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Illustrator
Jaian



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Characters



Sheila Ibarss

A guild receptionist.
Privy to Rentt's secret.



Lorraine Vivie

A scholar and a 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 a dungeon.



Edel

A monster called a puchi suri
who lived under the 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 rookie adventurer who saved
the ghoulished Rentt by bringing
him into town. Became Rentt's
familiar.



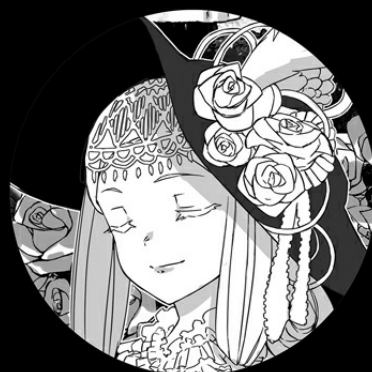
Wolf Hermann

The Maalt guildmaster.
Recruited Rentt to his guild.



Isaac Hart

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



Laura Latuule

Head of the Latuule family.
Collects magical items as a
hobby. Hires Rentt to
regularly harvest Dragon
Blood Blossoms.



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. Going by an alias, he renewed his quest to achieve Mithril-class. With orders from Maalt's guildmaster, Rentt and Lorraine make it to the capital to pick up the grand guildmaster. Learning that he is temporarily absent, the pair decide to deliver a letter entrusted to them by Sister Lilian instead.

[C O N T E N T S]

**Chapter 1: The Royal Capital
and the Church of the Eastern Sky**

Side Story: Meanwhile, Back in Maalt

Chapter 2: To the Palace

Chapter 3: The Job with Augurey

Chapter 4: The Arrival

Chapter 5: A Token of Thanks from the Village Girl



Chapter 1: The Royal Capital and the Church of the Eastern Sky

“It really does make Maalt look puny by comparison,” I said as I peeked out of our carriage at the scenery of Vistelya, Yaaran’s royal capital. Night was just falling upon the city.

Yaaran was a backwater kingdom, but even so, the capital was larger and more prosperous than the other regional cities. Or maybe it felt particularly glamorous because I was comparing it to a city like Maalt. I mean, sure, Maalt was trying its best despite being on the outskirts. It had its own dungeon now and a fairly large population. All in all, it was a nice place to live, but when compared to the capital...

“That goes without saying,” Lorraine remarked. “But I prefer Maalt over Vistelya. Vistelya is prosperous, but it reminds me too much of the imperial capital.”

“You said before that a lot happened to you there. Still, Yaaran isn’t as stuffy as the empire, right?”

Lorraine once mentioned that when she was in the empire, she’d found the constant politics that came with being an elite member of the scholarly community exhausting. Research and scholarship, in general, were valued much more in the empire, but in Yaaran, you didn’t hear much in the way of glamorous tales of the scholarly class. At most, the Tower and the Academy squabbled now and again. It was plenty stressful for people in the Tower and the Academy, but it wasn’t even comparable to the empire’s scholarly politics.

Lorraine nodded. “True enough. Maalt is a good example of the more relaxed atmosphere in Yaaran. Seems it’s the same in the capital.”

Yaaran’s capital felt like a giant metropolis to me, but to Lorraine, it was still on the quaint side. But if that made it easier on her, then it was probably a good thing. I silently gave thanks to Yaaran for being a backwater country.

“We’ve arrived,” our driver announced. “Please feel free to enter your lodgings. I’ll be staying in a separate location, so contact me when you’re ready to return to Maalt,” he added as we disembarked from the carriage.

It bears mentioning that the driver brought us straight to our inn, but he and the carriage would be staying elsewhere. The place we were at didn’t have space to store a carriage, and because the draft animal was special, it needed to be kept in a specialized holding pen.

All things considered, this was an expensive ride, but Wolf—or rather, Maalt’s guild—was footing the bill, so it was no skin off my back. Given that we’d use the same carriage to return to Maalt, it must have cost the guild quite a bit in additional lodging fees. Wolf had gone out of his way to treat us well.

“Come on, Rentt,” Lorraine prompted, and we entered the inn.



“Lodgings for two, then. Please, follow me,” the receptionist said.

After the receptionist left, Lorraine murmured, “They didn’t bother to ask and just gave us a single room.”

It was just the two of us now. As for Edel, I’d left him back in Maalt. It wasn’t that I wanted to exclude him, but security was a lot tighter in Vistelya. Since we were going to the palace itself, I thought it might be a problem if an actual monster like Edel was with us. I could’ve claimed I was a monster tamer, but Vistelya was a proper city, unlike Maalt. There were plenty of actual monster tamers in the capital, and if they’d bothered to take a closer look, I might have slipped up.

If I’d known I’d be in Vistelya, I would’ve asked my father in Hathara more about monster taming, but I could always do that next time. Besides, he had some weird monsters in his menagerie, and I wasn’t really sure if his knowledge would make me seem like a normal tamer. So, all things considered, I was pretty sure I’d made the right decision in leaving Edel at home.

“We must have looked like siblings or a married couple,” I replied.

Lorraine laughed. “Married couple, perhaps, but siblings? We don’t look anything alike.”

“Fair.”

Back when I was alive, our faces didn’t look similar at all, but the differences were even more pronounced now that I wore a skull mask. In fact, I’d be more concerned if an inn worker said we looked alike. Chances were that they thought we were married.

“Were we acting like a married couple?” I asked.

Lorraine paused, then calmly answered, “I don’t think we were, but it’s hard to say. You can’t really tell unless you’re looking at it from the outside.”

“Do you want me to get separate rooms for us?” I offered.

Lorraine furrowed her brow in exasperation. “We live in the same house. Staying in the same room isn’t that much of a change, is it?”

Part of me wanted to ask if she wasn’t worried that I’d try something, but Lorraine was a powerful mage. She only needed a wand to deal with the vast majority of men in this kingdom, including me. I could probably survive a couple of blows now, but I still couldn’t beat her. And as she’d pointed out, we already lived in the same house. I agreed with her that sharing an inn room wasn’t all that different.

“Fair enough. I thought I’d ask anyway. So which bed do you want?”

Thankfully, there were two beds in the room. Lorraine chose the one closer to the window, so I ended up having to stare at the wall when I went to bed.

Anyway, it was time to rest for the day and prepare for tomorrow. First, we had to go to the guild, but... Maybe we should go buy souvenirs first? I figured I would hammer out the details with Lorraine in the morning.



It’d been a while since I’d visited Vistelya’s guild, but just as I remembered, it couldn’t even compare to Maalt’s guild. The building itself had a more solid construction and was large enough to house the huge number of adventurers who called the capital home. Last time I was here, I wasn’t able to get a good look at the interior, but this time I spotted some elevator doors.

That made sense. The building was five stories tall, and it’d be quite the task

to use the stairs every time. It would be one thing if the upper floors were rarely used, but I was pretty sure the guildmaster's office was on the top floor, which would make a daily commute up five flights of stairs a bit of a chore.

"I'm told the Grand Guildmaster of Yaaran is fairly old," Lorraine said. "While he was once an adventurer, surely he's no longer active at this age."

Lorraine was right. I'd heard that the current grand guildmaster was already in that position when Wolf was recruited into the guild. I'd also heard the story about the grand guildmaster being a former adventurer, but I was sure I'd also heard that was over fifty years ago. Even if he'd retired in his thirties, he'd be over eighty years old at this point. Adventurers were substantially tougher than normal people because of their physiques and mana supply, but still being an active adventurer in your eighties was stretching it.

"But there are exceptions to that rule, like Gharb. So it's not impossible," I noted.

I thought about Gharb, the medicine lady and head mage of my hometown. She was getting up there in years, but she was still going strong. If she decided to become an adventurer now, they'd start her off at Silver-class, in which case, she'd instantly surpass me. Well, she was my mentor, so that was okay.

"Now that you mention it, I guess that's true," Lorraine said. "My mentor is similar. I'm sure they're enjoying themselves in the empire."

"The person you threw your wand at?"

Lorraine furrowed her brow. "I was young back then. I wouldn't do that now. I couldn't do that now. I still can't forget how angry they were..."

"Heh, I'd like to meet them."

They'd be a great source of fun stories about Lorraine, and it'd be nice to turn the tables on her for once. After all, the people of Hathara had told her all the embarrassing stories about me when we went there.

"Really? I'd like to go see them, but you can't just walk in and meet them. I'm sure we'll eventually head to the empire, so we can plan for it when that time comes."

Surprisingly, Lorraine was more receptive to the idea than I expected. I assumed she wouldn't want me to meet her teacher, but it seemed Lorraine felt a lot of gratitude toward them. Lorraine had lived in Maalt for a long time, and even though she sometimes returned to the empire, she'd never stayed long. She might not have seen them for ten or so years now, so I could understand why she'd want to go.

"I'll look forward to that," I quipped. "Ah, the receptionist is open. I'll go deal with that."

"Then I'll wait over there," Lorraine said as she pointed at the bar built into the guild hall.

Technically, it was a cafeteria that offered light snacks and all manner of drinks. While not all guild halls had one, they were a common sight in most of them. The menu selection and the portion sizes were a bit too limited for a proper meal, so it was mostly a place to take a short break between jobs or to wait for party members—meaning that Lorraine was using it exactly for its intended purpose.

"All right. I'll see you in a bit," I said and headed toward the reception desk.



"They're out?" I asked as I tilted my head quizzically at the receptionist.

The woman behind the desk calmly answered, "Yes. I'm afraid that Jean Seebeck is currently unavailable. I believe he'll be back in a few days."

"If I wait until he returns, will he see me?"

"Of course. If I neglect a guild employee who Master Wolf Hermann of Maalt sent directly, I'd be in trouble myself. Nevertheless, I can't do anything about the grand guildmaster's absence. I truly am sorry. Is there any way you can try again in five days or so?"

I felt she was being a little too polite to a fellow guild employee, but it made sense. The adventurer's guild was a single organization, but each regional branch was mostly independent. To a Vistelya guild employee, someone from the Maalt branch was basically a stranger.

That aside, she'd been respectful toward Wolf, even calling him "Master Wolf." Was he really worthy of that much respect? Really? But, on second thought, there weren't that many people who were as good a guildmaster as he was, and combined with his eye for detail and his abilities as an adventurer, he might be the epitome of what a guildmaster should be. That would explain the respect. That said, Maalt was in the middle of nowhere, so it was still surprising that they recognized Wolf's value. It felt kind of good, actually, to know someone who was treated with such respect.

At any rate, the only thing I could do now was wait. That might not be such a bad thing, though, because I still had a long list of errands to run. I had planned to just give up on them if I didn't have enough time, but now a pile of free time just got tossed into my lap.

I nodded to the receptionist and replied, "That's fine. Five days from now, then?"

"Yes. As for the documentation, we'll sort through and organize it on our end, so your report should go relatively smoothly."

The documentation in question was the huge pile of paperwork Wolf had given me to hand to Vistelya's guild. Most of it detailed the current state of Maalt, and you'd think that would be enough, but it was better to have someone who knew the situation give a direct report to the higher-ups. That was the reason Wolf sent me here, which was what had prompted the receptionist's remark.

"Thanks. I'll leave it in your hands. See you in five days."



"You're done already? What happened at the meeting?" Lorraine asked as I approached.

"It seems the grand guildmaster's out of town. Evidently, he'll be back in about five days."

"Out... Well, I suppose he can't stay in one place for too long. Although, I'd heard he wasn't able to leave the capital for long..." Lorraine said with a puzzled expression.

I nodded in agreement as I remembered what I had heard back in Maalt. “Wolf mentioned that, but he probably meant that the grand guildmaster couldn’t come out to someplace in the middle of nowhere like Maalt.”

The journey from Vistelya to Maalt took about a week using normal methods. Given that the grand guildmaster would have to go there and then come back, a visit would take at least two weeks. He couldn’t just abandon the capital for that long. The regional cities closer to the capital, however, were only a few days round trip, so it wouldn’t be particularly strange if he made frequent trips to those cities.

“Ah, you make a good point,” Lorraine muttered. “Either way, there’s nothing you can do about his absence. Plus, it’s fortuitous in a way. We now have time to take care of our various errands beforehand.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too.”

“Our to-do list includes delivering the letter from Sister Lillian to the Church of the Eastern Sky, visiting the palace for an audience with Her Highness, and buying souvenirs for Alize and Rina. Now, the first thing we ought to do...”

Lorraine looked at me and asked what we should tackle first.

“The letter, I think. I have no idea how long we’ll be at the palace, but with the letter, all we have to do is deliver it,” I suggested, thinking it best to get the simpler task out of the way first.

“That’s true. Since Sister Lillian gave me the letter, I could deliver it on my own, but I imagine I’ll be wanted at the palace as well.”

“Yup. Besides, there’s someone else we need to drag to the palace with us. We need to get in touch with him, but about the only way I can think of is to leave him a message here at the guild. Aside from that, we could try his regular haunt.”

I was referring to the bar we met Augurey at the last time we were here. We might run into him there if we just went, but a message left at the guild would reach Augurey the moment he came in. Conversely, while he might get the message tomorrow, he could be on a long-term assignment right now and wouldn’t get it until he came back. In that case, Lorraine and I would have to go

to the palace without him, but we'd cross that bridge when we got there.

"It might be easier to find him by asking around if anyone has seen an adventurer wearing strange clothing."

Lorraine had said it jokingly, but she had a point. Augurey's fashion sense made him stand out. Still, I'd rather leave that as a last resort.

"We can do that if we can't find him," I said, "but for now, why don't we head to the Church of the Eastern Sky. It's on the eastern side of the capital, right?"

"Yes, that should be right," Lorraine answered.

Lorraine and I left the guild and made our way toward the church.



"This makes the church in Maalt look like a ramshackle hut," I murmured in front of the building in question.

Lorraine nodded. "As expected, really. While the Church of the Eastern Sky isn't a particularly wealthy religious organization, it's still the main faith in Yaaran. It stands to reason that the main church here in the capital would be much grander than the one in Maalt."

The soaring building in front of us with its large towers shimmered overhead as though to corroborate Lorraine's statement. I also saw a large number of worshippers busily yet quietly making their way in and out of the building. It was a lively place. Not to say that the Church of the Eastern Sky in Maalt wasn't lively, but it was often overshadowed by the Church of Lobelia there.

Even here in the capital, the Church of Lobelia was starting to spread its influence. I could see their church not too far away. We'd had to pass by it on the way here, but they'd been so aggressive in their evangelizing that it'd been a tad overwhelming.

"If you join the Church of Lobelia, you'll be guaranteed salvation."

"We have a great many saints in our ranks, so you'll be set for blessings in this life as well."

"Our holy water is more affordable than other faiths'!"

Every ten feet or so, we'd get a pitch along those lines. I'd wanted to ask if they were trying to convert people to a faith or to seal a business deal, but I knew that if I said that aloud, it'd just set off another flood of words. I'd just ignored them instead.

Despite the fact that Lorraine had been standing next to me, no one had tried to sell her on the Church of Lobelia. This seemed odd to me, so I decided to ask her why that might be.

"Maybe you just looked more gullible than I did," Lorraine replied. "They kept glancing toward me, but after a few seconds, they all tended to scatter."

Did I really look that gullible? Maybe back before I'd gotten eaten by a dragon that might have been the case. When I'd been human, people had often told me I looked trustworthy and nice. I was sure I looked pretty shady these days, though. If anything, I looked like the sort that would prey on earnest followers of a faith. Either way, no one really bothered me that much when I was in Maalt. That sort of random recruiting on the street was rare there anyway.

By contrast, the Church of Lobelia here in the capital just happened to be particularly hungry for converts. The Church of the Eastern Sky wasn't doing much to spread their faith, so it might have been that the Church of Lobelia's eagerness to evangelize had created the situation where it was steadily encroaching on the Church of the Eastern Sky's turf in Yaaran. In that sense, as a citizen of Yaaran, I wished the Church of the Eastern Sky would step up its game a bit, but it wasn't like I was a devout follower, so I wasn't all that invested in the outcome either way.

Just as I'd reached that point in my musings, Lorraine said, "All right, let's keep moving, Rentt. We look suspicious just standing here."

She began walking toward the church, so I followed behind her. We then ducked into the building through the open doors of the giant entrance.



The interior of the Church of the Eastern Sky, like the exterior, was an impressive piece of architecture, but perhaps because of the church's teachings, it wasn't garishly or richly decorated. That wasn't to say it wasn't beautiful—it was—but its beauty was sober and understated, and the statues and murals

eschewed ostentatiousness in favor of piety.

The decorations all depicted people and events from the Church of the Eastern Sky's scriptures, and followers were offering prayers in front of each statue and mural. In the middle of the great hall, endless rows of large benches designed to seat scores of followers were lined up. In between the large benches was an aisle of purple carpet that stretched toward the altar. Behind the altar, a large stained glass panel that depicted the Angel of the East that the church venerated lit the room with a warm glow. Still, neither the altar nor the stained glass were about displaying the church's grandeur; they were devices meant to create a quiet, pious atmosphere.

"I have no intention of following a particular faith, but I always do feel something when I'm in a place like this," Lorraine said, exhaling softly.

The Church of Lobelia was quite influential in the empire, but Lorraine herself wasn't very religious. I suppose what she was trying to say was that this place made even someone like her want to believe in a higher power, even if for only a brief moment.



Given that there were such things as blessings from gods and spirits, I didn't see anything wrong with believing in something, but the fact was that blessings were often bestowed on those without a strong sense of faith. Since Lorraine and I both possessed divinity, we were both saints according to most religious institutions, but if asked if we worshiped the spirit from that shrine, I'd probably have to say no. I was grateful, but that wasn't the same as fealty.

"It's not that I don't understand why," I murmured, "but as I sort of expected, nothing's happening to me even in a place like this. I figured that unlike the little church in Maalt, something might happen here in the high church."

Lorraine turned to me and watched me intently.

"True, you're no different. Well, this is a church, but it's not as though it's overflowing with divinity. Besides, even if that were the case, you're an oddity. You're an undead with your own divinity, so it isn't terribly surprising that nothing has happened."

"Yeah. If I thought it'd be that big of a risk, I wouldn't have entered the church in the first place."

My impression before entering was that it was a large, impressive building, but I didn't feel any unease or fear. Since my body was that of an undead, if the church itself was dangerous to my kind, I'd have felt some sort of dread or disgust upon nearing the place. The reality was that I'd felt nothing of the sort when I got here.

Also, when I actually stepped inside, nothing had happened. It might have been reckless of me, considering that had anything happened, my only option would've been to have Lorraine drag me out of the building. I'd already been to a fair number of religious facilities at this point, though, including the chapel at the orphanage in Maalt. It wasn't a large chapel, but it'd been useful in testing my reaction to holy structures. Maybe it wasn't that reckless of me to have just waltzed in here, then.

"However, that simply means that you can handle this particular church. It's possible that churches of other faiths might affect you. You should still be careful."

Lorraine made sure to keep me from getting overconfident, and she was right, of course. I'd heard before that the relationships among gods could impact the power balance between a god and a divinity wielder. For example, saints might receive a power boost when facing followers of a god that their god hated. After all, the gods usually chose mortals based not on their morals, but on whether they liked the individual. That was what Lorraine meant when she pointed out that it might still be a problem at another church, even if I was fine in the Church of the Eastern Sky.

"Yeah, true. I'll be careful. That aside, what about the letter? Who do we give it to?"

When I changed the subject, Lorraine retrieved the letter from her bag. The letter was sealed with wax, and though it wasn't addressed to anyone on the outside, Lorraine had been told to whom to give the letter. She'd been the one to take the job too.

"Sister Lillian requested that I give this letter to Abbess Elza of the Yaaran Abbey of the Eastern Sky."

"So she's sending it to someone pretty high up."

In the Church of the Eastern Sky, Archimandrite was the top rank, followed by abbot, prior, canon, and so forth—ten ranks overall. There were more precise separations between ranks, but that was the basic hierarchy. The equivalent of the Great Church-Father in the Church of Lobelia, or say a pope or patriarch in other faiths, was the Archabbot, so an abbot in the Church of the Eastern Sky was essentially a cardinal or bishop. An abbot could even one day become an Archimandrite.

Lillian was directly exchanging letters with someone of that rank, so was she higher up than I thought? She'd always just introduced herself as a cleric and never told us her exact rank. Ordinarily, someone in charge of a church in a city the size of Maalt would be a canon, at best. I suppose this was something I'd have to ask Lillian about at some point.

"Perhaps it simply means that the Church of the Eastern Sky isn't as caught up in their hierarchy as the Church of Lobelia. I've been told that if you want to send a letter to the Great Church-Father in the Church of Lobelia, you have to

be either high-ranking or accomplished to get him to even pay notice of your approach.”

That was an extreme in the opposite direction.

“So no point in a small child saving their allowance to pay the postage, huh?” I said.

“Well, they can still send it,” Lorraine answered, “but the letters are first read by the Great Church-Father’s subordinates, who then sort through them. In the end, only a handful of them ever make it to the Great Church-Father’s desk. That said, it’s more likely that a letter from a child like you described might have a decent shot. If word got out that the Great Church-Father read it and responded, it would be good for the church’s reputation. In the empire, if you go to a church in the countryside, you sometimes see a reply from the Great Church-Father framed and displayed on a wall.”

“Y’know, it’s not entirely a bad thing...but it feels kind of dirty.”

“The reality is that we live in a hard world. At any rate, the letter. I’d like to make sure the abbess receives it, so I don’t want to hand it to a random priest only for it to never be read.”

Lorraine looked around the room, then called to a passing woman who appeared to be a nun. She was going to ask the nun to bring Abbess Elza to her. The easiest thing to do would be to give the letter to the nun and ask her to deliver it, but Lorraine had taken this task on as a proper request. Her professional pride as an adventurer meant she needed to make sure Elza got the letter. In that case, it would be imprudent to just hand it off to a passing nun.

“Yes? How may I help you? Do you wish to offer a prayer? Or purchase some holy water? Or perhaps you wish to make a donation?”

The nun was probably just listing off potential requests, but I couldn’t help but hear a tiny bit of hope in her voice on the last question. While religion wasn’t about money, every religious institution needed money to survive. It was understandable.

Besides, as far as I could see from the passing monks, they all wore simple

clothing. The older monks had evidently been wearing their clothes for a long time, because numerous patches were covering tears and gaps in the fabric. It was clear they weren't in the habit of frivolously spending on luxuries. It drove home how little the Church of the Eastern Sky cared about such things, which made me inclined to donate.

"I intend to make a donation before I head home," Lorraine said, "but that's not why I'm here today. We're from the city of Maalt, and we have a letter from a nun of the church that we were asked to deliver on her behalf. I'd like to hand it directly to the person I was told to give it to. Would it be possible to have you bring the recipient to me?"

"Ah, you truly have come a long way. Thank you for taking the time to do so. I will be happy to help you. And to whom is the letter addressed? And if possible, may I know who wrote it as well?"

