, you can tell?" he said. "Even still, journeying as a pair is safer than going alone when bandits are about. I was also hoping to have someone to talk to."

"I see. In that case, this should be fairly straightforward."

"Indeed. I'm counting on you. My name is Deque Eger. I'm the former...no, I suppose it doesn't matter. Please just call me 'Deque.' That's all I am at the moment."

"Sure. You already know, but I'm Rentt. Glad to be working for you."

Thus, we set off on our short journey to Weger Village.



In the forest, a naked sword flashed. A number of bows launched arrow after arrow into the fray, but that number was gradually dropping. Grunts of pain resounded through the trees, and eventually the forest was once again filled with nothing but silence.

"Hmm. They didn't prove to be much of a fight," the old knight said, blood dripping from his sword as he stepped out of the trees.

"Most people aren't skilled enough fighters that they can say that about a group of bandits ten men strong," I remarked.

"Ah, you flatter me."

"I think you could still work as a knight and do perfectly fine..." I said, being completely honest.

Deque sat down by the campfire and began wiping his sword. "That possibility was open to me. His Excellency the Earl did ask me to stay in his service as an instructor to his knights."

"I had suspected you were a knight of some prestige, but an earl's retinue, huh? I won't ask which earl's, though."

“Yes, and neither will I say. I’m not fond of boasting.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be. Still, why’d you retire? Staying wouldn’t have been a bad choice, right?”

“You’re right. I was on the verge of agreeing to continue my work, though, when a thought suddenly occurred to me.”

“And that is?”

““I am well-versed in the ways of rending through a man’s flesh, but I do not know how to till a field.””

“What?”

“Oh, it’s silly, I know. Forget I said anything.”

“No, well...” I thought forgetting would be rather difficult, actually.

“I spent over fifty years living solely by the sword,” Deque said. “It was enjoyable in its own right, but one day, I realized that I did not know anything else.”

“Ah. I can understand that. Still...why a village so deep in the mountains?”

“I purchased a small home and plot of land there, where I plan to spend my days living a farmer’s life.”

“A quiet retirement, huh? I can’t blame you for wanting that. Still, for a knight of such prestige...”

“It’s rather ordinary?”

“Yeah.”

Deque chuckled. “That it may be. But that’s fine. Such is life.”

“You think? I can’t say I can relate, really.”

I wanted to reach Mithril-class, the apex of all adventurers, one day. I couldn’t understand how a person could go into a quiet retirement while they were still able-bodied.

“Those eyes of yours are the eyes of someone with a dream,” Deque noted. “Perhaps my feelings *are* baffling to you, then. But you’ll understand, one day.”

“Hopefully after I’ve already achieved my dream,” I remarked.

“You’ll get there. I can tell.”

“You’re just saying that, aren’t you?”

“Ah—you’ve found me out.”



After that, I saw Deque to Weger Village, then returned to Maalt. That was the last time I ever talked to him.

Later down the line, I heard a story about how a powerful monster appeared in Weger Village, and how a retired knight fought it to mutual defeat. When I went to the village, I learned that the story was true, and that Deque had indeed died.

The villagers were grateful for what Deque had done for them. Evidently, in the several years he’d lived among them, he had settled in well, though he had never had any visits from family.

One of the villagers told me he’d left them with a final message at the end, and brought me a box of fruit—ones grown by Deque. Apparently, he’d taken care of his crops quite diligently and had been anticipating a promising harvest this year.

He’d died without getting to see them, though. The villagers had taken care of them until the harvest. One of them apparently remembered my name from when I’d stayed a night here several years ago; as they handed me the fruit, they told me something they’d heard Deque say once while he’d gazed at his fruit trees.

*“This makes the second dream I’ve achieved now. Life makes them easier to fulfill than you’d think, Rentt.”*

I took the fruit and set off back to Maalt. I tried some on the way. It was more sweet than sour, and still a little bitter.

Maybe that was what life tasted like too.

## A Miraculous Encounter

I, Ars—a merchant’s son—didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life.

Should I take over my father’s business, or embark upon a different path? The reason I wasn’t sure was because I had a little brother called Ridd, and only one of us could inherit. There *were* ways both of us could do it together, but two people succeeding a merchant’s business almost always led to inheritance disputes, and I wanted to avoid that. I also didn’t want to push my little brother into a different trade, since he was still young...well, *I* was only ten years old myself, actually. Ridd was three.

Currently, I worked as my father’s assistant in the frontier town of Maalt, and we often journeyed to the surrounding villages. The village that served as our base of operations was elsewhere, but my father said that it was most profitable to acquire stock in Maalt. I believed him—the town provided a steady supply of goods, much of which was obtained at a bargain.

Still, the region wasn’t very safe, and since most of Maalt’s adventurers spent their time delving into dungeons, it was hard for a merchant to find bodyguards. Today, however, it seemed that that wasn’t the case.

“Ars! I managed to hire a Bronze-classer! That’s as good as a guarantee that this trip’ll turn a profit!”

The adventurer whom my father, Gund, had brought with him was a sinister looking man wearing a skull mask. He was clad in a robe, but from the sword I could see at his hip, he was probably a swordsman rather than a magician.