"Right, my apologies. The letter is addressed to Abbess Elza. It was sent by Sister Lillian of Maalt. Forgive me, I don't know Sister Lillian's rank, as I never had the right opportunity to ask..."

Lorraine was just describing her requested task, but the nun's eyes went wide with surprise when she heard the name.

"A letter from Sister Lillian to Mother Elza?! I-I understand. I'll go fetch the abbess at once! If you two could wait in the drawing room— You! Show these two to the drawing room!"

The nun, who was thoroughly anxious now, stopped a young woman, apparently a novice, and issued her orders before she hurried off.

Lorraine watched her leave with bemusement. "Was it something I said?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. Maybe the girl could help us out?"

I turned to look at the understudy who'd been assigned as our guide, and Lorraine nodded in agreement.

"Forgive the odd question, but do you know of Abbess Elza and Sister Lillian?" she asked the young woman.

"Yes, I know of Abbess Elza. She's in charge of Ephas Abbey, the headquarters

of the Church of the Eastern Sky in Yaaran. But, my apologies, as for Sister Lillian...I am afraid I do not know of her. Where is she from?"

"She is a nun of Maalt."

"Ah, Maalt. I see. To be a nun in a hard land like that, she must be quite the person, but I'm afraid I do not know of her. My apologies. I'm sorry I can't be of use."

Lorraine glanced over at me, but if the girl didn't know, she didn't know. I shook my head.

"I see..." Lorraine said gently. "I'm sorry for asking you something so random. Please take us to the drawing room."



"If you'll excuse me. She should be here shortly."

After showing us to the drawing room, the woman made tea before leaving us alone in the room. Lorraine waited until we heard her footsteps receding in the distance before speaking.

"We still have no idea why that priestess was so surprised, do we?"

"Maybe she was just surprised there was a letter addressed to Abbess Elza? Could be she's not much of a writer and doesn't get much mail."

"Are you being serious right now?"

Lorraine furrowed her brow and glanced in my direction. I was kidding, of course. An abbess of the Church of the Eastern Sky was not just a religious figure, but a political one as well. There was no way she wouldn't be much of a writer, nor would receiving letters be rare for her. Therefore, it made the most sense to assume that the nun hadn't been surprised at the fact that Abbess Elza received a letter, but at the fact that Lillian had sent one to the abbess.

"I'm kidding. The most logical guess is that Lillian's pretty important in the church, right?" I said.

"Then why didn't that girl know of her?"

"I'm sure we can come up with a bunch of reasons, but she is young. It

wouldn't be odd if she didn't know a whole lot about the church, yet."

"I suppose you have a point..."

Although she nodded, Lorraine didn't seem particularly convinced by my logic. Lorraine was a scholar at heart, so she never liked relying on hunches and guesses aside from determining whether it was important or not.

Still, I shared her curiosity about Lillian. She was a nun serving out in the sticks of Maalt, but now that I thought about it, her presence there was odd. After all, she could use divinity, which made her a saint. It was easy to forget how impressive that was given that Lorraine, I, and even my thralls could use it if they wanted to, but it was a fairly rare ability. Those who could use it, regardless of the extent of their power, were valued by any religious institution they belonged to. It was normal for them to technically belong to a particular branch of faith but actually work as traveling priests, clerics, and deacons, yet Lillian had been assigned to a backwater congregation. It was easy to imagine that there was a complicated story behind that.

"If you really want to know, you'd either have to ask her in person, or maybe ask this Abbess Elza we're about to meet. Though, it's hard to say whether they'll answer that question or not."

"Hmm... That would be difficult."

Lorraine crossed her arms and sighed. Considering that this information dealt with the Church of the Eastern Sky's internal affairs, it seemed unlikely that they'd be willing to share freely. In that case, there wasn't much we could do about it. Although, if we asked Lillian, she might not make a fuss about it.

We sat waiting for a bit, sipping our tea, when a knock came at the door. Lorraine and I stood and both said, "Come in."

The door slowly opened, and the priestess from earlier entered the room, followed by a priestess who I assumed was Abbess Elza.

My first impression of Abbess Elza was that she looked a lot younger than I'd expected. An abbot was equivalent to cardinals and bishops in other faiths, and it was one of the most important positions in the Church of the Eastern Sky. When the supreme leader passed away, their successor would come from

among those who held this title.

People who were chosen for such roles had to meet a large number of requirements ranging from personal character to education to experience and, as a result, they often needed to be of a certain age. Despite that, Abbess Elza was extremely young. Since I hadn't picked up the trick to identify a woman's age at a glance, I couldn't say for certain how old she was, but at the very least, she looked young enough that some would say she looked to be in her late twenties, whereas others would say she was still in her late teens.

I figured I'd be safe if I said she was somewhere in her twenties. It wasn't that she'd lost all her childish features, but that she demonstrated a certain amount of intelligence and maturity, along with a calmness that no teenager could possess. She also had raven hair, which wasn't all that unusual in Yaaran, as well as obsidian-hued eyes.

Abbess Elza bowed deeply when she entered the room. Lorraine and I stood and returned the bow.

"I thank you for coming so far to deliver this to me," Abbess Elza said. "I'm told it's a letter from Sister Lillian Jean. I'm Elza Olgado, the abbess in question."

"Thank you for the polite introduction. My name is Lorraine Vivie, a Silver-class adventurer, and this is my companion, Rentt Vivie."

Lorraine was the one who'd accepted this task, so she was the one to answer the abbess. I was just along for the ride, so to speak. Still, I'd accompanied Lorraine from Maalt, so I did think I had a right to be here. Besides, from Lillian's point of view, it was less that she asked Lorraine alone, and more that she'd entrusted the letter to the two of us.

Upon learning that we shared a family name, Elza looked back and forth between us. Lorraine realized what the abbess wanted to ask, but she brushed it aside and pressed forward. There was no need to clarify things since there were a number of reasons we might share a surname, whether it be that we were married or that we were from the same family. Elza also let her question pass unanswered and returned her attention to Lorraine.

"I have come today because Sister Lillian entrusted me with a letter to give directly to you, Abbess Elza. Here it is." Lorraine retrieved the letter from her

magic bag and offered it to Elza.

“A Silver-class? I see. Would you mind terribly if I opened it here? I’m afraid I’m quite anxious to see what she has written.”

The reason Elza mentioned Lorraine’s rank was because ordinarily, a Bronze-class adventurer was more than sufficient to safely deliver mail. Not many would bother hiring a Silver-class adventurer to do so. There were cases where the rich would hire a high-ranking adventurer to deliver an important missive, but Lillian was the head of Maalt’s orphanage. She wasn’t particularly wealthy, and Elza must have wondered why she’d asked a Silver-class adventurer to deliver the letter.

The fact of the matter was that Lorraine had taken the job not because Lillian specifically wanted a Silver-class adventurer, but because Lillian knew Lorraine personally. As for the fee, Lillian had initially insisted she’d pay full price, but Lorraine had given her a discount since we were coming this way anyway.

As for why Elza wanted to open it in front of us, there were probably two reasons. First, as she had just noted, she was anxious to see what was written in the letter itself. Second, she wanted to confirm that it had been properly delivered to her.

The former reason was simply a statement made for politeness’s sake, while the latter was likely the real reason. Normally, when an adventurer was tasked with delivering mail, they never opened the letter to check its contents. In fact, doing so without the employer’s permission was a crime. Nevertheless, some less-than-honest adventurers would steal a glance. Not many would do that, but it was best to check if anything had been tampered with, just in case.

Lorraine nodded. “Of course. Please do.”

“Then... Oh, my apologies. I don’t mean to make you stay standing. Please, sit down. I’ll take a seat as well.”

At Elza’s prompting, Lorraine and I sat back down on the comfortable sofa in the drawing room. Elza sat down after she saw us settled, but the nun who’d brought Elza remained on her feet and stood quietly behind the abbess. The nun was likely standing at the ready so that she could run errands if Elza felt it necessary. That and she was probably there to serve as Elza’s shield if anything

happened. I could feel that the nun had martial training, but it was hard to tell if she'd be able to put up a decent fight against us. She wouldn't be able to do much if Lorraine decided to unleash the full force of her magic.

Then again, if that happened, we'd definitely be captured. Even if we escaped, we'd end up wanted criminals on the lam. I wished the nun would relax, given that there was no way we'd do such a thing, but since an abundance of caution was important in these situations, there wasn't anything we could really do about the nun.

As I pondered such things, Elza's eyes went wide as she opened the letter.

"Is something the matter?" Lorraine inquired.

Elza shook her head. "No. It was just that I felt an old familiar presence..."

Elza then suddenly chanted a holy mantra of the Church of the Eastern Sky, and a gentle blue light lit the air around her. As though responding to that light, Lillian's letter began to glow with a similar but slightly different light.

It was unmistakably the glow of divinity. Lillian, as a saint, could use divinity, and it appeared that Elza too was a saint. You didn't have to be a saint to become a high-ranking member of a religious institution, but having that ability would usually start you out relatively high on the hierarchy. That, in turn, allowed you to advance through the ranks faster, so in general, it made it easier to achieve a higher position. Or at least, so I'd heard. It would make sense if Elza's unusually high rank for her age was due to her ability.

The divinity subsided after a moment, at which point the wax seal on the letter crumbled into dust. Since I'd never seen it happen before, I glanced over at Lorraine for an explanation, and she began to explain in a soft whisper.

"It's a seal blessing used mostly by high-ranking clergy. It isn't known or used by the general public. If someone who doesn't know the proper way of opening the seal—that is, someone who doesn't have the 'key'—tries to open the letter, it leaves a mark indicating that it has been opened without permission. Since the mark is made with divinity, it also reveals who tried to open it. Though, I'm told that anyone who can use divinity can also erase the mark."

It wasn't as though Lorraine had said it so softly that Elza couldn't hear, and

indeed, she'd heard Lorraine's explanation.

"I'm impressed that you know of it. You're correct. Lillian lost the ability to use divinity some time ago, so it has been years since she sent me a letter in this fashion."



Lillian had lost the ability to use divinity? The first thing that came to mind was the fact that she'd developed accumulative malice disease, but when I thought back to those events, Lillian herself had only learned that she had the disease when she was treated for it. It would be strange for Abbess Elza, who hadn't heard from Lillian in a while and had been in the capital all this time, to know about it.

Although, maybe it wouldn't be that odd if Elza had gathered information in some way that Lillian herself was unaware. Elza's words didn't seem to have that connotation behind them, though. Instead, she seemed to be implying that Lillian had lost the ability to use divinity before she'd developed accumulative malice disease. That would explain why a saint like Lillian, who had the precious ability to use divinity, was assigned to be headmaster at an orphanage in Maalt, a backwater among backwaters.

"I do not know if you are aware," Elza continued, "but Lillian was a nun here in the Ephas Abbey until about ten years ago. She originally became a nun when she was fifteen, and even at that age, she had a powerful gift for divinity. She was regarded as a promising saint who would carry the future of the church on her shoulders."

Aha, so there was a meaningful reason that Lillian had been assigned to a rural place like Maalt. Well, no, Maalt wasn't rural. It was a relatively prosperous frontier city. And while I wanted to point that out, Elza wasn't the one who'd called Maalt a backwater, so I couldn't say anything.

"And yet she was assigned to Maalt?" Lorraine asked. "Not to cast aspersions on my own home, but Maalt is a country town compared to the capital. It doesn't seem like a place for a saint who has that much talent."

A part of me was a little hurt that even Lorraine would be so dismissive of Maalt, but she was from the empire and was a city girl born and bred, so I

couldn't really blame her. I was the only country boy here, then. I felt a faint sense of inferiority as I decided to stay out of the conversation for the time being.

Unlike my whimsical inner musings, their conversation continued on in a serious vein. Maybe I was just a little bit too much of a goof. In any case, this was all inside my head, so I could be forgiven for having a little fun in my own world, right?

"Not at all," Elza replied. "I'm told Maalt is one of the more prosperous parts of the frontier. In particular, as of late, it's considered a promising land with the birth of a new dungeon. Many are saying that it won't be considered a frontier or backwater in the future."

Elza offered some praise for Maalt with the confidence of someone from a big city. I could barely hold back tears; how she'd gently and tactfully worded her statement was a salve to my fragile country pride. I decided at that moment that I'd happily accept any task that Abbess Elza might ask of me.

Joking aside, I was pretty sure that Elza's prediction was right. Even now, we had the Tower and the Academy lurking around town. I didn't know how useful the discoveries in the dungeon would end up being, but observations would be conducted over the long term. Not only that, but a newly created dungeon was an extremely rare find. It'd require a large-scale research project that would require building advanced research centers and academic institutions in the city itself. It was easy to imagine that adventurers and workers would flock to the city in the process.

It was clear that the city would be booming in the future, so Maalt would be joining the ranks of the world's big cities. Well, I didn't know if it would go that far, but my hope was that it would. On the other hand, while there was a benefit to the population growth that would come from those developments, there would also be downsides. It was hard to say that growth would only be a good thing. The back streets might become poorer and end up as slums, or more conflict and crimes might arise as a result.

There were already signs of that now. The spat between the Academy students and the merchant we saw before, and the disputes between Tower

researchers and adventurers we saw before we left, were no doubt just the start of it. It would just mean more and more work for Wolf. Not that that was my problem, but I supposed I could help him out a little bit.



“As you’ve stated, Mother Elza, it’s true that Maalt is becoming prosperous now,” Lorraine said. “However, that probably wasn’t the case when Sister Lillian was assigned there.”

Elza nodded in agreement. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Then why... No, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry...”

Lorraine held back, evidently feeling that she might be prying into Lillian’s private affairs, but Elza answered her unspoken question.

“No, I’ve perhaps said too much. I should apologize to Lillian later. Still, I feel I’ve given you an incomplete picture. To offer a little more detail, the reason Lillian went to Maalt wasn’t because of anything she had done, but because of internal conflicts within our faith.”

This was a common story, but it wasn’t typical in the Church of the Eastern Sky. Or rather, it wasn’t the sort of thing that went public even if it did happen. It was more common to hear about it when it involved other religions, but...

Elza continued, “Which is why I’ve always felt guilty about it. I tried to stay in contact with Lillian even after she left for Maalt, but Lillian herself said that contact with her would be bad for me and, at a certain point, had stopped contacting me at all. This letter is the first I’ve heard from her in a long time. I’ll carefully read the contents later and, if possible, write her a response. While I would hate to trouble you, I would appreciate it if you could take the response to her directly. We can make it an official request through the guild...”

The conversation had gone in an unexpected direction. It was natural to want to write a response to a letter you’d just received, especially if it was from an acquaintance you hadn’t heard from in a while. It seemed Lillian and Elza weren’t just acquaintances or superior and subordinate in the church, but also friends, so it was even more understandable that Elza wanted to send Lillian a reply.

That raised a question. Were Lillian and Elza about the same age? Lillian was a stout middle-aged woman who appeared to be in her early forties, but Elza was talking like she knew Lillian when she was in her teens. I fought the urge to ask Elza, “How old are you?” because I was well aware that the only thing that

awaited a question like that was pain.

I'd seen it happen all too often to my fellow adventurers who'd posed the same question to veteran female adventurers at the tavern. They'd received a fist or two as an answer and ended up with a nice mouthful of dirt to go with their ale. After seeing that happen several times, I'd learned the valuable lesson of not asking women their age. Not that it completely stopped me from asking, even now. Maybe I just needed more discipline.

Anyway, carrying back a reply... Since we'd be returning to Maalt eventually, it shouldn't be an issue. Lorraine must have agreed, because she glanced at me to check before replying to Elza.

"In that case, we have no problem with accepting your task. I plan to stay in the capital for a while, meaning that any letter to Sister Lillian will only be delivered once I make my way back. If that is acceptable..."

"Yes. It's not an urgent matter, so that would be fine. Then, I will contact you through the guild once the letter is completed. Thank you for taking on this job."



Lorraine and I then each made donations before we left Ephas Abbey, the great abbey of the Church of the Eastern Sky's Yaaran branch. While Lorraine made donations every once in a while, it was rare for me to make donations of any kind, but now that I finally had some financial cushion, I was able to make one today. I could only spare a few silver pieces, but it was enough to support a family for a month, so it wasn't a small donation. Well, okay, it was enough for maybe twenty loaves of bread.

I had no idea how much Lorraine gave, but the average donation from a follower of the church was, at most, several copper pieces. This figure shot up when adventurers got involved, but earnings from adventuring flowed like water, so it was almost unavoidable. Adventuring was good money, but it was also an expensive job to maintain. Just weapons, armor, and tools were enough to give me a headache when budgeting my funds. Even lower-ranked adventurers made decent money, but for many of them, once they factored in equipment and maintenance, they tended to lose income rather than make it.

The only way for adventurers to find financial security was to work hard and get stronger.

A little while after we'd left the abbey, Lorraine said, "So now the only things left to do in the capital are to buy gifts for the others and to have an audience with Her Highness."

"True, but the gifts can wait until we're ready to leave, I think. Rina's list is mostly things that spoil quickly..."

"For foodstuffs, magic can help preserve them, but even then, it'd be best to wait on those."

She wasn't talking about manipulating time and space, but just using magic to cool things or to remove humidity. It wasn't that there was no such thing as space-time manipulation magic, but such magic was far more difficult to use than other types of spells. It wasn't meant for casual use.

Maybe it was easier to understand how hard those spells were if I said teleportation was essentially a form of space-time manipulation magic. Not even Lorraine could use it to preserve food. Of course, she could probably do it given enough preparation, resources, and help, but it wasn't the sort of effort you'd expend on mere souvenirs.

Having maybe a dozen mages in a giant magic circle chanting while pouring vast amounts of mana into a cake would make anyone critique the waste of high-level magic that would be. There was a part of Lorraine, however, that would delight in doing such a thing, so I couldn't say for certain she'd never do it. Thinking about it, I kind of wanted to do it myself at some point. There was just something cool about experiments so ridiculous that no one had ever been crazy enough to try them before.

While I daydreamed about that ludicrous waste of magic, Lorraine continued the conversation.

"That leaves our audience with Her Highness. Rentt, did you remember to bring that medal?"

The medal Lorraine referred to was the one given to us by Nauss Ancro, the captain of the Yaaran Royal Guard, who'd been protecting the princess when

we'd saved her. It depicted part of the scene decorating Nauss's armor—a unicorn stabbing a monster with its horn—which was a part of his heraldry. It was a magic item used as a form of identification, and he'd handed it to us to show to the guards at the palace gate when we wanted an audience with the princess. Technically, he'd just lent it to us rather than gifting it, so obviously I wasn't going to lose it. And since I needed it for this journey, of course I had it on me. I thought I did, anyway.

"Ahem... I'm sure I had it in here..." I stuck my hand into my magic bag and thought of the medal.

"Why do you sound uncertain?" Lorraine questioned, looking a tad worried.

I mean, I knew I'd put it in there, but there was always the possibility I'd just forgotten. All the same, I was sure I'd put it in there—pretty sure, anyway. Even as I fretted, I felt the hefty weight of metal in my hand, and a wave of relief washed over me. I pulled my hand out of the bag and the medal was there, lying in my palm.

"Aha!"

"Oh for the love of... You had me worried there for a second," Lorraine said with a faint look of exasperation, but I pretended not to notice.

"Anyway, this seal... It's kind of creepy no matter how many times you look at it, huh? I guess a family that produces a captain of the royal guard needs to show its martial prowess even in its heraldry."

"Yes, that's probably true. Nobles do have to be concerned with appearances. Of course, those who can't back up those appearances with substance fall out of favor quickly. At any rate, with this we can enter the palace, but we still have to worry about your identity being discovered."

Lorraine referred to the detection net that checked for monsters entering the capital. I'd been able to get into the city due to a magic item from the Latuule Family, but when it came to the palace...

"But you're sure it'll be fine, right, Lorraine?"

"Yes. I checked what sort of detection items they use in the palace and even tested one on you. None of them responded to your presence, so there's no

need for excessive concern. But it's still important to be prepared, just in case, which is why I've borrowed an underling from Edel."

That surprised me. "Just when did you do that?" I asked.

"Back in Maalt, of course. It was accompanying me in the carriage. Did you not notice?"

"Now that you mention it, I remember seeing a single puchi suri there, but I just assumed it was a wild one."

Puchi suri stowaways were common when traveling by carriage, so I'd paid no attention to it at the time. Since I'd no longer felt its presence when we got to the gates, I'd assumed it'd hopped off somewhere along the way.

"It goes without saying, but even a puchi suri, unlike you, is obviously a monster, and we couldn't very well enter the capital with one in the carriage. Plus, I wanted to confirm how effective the House Latuule's device was, so I gave it the item and had it sneak into the capital first. It's now wandering around the nobles' district to make sure it's safe to go that far in with the item. Once we're sure of that, I'll have it try the palace."

It sounded like quite a precise plan, but just how had Lorraine been able to communicate so well with Edel and the puchi suris without my knowledge?

Lorraine must have noticed my confusion, because she added, "I was thinking a lot about this visit, so I was muttering about wanting to confirm it was safe ahead of time. Edel evidently heard me talking to myself, and he brought his underling to me. It felt like Edel was telling me to make use of it. It's not that we can talk, but it can nod or shake its head in response to things I say, so when I was able to confirm we could communicate, I had it tag along to help me."

This was a bit too much independence, wasn't it? Or maybe it was fine because it was for my sake.

"But Edel never misses a beat," Lorraine continued, "and he made sure to ask for a reward."

"A reward?"

"Yes. You know the temperature-adjusting magic item at the house? He wants

one for the basement of the orphanage as well. It's a small price to pay for having them take on a dangerous job."

Edel had stayed quiet because he had other motivations, eh? It wasn't like it cost me anything, so I figured it was fine.

"I understand how it happened," I said. "But even if that's taken care of, it's the three of us that have to pay Her Highness a visit."

Lorraine nodded. "Yes. We need to contact Augurey. I know the location of his inn. Why don't we try starting there?"

Side Story: Meanwhile, Back in Maalt

“Hrrrm...”

Rina—Rentt and Lorraine’s apprentice—stood furrowing her brow as she groaned in concentration and focused on the task at hand. She was currently in the courtyard at the Latuule estate, which was located in a corner of the city of Maalt. Nearby, Alize, Rentt, and Lorraine’s other apprentice, watched Rina as she gathered mana into the magic wand she held in her hand. Once Rina’s concentration had reached its peak, she opened her eyes and shouted out a chant.

“Gie Vieros!”

A moment later, brown matter that appeared to be dirt gathered in the empty space at the tip of the wand, slowly forming into an arrow floating in midair. Rina then motioned as though she were pushing forward. The arrow sailed through the air almost as fast as an ordinary arrow, flew toward a target made up of several concentric rings, and struck the outermost ring.



“Wow,” Alize muttered after Rina’s arrow had landed.

Isaac, who was standing next to Alize, nodded his approval. “Taking into account that this was your first time trying a quickened spell, you did well. If I were to nitpick, I’d say I would have liked you to hit a little closer to the center.”

Rina and Alize were in the middle of practicing their magic. Lorraine had given them a list of tasks to do while she and Rentt were away, and on that list was a note saying to get Isaac to instruct them if they wanted to practice offensive magic. The pair had followed their mentor’s directions and gone to the Latuule estate to ask for Isaac’s tutelage.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Rina and Alize had been able to enter the estate without any fuss. Ordinarily, one had to go through a hedge maze that even Rentt had struggled to navigate, but the pair had been allowed to skip that challenge. That also meant they hadn’t gotten the reward for making it through the maze—a magic item of their choosing—but since neither of them knew about that, they were hardly going to complain about it.

What’s more, given that Alize was a child from the orphanage, it could have been a bad idea for her to be here alone among vampires and undead, but fortunately she was unaware of this; she hadn’t noticed anything unusual when she’d met Isaac and the other servants who worked at the estate. That was natural, though, considering that the vampires there had spent years, decades, and possibly even centuries in Maalt without anyone discovering their true identity. Even if you were shown into the very heart of the mansion, it would take a particularly keen-eyed observer—which Alize certainly was not—to see through their facade.

From Alize’s point of view, she had simply entered a beautiful estate with a gorgeous rose garden and a staff made up of elegant and refined servants. Although the mothers of the world might protest an orphan being in the company of vampires, there were no mothers present and therefore no one to rally against it.

The only “good” person who knew the truth was Rina, and she was a pseudo-vampire herself, not all that far removed from the estate’s undead denizens. Alize was, essentially, a sitting duck—a treat for the vampires to nibble on at

their leisure—but no one there would actually feed on her.

“Mister Isaac, is it possible for me to do that as well?” Alize asked.

Isaac smiled that creepy yet elegant smile that might have marked him as a vampire in more cautious company and answered, “Eventually, yes. But it would be difficult to do so immediately.”

“Why is that?”

“What Miss Rina is doing is not ordinary chanted magic, but quickened magic. In general, magic is divided into chanted magic, quickened magic, and silent magic, but the latter two become progressively more difficult. Miss Alize, you’ve only learned chanted magic so far, yes?”

“Yes. Is it that I have no talent as a mage?” Alize muttered with a worried look on her face.

Isaac shook his head and smiled at her reassuringly.

“No, that’s not it at all. The issue is more that if you don’t take care and pay attention to your chanting when you’re first learning magic, you will end up developing some strange habits as a spellcaster. To put it another way, chanted magic is the equivalent of forms in swordplay. A swordsman’s style greatly depends on whether they start by mastering those forms or forgo them altogether. The former produces a swordsman of a particular school, while the latter creates a completely self-taught fighter. It’s not as though one process always results in a stronger warrior, but the former is a more efficient way to learn, is it not?”

Alize nodded, the description jogging something in her memory.

“That reminds me, Rentt’s really good at manipulating mana, but Professor Lorraine said there was something creepy about that.”

“Heh. I understand what she means. Rentt is like the self-taught fighter I mentioned. However, Rentt intends to relearn the basics, so while he can keep the benefits of his own self-taught style, he’ll also get some consistency from learning them. He understands the value of mastering the basics.”

“You’re right. He’s learning from Professor Lorraine with me.”

“Now, as for the magic Miss Rina just used, she has already mastered chanted magic. She’s trying quickened magic as part of her attempt to move to the next step in her training. Since she seems to find earth magic particularly difficult, Gie Vieros is also useful for practicing that type of magic. As for you, Miss Alize, you have time. Take it slowly and focus first on perfecting your chanted magic. I’ll be here to make sure you two don’t learn the wrong lesson from your practice, so don’t worry about making mistakes along the way.”

“Yes, sir!”

While it appeared as though Isaac was teaching the pair how to use magic, all he was really doing was watching to make sure neither of them did anything too dangerous, offering little bits of advice along the way. They were still learning in accordance with Lorraine’s instructions, so she was still their teacher in terms of actual theory and foundations.

And so, the pair continued their training...

Chapter 2: To the Palace

“Ah, here we are.”

We stopped in front of a rather worn-looking inn, but it wasn't as though the building was in bad shape. It was well maintained and clean, even though it was old. It gave the impression that it was an established institution in this part of the city.

“The sign says ‘Falcon’s Rest Inn.’ This must be the place,” Lorraine murmured after she checked the scrap of paper that Augurey had given her.

We entered the inn, and inside we found the inn master and his wife working. At the front desk was a young girl who was presumably their daughter. Inns like this one were usually family businesses. Of course, high-end lodgings aimed at high-ranking adventurers were generally run by well-established merchant houses, but most places on this scale were run by a family.

Augurey was a Silver-class adventurer, so I’m sure he could have moved to a pricier place if he’d wanted to, but people usually preferred the environment they were used to. He’d likely used this inn since before he became a Silver-class adventurer and just preferred to stay here.

“Oh, welcome. Are you here to rent a room today?” the girl asked as we approached the reception desk.

I shook my head. “No, we’re here to see someone. I’m told an adventurer named Augurey stays here.”

The girl nodded as though our appearance made sense to her. “Mister Augurey is in room three. I don’t believe he’s gone out today. Would you like me to go get him?”

“No need to trouble yourself. We’ll go to him. Would that be a problem?”

“Not at all. Please do. It’ll be the room on the right at the end of the hallway.”

Lorraine and I exchanged nods and made our way to the specified room.

I lightly rapped my knuckles against the wooden door.

“Hm? A guest? I don’t remember making any plans for today...”

We heard a voice talking to himself on the other side, then the door swung open. I couldn’t help but think it was a touch careless since he didn’t know who was on the other side, but there weren’t that many people who could pose a threat to an adventurer—even fewer if the adventurer was Silver-class. So while I wouldn’t call it wise, it wasn’t particularly an issue for him. It would be different if he was in a situation where he knew someone was out to assassinate him, but I doubted that was the case at the moment.

When the door opened, we were greeted by the sight of Augurey dressed just as garishly as I remembered. He was wearing frilled, rainbow-colored clothing, a hat with a giant peacock feather, and a sword on his hip that had brightly colored patterns inscribed into the hilt. In other words, he hadn’t changed since the last time I saw him.

Still, in spite of his questionable taste in clothing, his facial features were well formed, and if he were to dress a little more reasonably, he would look quite handsome. He even had a cultured air that made you think he might be a scion of some noble house. That aside, based on his current attire, you’d have to conclude that he’d taken one too many blows to the head. Why did he like to dress this way? It was a mystery to which no one knew the answer.

As Augurey stood there with the door open, his expression turned to one of surprise. “Rentt! And Lorraine too!” He exclaimed loudly.



“Yeah, been a while,” I said. “Well, maybe not that long, but anyway, it really has been some time since we’ve seen each other dressed normally like this.”

The last time we saw him, we’d been dressed in the latest imperial fashions, but this time we were dressed normally—aside from my mask, that is.

Lorraine eyed Augurey with a faintly exasperated look. “The person right in front of me isn’t dressed normally...”

Augurey looked confused, as though he didn’t know what Lorraine was talking about. I wasn’t sure if he was playing around or if his reaction was serious, but if I had to guess, he was feigning obliviousness. Despite appearances, Augurey was well grounded and intelligent. He wasn’t the sort of fool who didn’t understand just how unique his fashion sense was. The fact that he dressed this way despite that probably meant there was a reason behind it, but it might just be his personal preference, so it was perhaps useless to pursue that line of questioning.

“The two of you really did come out of the blue, but I’m glad to see you. I was starting to run out of excuses.”

Augurey sounded uncharacteristically tired, and I had a good guess as to the cause of that fatigue.

“The palace has been insistent, I suppose?” Lorraine asked.

“Well, yeah. Why don’t we sit down and talk about it? Come on in. It’s a little messy, but there’s enough room for the three of us to relax and have a chat.”

It seemed Lorraine’s guess had been on the mark. Since we had come to see Augurey for that very reason, it was a convenient segue for us. We nodded and entered his room.



“So. It’s been a while since that incident...”

Augurey seemed to be asking what our excuse was for taking so long. That was understandable. We’d told Nauss Ancro that we’d come by later, without specifying a date, and we’d also mentioned we needed a few days to sort out other matters. All things considered, it made sense that the royal family would

think it would only be a few days before we came for an audience. When we didn't appear in that time frame, they'd started nagging the one among us they knew lived in the capital. We'd evidently left Augurey in an awkward position.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I apologized. "A lot came up that we had to deal with."

I then described the events that had occurred in Maalt to the extent that I was able to tell him. Augurey already knew I was a monster. Moreover, he'd signed a magic contract that prevented him from talking about any matters that would do us harm without our permission. That was why I told him most of what had happened. Since we were unsure of how much we could tell him about the Latuules, I left that part vague. I basically just told him that we'd gotten help from a powerful vampire.

Having heard the story, Augurey appeared satisfied. "It sounds like you got caught up in quite a bit of trouble. Then again, you've been in trouble since you turned into a monster. Given what happened, though, I can hardly blame you for taking so long to show up. Things were pretty difficult for me, but compared to you, I was just getting nagged by the palace. Not a big deal, all things considered." He gave us a nod of understanding.

"When you say nagging, what sort of thing were they doing?" I asked. I wanted to know if they were just pestering him or if they were threatening him with something heavier like actual punishment. Based on what I could see from Augurey's demeanor, it was likely the former.

"At most, it's them demanding to know how much we're going to make them wait," Augurey replied. "That said, the days between each messenger have started to get fewer and fewer, and I felt more and more guilty each time I had to turn the messenger away. Even though I always said I'd make sure to bring you two, they'd ask when that would be. I almost gave myself an ulcer by repeating the same stressful exchange over and over again."

It didn't sound that easy to deal with, honestly. Now, whether it caused Augurey a great deal of mental anguish was a different question. It might have been slightly stressful, but Augurey was the sort of man who'd get the heck out of the kingdom if things started looking serious. He wasn't the type to feel

overwhelmed by the pressure heaped upon him and end up hanging himself. Nevertheless, our prolonged absence had caused him undue stress.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized again. “I wish there was something we could do to make up for it.”

I felt guilty about leaving him to shoulder all of that burden. Then again, I didn’t feel guilty for committing the crime of entering the capital as a monster. It’s not like there was anything I could do about it, anyway.

Augurey smiled as though he had been waiting for my comment. “Oh, really?! I have just the thing you can help me with...”

He began listing off jobs that required a party to undertake. He didn’t hesitate in the slightest, but that was because we both knew each other very well.

Augurey then turned toward Lorraine as though he were asking the most natural question in the world. “Lorraine, you’ll help too, right?”

“I suppose I have no choice. I hold some responsibility for this matter. I’ll listen to your request,” she said with a note of resignation.



“So now that I’ve gotten a fair reward for my work,” Augurey began.

“I can’t help but feel I’ve been fleeced,” I muttered.

“Different things, really. A totally different matter altogether. The problem is with visiting the palace. Even if we can easily get in thanks to the medal you were given, are you sure you’ll be okay with your, um...special body? The palace has some impressive detection equipment.”

Augurey sounded genuinely concerned, but we’d already dealt with that particular issue.

“We’ve tested all of the detection devices the royal palace uses,” Lorraine answered, “and none of them responded. There’s no problem in the slightest.”

Augurey tried his best to hide his shock. “Um, I’m pretty sure information on what devices the palace uses isn’t public knowledge. How did you even discover that?”

His reaction was perfectly understandable. After all, Lorraine had confidently and plainly stated that everything was fine. She wasn't the sort to make definite statements when she wasn't certain or had any doubts, and evidently, I'd developed a habit of wholly believing something to be fact if she was willing to state it was. If I called that an expression of my trust in her, that sounded nice, but perhaps I had just entrusted the difficult thinking to her and stopped thinking for myself. Since I had a tendency to make careless blunders at important points, I should've probably been more careful. I mean, that was exactly how I'd been swallowed by a dragon. But for all my precautions, I couldn't help but unconsciously and implicitly trust Lorraine.

"Through my connections and my knowledge as a scholar," Lorraine replied. "Of course, even then, there's a chance my knowledge might not be complete, so I'm currently in the process of confirming that it is. In fact, all right..."

"Confirming?" As Augurey quizzically tilted his head, a knock came against the wooden slat placed in the window frame. "I sure have a lot of guests today. But why from here? We're up on the second floor."

Augurey looked at us, silently asking if he could open it. He was being considerate, since the conversation we were having was far from normal.

I nodded. I had no idea who was at the window, but if it was someone unwelcome, we would just have to chase them off. Lorraine also nodded, so Augurey walked over to the window and opened it.

"Hm? There's no one here...?"

"No, it seems the guest was looking for me rather than you," Lorraine explained as she approached the window. She looked to the lower right, almost to the very end of the sill, and cupped her hands as though she were scooping up water. Something then hopped into her palms.

"It's a puchi suri," Augurey said with a faint note of surprise. "Lorraine, when did you start keeping monsters as pets? Oh, I suppose Rentt might be part of that hobby..."

Augurey seemed to be drawing some strange conclusions in his head, so I hurriedly interjected, "Hold up, hold up! That's not it at all!"

Augurey chuckled and said, “I’m kidding. At any rate, it seems the puchi suri is completely obedient to Lorraine. Did she become a monster tamer?”

Lorraine slowly shook her head and gestured toward me with her chin. “No, this is one of Rentt’s familiars. I’m just borrowing him for now.”

“A familiar. It really drives home that Rentt’s an actual monster. But it doesn’t seem that bad when I think of how monster tamers also control monsters as servants. It’s said goblin riders use the same methods as monster tamers, and the line between monsters and familiars and pets can be ambiguous. That’s something I remember Lorraine saying a long time ago.”

For a minute there I was impressed with Augurey’s level of knowledge, but it turned out he’d just regurgitated something Lorraine had told him.

Generally, the difference between familiars and servile monsters was that owners controlled their familiars with their own mana, while monster tamers trained their servile monsters like horses and pets to obey commands. Be that as it may, it seemed monster tamers also had magic connections to their servile monsters, so they weren’t totally different, just a difference in degree of control through mana. Not even experts were certain about the exact distinction, and it was one of those things where precise definitions weren’t really possible.

“So why did this familiar knock on my room’s door...or rather, window?”

“He’s the one who was doing the confirmation that I mentioned earlier,” Lorraine said. “Rentt, can you tell what he’s saying about the test results?”

The reason Lorraine was asking me was because she couldn’t directly exchange thoughts with the puchi suri, but I could.

“So, how’d it go?”

When I sent those words with my mind, I got an answer.

“Not a problem. Got into the king’s private chambers.”

It was short and to the point. Maybe this puchi suri was the quiet and concise type? Edel’s answers were usually a lot louder and vaguer. He had an almost piratical air to him. It was hard to describe, since he didn’t put it into words, but somehow his thoughts reflected his personality.

“Seems things were fine,” I told Lorraine.



“My name is Rentt.”

When I introduced myself, one of the two soldiers standing watch in front of the well-built stone bridge leading into the castle furrowed his brow in suspicion. I couldn't blame him; I'm sure this was the first time he'd heard my name.

“Where are you from? What do you want?”

Lorraine, Augurey, and I were all here. Yesterday, after chatting a bit more, we'd cut our meeting short, and today we'd made our way to the palace.

I'd gotten a little nervous when we went from the commoners' district to the nobles' district, but just as Edel's underling had said, none of the detection devices had gone off, and we'd been able to make our way to the palace without incident. While the guards keeping watch in front of the noble estates had looked at me with suspicion, they were retainers who reported to that particular noble house rather than the palace and weren't the sort to leave their posts to chase after a faintly suspicious passerby.

Well, I'm sure they would've sent word to the authorities and come after me if I'd been swinging around a weapon or firing off magic while shouting, “Fear the undead! I'm here to destroy this city in the name of the great vampire lord Laura Latuule!” I would never do something like that, though. It'd turn the entire Kingdom of Yaaran against me. Wait, the scarier thing would be having House Latuule as an enemy. What was even scarier than that, though, was that I wasn't sure if it would even turn them against me. I felt like Laura might chuckle and say something like, “If you wish to play like that, please, do as you wish. That sounds entertaining.” Isaac would happily go along with her wishes too. It was a creepy thought.

Besides, I just couldn't imagine winning against them. It was such a tall order that I might even give up my childhood dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer if fighting House Latuule was one of the requirements. Just kidding. Maybe.

I mulled over those silly thoughts in my head as I talked to the sentry.

“I’m a Bronze-class adventurer. I have business with Her Highness, Princess Jia Regina Yaaran. I’m not here to cause trouble. Would you mind letting me through?”

All I was doing was stating why I was here, but the sentry looked at me suspiciously and continued to interrogate me. His suspicion was well placed; I was, after all, a monster, and an undead to boot—the most hated and distrusted of all the monsters in this world. The popular conception of the undead was that they were either mages who’d sold their souls to evil or people who’d died with such anger and hatred that they had stuck around just to get their revenge. Basically, they were as bad as could be imagined. There was no way for the guard to know that I was undead, though.

“A mere Bronze-class adventurer is here to see Her Highness? I won’t say it’s impossible, but I’m not aware of any visitors of that sort scheduled for today.”

The fact that he was genuinely considering my story despite my appearance spoke to how seriously he took his job and how sincerely he dealt with people as a representative of his employer. I’m sure that in plenty of other countries, he would have just dismissed me and chased me off. If I were in his place, if some weird-looking man like me came around saying he had business with a princess, I’d never let him into the palace. I had an ace up my sleeve to turn this situation around, however. Or rather, I should have just started the conversation with it.

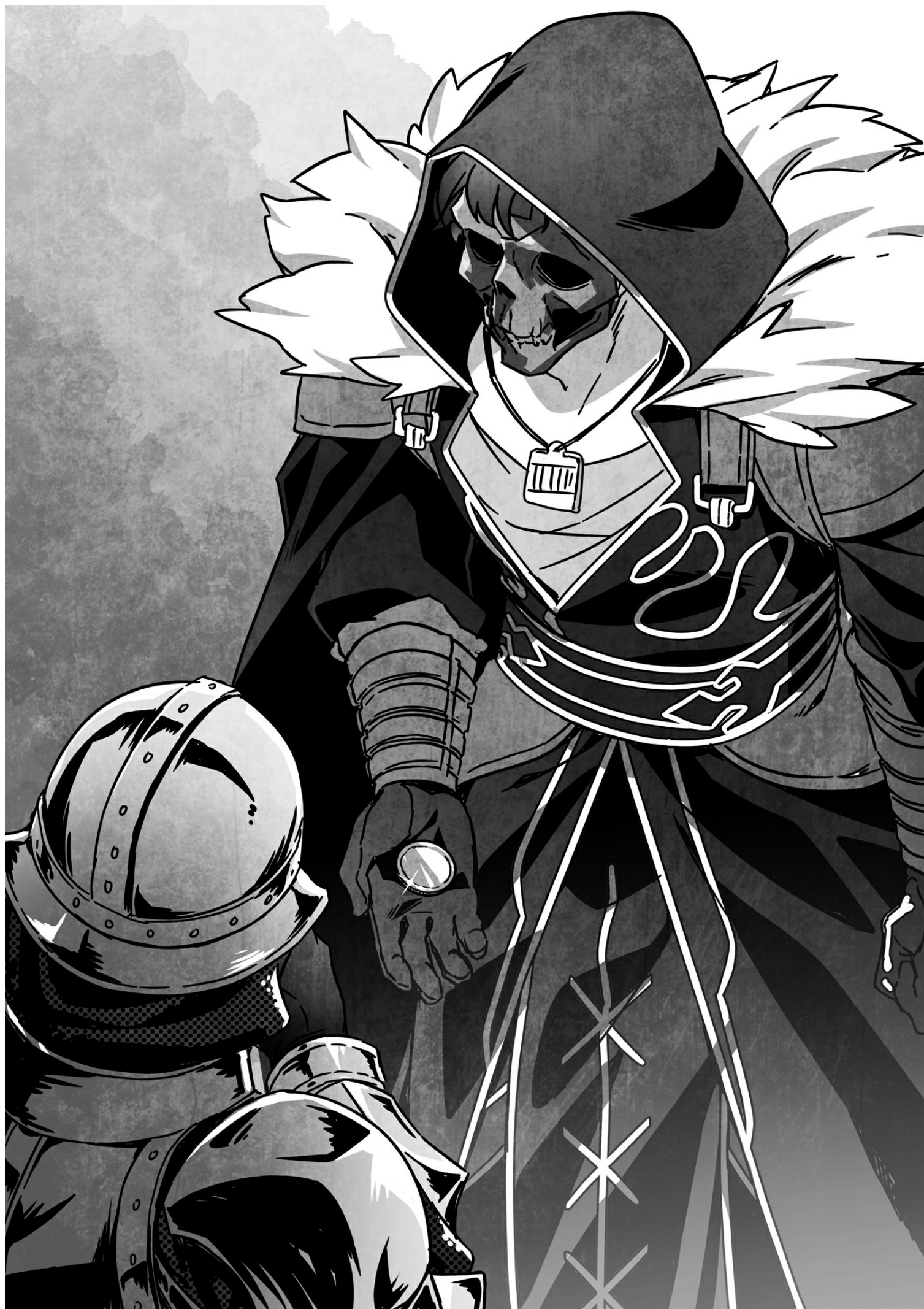
I began to dig around in my pocket. While I had my magic bag with me, I’d already taken the medal out in anticipation of this very situation, since that’d make it easier to just—presto—produce the medal as needed.

And so—presto—I wasn’t able to instantly produce the medal. I thought it was here somewhere. I continued to search, but I obviously wasn’t doing myself any favors by standing here digging around in my pocket. The sentry slowly started to reach for the sword hanging on his hip.

Crap, this was bad. I needed to find it soon, or...

My hand found what felt like the right object, and I drew it from my pocket with gusto, which prompted the guard to do the very same thing with his

sword. He must have thought I was drawing a weapon of some sort, but what I held in my hand wasn't a weapon.



“A medal?” the sentry said aloud. He then sheathed his sword and continued as though he’d never drawn his weapon at all. “Which must mean you have an introduction from a noble. It’s a common scam. Some ne’er-do-well will manage to talk a gullible rural noble into giving them a medal with the family seal so they can get a look at one of the royals. So you’re one of *those*, eh? Wait, hold on...”

The guard looked closer at the medal as he spoke and finally recognized the crest depicted on it. His tone suddenly shot up half an octave.

“W-Wait, this is the seal of the Marquess of Ancro! And this version is Lord Nauss’s personal...”

I hadn’t realized this, since I hadn’t taken time to carefully look over the medal, but it appeared the seal on it also identified the individual member of that noble house. This was the first time I’d ever been given— Oh wait, this was only loaned to me. Anyway, this was the first time anyone had ever lent me anything like this. I didn’t know anything about medals since I’d never had an opportunity to learn about them.