Still, I had my doubts. It seemed very reasonable to me that this man could just be a bandit pretending to be an adventurer.

“I’m Rentt, a Bronze-class adventurer,” the man said, inclining his head. “It’s a pleasure to be working for you.”

He seemed more decent than what I’d heard adventurers were like—namely rough and crude—but I still wasn’t sure... Well, there was no point voicing my concerns. It was rare that minor peddlers could boast a Bronze-class adventurer for a bodyguard. I’d just have to shove my doubts aside.

Or at least, that was what I’d thought...

“Ars, look!” Ridd said, as he crouched by the roadside and plucked clumps of

grass. Rentt the adventurer was next to him. “He said these are papyr herbs!”

“What? Papyr herbs?” I scoffed. “Those are expensive medicinal herbs. There’s no way they’d just be growing on the side of the ro...” I trailed off when my father ran over to take a look.

“These really *are* papyr herbs,” he said. “How did you recognize them, Ridd?”

“Rentt told me!”

My father turned to Rentt. “Really?”

“I did,” the adventurer confirmed. “Harvesting herbs and plants is something I do quite often. It’s rare that you find them so close to the highways...but I remembered coming across papyr herbs here before, so I went looking with Ridd as a way to pass some time.”

“I see... Then, would you be willing to sell us your harvest?”

“Oh, no, Ridd was the one who found these. I just taught him the knack for it.”

“But that knowledge alone is invaluable!”

“It’s fine. I’m an adventurer—right now, my job’s to be a bodyguard. More importantly, I accepted this job because I read that it came with meals supplied. Is the food ready?”

“Oh! Curses! Hold on just a moment!” My father hurriedly ran over the campfire.

It was still evening, and the setting sun bathed our surroundings in its beautiful glow. We’d stopped here for the night though, since any farther and we would be heading into bandit territory. We planned on setting out bright and early in the morning.

That night, as I slept wrapped up in a blanket by the campfire, I was awoken by the sound of someone standing up. When I sat up to see who it was, I spotted Rentt.

“Oh, sorry,” he apologized. “Did I wake you?”

“Weren’t you supposed to be keeping watch?” I asked, a little harshly. I

wanted him to do his job.

Rentt nodded. “Yeah, but it looks like it’s time for me to handle the other part of my job. There are bandits nearby. Since you’re already awake, could I ask you to watch the fire for a bit?”

“What?!”

Before I could ask Rentt if he was serious, he vanished into the night. I wanted to go wake my father, but I couldn’t just take my eyes off of the campfire, so I gave up and did as I was asked. Eventually...

“Sorry about that, Ars,” Rentt said as he stepped back into the light. He held a bag in his hand. I didn’t know what was inside, but it was dripping blood. “It’s finished.”

“Is that...?”

“They were bandits of some infamy—or adventurers willing to get their hands dirty, I should say. They had their licenses on them, so I collected them to hand into the guild later.”

“You beat them by yourself? All of them?”

“Five of them, yes. Bronze-classers...but they weren’t anything special. You can go back to sleep, Ars.”

“Five Bronze-classers?!”

How did a single Bronze-class adventurer beat five? It boggled my mind.

Rentt seemed to recognize my shock, because he smiled. “I’m stronger than I look. I’d like to move up to Silver-class soon, but that requires taking the Ascension Exam first.”

“You really *are* strong...”

“Oh, it’s not enough to write home about.”

A thought suddenly occurred to me. “Hey, um, Rentt...do you think I could be an adventurer?”

It was a question that had always lurked in my thoughts, half formed. I’d just never had anyone I could ask about it.



Instead of making fun of my childish question, Rentt asked, “Do you want to be one?”

I nodded.

“That so...?” he said. “Then first, you need to train. You can register as an adventurer at fifteen. You’re around ten or so, right? You should spend the next five years training to fight, gaining survival knowledge, and learning how to use mana, spirit, and the like.”

“How do I do that...?”

“You’re a traveling merchant’s kid, so you visit a lot of towns and villages, right? There are retired, washed-up, or part-time adventurers and mages everywhere you look—people who can teach you how to make simple herb mixtures too. Learn from them. You won’t be able to get much for free, though, so make sure you have something to pay them for their time.”

“Like what...?”

“The herbs I taught Ridd about today are a good example. You could also sell them for coin and pay with that. I’ll teach you spots near the highway where you can find them. Good luck, kid.”

“Are you sure about all this?” I was taken aback by how much Rentt was doing for me.

He smiled slightly. “Yeah. I was exactly where you were once—learning from others. What could make me happier than getting the chance to pass it on? You can pay me back by becoming a great adventurer. When you do, let’s share a drink.”

“Rentt...thank you.”

I stayed up the rest of the night listening to Rentt’s lessons. I had no doubt that the knowledge would be of great use to me in the future.

People said that every encounter was a miracle, but I had never expected that to ring so true...or for a miracle to be just around the corner.

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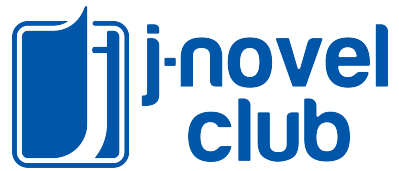
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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 12

by Yu Okano

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