The only large noble house around Maalt was its ruler, the Viscount Lottnel, and it wasn’t as though I was close with the viscount himself. The most I’d ever interacted with him was attending the occasional party he threw to interact with the adventuring community in Maalt and glancing at him from a distance. At a party like that, the viscount had no time to talk to a Bronze-class nobody like me, and he was usually too busy talking to other attendees like the guildmaster, Wolf, or the head of some group that had close ties with the guild. Even if I’d wanted to talk to him, his entourage would probably have shooed me away.

Basically, I just wasn’t in the right social circles to have any meaningful relationship with a noble like that. There might be opportunities in the future, perhaps. After all, I’d heard that the Viscount Lottnel had a close relationship with House Latuule, and these days I was pretty close to House Latuule. Still, it wasn’t as though I needed to think much about it at the moment.

“How did you...get this?”

The guard must have really wanted to ask me how I’d managed to steal the

medal from Nauss, but he'd somehow swallowed that accusation and calmly finished his question.

"I once spotted Her Highness and Lord Nauss being attacked by monsters," I explained. "I knew I couldn't just leave them, so I went to their aid. These two were with me at the time."

I gestured to Lorraine and Augurey.

"Oh, so you're... Yes, I've heard about you. I've also heard that you didn't show up despite the invitation, so I had forgotten about the whole incident because I thought you were never going to appear."

The guard was being a touch snide, but it also seemed he was telling the truth. Not everyone who got an invitation to the palace showed up. For example, those who had skeletons in their closet might not appear out of a desire to avoid those skeletons coming to light. I was kind of a shining example of that, even though, technically, I was the skeleton in my closet. I would've had no choice but to run like hell if the security devices had detected me.

There were less extreme examples than me, like merchants who'd once been famous bandits or famous adventurers who'd run away from a noble house and were operating under a false name. No matter how much of an honor it was to be invited to the palace, those sorts of people would never dare to come. That was why the sentry had filed us into a similar category and forgotten about it. Really, he should've been praised for retaining some information about us in the back of his mind.

"We had reasons for our delay. We weren't putting it off on purpose. We'd certainly like to apologize to Her Highness and Lord Nauss directly. Will you let us through?"

The guard nodded. "Very well. But if I let the three of you merely wander in, you'll just end up repeating this same exchange again inside. I'll come with you until we can find a servant to show you the way."

He then politely accompanied us to the entrance of the palace.



"Ah. I'd heard you'd finally come, and so you have!"

As we waited in one of the palace's sitting rooms intended for lower-class guests, the door suddenly burst open, and with a chipper greeting, a man we recognized walked through the door—Nauss Ancro, the captain of the Kingdom of Yaaran's Royal Guard. He was middle-aged and equipped from head to toe in shining silver armor.

Although the guard had already returned to his post, he had told us on our way here that Nauss was the head of House Ancro and that he had a good reputation among the nobility. That said, he wasn't particularly powerful in terms of influence, trailing behind the viceroy Duke Lukas Bader; Marquess Marcel Viesel, the head of the first prince's faction; and the Countess Gisel Georgiou, the first princess's faction in name recognition. He didn't have any particularly notable accomplishments, but he was evidently known as a loyal man of good character.

While I'd heard of the other nobles the guard had listed, I didn't remember hearing Nauss's name all that often. Even if we adventurers loved freedom and disliked authority, considering that we had to live in this country, we couldn't avoid interacting with nobles or their relations in some fashion. We did talk about nobles from time to time, but I didn't recall Nauss ever coming up in those conversations.

Besides, Maalt was so far away from the capital that we rarely had a reason to talk about these kinds of things. At most, we might discuss them once every six months or so. I figured Lorraine might be an exception, though, and when I looked over at her, her expression told me that she'd known the basics about Nauss beforehand. The reason she hadn't mentioned anything was because, based on what the guard had told me, Nauss wasn't a particularly objectionable person. Or maybe Lorraine had been letting me judge Nauss for myself.

I wasn't sure about Augurey, but he'd presumably looked up Nauss while we were busy in Maalt, and they might have even met during that time. The fact that Augurey hadn't given us any warnings before the meeting told me that Nauss wasn't excessively touchy about matters of etiquette. And it wasn't like Lorraine and I were completely uncultured and lacking in manners. If Augurey had been with more rough-hewn adventurers, he might have offered pointers on how to act or speak around nobility.

“Lord Ancro. As I promised, I’ve brought them to the palace,” Augurey said grandly.

Nauss must have been the one who’d been bugging Augurey about visiting. While Augurey was confidently acting like this had all gone according to plan, the fact of the matter was that Augurey had been bluffing and buying time. His mannerisms and tone gave none of that away, though. In fact, they demonstrated that Augurey was an unexpectedly good actor. He’d always been prone to gesticulating grandly and speaking grandiloquently like a performer, though. In that sense, maybe he was acting exactly like what you might expect of him.

“Augurey, you have my apologies for doubting you. You must understand. Everything was so ambiguous—the date the pair would arrive, where they lived, and even their names. Surely you can’t blame me for wondering if there was something more behind it all.”

Depending on the listener, Nauss’s apology might have sounded like a veiled insult, and most commoners would have kowtowed to him and begged his forgiveness at this point, but again, Augurey maintained his debonair attitude.

“Fair enough, m’lord. Still, the two are, in fact, here. If they had anything to hide, they wouldn’t come to a place like this.”

Actually, I had a ton of things I was hiding. Like the fact I was a monster and an undead. And that I knew vampires. And that I had a means of instantly traveling to the capital. I was pretty sure that any one of those things would warrant death, or maybe something worse—never mind them all combined. Even so, Lorraine and I maintained our level expressions and nodded along to their conversation.

Nauss smiled at Augurey and replied, “Indeed, you’re quite right. This palace is equipped with a great many protections. A criminal can’t just easily enter, and we even have magic items that can detect ill intent. I’m afraid I cannot divulge any specifics, but many other layers of protection are in effect as well. But since the three of you are present despite that, it is proof you have nothing to hide or feel ashamed of.”

It was true that I wasn’t a criminal, and I had no intention of harming anyone

in the palace. I didn't know what other detections they might have in place, but since they didn't react to me, it meant that Nauss was right. As for the monster detection, for whatever reason, it just didn't react to me.

That was the biggest issue, but it wasn't like we could say, "Hey, I'm a monster, but your devices didn't react. You should switch device providers! If you act now, the great alchemist Lorraine Vivie will be happy to provide you with a set of monster-detection magic devices built on new principles for just five platinum pieces! Just five platinum pieces; what a bargain! And if you buy now..."

We weren't some vendors hawking wares on the street. I mean, I'd fallen for that sort of sales pitch a few times in the past and ended up making an unnecessary purchase. None of them were big scams, though. It was more like realizing that the "sale price" was just the normal price, or something was a little smaller than usual—just petty little things like that.

"Quite so. Now, Lord Ancro, if possible, today we'd like to simply pay our respects to you, m'lord, and then be our way," Augurey said casually.

He was essentially asking if we could leave. For our part, it'd be easiest if it turned out all they wanted was to see us at the palace, then let us go, but...

"Surely not. We haven't been able to properly thank you yet. And Her Highness has been anticipating seeing the three of you again. I, Nauss Ancro, certainly couldn't continue to use the title of marquess if I were to simply let you go."

Well, there went that hope. Sure, this was always going to be the most likely outcome, and Augurey hadn't asked to be excused with the expectation that we'd be let go, but Augurey was really good at setting up these sorts of conversational traps. He could basically trick you into giving permission for something before you could really think it through. Clearly it wasn't going to work with a noble who was used to dealing with that sort of subtle wordplay every day, though. Damn. It worked so well on simple adventurers!

"You honor us, my lord. Then, do we have an audience with Her Highness next?" Augurey asked.

"That's the plan, yes. There's no need to be nervous. As I said before, Her

Highness is a grounded and gracious woman.”

That was clear from the fact that she was willing to go to the trouble of inviting adventurers to the palace just to thank them. It was just that, from our standpoint, being here was a little bit of a hassle by our standards as adventurers. This was merely a gap in our worldviews, however, and there wasn’t really anything we could do about it.

If possible, I’d hoped that the princess would be gracious enough to just let us go home, but I wasn’t going to get my hopes up for that one now.



Nauss lightly knocked on a giant door. “Pardon me, Your Highness. It is I, Nauss. I have brought guests for you.”

On either side of the door were two large, fully equipped knights standing guard. We stood ramrod straight behind Nauss in an effort to appear as inconspicuous as possible. No, wait... I was the only one doing that. Neither Lorraine nor Augurey appeared particularly ruffled. They were at ease and acting no different from usual.

Were they used to visiting royals? Now that I thought about it, they were both Silver-class adventurers, so they’d probably worked directly for high-ranking nobles in the past. It reminded me of the sheer gap in experience between them and me.

Well, not that it bothered me all that much, but I really needed to become Silver-class soon. I hadn’t been able to take on enough jobs to fulfill the prerequisites for the Ascension Exam because of all that had been going on lately, but I figured I should take on a bunch of jobs when I had some free time so that I could apply for the exam. I swore to myself at that moment that I would.

I wasn’t sure whether I had the skill to pass the exam, but I wouldn’t know until I took it. I mean, I could now handle Silver-class monsters, and depending on the situation, I could even defeat Gold-class ones like the tarasque, which was only for Gold-class adventurers and up. That was partly because it required special preparations to deal with its venom, but I just happened to be immune to poisons. That was why I thought I was maybe around the Silver-class level. Or

perhaps I could only take on upper-Bronze-class monsters. I wasn't super confident about that.

While I was second-guessing myself, someone answered from the other side of the door.

"Nauss, come in."

"Then, if you'll pardon us," Nauss said as he opened the door. He entered, then held the door open and gestured for us to follow suit, so we filed into the room after him.



When we entered, a girl of maybe fifteen or sixteen dressed in really elaborate clothing greeted us. Maybe her outfit wasn't all that elaborate considering she was royalty, but it was certainly fancier than what a commoner might wear.

It went without saying that this girl was Jia Regina Yaaran, the second princess of the Kingdom of Yaaran. It looked like she hadn't changed much since I last saw her.

Once we were inside, Nauss began explaining who we were. "Your Highness, these are the adventurers who came to our aid when we were attacked on the highway."

Nauss then glanced briefly in our direction, which was his way of telling us to introduce ourselves. I wondered if I should go first, but before I could say anything, Lorraine began her introduction.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Highness. My name is Lorraine Vivie, a humble scholar who makes her living in the city of Maalt."

Lorraine's movements were also extremely elegant, and it reminded me once again that she was from the empire, the greatest country on the continent.

After Lorraine had finished her introduction, the princess tilted her head quizzically. "A scholar? Are you not an adventurer?"

"I am also an adventurer, Your Highness, but that is, technically, a secondary occupation. My proper occupation is as a scholar."

“I see.”

The princess, satisfied with Lorraine’s explanation, gave Lorraine a faint nod. She then remained silent, indicating that we should continue our introductions. As I was readying myself to go next, Augurey beat me to the punch.

“An honor to be in your presence, Your Highness. My name is Augurey, and I am an adventurer. I have a more formal name, but it is long and can be hard to pronounce without stuttering. I scarcely wish to subject you to such an embarrassing sight, so please forgive me for introducing myself so simply.”

Augurey’s introduction was rather informal, and in some contexts, it would have come off as disrespectful, but both the princess and the marquess were smiling, which told me that they found it acceptable. How nobles drew the line between familiarity and disrespect was vague, and it differed depending on the individual and the region, but it seemed Augurey knew where the line was in Yaaran.

The princess then addressed Augurey. “Oh my. To have such a long name... Is that a tradition of your people?”

“Yes, it is, Your Highness. For my part, I would have preferred a shorter, easier to pronounce name, but I’m afraid I lacked the ability to communicate that to my parents before I was born, and I couldn’t simply discard my own name. That is why I chose to introduce myself with the easiest and shortest part of my name, for the sake of others. Of course, if you wish to learn my full name, I would be happy to oblige Your Highness, but in that case, I would recommend calling for tea and sweets. I will do my best to finish reciting my name before you finish your tea.”

“He he. No, you need not trouble yourself. Nauss, it is fine, yes?”

Nauss nodded. “If that is what you wish, Your Highness.”

A part of me questioned if it really was fine, but the guild would have already run a background check when they made him a Silver-class adventurer. It wouldn’t reveal personal information about an adventurer just because a noble demanded it, but it would often relay background information, especially if the inquiry came from the palace.

While the guild was technically an independent organization, it wasn't completely free from government involvement; it couldn't afford to ignore the government's orders. Guilds also had connections with those located in other countries, though, and if a country tried to push the guild too far, it could put up some resistance. It was something of a balancing act. Whatever the relationship between the guild and the kingdom, it was clear that there was nothing objectionable about Augurey's background.

Next, Princess Jia turned her gaze toward me. Lorraine and Augurey did the same. I felt nervous as I finally began my introduction.

"An honor to be in your presence, Your Highness. I am Rentt Vivie, a Bronze-class adventurer. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

My introduction was short and simple, partly because I was afraid of tripping over my words and partly because I was the lowest-ranking one here. I didn't have anything I wanted to explain to her either. In addition, though I was maybe overestimating my importance, I didn't want to draw the princess's curiosity. After all, I was already wearing a weird mask. I figured it was best to be quiet and unassuming. My efforts, however, were for naught.

"You're a Bronze-class adventurer?" the princess asked. "Yet you are in a party with two Silver-class adventurers? And your mask... Is there some important reason for it? Also, you share a family name with Miss Lorraine, so perhaps you have some relationship with her?"

Despite my best efforts, she subjected me to a barrage of questions. They were all understandable questions, though, and I'd gotten the same ones repeatedly since I'd become undead, so I figured they wouldn't be too hard to answer.

"Allow me to clarify, Your Highness. First, as to why a Bronze-class adventurer such as myself is partied with two Silver-class adventurers..."

"Yes?"

"The three of us once operated primarily from the city of Maalt. Furthermore, I have known Lorraine since we were both fledgling adventurers, and I met Augurey when he was still Bronze-class himself. When we first met, we were all peers."

We weren't anymore, though. Augurey's promotion to Silver-class had been a bit of a shock, but that wasn't because he didn't have the talent or because he had no future as an adventurer. I knew he would eventually earn the promotion, and I had steeled myself for that. It was just that it'd happened a lot sooner than I'd thought it would.

I wasn't particularly jealous of him or anything. I'd grown used to my fellow Bronze-class adventurers overtaking me the last ten years. Besides, my dream was to become Mithril-class; other people's rank had never been my focus.

"I see. But it is somewhat unusual that you are still in the same party, is it not?" the princess asked.

That was definitely true. Lorraine and I were one thing, but Augurey was now operating out of the capital. It probably seemed even odder to the princess, because she wasn't aware of those details. It wasn't unusual for parties to disband when the party members changed ranks. It had nothing to do with adventurers being disloyal or heartless; it just tended to cause problems if there was too big of a difference in the members' skill levels.

It wasn't good for the stronger members of a party to spend most of their effort protecting the weaker members in the middle of a job. It meant they couldn't focus on the task at hand. The guild itself must have believed that mixed-level parties were an issue, because it was relatively proactive in introducing people to new parties or helping parties recruit new members. They never did that sort of thing for adventurers, though. The guild likely thought it was more efficient to let attrition thin the huge number of newbies. It was a harsh world out there.

"I believe you are referring to the fact that we were together when we came to your aid, Your Highness," I replied.

"That's right."

"At that time, we were only in a temporary party. Ordinarily, we work separately. Lorraine and I operate out of Maalt, while Augurey operates out of the capital. We aren't a permanent party, Your Highness."

The princess nodded. It appeared that explanation had put the question to rest in her mind. She no doubt had a number of follow-up questions on the

subject, but since I didn't want her probing into our affairs, I decided to continue.

"As for the skull mask..."

She tastefully clapped her hands together. "Yes! I was particularly curious about that!"

I had successfully changed the subject. I mainly wanted to avoid answering why we'd come from Maalt to the capital. I could always lie about that, but I wanted to be as truthful as possible. I didn't want us getting in trouble if they found out we were lying.

Still, the princess seemed awfully interested in my mask. I supposed that made sense; adventurers often wore masks, but not many would choose a creepy skull mask like this one. I couldn't say no one would, but I was sure the vast majority wouldn't. At most, I'd seen one or two walking around in Maalt.

Normal masks were common, honestly—things like birds, cats, or dogs. There were odder ones, like really abstract masks that weren't really patterned or anything, but the adventurers who wore those were the oddballs. It was best to avoid them when possible.

Hold on... Did that mean people looked at me in that way? There was a good chance that was the case. I wasn't sure if I was happy to learn that about myself, but either way, I needed to continue.

"As for my mask... I apologize, but there's nothing particularly complicated about why I wear it."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. When I suffered an injury to my face, I decided to conceal it until I could get it healed using healing magic or potions. I asked for an appropriate mask from an acquaintance, and this was the mask they brought me."

"And your injury?" the princess prompted.

She must have been asking if it was still unhealed, but the answer to this one was also clear.

"No, it has already healed, Your Highness."

She tilted her head questioningly. “Then why...”

“There is something strange about this mask, and I cannot take it off.”

“Are you saying it’s a cursed item?” Nauss cut in. It was clear from his expression that he wasn’t happy that I’d worn it into the palace.

I shook my head. “No, that doesn’t appear to be the case. If it truly was cursed, I wouldn’t have been able to wear it into the palace, right?” We were in the royal palace, so there had to be a number of countermeasures in place that didn’t exist elsewhere against cursed items.

“Yes, indeed. Nevertheless, there are no such things as absolutes. This happened quite a long time ago, but some rogues brought a powerful cursed item into the palace.”

“I had no idea.”

The truth was that I was a bit of a rogue here. I was a monster. The fact that I was able to enter the palace meant that exceptions could get through the protections. Even so, Nauss was simply describing an example from the past, so I went with the assumption that he was simply speaking of the rare exception.

“However, that is not the case with me,” I explained. “And this mask... It is evidently closer to a holy item.”

“A holy item?” Nauss inquired.

“While it is not very much, I am imbued with divinity.”

With that, I released a small amount of divinity and made it visible. This was something I’d just recently learned how to do, around the time I learned the vampire techniques. I felt like there were commonalities between them and divinity, but I couldn’t say what exactly they had in common.

Nauss nodded. “That is, indeed, the glow of divinity.”

“It was given to me because I decided on a whim to repair a shrine that had fallen into disrepair. The spirit of the shrine blessed me with divinity as thanks. That is why it’s so weak. But I was able to speak with the spirit a second time, and when I asked them about the mask, they told me it was like a holy item. Unfortunately, the spirit also said they couldn’t give me any more details about

it.”

A part of me still wanted a more detailed explanation from the spirit, but gods and spirits were fickle. There simply wasn’t anything I could do about it.

“A holy item...” Obviously surprised by my explanation, the princess looked curiously in my direction. Wait, she was more than just curious. “Nauss, this may be...”

Her Highness then glanced at Nauss, who caught some sort of message from her look. I could tell they were communicating with their expressions, but I couldn’t tell what exactly they were saying. I turned to Lorraine and Augurey, but they were just as lost as I was. I’d mentioned the spirit and the mask because the spirit wasn’t anything unusual and I just didn’t know all that much about the mask, but I wondered if I’d said something wrong.



After exchanging glances with Nauss, the princess turned to us and bowed her head. “I have a request for you three. Please, will you help me?”

Though Yaaran was a pretty informal kingdom, the class system was still as strict as anywhere else. While lower-class nobility might occasionally mingle with commoners as near equals, and an eccentric higher-class noble here and there might do things like work as a logger with his subjects in the mountains, a member of the royal family wouldn’t bow their head to some adventurers and ask them for help. Despite that fact, the princess was now doing exactly that.

All three of us responded by mildly panicking.

“Your Highness, please raise your head!” I exclaimed, yet the princess was determined to hold the course. It took her some time to come up from her bow.

I was positive that this would send a whole boatload of trouble our way, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. The only thing I could do was be grateful that she wasn’t trying to use her authority to force us to do something for her.

“While we would be happy to help, Your Highness,” Augurey began, “we certainly can’t say yes unless we know what it is that you wish to ask of us. Surely you won’t request that we find the end of a rainbow, or bring back manure from a dragon. I’m afraid that’s beyond even our abilities.”

Augurey had attempted to defuse the tension with humor. There was no way to find the end of the rainbow, and as for dragon manure, it didn't not exist, I guess? Technically, I might qualify as such. I didn't know where I'd been expelled from after being eaten, so it was certainly possible that had been my exit. In any case, I shouldn't be letting my thoughts go there.

"Yes, I suppose you're correct. My apologies. I let my haste get the better of me," the princess muttered.

"No need to apologize, Your Highness. That said, it seems that Rentt's referring to his mask as a holy item is what drew your attention."

Augurey tactfully continued to guide the conversation. He was right, and it was around that time that the conversation, or rather the atmosphere, went awry.

"I am afraid it will be a somewhat long tale. Will you listen to me recount it?" the princess asked.

The three of us wasted no time in nodding. It wasn't like we had any other option, and it might end up causing trouble down the line if we didn't listen now. You could argue that listening would be the problem, but given that we were already here, we had no choice but to find out what was going on.

"Very well," Augurey replied.



"Are you all familiar with His Majesty, the current king of Yaaran?" the princess inquired.

"Yes, His Majesty, Karsten Reshon Yaaran," Lorraine answered. "I believe as of this year, he is sixty-five years of age."

"You are correct."

Leave it to Lorraine to know not only his name but his age as well. Still, sixty-five was relatively up there. Most kings died before they reached sixty and very rarely from natural causes. Those that died of old age were the happy few. That said, a fair proportion of Yaaran's kings had died from either old age or real diseases—not poison disguised as a disease. Naturally, this information had

been released by the government itself, so for us lonely commoners, it was impossible to tell if that really was the case.

“He was still in good health,” the princess explained, “and he was enthusiastically fulfilling his duties as ruler. It was hoped that he would continue to do so, and it was said he would reign for another ten years.”

Oh crap. She was about to say something that normal civilians like us weren’t supposed to know. We couldn’t do anything to stop her, though, so we resigned ourselves to the inevitable as the princess continued.

“Recently, though, His Majesty’s health has taken a turn for the worse, and if things continue on their present course, he may not even see out the year.”

And now we knew, which meant we couldn’t leave the palace. They would chain us up in some dungeon, and we would spend the rest of our lives crying as we were fed stale, unappetizing bread. At least, that was the image that popped into my head, but I figured we didn’t need to worry about that. If they were going to do that, it would’ve been easier to not tell us anything in the first place.

Of course, if we declined Her Highness’s request, we could end up living like that, at least until the king’s death. We’d probably be okay, though. Worst-case scenario, we would just need to get out of the palace, then use teleportation magic to flee to some other country. We already knew that a kingdom of Yaaran’s size couldn’t chase down people who fled the country. Maybe I was dismissing Yaaran’s capabilities a little too much, but I doubted we’d be valuable enough to be worth that level of effort.

“Just what is the cause?” Lorraine asked. She did so specifically because it would help us understand the crux of the matter—what Her Highness wanted us to do. I hadn’t a clue how we might be involved, though.

Her Highness avoided directly answering Lorraine’s question and instead said, “In this kingdom, a new ruler must inherit two objects if they are to take the throne: the crown of the kingdom and the scepter of the kingdom.”

“Yes, I’ve seen them before,” Augurey chimed in, “when they were on display at the temple. I also recall that the crown was an exquisite piece of craftsmanship. The scepter, on the other hand, was surprisingly simple for a

relic of state.”

“Yes, that is correct. The crown was crafted by dwarves in the distant past, but the scepter was a gift from the high elves.”

High elves ruled the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree, and they were equivalent to royalty there. However, no matter how special a human royal might be, they were just as human as your average commoner. High elves were different in that they were a distinct race considered superior to the elves they ruled. Furthermore, high elves were extraordinarily long-lived. They were living links to history, making their very existence valuable.

Then again, if you looked back into history, you’d find that humans had fought against high elves in the past. Once was when the humans tried to enslave the elves. They’d also warred over religious disputes, which had ended in human religions declaring that high elves were inferior to humans. To put it mildly, the relationship between humans and high elves was a long and complicated one. There was no doubt, though, that they were skilled artisans of magic items, and treasured relics attributed to these artisans were scattered all over the world. The scepter of the Yaaran Kingdom must be one of those relics.

“So what does the scepter have to do with His Majesty’s health?” Lorraine asked.



“When the true king of the kingdom possesses the scepter, it dampens the unclean energy that exists in Yaaran. It doesn’t have much of an effect on locations such as dungeons and the lands around them, and the effects do become weaker with distance, but even then...”

Her Highness made it sound simple, but the scepter’s power was remarkable. It depended on what specifically she meant by unclean energy, but it piqued my curiosity, as well as Lorraine’s as a researcher.

“You mentioned that it dampens unclean energy, but that can mean many things depending upon the context,” Lorraine said, bluntly asking what we were all thinking. “It can be interpreted as weakening monsters, but it can also be interpreted as dispersing diseases or toxins. Or it can also simply clean the air. May I ask what the exact powers of the scepter are?”

Her Highness nodded. “It is said that it prevents the birth of undead monsters, as well as reduces their powers. Of course, that is restricted to cases where the bodies are properly buried. It can’t do anything if the bodies are simply left where they fall, and its effects do not extend to dungeons and their surroundings. Because of the scepter’s powers, there are almost no skeletons or other undead in cemeteries around the capital. Occasionally, skeletons appear in places far from the capital, but powerful undead are rarely born within Yaaran itself. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, thank you. I hadn’t the faintest idea that the scepter had such abilities, but now that you mention it, skeletons are rare in this region.”

We would run into them around Maalt sometimes, but Maalt was far from the capital, so it just meant that Maalt was so rural that even the scepter’s powers weren’t very useful there. Still, if the scepter considered Maalt a backwater, it made me want to snap it. I wouldn’t do that, though. They’d do a lot worse than just arrest me if I did.

“Those are the powers of the scepter,” the princess added. “Sadly, there is no such thing as a magic item that produces effects without any cost. Just as it is necessary to have flowing water to power a water wheel, mana is required to operate a magic item. In the scepter’s case, the necessary power is the king’s very own life energy.”

“That’s unsettling...” Augurey mumbled as he groaned. I understood how he felt. Considering that it protected the kingdom, the king’s life force was an appropriate exchange, but it sounded like it was practically a cursed item now.

“It originally did not ask much of the wielder,” the princess explained. “At most, using it would cause an hour or so of fatigue. However, it is now a dangerous object that attempts to endlessly sap His Majesty’s life force.”

“How did that happen?” Lorraine asked.

“According to the court mage, the scepter has been worn down by long years of hard use and is now bearing too much strain. I have seen it with my own eyes, and the scepter does, in fact, have cracks all over its surface.”

“I suspect that means that the efficiency of its energy conversion has significantly deteriorated. I myself create simple magic items here and there,

but even simple objects crack if they are used too much without maintenance, and it can take so much mana from me that even I, as the creator, will be caught by surprise.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, His Majesty will not stop feeding his life force into the scepter because he states that if he does, tragedies will unfold all across the kingdom. While it’s certain that if the scepter’s effects fade, the powers of undead monsters will increase and their creation rate will rise, many of his advisors note that the guilds and the knight companies throughout the kingdom can combat those effects to some extent and have urged the king to stop using the scepter.”

It seemed that the king had decided not to listen to that advice, because the princess shook her head sadly.

In reality, if His Majesty were to stop using the scepter and undead started spawning in greater numbers, and if they became stronger, it would be difficult to deal with it. One of the reasons Yaaran was relatively peaceful and stable was because of the paucity of monsters along its major highways.

In most countries, major highways were spawning points for undead. After all, lots of people died on the road, not to mention the animals and monsters that also died there. If the scepter was reducing the creation rate of undead from those corpses, even if it wasn’t particularly powerful, it was easy to imagine what would happen if that disappeared. There’d be a lot more people dying along the highways, and, as a result, the flow of traffic would slow down. Merchants would require a lot more guards as they traveled, and that would have a major impact on the economy.

It wasn’t as simple as telling the king to stop using the scepter. It might result in a boom economy for adventurers, but I, at least, wouldn’t want that to come at the expense of a bunch of innocent people. The king’s royal and noble advisors weren’t looking to increase the number of victims along the highways either. It was just that to them, they felt that the king’s life and his health were top priority and that it was best he stop using the scepter. Evidently, the king was an extremely serious and honorable man when it came to his duties. That, or there was some other motivation. Either way, that didn’t change the fact that he continued to use the scepter.

“Forgive me for saying this, but if it means he may only survive for another year or so, shouldn’t we come to a more permanent solution?” I tried to be a little more vague with my wording, since it would be a *lèse-majesté* to just flat-out say, “You guys need to think about what’ll happen after he’s dead.”

I might not have been vague enough for some people, but the princess didn’t take any offense. In fact, she interpreted my question differently.

“You are completely correct, which was our reason for that journey to the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree.”



“That journey?” I asked as I tilted my head.

“The one where the three of you came to save us,” the princess answered.

Ah, that was really the only way to describe that incident. I then remembered that we hadn’t asked where the princess and her entourage were going. It wasn’t like we’d discussed it beforehand, but all three of us had decided it was best not to get dragged into any further complications. I guessed the whole desire to avoid unnecessary problems was really what marked us as commoners.

“May I assume that you were on the way back from the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree?” Lorraine asked.

The princess nodded. “That’s correct, but we were attacked multiple times on the way, and by the time we reached that location, Nauss and the other royal guards were exhausted. That was why we required your aid.”

At the time, Nauss and the others had been so worn out that it was hard to believe they were royal guards. I remembered wondering why they’d fought so poorly, but it made sense once I learned it was the result of a continual string of battles. Wait, did that mean...?

“Did the elves of the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree attack you?” I asked. “That sounds like it would have some scary consequences.” I remembered that Nive had been attacked a bunch of times when she’d gone there to obtain a wand.

“No, certainly not,” the princess insisted. “The elves may be somewhat xenophobic, but they are, at heart, very peaceful people. That doesn’t preclude them taking up arms when the circumstances call for it, but they’re too civilized to suddenly attack royalty from another kingdom.”

Well, I guessed that was true. If they did such a thing, the best-case scenario would be a war between the countries. Even though Yaaran was more rural, it could still mobilize a fairly large army. Not even the elves would casually start a war against the kingdom.

“Then why?” I prompted.

“In all honesty, we do not know who attacked us. The attackers varied. At times it would be monsters, then bandits, then mercenaries. However—”

“Allow me to explain the details here,” Nauss interjected before Her Highness could continue.

“Thank you, Nauss.” Rather than be offended, the princess gratefully let Nauss take the reins.

As I wondered why she would do that, Nauss said, “I will explain this speculation. It would be problematic if Her Highness were to speak the words.”

Nauss sounded cautious, and he waited until we’d nodded before he continued. It wasn’t that he trusted us implicitly; he was doing it so he could take responsibility for any fallout. It was hard to say how we should interpret that, but in that case, we’d end up in the dungeon, so I definitely wasn’t going to tell anyone else.

“We have no incontrovertible evidence, but we have strong reason to suspect that the attacks were organized by His Highness, the first prince, or by Her Highness, the first princess, or perhaps by both.”

Now I understood why the princess couldn’t say it out loud herself. The two other royals were ranked higher than Princess Jia. The first prince, Joachim Princeps Yaaran, and the first princess, Nadia Regina Yaaran, were Princess Jia’s siblings by blood, but that was exactly why they would become enemies the moment the current king passed away. This was starting to shift into some shady territory.

“Why would they do that?” Lorraine asked.

That was a good question. Even if one or both of her older siblings had been behind the attacks on Princess Jia, that still left the question as to why. The simplest explanation was that they were seeking to remove a rival claimant to the throne, but Princess Jia didn’t have a particularly strong claim in the first place. Even in a disputed succession, it was more likely that one of the two older royals would receive the crown. If we were to dig in the weeds, there might be other claimants, like the current king’s younger brother or other scions to the royal family, but even though I was from Yaaran, I didn’t know any of those details. Either way, it didn’t make much sense to target Princess Jia this early in the game.

Nauss was quick to answer. “That is because there was a chance that Princess Jia would become the designated heir as a result of her visit to the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree. I believe they wished to nip that potential outcome in the bud.”

If that was the case, it would make sense why the prince and the princess would act. Still, that just raised yet another question. Why would Princess Jia become the designated heir by visiting the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree?

“I explained earlier that the scepter was approaching the end of its life as a result of years of hard use, and that His Majesty continues to use it in spite of that fact,” the princess said, rejoining the discourse. “It goes without saying that this is not a desirable outcome. We needed to find a solution, and there were two possibilities that seemed the simplest. The first would be to repair the scepter. Then perhaps the king could continue using it. But since His Majesty continues to use it on a daily basis, we would have to remove it from the capital for several weeks to have it repaired—we’d have no choice but to ask the high elves to repair it for us—and that would have dire consequences.”

It was a powerful relic. It didn’t take an expert in magic items to know that it required a certain level of specialized knowledge to fix it, which was why they’d have to ask the creators of the relic to do so. But taking the scepter out of the kingdom meant that it wouldn’t be usable for a time and undead would spawn all over Yaaran.

It could be a fun country for me to live in, but it definitely would be hell on normal people. I felt Laura and Isaac might be able to keep Maalt safe, but I couldn't see that being the case everywhere else, so that wasn't a feasible option.

"In the end, we concluded that we had to choose the second option—to request that the high elves craft a new scepter. The scepter itself is a relic of the high elves, so they are the only ones who could craft a new one. That was why I decided to go to the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree."



"Did the elves agree to craft a new scepter?" I asked.

That was the most important question. If that was settled, then there wasn't all that much to worry about. Once the new scepter was completed, the king wouldn't have to continue sacrificing himself. After all, the whole thing about him only having one year to live was because he kept using the current, broken scepter. Since he was healthy enough that he could reign for another dozen years or so, so long as they got a new scepter, he'd most likely live out the rest of his natural life. Even if the strain of using the broken scepter had reduced his life span, it would give the kingdom time to plan. At the very least, it would avoid the prospect of a bloody succession battle in around a year's time.

The princess nodded. "Yes, technically. However, they had some conditions..."

On one hand, I knew there would be strings attached, but on the other, I was surprised they'd agreed to do it. Elves were known to be isolationists, and they didn't like to interact with other people. There were exceptions, like the one I'd met, but I was sure the elves regarded her as an eccentric. I mean, her personality alone would've marked her as odd even among humans. She wasn't the typical example of an elf.

After a brief pause, Augurey asked, "Conditions? What sort of conditions did they request? Did they demand ceding of land perhaps?"

Now that I thought about it, I couldn't think of a lot of things that elves might want in exchange. They had a very different outlook on life than humans did. While money and land were the most basic forms of wealth, if I had to say whether elves coveted that sort of thing, I'd say that they didn't. Augurey didn't

seriously believe the elves had demanded land either and had just used that as an example of terms they might request.

As expected, the princess shook her head. “No, they were not interested in such things. They asked, broadly speaking, for two things. First, that they would determine the ingredients that went into the scepter. This is less a condition and more a necessity, given that they are better informed about how to make such a thing. As for the other...before I speak about it, do you know about the Holy Tree?”

Lorraine was actually more interested in learning about the materials that would go into the scepter’s creation, but she decided it would be prudent to simply answer the princess’s question.

“Yes. They even call their country the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree. The Holy Tree is the pillar that holds the nation of elves together, one that they protect and sing the praises of above all else. Unfortunately, I’ve never seen it with my own eyes, but I’ve heard that it is imbued with enormous amounts of divinity and that even a single leaf from the tree is traded at astronomical prices. To adventurers, the tree is literally worth its weight in gold.”

Perhaps that was a crass way to frame it, but that was exactly what the tree was to people like us. I’m sure the elves would regard this as the height of blasphemy, but since there weren’t any elves here...

“Indeed,” the princess continued. “Among humans, the royals of the Kingdom of Yaaran may very well be the only ones who have ever laid eyes upon it. I’ve only seen it once myself, when His Majesty took me to visit the country.”

Lorraine looked surprised. “I wasn’t aware that relations between the countries were so close.”

I looked at her for an explanation, and she leaned over and whispered in my ear, “It’s said that the elves won’t show anyone, not even royals of the most important countries, the Holy Tree. Even the emperor was unable to persuade the elves to do so. He could have forced it if he’d wanted to, but that would have required starting a war. It’s that important to the elves.”

Did that mean the Yaaran royal family had a special, close connection to the elves? Or was that relationship just between the king himself and the elves?

Well, considering that Princess Jia was able to visit the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree, speak to the high elves, and ask them to craft a new scepter, the royals must have a good relationship with them. Also, the original scepter had been a gift from the high elves in the distant past. It was easy to imagine there was some sort of connection between the two groups.

“When I saw it, I understood how an entire country could worship the tree. Since I’m a follower of the Church of the Eastern Sky, I couldn’t simply worship or pray to the tree, but its sheer brilliance, its presence, and the aura of purity it gives off could convince one that it was a god itself.”

What were gods? The definition depended on the religion, so there wasn’t one simple definition, but the princess had felt something supernatural and otherworldly from the Holy Tree. Some things in this world just made you fall silent in awe. The dragon I ran into was one, and it was clear that the Holy Tree also fell under that category. I felt a little impatient as I waited for the princess to continue.

“I’m told some elves can even hear the voice of the Holy Tree. High elves in particular can distinguish distinct words from it.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever heard of such things,” Lorraine remarked.

The princess was telling us about things so secret that not even Lorraine, who had far more knowledge than anyone else here, had heard of them. It was starting to make me worry that even if we did listen to the princess’s request, we might not be allowed to leave here. We’d probably heard too much to go back to life as normal.

“This was something I only learned in my recent visit,” the princess explained. “I’m told that the Holy Tree’s voice sounds like a song to the elves. They also mentioned that those songs are then recorded as music. The elves outside of the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree always carry a musical instrument when traveling, and the songs they play have a mystical sound to them. I was very happy to learn the roots of that music.”

You might run into elven bards every now and then. They didn’t stay in a single place for long, but they often spent anywhere from a few days to maybe a month in a single pub, making money by performing before they resumed

their wandering. They weren't particularly good at conversation, despite the fact that they played music so eloquently, and most of them weren't talkative even if you addressed them, so I'd never had a detailed conversation with one. So their songs came from the Holy Tree? That was interesting to learn, but it wasn't all that relevant right now.

"I apologize for getting off track," the princess said. "The subject I wished to focus on was the fact that the elves could hear words from the Holy Tree. I'm told that hearing actual words is rare, but they recently heard the following. To paraphrase, they were told that 'a human will come with ties to one who owns a holy item. Bring the one with the holy item to the tree.'"

Augurey and Lorraine turned to look at my mask, and I put my hand to it.



"A human will come with ties to one who owns a holy item. Bring the one with the holy item to the tree."

That would sound vague and nonsensical without any context. Gods and spirits sometimes handed out prophecies, but they were rarely as clear-cut as conversations between mortals. There were a lot of explanations for why that was, ranging from the fact that there were limits on how directly gods and spirits could interact with the world, to the fact that there were strict rules between the gods as they jockeyed for influence. It could also be because the future was never set in stone, and the gods valued that uncertainty and therefore left things up to the interpretation of the mortals. The favored reason depended on which religion you subscribed to, but since they all had this in common, it likely meant gods and spirits did speak in riddles.

I'd technically received a prophecy from a spirit, but that had also been vague and hard to interpret. Maybe it was different if you created a vessel for the spirit and kowtowed to it, asking for its guidance, but if I did anything like that right now, everyone would think I'd gone mad. Maybe I'd try it later.

Oh, but I needed special components. That sort of thing required mana-infused material, but I was fresh out of the shrub ent wood I'd used last time. I'd have to get some new material, and since the vessel had to be in the shape of a person, it'd be easier to use wood of some sort. Clay might work, but it

wasn't like wooden or clay monsters were common. I'd have to go to where those monsters lived to gather it. I supposed I could always just buy it, but I had trouble breaking out of the adventurer's mindset that it'd be cheaper to gather the materials myself.

Well, I didn't have to do it right away. Besides, the spirit in question was supposedly a minor split-off of a bigger spirit. If the Holy Tree was a god, then my spirit barely registered as divine. Chances were I wouldn't get much useful information.

The meaning of the Holy Tree's words were clear without clarification anyway. If we assumed the "human" in this prophecy was Princess Jia, then the one with the holy item would be me, and the Holy Tree wanted the princess to bring me to it. Oh dear. What a headache. I immediately concluded that it'd be better to avoid getting involved.

"I see. Based upon those words, it does seem like I fit the terms offered by the Holy Tree—"

"Almost certainly!" The princess leaned forward excitedly, encouraging us to agree with the observation.

She was a bit more forceful than I'd expected. I figured she was a lot calmer and more collected, but I guess heightened emotions brought out her actual personality. And now that I thought about it, she'd also practically leaped out of her carriage after the monster attack, so I supposed it was in character.

I tried not to be intimidated by her enthusiasm as I continued, "Unfortunately, my mask is only 'close to' a holy item, and it's not certain that it actually is one. Perhaps it would be unwise to take an item that isn't explicitly holy to something as divine as the Holy Tree?"

Technically, I was told the mask was *probably* a holy item, so I kept my phrasing within the bounds of the truth. After all, it'd be bad if they had some sort of lie-detecting magic item here in the palace. They wouldn't be checking each and every statement I made, though.

From what Lorraine had told me, while it was possible to create a lie detector, it was hard to say how reliable they were because people very rarely saw things in such stark terms as truth and lies. The precise details were a little too

specialized for me to understand, but I was able to get the gist of what she was saying.

It was common that if you told a lie often enough, you'd believe it yourself. Occasionally, adventurers would lose a comrade during a job but couldn't find the body, and as a result, they'd convince themselves that said comrade was still alive somewhere. If you questioned someone like that with a lie detector, even if you asked them if their comrade was dead, the lie detector wouldn't be able to tell that the adventurer's claim was a lie.

At least, that was how I interpreted Lorraine's explanation. Even if more precise lie detectors had been found in a dungeon, installing it at the palace would demonstrate a ruthlessness in court politics that the nobles would find hard to swallow. I hated to phrase it this way, but for court nobles, their entire job pretty much consisted of lying for a living. It'd put a serious damper on their way of life if they were being fact-checked every time they spoke. Anyway, all that was to say that it was unlikely they'd find out I'd been a little misleading about my mask.

The princess took a moment to think, then said, "That may be true. The high elf informed me that I was the human described in the prophecy, but when I asked who the person with the holy item would be, they only said that I'd know when I met them."

That wording was tricky. The princess must have figured that I was the person in the prophecy when she found out I owned something that might be a holy item. So, in a sense, she'd known the second she'd met me, but she was also wavering after my critique. Maybe she hadn't known after meeting me. It seemed the high elf and the Holy Tree's vague wording was working in my favor. Lorraine and Augurey also recognized this fact and joined in to help me.

"We cannot deny the possibility that Rentt is the one described in the prophecy," Lorraine said. "But if Rentt were to go the Land of the Venerable Holy Tree and it turned out he was not the one, it could damage the relationship between the kingdom and the elves. It may be best to proceed cautiously."

Augurey added, "There's a chance that someone with an actual holy item,

rather than Rentt's iffy one, will appear soon. If relations with the elves aren't ideal at that point, it might make the situation far more complicated than necessary. It would be better not to hastily jump to conclusions."

It almost sounded like they were making me out to be some sort of forgery, but they had a good point. Questionable actions like taking an odd person to the Holy Tree could damage the good relations the kingdom currently enjoyed with the elves.

Their arguments resonated with the princess, and she began conferring with Nauss. After a short conversation, they reached a conclusion.

"It is as you say," the princess concluded. "Perhaps I was getting ahead of myself. There remains the issue that His Majesty does not have much time left, but now is certainly not the time to draw rash conclusions and make the problem more complicated."

She'd accepted Lorraine and Augurey's argument, but that didn't mean I was home free.

"Nevertheless, Mister Vivie, the possibility remains that you may be the one, which is why I would like to have a method to contact you when necessary. Have you any objections?"

It was phrased as a request, but I was sure it was meant as an order. This was as good of an outcome as I could expect, though.

"No, Your Highness," I replied.

After that, Lorraine and I gave Nauss our contact information. Specifically, we gave them our guild registration numbers—I gave the number for Rentt Vivie—and our address in Maalt. We also mentioned that we were currently here on a job and that we would leave the capital in a few days time. Nauss expressed that they would've preferred we stay in the capital for the time being, but given that he couldn't give us a clear time frame, he was willing to let us leave.

That was how we managed to complete our visit at the palace. There was still a good chance we'd be called back, but I could always worry about that once we were done with our current to-do list.



“Now that we’ve taken care of the biggest concern, we’ve got a few days without any plans,” I said when we returned to Augurey’s lodgings.

We could have gone to our inn instead, but Augurey’s felt more comfortable. His experience working in the capital had paid off, so he knew the best inns to use as a base. Even though he’d chosen this one not long after he came to the capital, he’d surely tried out various lodgings when he first moved here.

Even though this was an inn, he’d been using it as his base of operations for a while. He had settled into this room, and a number of his own things lay around here and there. Some innkeepers didn’t like their guests doing this sort of thing, but most weren’t particular about it. That was partly because they were tolerant and hospitable, but often they would sign contracts with adventurers saying that they could have the things in the room if the adventurer died, so it could work to their advantage.

It was a stark reminder of how cutthroat adventuring could be, but it was a fact that adventurers died often, and the sort of things they kept in their rooms could be valuable. It was usually a diverse assortment of things—spare weapons and armor, magic crystals, and magic items. At some of the worst inns, the innkeepers would greet you with disappointment if you came back in one piece. Of course, I wouldn’t want to rent a room in a place like that, especially for an extended period.

“Oh, right. You have to wait for the grand guildmaster to return, don’t you?” Augurey asked.

I’d already explained that whole situation to him. Many jobs required confidentiality, but when I entered into this particular contract, I’d gotten permission from Wolf to share the basics of my task, so long as I wasn’t out telling the entire world that I was here to take the grand guildmaster to Maalt.

There were a few reasons for that, but the biggest one was that I couldn’t say anything that risked drawing unwanted attention. If other adventurers saw me wandering around with the grand guildmaster, they might think that I was following them to curry favor or that I was part of some weird entourage. That wouldn’t happen to me in Maalt, but here in the capital, adventurers were typically more ambitious and thus more sensitive to that sort of thing.

Basically, Wolf had arranged things so that if someone came up to me and asked why I was with the grand guildmaster, I could just say, “Oh, I’m here to escort the grand guildmaster to Maalt. As for me? I’m just an adventurer who works in a backwater city. I’m looking forward to getting back there and eating some bug stew.”

Despite appearances, Wolf was good at taking care of little social cues like that. Oh, and for the record, I didn’t eat bug stew all that often, but I was a lot more desensitized to it than the city kids in the capital. I’d be perfectly fine with eating it if they dared me to do it to prove I was from the country.

“Exactly,” Lorraine answered. “They’re out for the moment. Augurey, have you met them before?”

Lorraine had never met the grand guildmaster of Yaaran, so she wanted to learn more about them. I had to admit, I wanted to know more too. Part of it was simple curiosity, but part of it had to do with the grand guildmaster’s advanced age, so I also wanted to plan a journey that they’d be able to handle.

Augurey paused, then said, “I’ve met old man Jean before. He’s got a habit of popping up randomly. You sometimes catch him wandering around town, then you’ll see him run off in some odd direction, only to find a guild employee dashing after him.”

“Hm? What’s the deal with that?” Lorraine asked as she tilted her head to the side.

She understood what Augurey meant, but she couldn’t imagine the sort of situation where that would happen. Why would the grand guildmaster be running away while a guild employee hurried to catch them? I wondered the same.

“That’s just how he is,” Augurey explained. “There are times when I have to report to him, and an employee will tell me that he’s up in his office. But when I go up there, I find that the office is empty and a pile of unfinished paperwork sits on his desk. When I report that to the guild employee, they’ll turn pale, hurriedly start issuing instructions, and send all of the employees out into the city to look for him. That’s almost a daily occurrence, I guess? I’ve sometimes wondered why he’s even serving as the grand guildmaster.”

From the sound of it, the grand guildmaster was just immature and didn't like to do his job. Lorraine came to a similar conclusion, but she also found some other issue with the situation.

“Wait, but I also heard he dealt with major disasters by directing many of Yaaran's guildmasters in incidents like the Ansallen Riot, the Deneb Goblin King Tsunami, and the eruption of Mount Jarlis. It was thanks to Jean Seebeck that they were settled with minimal damage. However, I don't know the details because they all happened before I was born.”

All three were famous incidents. The Ansallen Riot occurred when a sect of a new cult holed up in a city and summoned a huge horde of powerful monsters. Something went wrong with the summoning circle, though, which resulted in it continually summoning monsters. From what I'd heard of it, it was a hell of a mess.

The Deneb Goblin King Tsunami happened when a huge number of goblins flooded into Deneb, but on a scale much larger than usual. No one knew what the exact numbers were, but I'd heard that it was somewhere between thirty and seventy thousand goblins. Some people claimed it was closer to two hundred thousand.

The eruption of Mount Jarlis began when a red dragon made its nest in the volcano, and because its presence empowered the fire spirits in the volcano, it erupted. At the time, there were a number of cities and villages near Mount Jarlis, and the damage that would have occurred if it hadn't been dealt with would have been immense. The worst of the damage had been averted by mobilizing a huge number of mages to redirect the lava flow.

In all of those cases, it was said that Jean Seebeck, the currently grand guildmaster of the Yaaran's guild, had taken charge and prevented the worst from coming to pass.

Augurey clapped his hands together and, with a forced smile, said, “Yeah, that's exactly it. He's amazing when it comes to dealing with emergencies, so the guild wants to keep him from quitting no matter what. He himself has wanted to retire for a while, but a lot of people just genuinely worship him, so they put up with his antics...”

Chapter 3: The Job with Augurey

“The guild employees said he’d be back in five days, but is he really going to be back by then?” I asked.

This was the grand guildmaster we were talking about. I would understand if he was so busy I’d have to wait to see him, but it would be different if they told me to come back in five days because the grand guildmaster was an eccentric who was prone to randomly going walkabout and they weren’t sure when he’d be back. The guild employee had sounded confident about the date, but they might have been nervously crossing their fingers under the desk when they said it.

“He’ll be back in five days! I hope...”

That could have been the subtext I missed during that conversation. It was hard to be at the bottom rung of the ladder. Then again, only the elites of the Yaaran’s guild employees worked in the capital, so I guessed they weren’t quite at the bottom rung.

“Who knows? If they told you to come back in five days, you’ll have to go there, but you shouldn’t get your hopes up,” Augurey cautioned.

“I think I’m starting to see why Wolf gave me so much discretion on this one,” I murmured.

“He probably didn’t want to deal with it.”

That was likely the long and short of it. No wonder Wolf had looked oddly uncomfortable during the whole process. I decided I’d give him a piece of my mind when I got back to Maalt.

“But, for my part,” Augurey said with a smile, “I’m grateful to Wolf for sending you. It’s thanks to him that I got to see you two and that I was able to get the whole palace stuff and the huge stress it caused off my plate. And it looks like I’ll be able to do a job I can’t take on my own.”

The simple fact was that we would’ve had to visit the capital at some point

anyway. Besides, I wanted to have a proper conversation with Augurey instead of the hurried chat we'd had when we saved the princess, so in that regard, I should be grateful. Maybe I wouldn't complain to Wolf after all. Nah, I could always give him an earful and then thank him.

"So a job then. Augurey, you're Silver-class now, so shouldn't you be able to deal with most jobs solo?" Lorraine asked. "Even if you can't do it alone, you can ask for temporary party members for the duration of that specific job."

Lorraine made a good point. Even if Augurey needed to form a party to handle the job he had in mind, it wasn't like it had to be Lorraine and me who helped. I was just a Bronze-class adventurer after all, and while Lorraine was skilled and knowledgeable, she didn't know as much about the area around the capital as the local adventurers. I agreed with her that it'd be more efficient just to work with adventurers who were used to the terrain.

"That'd be fine for a normal job," Augurey said, shaking his head, "but the job I've taken is one that most adventurers here don't do very often. Would comparing it to gathering the fire spirit madder we did last time help give it more context?"

When we came to the capital in disguise, we'd taken a job along with Augurey. Well, technically it was a job *for* Augurey, who'd wanted a specific plant to dye his clothes, but that wasn't all it was for.

"Ah, that. Did it save the girl's mother?" Lorraine asked as she recalled the job.

Augurey blinked in surprise. "Huh...? How did you...?"

"I saw you along the main street when we were heading back. I thought it was an admirable thing," Lorraine said without a hint of irony.

"No, that was..." Augurey looked down as if suddenly struck by shyness. "I just thought we'd gathered too much to use just for dye. That's all. Oh, the girl's mom got better. She got ill because she had circulation problems. The healer said she required fire spirit madder for treatment."

In addition to being useful for dying clothes, fire spirit madder also had a medicinal use. Or rather, that was its primary usage. However, I hadn't really

thought much about it at the time because Augurey had been so insistent on dyeing his clothes a specific color. Turned out it was needed more as a medicine that time as well.

“You call us too nice, but I’m sure you’re just as bad as we are,” Lorraine commented.

“Eh, I guess that’s just a Maaltesian adventurer for you. I’m sure any adventurer from Maalt would have done the same thing.”

I hoped he was right, but I wasn’t so certain that he was.

“So is the job you want us to do one that doesn’t pay well and is pretty much volunteer work for someone in need?” I asked.

“No, not this time,” Augurey replied. “Last time was the exception. The reason I mentioned that job was because this job also requires an eye for finding materials that your average capital adventurer wouldn’t spot. Not that I’m saying there’s anything wrong with occasional charity work, mind you, but fortunately, there are a few oddballs even in the capital willing to do that. You don’t need to worry on that front. The thing with the fire spirit madder was that no one would take that job because they didn’t know how to find it.”

“I see. So what are some examples of what you’re talking about?” Lorraine asked.

“Let’s see... Catching an aqua hathur alive, and I guess gathering clay from luteum golems? Both of those require cutting off the monster’s escape routes. There was also one about wyvern flax too. I had trouble figuring out how to handle that one, but with you here, Lorraine, we could do it using your magic.”

I felt my heart sink as Augurey listed off a litany of jobs. “Wait, were you planning on doing all of those with us?”

“Of course. I mean, you’ve got the next few days off, right? Perfect timing, I’d say. Not like you were planning to spend all day sleeping at your inn, right? Adventurers have short shelf lives, so you gotta make money while you can.”

In a broad sense, he was right, but it seemed like an awful lot of work. Still, we had four days until the grand guildmaster returned to the capital, so we did indeed have a lot of time on our hands. I guess this would be a good way to

pass the time. Lorraine and I exchanged glances, and after we both let out a dry chuckle, we decided to go along with Augurey's proposal.



"Oh? Master Rentt? What can I help you with today? The grand guildmaster hasn't returned yet," the guild receptionist said as I approached.

She must have remembered my face, or rather my appearance, from my last visit. It'd be hard to forget the creepy man wearing a skull mask and robes, but adventurers were a diverse bunch. We ran the gamut from colorful dandies like Augurey to dark, brooding types like me. There were plenty of eccentrics who looked like they had far more interesting stories than I did, which meant that the receptionist who remembered me was really good at her job.

Although, part of it might be because it hadn't been that long since my last visit. Now that I knew more about the grand guildmaster, I could tell the receptionist was a little nervous when she mentioned that the grand guildmaster hadn't returned yet. It seemed Augurey had been right on the money, and the receptionist wasn't sure if he'd show up on schedule.

While I was technically here as a guild employee, the connection between guild branches wasn't that strong. Surely there were things they didn't want outsiders to know. Then again, when it came to Jean Seebeck, even Augurey knew about his antics, so I supposed adventurers in the capital and even the old-school adventurers in other regions might be able to tell us more stories. I just hadn't been aware of it because there hadn't been any major disasters that our generation had to face. I knew from old stories that he was a legend, but I hadn't experienced anything firsthand, nor did I have a good sense of his personality either.

At any rate, I decided that as a fellow guild employee, I'd at least try to temporarily alleviate some of her anxiety about the grand guildmaster's whereabouts.

As reassuringly as possible, I said, "No, I'm already aware he isn't back yet. I have an old acquaintance among the adventurers here, and he told me stories about the grand guildmaster. Must be difficult to deal with that."

The receptionist looked surprised, then sighed in relief. "I see. Then allow me

to be honest. I truly can't say for certain if he really will return in four days' time. He promised that he'd 'definitely' be back by then, but..."

"You can't exactly rely on his word. I sympathize with you there." I sighed, but the receptionist shrank back, so I altered my tone of voice and changed the subject. "That aside, I'm not here to hound you on that subject."

"Oh? Then what brings you here today?"

"As I said before, I have an acquaintance among the adventurers here. Augurey."

When I called his name, Augurey removed several of the postings on the job board and wandered over to join me. Lorraine was with him as well.

Seeing that, the receptionist nodded. "Ah, that would make sense. If I recall, Master Augurey used to work out of Maalt. Have you known him since back then?"

"Yeah. After catching up, we got to talking about old times and decided to take a few jobs together since we have time until the grand guildmaster returns. We probably won't go that far afield, but we may as well make the most of that time."

The receptionist's expression brightened. I supposed she was glad I wasn't going to grill her about the grand guildmaster. That, and our going out on jobs would work out in her favor as well.

"I'll go ahead and register you as a temporary party," she said. "If you can just fill in the necessary information, I can begin the process immediately. Also, you're more than welcome to keep the grand guildmaster waiting. Even if it winds up being a few days, it'd be his own fault for wandering off. Rest assured, we'll keep him properly secured once he returns."

We were talking about her boss, but if you had no context coming into this conversation, you'd think we were talking about a criminal of some sort. It was the grand guildmaster's fault for wandering off on a regular basis, but...

Anyway, even though we'd been given permission to stall, I intended to return on schedule. If I dawdled too long, I might get dragged into more palace-related complications. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

I took the temporary party registration form from the receptionist and turned to talk it over with Augurey and Lorraine. It wasn't like there was a whole lot to discuss, though. All we needed to do was go over the basics.

"Is splitting the rewards three ways okay?" I asked.

"Yes, that's fine," Augurey and Lorraine both answered.

I wasn't too sure if that was fair, so I said, "I'm still Bronze-class. Shouldn't my rate be lower than yours?"

Augurey stated, "If we were just talking about class, that would be the usual practice, since that would mean there's a gap in combat ability. But as far I can tell based on fighting together the other day, it didn't feel like I was any better than you."

"Really?"

He was referring to when we saved the princess. Well, my physical abilities had improved quite a bit. I knew I'd gotten stronger, but Augurey had gotten stronger as well. I didn't know who'd win if we had a proper fight. While I had some monster abilities hidden up my sleeve and could use them to catch him off guard, I couldn't say for certain that Augurey didn't have anything comparable. Silver-class was the rank when most adventurers began to develop abilities of that type. Underestimating a Silver-class adventurer by assuming they had no hidden cards up their sleeves was a quick way to end up in a lot of pain.

"If I had to add more reasons," Augurey continued, "the jobs we're taking all require special knowledge and skills more than they do combat ability. And you're a lot better at those things than we are, really."

"Augurey is right," Lorraine chimed in. "Rentt, you're the mentor who taught me how to survive in the forest."

That had been true a long time ago, but Lorraine had mastered those survival skills quickly. I didn't think I'd done anything that deserved being referred to as her mentor, but I was really grateful that these two Silver-class adventurers were evaluating me fairly like this.

"When you phrase it like that, it makes it hard for me to say no," I admitted.

“Okay, I’ll take an equal share.”

We then quickly handled the other details with the default terms set for temporary parties and handed the sheet to the receptionist.

She scanned over the pages and nodded. “Everything looks to be in order. I’ll go ahead and register you now. Next, concerning the jobs...”

Augurey nodded and handed the job requests to her. She quirked a brow as she read over the details.

“These are all jobs that have been neglected for a long time. The locations where the materials can be harvested are the same, but no one has taken these jobs due to the difficulty. Are you sure you want to take them?”

I understood that the receptionist was just worried about us, but we’d already discussed which jobs to take, and based on the content of the requests, they were well within our ability to complete.

Augurey wouldn’t have proposed taking jobs that we couldn’t handle. A few other jobs on the board had been left to fossilize there, but all of them were clearly impossible for the average adventurer. One wanted the tears of a fire dragon, while another asked for ore from a kraken’s lair. They were the sort of jobs that would make even Gold-or Platinum-class adventurers hesitate.

Mithril-class adventurers would have been able to handle them, but there weren’t any in the capital. Most Mithril-class adventurers tended to wander from land to land rather than stay in a specific location. At the moment, there were only two whose precise locations were known. One was in the Lelmudan Empire and the other in the Holy Kingdom of Ars. No one knew where the rest were. Or, at least, that was the official story. It was possible that they were on retainer for some country and kept out of the public eye, but that wasn’t the sort of thing normal adventurers like us had any way to determine.

“Yeah, it’s not a problem,” Augurey answered. “I know they’re not easy jobs, but these two specialize in this sort of work. I wouldn’t have thought to take these jobs if they weren’t here, but since they have some free time, I figured it was a good opportunity to take care of them.”

“Understood,” the receptionist said with a nod. “Then I’ll process your

acceptance of these jobs. I would add that they have no penalty for failure, so you don't have to worry in that regard."

"I know. That's part of the reason I chose them."

Augurey had carefully considered the risks when choosing the jobs. Of course, the lack of penalty didn't mean that we were taking the jobs with the assumption that we'd fail, but it was always nice when a job had no penalties for the adventurer in the case of failure.

At its heart, the guild took everyone, so the restrictions on success rate weren't all that stringent. Adventurers wouldn't be expelled for failing too many jobs. Part of that was due to the uncomfortable fact that anyone who failed that much would probably die before they reached the point of being expelled, but there was also the fact that there weren't any strict terms attached to success rates. Still, I'd heard that you could get a bad reputation if you failed too often. That would hurt your chances during Ascension Exams, and the guild wouldn't inform you when profitable jobs became available.

Jobs weren't restricted to just the ones posted on the public boards. The guild would hold specific jobs for specific adventurers, which was why the adventurers who understood where their bread was buttered paid close attention to their success rate. Essentially, what the receptionist meant was that failing any of these jobs wouldn't be counted as part of our success rate in terms of our reputation with the guild.

The types of jobs where that was true, while rare, did exist. They were usually ones that had been sitting there gathering dust or ones that were so challenging that failure seemed unavoidable. That didn't mean you wouldn't get fair credit for completing them, but most people wouldn't go near them because they were either a waste of time or a waste of your life.

As for the jobs we'd just accepted, they were the sort where you might just waste a lot of time.

"I see. In which case, I have nothing more to add." The receptionist finished processing our paperwork. "There. Everything is complete. Please be careful, and I wish you the best of luck."

We nodded and turned to leave the guild building.



It went without saying that even in the capital, the area past the great walls encircling the city was a vast wilderness. The kingdom's knights and adventurers made a habit of regularly culling the monsters in the immediate vicinity, so the ones left were typically small spawns of the weakest monsters, but being near the city didn't guarantee your safety. If you traveled half a day away from the city itself, you'd be in completely untamed territory.

"Rentt! Incoming!"

"Got it!"

I was already aware of the approaching presence before Augurey shouted his warning, and I turned to face it, readying my sword. I saw a somewhat larger, lanky monster with green skin charging at me with a crudely crafted weapon in its grasp.

It was a monster called a hobgoblin, which was larger than a goblin and had a silhouette closer in proportions to that of a human. People speculated that they evolved from normal goblins, but no one really knew that for certain because it was extremely rare to actually see monsters evolving.

In my case, I'd experienced it firsthand, but I'd been told that I was going to evolve into a vampire after a ghoul, only to find myself turning into something else entirely. The scholarly evolution theories weren't without issues either. There were examples like puchi suris, which had multiple paths to evolution, but I would imagine monster evolution itself was a complex topic.

Despite all that, it felt intuitive to me that hobgoblins were an evolved form of a goblin. It looked like a normal goblin just had a growth spurt, and other than gaining a little speed and some ability to plan, it was close to a regular goblin in terms of capabilities. Basically, they weren't that strong.

I swung my blade downward, and it slid easily through the hobgoblin's neck. Its head went flying in one direction while the rest of its body collapsed as the momentum from its charge continued to carry it forward. It then lay motionless and didn't so much as twitch.



After defeating the hobgoblins, we immediately harvested their magic crystals. We had plenty of experience doing this, and even I had fought hobgoblins countless times and knew precisely where their magic crystals were and how to harvest them. The crystal was right under the heart, and you could easily find it by stabbing around that area with a dagger.

I wasn't the only one who was used to doing this, though. Lorraine had her scholarly training, and she'd memorized the anatomical drawings of most monsters. She'd also put in plenty of work as an adventurer in Maalt. Dissecting a hobgoblin was child's play to her at this point.

It was the same for Augurey. While he was now a Silver-class adventurer, he'd spent a fair amount of time as Bronze-class. Among the Bronze-class monsters, hobgoblins had relatively valuable magic crystals. They were a good source of steady income, so we were all accustomed to dissecting them.

"Guess that about does it," Augurey said with a sigh after we finished dissecting the ten or so hobgoblins and gathered them in one spot. The work wasn't particularly taxing, so he was relieved that no more hobgoblin bodies littered the roadside. The scene looked like the aftermath of a monster attack, which often conjured unpleasant memories for most adventurers, so I understood his relief.

Still, it wasn't like any of us would have fallen to pieces if people had been attacked by monsters and we'd been too late to save them. Sure, that sort of trauma might affect young, inexperienced adventurers, but it'd been a long time since we'd passed that stage in our careers. It wasn't that we felt nothing at all, but we could keep our cool even if we witnessed such a scene.

"Yeah. Not that there aren't other things we could harvest from them," Lorraine remarked, "but I doubt there's demand for it in the capital. I can't imagine we'd be able to sell it, so I'll just incinerate the bodies."

Lorraine began chanting her spell and turned the pile of dead hobgoblins into ash. If we were in the middle of the woods, we could've just left the bodies there to rot, but this was right by a major road. It'd be bad if the smell of the bodies drew other monsters. Sometimes that could even spiral into a situation where even stronger monsters came hunting the monsters drawn by the

bodies. When that happened, the road would be closed to traffic until they could be eradicated. It was bad news all around, which was why when monsters appeared near major roads, it was standard practice to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Even if a party had no one who could use magic, almost all adventurers had some way of starting a fire. If you couldn't dispose of the bodies with fire, you would carry them away from the road and bury them. It was often a hassle, but it was better than the alternative.

That said, it wasn't a particularly common occurrence. Most monsters with some level of intelligence understood that people passed through areas near roads, and among them would be powerful adventurers. For roads near the capital, there was the added threat of knights on patrol or in training, which meant monsters were even more likely to avoid them. Yet we'd run into some hobgoblins—not just a couple strays, but a group of ten of them. That was unusual.

It seemed Lorraine had been thinking the same thing, because after a moment, she murmured to herself, "Perhaps there is some sort of turf battle occurring between monsters in this area."

"That might be it," I said, "but we have no way of checking. It might be best to go into the woods to investigate, but there are no villages or hamlets in this area anyway. Besides, if all that's running away is hobgoblins, it can't be that serious."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It could be the start of something much worse. When a goblin king is about to emerge, it starts as skirmishes between groups of goblins. It's not rare for events that appear to be minor squabbles between goblins to turn out to be a sign of an emerging goblin king."

She was right, but she was jumping to the opposite extreme.

Augurey shrugged. "We could debate this all day. Even the biggest disasters have little hints that something is coming, but if we were to chase down every possible sign of a looming threat, we'd run into a shortage of people really quickly."

Obviously, Lorraine understood this as well. She smiled and said, "That's true.

I don't think we need to investigate at this stage. I was simply making note of the possibility."

"That's fine then. I just didn't want to go home empty-handed because we went chasing after a phantom goblin king." Augurey was joking, of course. He wasn't so self-centered that he'd worry about money if there really was a big threat looming on the horizon. "Then I guess we can move on?"

"Hey, folks!" a voice called out to us.

I turned to find our wagon with a middle-aged man sitting atop it approaching. It was the man we'd hired to be our driver for this trip. His name was Yattul, and because of his line of work, he was very muscular. He wasn't trained to fight, though, and he wasn't so strong that he could face a group of ten hobgoblins himself.

The instant we'd detected the group of hobgoblins, we'd instructed him to stay behind as we got off the wagon and went ahead to take care of the monsters. Although he'd been far back enough that we weren't in his line of sight, he must have seen the smoke rising from the burning bodies, so he'd come forward on his own.

"Were ya able to get rid of all the beasties?" Yattul asked as he approached.

"Yeah," I answered. "There were about ten hobgoblins. We took their magic crystals and burned the bodies. Did you want to buy the crystals?"

Yattul wasn't just a wagon driver. His main occupation was a merchant. He traveled between the small village we were headed toward and the capital. However, since that wasn't really enough to survive on, he evidently did work elsewhere.

"Ohh?! Really?! Hobgobby magic crystals fetch good prices, so I'd be happy to buy 'em, but are ya sure? You'd get a better price at the guild, I reckon?"

Yattul was right, but the price difference wasn't huge, and we wouldn't lose much by selling the crystals to him. A part of me also felt it'd be better to sell to someone like Yattul, who worked an unprofitable route to support a small village. Augurey, Lorraine, and I had already agreed to sell the crystals to Yattul beforehand, so there was no reason not to do so now. If he'd said no, we

would've sold them at the guild.

I nodded. "It's fine. We can't sell you all of them, but..."

"No, no, it's more than generous of ya to offer just a few. I appreciate ya, boss."

The rest of the crystals Lorraine wanted to use for alchemy, so they'd be her share. I handed the magic crystals to Yattul, then after receiving the payment, I split the money with Augurey, giving him three crystals' worth and keeping the same amount for myself. The remaining one we'd use for a meal when we got back to town. Perhaps we were being a little too precise on dividing the spoils, but carelessness in this sort of thing often led to inner conflict and resentment later. We were above those sorts of things, but it was best to make sure we drew clear lines when we could.

After checking that the monsters had all been reduced to ash, we got back onto the wagon. Yattul cracked his whip, and the wagon once again began traveling down the highway.



"Huh...? That's odd..."

As we were lazing around in the wagon, we heard muttering from the driver's seat. Yattul was talking to himself. I was curious, so I poked my head out from the back.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Yattul turned to me with a troubled expression. "Oh, hey, boss. Something's off. The road should be right, but it looks different from usual. Normally, we'd be almost to the hamlet, but..."

"You might just be imagining it," I suggested. "Your sense of distance might be off because of the hobgoblin attack."

"Hmmm... Ya really think so? I can't tell. Could you guys take a look outside every so often? Lemme know if you notice anythin' off."

I nodded, then returned to the others. "We're apparently in the process of getting lost. He wants us to keep our eyes open too."

Augurey tilted his head quizzically. “Huh? Was the way to the hamlet all that complicated? It’s not a straight path, but it should be pretty hard to get lost on the way.”

The highway had multiple forks, so if you picked the wrong path, you’d end up in the middle of nowhere. I’d understand getting lost if he took the wrong fork in the road, but there hadn’t been any up to this point, and Yattul traveled this route regularly. If he got lost this easily, he would’ve gone broke a long time ago.

“It’s unusual to be attacked by a group of hobgoblins on the highway around here,” Lorraine noted. “I could see how it might be enough to confuse him and make him lose his way. But, monsters aside, I’ve heard ‘there’s no such thing as a merchant who’s never been waylaid by a highwayman.’ If one panicked that easily, I don’t think they’d be able to work as a merchant.”

Lorraine referenced a common saying among merchants. Few had combat skills like adventurers, but they still had the bare minimum to defend themselves. It was common for merchants to pick up weapons and fight alongside mercenaries and adventurers when they were in a convoy. As a result, merchants were usually a lot more desensitized to violence than your average person, so a little bit of danger shouldn’t be all that traumatic. And yet...

“If I had to suspect something...” Lorraine continued as she stroked her chin.

“What?” I asked.

“He’s under the influence of some sort of charm. It would make sense if its effect interfered with his sense of direction and caused him to take a wrong turn.”

“Charm? You mean magic?” Augurey asked.

“No. I don’t feel any presence of magic. I’d be able to tell immediately if that were the case. It’d have to be some other method. Drugs, perhaps?”

“Drugs, hm? But when would that have happened?”

“That I don’t know. It could have been while we were away from the wagon fighting the hobgoblins, or someone might have dosed him before we set out.

No point in worrying too much about the timing.”

She meant the drug could have had a delayed effect. That wasn’t impossible, but...

“Even if that was true, why would someone drug Yattul?” I asked, scratching my head. Not to be rude, but while Yattul was probably a little richer than your average capital resident, he didn’t seem to be worth targeting if you wanted money.

Lorraine contemplated it a moment, then said, “I can’t answer that one either. Someone might have a grudge against him, or perhaps we’re the target. But that’s a bit implausible as well. We’ve been with Yattul since we decided to hitch a ride on his wagon. If they were targeting us, then they drugged him after we made that decision. Which would mean the only opportunity to do so would have been during our encounter with the hobgoblins earlier.”

“If that’s the case, then the one who drugged him might still be nearby.”

“Right. But they’re both only possibilities. It might just be that Yattul himself has a terrible sense of direction. To confirm that we’d have to check on Yattul first.”

“You have a good point. Should we stop him now?”

Augurey stuck his head out of the wagon. “The sun’s about to set. We should have been at the hamlet by now, so I’m sure Yattul’s going to propose making camp. We can wait until then to check on him, right?”

It might have seemed like we weren’t taking this seriously enough, but if someone really had drugged Yattul and was still hanging around, a sudden stop would tip them off. It’d be better to wait until we had a natural reason to stop. If Yattul ended up going in some strange direction, we could stop him then, but this was the most reasonable solution for the time being.

Augurey’s prediction didn’t take long to come true.

“Sorry, folks. Looks like I made a wrong turn. Don’t think we’ll make it to the hamlet today, so we should set up camp here. That be okay?”

We all nodded.

“That’s fine. But do you know where we are?” I asked.

“I’m not even sure about that. Sorry, but we should be okay if we turn back. Oh, and as for the fare, I’ll return it since it’s my fault we got lost. And I’ll make sure we get there.”

Yattul, crestfallen, gazed at the ground. It gave me the impression that he might just have a terrible sense of direction. At any rate, we were going to set up camp here. Yattul intended to give us some of his rations, but we’d brought our own food. We also had our cooking gear in my magic bag, so even though we were camping, it’d be a decent meal. Yattul was overjoyed when we invited him to join us.



As we were having dinner, Lorraine quietly checked to see if something was wrong with Yattul and came to the conclusion that there were signs he’d been drugged in some fashion. While I also had training as a healer and would have been able to figure out the drug if I could check his symptoms, doing so without touching him would require a high level of magical knowledge, hence why Lorraine did the checking.

After Lorraine finished describing Yattul’s condition, I identified the potential drugs that could have been used on him and laced his stew with antidotes for those drugs. Whatever drug it was, it wasn’t all that powerful, and the antidote was similarly weak with few side effects, so he probably wouldn’t die from it. It’d be different if he already had some physical malady, but I remembered Yattul mentioning that he’d been blessed with a hardy constitution and couldn’t ever remember getting sick, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

After we finished dinner, Lorraine and Augurey got sleepy and began to nod off.

“You can go to sleep. I’ll watch the fire,” I offered as I turned my gaze to the campfire Lorraine had started.

“All right. Thanks,” Lorraine said. “I guess we’ve just been so busy lately that I can’t keep my eyes open. Good night.”

“Then I’ll do the same,” Augurey added. “Wake me up if anything shows up. I

might wake on my own, but there's always the possibility I might not." He shrugged, then found a suitable branch to use as a pillow and lay down.

The last one awake, Yattul, also seemed to be nodding off.

"You can go to bed too, Yattul."

"No, I'd feel bad for makin' ya do it, boss. I should keep watch..."

He was apparently still blaming himself and trying to stay awake out of a sense of duty. I doubted he planned to stay awake the whole night, but he wanted his passengers to rest first. In my case, I could last a few days, even a week without sleep—one of the biggest advantages of becoming a monster. On the other hand, maybe I'd lost many opportunities to find peace and rest in this life, but considering that I was an adventurer, the advantages still outweighed the downsides.

Lorraine and Augurey had gone straight to sleep—not because they didn't care about me, but because they understood I'd be fine. Yattul had no way of knowing that, though. He was wavering, so I decided to nudge him to go to bed.

"It'd be bad if you don't get enough sleep and it impacts your ability to drive tomorrow. If you're prioritizing your job, then go ahead and sleep. You can sleep until the morning. I'll make sure to swap with Augurey and Lorraine during the night, and it won't be that hard with the three of us."

I was actually planning to keep watch all night, but I told a little white lie to avoid suspicion.

Yattul was convinced by my argument and nodded, although hesitantly. "You're right. Somethin' was off about me today. Sorry it caused this whole mess. I'll sleep now so I can make up for it tomorrow..."

He then lay down.



Although Yattul had lain down, he was still awake, only pretending to sleep. The merchant Yattul—or rather, the operative "the Goblin"—was acting under orders he'd been given from above. He'd been instructed to approach three adventurers named Rentt, Lorraine, and Augurey in the capital, to promise to

take them by wagon to their destination, and to follow through with that promise. Then, he was to find some way to dispose of them on the way there.

While he hadn't bothered looking up the Bronze-class adventurer, he'd already been provided with a fair amount of information on the Silver-class ones. He'd understood that it wouldn't be an easy job, but when he dug further, he'd discovered that Augurey had only recently been promoted to Silver-class and had been stuck at Bronze-class in some backwater town.

Furthermore, he'd also found that Lorraine's primary occupation was as a scholar and that she'd only been given the rank of Silver-class in recognition of her scholarly accomplishments. Essentially, it was clear to Yattul that she didn't have the actual skill of a Silver-class adventurer.

The Goblin himself was about as skilled as a Silver-class adventurer, and he'd disposed of plenty of adventurers at that rank before, so while he thought the job would be difficult, it wasn't beyond his abilities. He also had no intention of underestimating the trio and had made extensive preparations to ensure that his targets were disposed of without a trace.

As for the Goblin's code name, it came from a special ability that he possessed. He sort of looked like a goblin—he was short and had a faintly feral aura about him—but the name came from the fact that he'd been able to command goblins and hobgoblins from birth. His ability was similar to that of a monster tamer; only he'd had it as a baby. He'd heard from his parents that they'd almost had a heart attack when a goblin approached the unattended baby and started caring for it, but he had no memory of that event.

His ability was extremely unusual in the small village he was from, and word spread quickly about it. One day, someone from the capital came who wanted to adopt him. As recompense, his parents had accepted a large fortune, and he'd been taken to the capital to grow up in an ideal environment.

He originally could get only one goblin to listen to his requests, but his training in his new home had helped him develop his ability to the point where he could now control a dozen evolved hobgoblins. Yes, the monster attack hadn't been random; the Goblin had set it up using his special ability. He'd also been trained in various skills and fighting techniques needed of an operative,

along with developing a resistance to various poisons and drugs.

Nonetheless, he hadn't expected a measly dozen hobgoblins to take down two Silver-class adventurers. He'd had them attack the party to test the trio's abilities. Even though he had prior intelligence on their potential capabilities, the Goblin knew from experience that his own two eyes were the best source of intelligence. He'd known plenty of operatives who'd failed catastrophically because they'd relied too much on the information they'd been given ahead of time.

That was why he'd sprung the hobgoblins on them, and the results of that attack had proven that the Goblin's faith in his own two eyes was justified. Even three Silver-class adventurers took some time to deal with a dozen hobgoblins, but the trio had easily disposed of them and had even had time to harvest magic crystals from them.

Although he still felt he could take them in a fight, he needed to make sure he accomplished his mission. He'd decided to take the more devious but certain method—to put the adventurers in a state where they couldn't resist and then kill them. Fortunately, he'd chosen to start on the wrong path and had already made arrangements to set up camp for the night. He'd also prepared rations that were loaded with sleeping potion. It was a potent sleeping potion too, one that would knock out a monster five times the size of a human.

The Goblin had planned to feed those rations to the adventurers, put them to sleep, then kill them—or rather, have goblins kill them—but even that plan had gone awry. One of them had been oddly well prepared, producing cooking utensils from a magic bag and making a stew. But the Goblin was tenacious, and he'd sneaked the sleeping potion he had in reserve into the pot. The adventurers had eaten the stew, and the two Silver-class ones had fallen fast asleep.

Unfortunately, the potion was taking time to have an effect on the Bronze-class one. Maybe he'd been in too much of a hurry and hadn't put in enough. Still, it was just a matter of time. It was clear he'd fall asleep eventually, and then the Goblin would dispose of the three adventurers.

The Goblin lay down, waiting impatiently for the potion to have its effect.



The night's over, the Goblin thought as the golden orange light of daybreak began to shine above the distant mountain range.

How was this possible? The answer was simple. Rentt the Bronze-class adventurer simply never slept.



The adventurer had undeniably eaten the stew the Goblin had dosed, and the dose he'd used was supposed to be powerfully soporific, yet the adventurer had stayed up all night without so much as a yawn. The Goblin had watched with bated breath, wondering if Rentt would sleep this moment, or the next, or in the next minute...until the night was gone.

The impossible had happened, and the Goblin wanted to scream and demand answers from someone—anyone. Had he failed to stir the stew thoroughly enough when he'd hastily sneaked the poison in? Had Lorraine and Augurey taken the majority of the dose, leaving none left for Rentt?

It wasn't impossible, but the Goblin clearly recalled... No, he paused and reconsidered. The truth was what you could see and feel, what you could verify. He had to stick to that philosophy.

Rentt hadn't slept. That was a fact. The Goblin's scheme had ended in failure, but there was nothing he could do to change that now. Besides, that wasn't the only trick he had up his sleeve. The Goblin wasn't so prideful he thought he could pull off any job alone on the first try. All that mattered were the final results.

For the time being, he would accept the small victory of forcing one of them to keep watch all night, which must have weakened Rentt to some degree. The Goblin would have preferred to weaken the two Silver-class adventurers, but for whatever reason, Rentt hadn't woken either of them. The Goblin was concerned for a moment that the trio had seen through his sabotage, but he soon chased away that thought. If they had, they wouldn't have kept him around. They could have left him prey to a monster and led their own way. As to why Rentt hadn't woken his Silver-class companions, the Goblin just assumed they were the greater fighters, and Rentt had wanted them to be well rested.

It wasn't uncommon for adventurers of varying ranks to form a party, but the lower-ranking member usually volunteered for menial duties around the camp to compensate for the gap in fighting capabilities. Perhaps they felt pressured to earn their keep, or perhaps they genuinely believed their assignment was for the betterment of the team. That was certainly the more efficient approach to running a party, and as long as the members got along, things ran smoothly.

The longer a party worked together, the more likely it was that they suffered some fissure in their dynamic, but Rentt's party seemed free of any such friction, so it was logical that Rentt had let the other two sleep.

As if to confirm the Goblin's assumption, once the Goblin started the wagon, Rentt lay down and went to sleep. Keeping watch through the night must have taken a toll on him.

Some things had gone according to plan, but the Goblin had executed missions before where things hadn't gone perfectly at first, so he wasn't too shaken about it...yet.



"Well? What are we going to do, Rentt?" Lorraine asked after stealthily setting up a Sound Barrier around us.

The barrier was so masterfully constructed that even I, with my heightened sensitivity to mana, barely felt the thin, invisible veil covering us. This was one handy spell, considering it perfectly soundproofed the area within it. Of course, the average mage couldn't whip up one of these. It was only at our disposal thanks to Lorraine. In any case, it was safe to say that a normal human wouldn't have a clue that a barrier was up.

Case in point, Yattul hadn't moved a muscle when Lorraine spoke. If he'd been feigning ignorance, he could seriously pursue a career in acting. Although, considering how obvious he'd been when he drugged our stew, I doubt he was powerful enough to negate this Sound Barrier.

"What is there to do?" I replied. "We're going back the way we're supposed to. I think we're good."

I'd grabbed a hat from the floor of the wagon and placed it on my face to emphasize my snoozing facade. I'd also tucked the Map of Akasha into it, which continuously showed us our current location.

Just recently, I'd discovered that there was more to this item than just mapping dungeons. I'd been playing with it and had accidentally pulled up a world map. I could possibly discover more hidden features, but it had taken me a while to find the world map one, so even if there were additional functions, it

could take me some time to figure them out.

The world map feature, by the way, differed from the dungeon one in that it showed us our current location even though I certainly hadn't traversed the entire world yet. Like the dungeon map, though, it only labeled towns and settlements that I'd personally been to. I guess it wasn't easy to master the use of any item. It was plenty useful as it was, however, particularly in our current situation.

"You two are awfully blasé about this. He's definitely working for someone. The sooner we detain and interrogate him, the better, in my opinion," Augurey said with a friendly smile. His sardonic tone betrayed that mask, producing a chilling contrast.

Lorraine had spoken in a similar manner, and I was quietly impressed by their acting chops. I, on the other hand, was free of that burden, thanks to the hat on my face. Not that I couldn't have done the same if I'd tried, but my version of masking my emotions required less work.

"Even if we interrogate him now, there's no guarantee he'll spill everything," Lorraine countered. "It'll cause more trouble later if he gives us half-truths and we're left with ambiguous intel. We need to clarify more of the situation. The fact that he's still with us, even now when he suspects we might be on to him, suggests that he's going to pull another trick. Best-case scenario, a few of his friends come out of the woodwork. Then, even if we happen to dispose of a few of them, we can gain some information."

"You scare me sometimes, Lorraine," Augurey admitted with a quaking breath, but he didn't criticize Lorraine's train of thought, so he must have considered it logical.

"Lorraine's only showing her true colors. She's a scholar willing to sacrifice her life in the pursuit of knowledge," I said.

"Even scarier. But I can't argue with your points, Lorraine. Oh, well. Let's keep up the charade and pretend we're one gullible bunch."



"Oh? The wagon stopped."

The horses had quietly come to a halt. We were still on the same road back, and it didn't look like there was anything around us. Just as I was wondering what had happened, Yattul poked his head into the wagon.

"Sorry, folks. Nature calls."

Whoever our driver worked for, he seemed human enough. There was nothing suspicious about him needing to use the bathroom once in a while. There would have been nothing suspicious, anyway, if we'd been a genuinely gullible bunch.

Lorraine spoke to our driver while I was indisposed by my fake sleeping. "There are few monsters along the travel roads, but the same can't be said for bandits. I'll go with you."

In other words, we wanted someone to keep an eye on him. It was a reasonable request, and we'd kept up this routine throughout our journey.

This time, however, Yattul took advantage of the fact that Lorraine was the one to mention this. "No, no, no! Can't have a lady accompany me! I'd be too nervous to go!" he said and hopped off the wagon before anyone else—by that, I mean Augurey—could get a word in edgewise.

If we were a gullible bunch, we would've believed that he went to answer nature's call as he'd claimed, though he would have been much safer with Augurey by his side if that was the case. Yattul had craftily timed his announcement, making sure that I was asleep and addressing Lorraine so she would be inclined to volunteer as bodyguard. Maybe he had another excuse if that hadn't worked out.

"There he goes. I guess he doesn't want me to watch either." Augurey shrugged, finding a bit of humor in the exchange.

"If he had to choose, I'm sure he wouldn't want you staring at him. Besides, you'd stick out in the woods, Augurey."

Augurey was dressed in contrasting colors that made your eyes ache. Since monsters usually directed their attention his way, it came in handy when trying to herd hordes of them. You might think him an altruistic adventurer to choose his outfits with this in mind, but Augurey insisted that his attire was a product

of his fashion sense. Its practical benefit came at a mere coincidence. Yattul might have been able to use the monster-luring getup as an excuse for why he wouldn't have wanted Augurey to follow him out.

"I can conceal myself if I want to, with an overcoat or something. Not that he was really concerned about that," Augurey muttered.

"He has accomplices out there, then," Lorraine said. "They must have planned to meet up in the woods. Shall we investigate?"

Tough call. "They'd probably spot all three of us coming, so I'll go," I offered.

"Should I try to tie them up?" Augurey asked.

It didn't matter very much which one of us went, but considering the possibility that someone skilled in detection could be among the friend group Yattul was soon to be reunited with, I was the best option since I could eavesdrop from farthest away. My undead ears were pretty high caliber.

"Let's play it by ear," I said. "If I can suss out what they're planning to do, it might be better to just listen and let them be. I prefer that to trying and failing to catch them all and losing the element of surprise."

"You're going to peek at their cards and crush their plan at every turn. That'd be a nightmare to anyone in his line of work," Augurey said in mock horror, but the content of his remark was accurate.

I didn't know who Yattul was spying for but having his every scheme crushed head-on must have seemed like a never-ending nightmare to him. I liked the sound of that.

"Let's go with that," I suggested.

I sneaked out of the wagon, making sure Yattul didn't see me.



The Goblin was a decently skilled saboteur, but he rightly understood that he required some additional assistance to complete some missions. On this mission too he'd brought along colleagues who could aid him if needed. However, this was accomplished more by his master being extra careful than by any request on Yattul's part. The Goblin had come to believe that his master's

decision was spot on in this case.

The Goblin walked away from the wagon and into the woods and called out the code names of his aides. Immediately, two shadows appeared nearby.

The Goblin explained, "The trap didn't spring. I failed. But they haven't noticed yet. I will carry on with the plan."

"You failed, Goblin? I hope our targets are as capable as you're making them sound," answered the voice of a young woman, lusty and confident.

"I can't be certain yet. It could have been pure luck."

"Then just try again," the woman answered without a second thought.

While she was a trained saboteur like the Goblin, she'd only worked in the profession for a few years, which meant her missions so far had been relatively easy. She had not yet realized that some things simply couldn't be explained.

So far, the Goblin had little cause for worry with his targets, but some part of him deep down warned him that he must not underestimate this mission. While his brain told him that he was being overly cautious, he knew from experience to trust his gut in times like this.

"I am aware of your accolades, Siren," the Goblin stated, "but we may be dealing with someone the likes of which you have not yet encountered in your career. It's important to keep that mindset at all times. Of course, there may be nothing to worry about."

"I suppose we'll find out. Well, I'll go set up my stage, then. Just up the road," Siren said, then disappeared.

An old and brittle voice, starkly contrasting with the Siren's, spoke next. "Underestimating your enemy is dangerous, but so is fearing them more than is necessary, Goblin."

"That's true, but..." The Goblin couldn't put his finger on what was causing the tide of anxiety rocking his heart.

His hidden comrade chuckled. "If anything goes wrong, I'll clean up the mess. You and Siren may each pursue the mission however you see fit." The shadow then disappeared as well.



“What did you find out?” Lorraine asked as soon as I returned to the wagon.

Yattul hadn’t returned, but I noticed that the Sound Barrier was still active, so we could talk within it. Of course, Lorraine would never have asked such a question if there was any chance Yattul could have overheard.

I answered, “Not much. They didn’t go into details. They must have planned this out beforehand.”

“So ‘Operation Eavesdrop on Their Secret Conversation So We Can Anticipate and Crush Their Every Move’ wasn’t the master plan you thought it would be?” Augurey asked.

“Since when are we calling it that?”

“Just now. I came up with it. Not bad, right?”

“You’re right. It’s horrible,” Lorraine remarked, sounding exasperated. “It lacks any semblance of creativity.”

“Then what would you call this operation, Lorraine?” Augurey countered.

“What? W-Well...” Lorraine looked flustered, which didn’t happen often. She was both knowledgeable and creative, but her talents were limited to the field of academics and magic, not in witty operation naming.

After groaning in contemplation for some time, she finally said, “I take it back. We can call it ‘Operation Eavesdrop on Their Secret Conversation So We Can Anticipate and Crush Their Every Move.’”

“Victory!” cheered Augurey. At what, though, I didn’t have a clue.

As Lorraine and Augurey reached a common ground that no one had asked them to find, I steered the conversation back in its original direction.

“Operation Eavesdrop wasn’t a complete failure.”

“You already shortened it?” Augurey asked dejectedly.

Ignoring him, Lorraine asked, “Why not?”

“I didn’t get the details of their scheme, but I got the gist. First off, there are three of them, including Yattul.”

“Oh? Are they going with quality over quantity?” Augurey asked, still sounding downtrodden.

“Maybe. And they were using code names. Yattul’s is ‘Goblin.’ A woman and another agent who sounded like an old man were with him. The woman was called ‘Siren,’ but I never heard the code name of the old man.”

Augurey seemed to regain some of his spirit. “‘Goblin’? I thought it was weird that we encountered hobgoblins yesterday. Was it Yattul’s doing?”

Monsters rarely appeared on travel roads, especially if they were relatively smart like a hobgoblin. We naturally assumed that the variable was Yattul. If the hobgoblins hadn’t been lured there, they would’ve had to have been chased from their original nest by other monsters or the like. And if that had been the case, the hobgoblins would have suffered some injuries. The ones we encountered, however, might have been covered in some dirt, but they’d definitely been fine until they’d attacked us.

“Most likely it was him,” Lorraine answered. “He somehow lured them from their nest or summoned them here. It could have been done by either of his accomplices, but it’s certainly possible if any of them is a monster tamer.”

“Do you think Yattul’s the one?” I asked.

“Just a possibility. It’s rare for a tamer to control that many monsters at once. It may be more likely that he used some other method to lure them here.”

At most, a monster tamer could control up to five monsters at once. Various theories as to the cause of this limit existed, but that was the generally accepted cap. Controlling ten of them at once, even hobgoblins, seemed impossible for a single tamer.

“We can only speculate beyond that,” I concluded. “As for the other two...”

“Code name ‘Siren’ and an elderly accomplice... If the code name ‘Goblin’ is rooted in his talents, I wonder if the same goes for Siren,” mused Lorraine.

Augurey contemplated this as well. “Could be. Siren’s a woman, you said? The monster siren lives out at sea and tempts seafarers with her song, luring them to the dark depths. Which means...”

“Which means?” I prompted.

“She could be a total hottie!” Augurey exclaimed, shaking his fist in utter conviction of his hypothesis.

Even as Lorraine and I rolled our eyes, Lorraine admitted, “We can’t count it out, though I doubt any agent of the empire would be so straightforward with their code-naming.”

“They’re not?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about them. Information about them seldom surfaces. What I’ve heard are various rumors—that they call each other by number alone, or that they have no name or code name at all. In comparison, our opponents are like children playing spies. It’s cute, really,” Lorraine added with a touch of mockery.

It seemed like they’d chosen those code names because they hadn’t expected anyone to find them out, but considering the chances of someone eavesdropping on them, even I could see that they should have chosen names that didn’t give away information about themselves, or chosen not to have code names at all. That was what I would’ve done, anyway, if I made my living in the—metaphorical—underground.

“I’m sure it’s not child’s play for them, but I see what you’re saying,” Augurey said. “My joke about Siren’s appearance notwithstanding, wouldn’t our best guess be that she specializes in manipulating men?”

As I suspected, Augurey hadn’t made the comment about Siren in earnest.

“Manipulating men, huh?” I mused. “That reminds me. Siren did mention ‘building a stage’ up the road. Guess that makes sense now.”

“Building a stage? We might run into her in the village of Looza, then,” Augurey speculated.

“Let’s see... I guess we better watch out for friendly women in the village.”

“You said it.”

“I feel like I’ll be left out,” Lorraine muttered with some disappointment.

Chapter 4: The Arrival

“We finally made it, folks.”

Some time had passed since we backtracked the road we took and returned to our original route. There was a slight chance we’d be led off the grid again, but this time, Yattul had taken us correctly to the village of Looza. Yattul had maintained his friendly, traveling-merchant attitude and showed no sign of setting another trap. Maybe the Goblin had no tricks left up his sleeve after siccing a horde of hobgoblins on us and dosing our dinner with sleep medicine. Maybe he thought we’d get suspicious if he tried to pull another scheme. Of course, we were already very suspicious of him.

It was worth mentioning that I was completely immune to the drug, but Lorraine and Augurey had neutralized the dose in their own ways—Lorraine by magic, and Augurey by some mysterious way that he hadn’t shared with me. He was a Silver-class adventurer, after all. They’d both see through any cheap trick and crush it before it sprang.

“Finally. I’m just glad we made it in one piece. You made us sweat for a while,” I said.

“C’mon, boss, can we leave the past in the past, now?” Yattul said with humble humor and a convincing hint of guilt.

With every interaction, I was becoming more and more convinced that Yattul was much better off making a living onstage than in the underground. He wasn’t good-looking, per se, but he had a distinctive look and air about him, and he’d commanded some authority when speaking to his accomplices the previous night, though that sense of authority was well concealed now. I supposed he might need some training in projection and articulation, but I’d have to hear him do a few tongue twisters to be the judge of that.

I gave him a hearty laugh. “I’m sure it’s smooth sailing from now on. We’ll get some rest back here, Yattul. You can focus on the horses.”

“Yessir.” Yattul tucked the wagon roof closed and turned his attention to driving. That being said, the only task left for him was to find lodging for us and a stable for the horses. That wouldn’t require much of his concentration.

“That was a surprisingly quiet trip,” Lorraine said after the wagon was sealed.

“Right?” Augurey agreed, keeping his guard up. “I was expecting something to happen on the road. I guess we can look forward to that now.”

“I’d prefer to relax in the village when we have a room, but I don’t think that’s in our cards this time,” I remarked.

My body didn’t tire, but there were times when I felt mentally exhausted. Even without a long night’s sleep, I could usually recover if I loafed around for a bit. Knowing that I’d have to stay alert, rest was off the table.

“That’s that,” Lorraine said. “Let’s call it entertainment to liven up our stay, which is usually so boring. That being said, we shouldn’t underestimate our foes, of course.”

I couldn’t help but feel taken aback by Lorraine’s unabashed optimism.



Looza was one of the numerous villages in the Kingdom of Yaaran, and like many of its villages, it was incredibly rural. Not quite as much as my hometown, but I assumed this village didn’t share the particular characteristics of Hathara. Life here seemed very peaceful, so much so that Maalt started to look like the center of society by comparison. Every resident must have been a farmer, hunter, lumberjack, crafter, merchant, or bartender. Even this village had a bar, allowing the rest of the residents to cut loose once in a while.

“We don’t see adventurers around here very often. There’s not much to see here, but there’s plenty to drink. I’ll keep them flowing until you’re all down for the count,” said the owner of the bar. His towering stature reminded me of a bear, but he seemed more friendly than intimidating. In contrast to his appearance, he was a man of delicate sensibilities, according to other patrons of the bar.

“I don’t know if we’ll party that hard, but I’m glad we can unwind here. And I was hoping to ask you about Lake Petorama,” I said.

“Lake Petorama? So that’s what you’re here for. Not even we go near that place this time of year, but I know someone who can tell you how the lake is most of the time. Hey, Ferrici! These people want to hear about the lake!”

The bar owner called toward a table of three women enjoying their meals and drinks. The one who reacted was the most plain looking of the trio, and she seemed shy as she hesitated to answer. With encouragement from her two tablemates, however, she eventually made her way to us, looking a bit flustered.

It must have been scary to be called over to a band of adventurers who’d just wandered into the remote village. Most adventurers were rough around the edges, and many of them started trouble in a bar once they got a few drinks in them. You could easily imagine how things usually went when a gang of drunk adventurers called over a young maiden. Of course, this kind of situation could also lead to positive outcomes. A girl might earn a gold coin—which could be worth a year’s salary in remote villages—just by pouring the adventurer a drink, or perhaps earn a genuine request for a proper date.

Her friends who’d encouraged her seemed to think this interaction would end positively, at least. Maybe they thought we wouldn’t do anything too aggressive since a woman was in our party—not that there weren’t dangerous men with women in their parties.

“I-I...” Ferrici muttered, clearly nervous.

Lorraine smiled at her. “You can relax. We won’t hurt you. We just have a few questions. Tomorrow, we’re headed out to Lake Petorama, and we wanted to find out the general terrain around it, its distance from here, its size, and any information about its ecosystem. The owner tells us you’re the expert.”



Lake Petorama was the final destination of our trip. Looza was the closest village to the lake, which was why we’d decided to stay here. We were after some precious materials that could be found around the lake: aqua hathurs, luteum golems, and even wyvern elata. This place had all the major loot we were after.

Even so, few adventurers made the trip to Looza, mostly because all the other

materials available at Lake Petorama were easily obtainable elsewhere. No one really bothered to come this deep into the country. We had little choice but to make the journey, though, because this was the only spot where we could gather all the materials we needed at once, or at least by the deadline.

If we'd tried to gather them at more convenient locations, it would've taken us a week just in transit, but trying to round them up all at once wasn't any better. Any one of them we could have collected in two days' time. The thought that we were in this mess because Augurey jam-packed our schedule crept back into my mind, but I was sure that Augurey would say he'd planned our itinerary with full confidence that we could pull it off. In fact, it looked like we were going to do just that and validate his planning skills. How annoying.

"Y-You want to ask me about Lake Petorama?"

I came back to reality, remembering that we were going to ask Ferrici a few questions. We'd delegated the interview to the calm and collected Lorraine, out of pure calculation that she'd have much better chances than I would, skull-faced as I was, or Augurey, gaudy epitomized.

"Yes," Lorraine started. "We plan to gather a few materials up there."

Ferrici hurriedly interjected. "What?! Y-You can't go there now! It's wyvern mating season, so they are very protective of their territory. If you go there, they will attack you!"

Lake Petorama was a famous mating ground for wyverns. Wyverns came in many varieties, but the lake was a favorite destination for the light-blue mime wyverns, a subvariety of the ceva wyverns. The wyverns' pilgrimage was not an annual event, as they only congregated during a specific time of the year once every few years. During that time, they laid their eggs, raised their hatchlings until they learned to fly, and departed to a warmer climate before winter came. Ferrici was telling us that the mime wyverns had recently taken over the lake for this purpose.

"We know," Lorraine countered. "We intended to harvest some wyvern elata, since it only grows in the presence of wyverns."

"Wyvern droppings fertilize the elata, don't they?" I chimed in, recalling a page from a book I'd read.

“Yes. That’s the theory, anyway. Some smaller wyverns are ridden by dragon knights or wyvern cab drivers, and I’ve heard of an experimental farming of wyvern elata, but they never grew bigger than their natural-grown counterparts. There must be other conditions for it to grow.”

“They were able to farm it, then?” I asked.

“Yes, but it was insufficient in both quantity and quality to make the method economically viable. Harvesting them from the wild yielded better products more quickly. The experiment wasn’t too successful.”

I appreciated how someone somewhere could be taking on any project. This operation wasn’t included in any book I’d read, though. Maybe because it wasn’t worth an inclusion in a book, the experiment had been performed in secret, or maybe I just didn’t read enough, or all of the above.

“We got off track there. Ferrici, was it? Long story short, we know there are wyverns at the lake,” said Lorraine.

Ferrici’s face clouded. “Perhaps you should change your plans, then...”

Lorraine shook her head. “We’re adventurers, Ferrici. We don’t back down from a challenge. Well, that makes us sound braver than we are, but we know the venture itself is possible. There are records showing small amounts of wyvern elata being exported from this village in the middle of wyvern mating season. There must be a way to get to the lake.”

This much we’d researched in the capital. We’d looked up a few traveling merchants who’d been to Looza before and interviewed them. Yattul was one of those merchants. Of course, now we knew that he wasn’t a merchant at all—unless he was and was only moonlighting as a spy. Seemed plausible. A traveling merchant would have an easier time gathering information than most, and it was the perfect cover for most situations. He’d even fooled us at first.

Ferrici’s eyes widened. “W-Well...”

It was clear that she, or the village at large, didn’t want that information to get out. But why not? If there was something that allowed them to go into wyvern mating territory, that would be a highly useful trick. Maybe the secret was too profitable for them to share. Wyvern eggs and hatchlings sold for very

high prices, since wyverns could be trained if they were raised by hand. Dragon knights and wyvern cab drivers raised them in a way that best suited their use. In either case, it all started with conditioning from a very young age. If there was a way to obtain a whole bunch of wyvern hatchlings or eggs, any country would want to get its hands on it.

Whether my guess had hit the mark or not, Lorraine looked like she had followed a similar train of thought.

“There’s something you don’t want to talk about? I can make some guesses, but we only want to gather the materials we need, and only as much as we need. Neither wyvern hatchlings nor eggs are on that list. If you can’t tell us how... Well, could you take us there? We’ll pay for your trouble, of course, and we swear to keep our mouths shut about anything we see.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t!” Ferrici exclaimed and sprang out the door.

Lorraine watched the girl bolt, then turned to us apologetically. “Sorry. I couldn’t tie up the deal.”



“There was nothing more you could’ve done,” I said, trying to reassure Lorraine. “No way they’d give up on how to get close to mating wyverns, especially not to some random adventurers they don’t know.”

Lorraine nodded, but she was still somewhat disappointed. “True. I did personally want to learn the method, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Lorraine did boast a hungry sense of curiosity. She wanted to know this particular secret more than she let on, but she had enough common sense and—some form of—a conscience. She at least wouldn’t consider torturing Ferrici for the information or anything like that.

“It’s fine if the magician won’t share their trick with us. If the back door’s closed, we’ll go in through the front,” Augurey said.

Going through the front door, in this case, meant charging into wyvern territory. The wyverns would storm us, but all we had to do was take them all down. Every part of a mime wyvern was useful, so it would net us a nice profit. Their water magic crystals were very versatile too.

The question was if we could actually take on that many wyverns. / couldn't, obviously. Neither could Augurey, as far as I knew. Our plan rested on the shoulders of our resident mage, the Great Lorraine. This sort of joking description might have drawn her ire, but she would definitely be the most effective member of our party if we were going to charge straight into a horde of mating mime wyverns.

A wyvern's strength came from the sole fact that it was airborne, but once a wind spell knocked it down to the ground, Augurey and I could manage it. Not dozens and hundreds of them, of course, but all wyvern subspecies were decently intelligent, so once a few were grounded, most of the others would stay away from us. If any stubborn individuals came our way, we could deal with them one by one.

If the task proved too challenging, tucking tail and running was still on the table. No sense biting off more than we could chew. Good thing the guild had offered not to mark this quest as a failure if it came to that.

"That's all good and well," Lorraine replied, "but if a few hundred of them come flying, I'm running away. There's no sense in massacring a population of mime wyverns."

Lorraine seemed more concerned with the environmental impact than our potential profit, and she added that the wyverns must be keeping the other monster populations in check. Stronger monsters often preyed upon weaker ones like goblins, which multiplied quickly. That said, even goblins could become a serious threat to a small village like this, so I figured they appreciated the mime wyverns helping with pest control.

It was worth noting that wyverns rarely attacked humans unprovoked. In fact, the more powerful and intelligent a monster, the less likely they were to do so. It was believed that they knew eating monsters was more nutritious than eating humans. Still, although there was never a guarantee when it came to monsters, I'd say wyverns were easier to deal with than the likes of goblins, which seemed to *enjoy* attacking humans.

"Indeed," Augurey agreed. "We don't want to bring this village any harm. Let's get back to the inn, shall we? We should get some rest. Big day

tomorrow.”

When I glanced outside, the moon told me the time. With much to do on our agenda tomorrow, it was best for us to get to bed early and start bright and early.

“Yeah, let’s go back,” I echoed.

We paid the barkeep, with a few extra coins for his trouble, and walked out the door.



Back at the inn, we each retired to our own room. We’d told the innkeeper that one room would suffice for all of us, but he’d offered three rooms for the same price, since there were extra rooms owing to the village being so remote. Besides, he’d added that he didn’t have any rooms with three beds, so arranging one for us would have been more trouble than giving us the extra rooms—all said in the matter-of-fact manner innkeepers in the middle of nowhere often used.

As soon as he entered his room, Augurey Ars turned off the lights and lay down on the bed. He could still see his surroundings, perhaps because of the excitement this adventure with his old friends had brought him. He stared up at some marks on the ceiling. They started to resemble faces, then the faces of his old acquaintances. This reminded him of his hometown and how there was nothing there.

Perhaps some found value in that town, but not Augurey. He’d grown tired of prideful people refusing to look for new possibilities. He couldn’t stand his soul rotting away in that place, which was why he’d become an adventurer. If the people he used to know were to hear that, they’d turn their noses up at him, scoffing at him for wasting his time. Augurey didn’t care. They didn’t understand him anyway. Well, one person did.

“Grandpa...”

Augurey wondered if he was still alive. He swore when he left his hometown that he would never return, but now he felt like, maybe, he could.

As he spoke with Rentt and Lorraine, he began to realize how important it was to know the place you came from. Even his decision to never return to his hometown seemed more like an excuse to run away than stone-cold determination.



So, maybe now...

“I might go and see him. With Rentt and Lorraine...” Augurey muttered, his eyelids growing heavier until his vision went dark.



When a knock came at the door, Augurey opened his eyes. He’d been awake for a few moments already because he’d sensed someone approaching his room. Without instincts like that, he wouldn’t have made it this far as a Silver-class adventurer.

The Bronze-class exam was pretty tough, but the Silver-class one went above and beyond. One time, even his fellow party members, with whom Augurey had been dungeon crawling, had tried to turn on him in his sleep. He never would have become Silver-class without the intuition that woke him up at the first sign of danger.

Some people overcame every challenge with brute force, but that wasn’t Augurey’s style. He’d prepared well and beat the Silver-class exam in the expected way. Compared to that, picking up on someone coming down the hall who wasn’t even concealing their presence was second nature to him.

Augurey got out of bed and approached the door. Glancing out the window, he saw the sky was still dark, with no sign of daybreak. It was the dead of night. If he ever had before now, Augurey no longer expected his guest to be reputable.

With plenty of caution, Augurey called through the door, “Who is it?”

He tried to sound as calm as possible, and no one would have doubted the tranquility in his voice—no one save for Rentt, maybe. Augurey imagined that Rentt might have asked him if he was nervous. Rentt always seemed like he was daydreaming or thinking of nothing in particular, but he always kept a sharp eye on his surroundings. Augurey knew that was just how Rentt was, but Rentt wasn’t the one standing on the other side of the door.

In fact, the unexpected guest sounded a bit nervous but not suspicious. “Um... It’s me, Ferrici. Do you...remember me?”

Augurey recognized the girl's voice, then recalled how Ferrici had looked to be around seventeen or eighteen. He wondered if she would be offended by that descriptor. She was old enough to marry and might even be expected to do so in a couple of years in a remote village like this. The idea didn't sit well with Augurey, but he was willing to accept the local customs.

Making a note to himself that he was speaking to a lady, Augurey answered, "We spoke at the bar, not that I contributed much to the conversation. Can I help you? If you want to share something about the wyverns, I'll go wake the other two."

Augurey remembered that the barkeep had said Ferrici knew Lake Petorama like her backyard, and judging by her conversation with Lorraine, she knew some important information about the wyverns. He hadn't expected Ferrici to backtrack after she refused to answer Lorraine's cordial questioning, but something seemed to have changed her mind.

"No, I...wanted to speak to you, privately, Augurey. Could you open the door?"

So, she's fallen for me. Augurey wasn't too full of himself to jump to that conclusion, although adventurers were relatively popular in remote villages. They made more money than most other workers could dream of, and even Bronze-class adventurers could deal with most dangers in the area with an arm tied behind their back. All in all, adventurers made very good matches for ladies of these villages. That said, the fact that many adventurers were rough around the edges and always risked never returning from a job polarized their reception among women. They either clung to them or wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole. It wasn't inconceivable that Ferrici would rather cling than reach for the pole, but the timing seemed off.

Out of the three of them, at least, Augurey could see why he would be the best candidate for a match-seeking lady, when the other two options were a woman and a weirdo in a skeleton mask. Considering Augurey himself dressed like a peacock, he might very well doubt the sensibilities of any lady who chose him, but he also conceded that, since most adventurers were oddballs at best, ladies who sought after them were ready to overlook some details.

As these futile thoughts whirled through his brain, Augurey reached for the door, recognizing that he wouldn't get past his musings until he opened it. He turned the doorknob, and the door slowly creaked open.

"Uh... I'm sorry..."

The suspenseful motion did reveal Ferrici, the very one from the bar.

"It's all right. There's something important you wanted to talk to me about, isn't there? Why don't you come in?"

Ferrici agreed, her cheeks rosy, and quietly stepped into the room.



After entering, Ferrici took a seat at the edge of the bed where Augurey had been asleep moments ago. She let out a sigh that would have come across as strangely alluring to most men. Even her attire...

"Ferrici, something's different about you from when I saw you at the bar."

"D-Do you think so? Um... How do I look?" Ferrici asked, looking up at him with just her eyes.

Augurey admitted that the gesture was cute. While her silhouette was rather flat, owing to the lack of ample food in the village, her body looked fully matured. Now, she was sitting at the edge of a man's bed, quite seductively. No one could have missed the signal, no matter how oblivious they were. She'd swapped her plain linen clothes for a dress fit for a lady of the capital, though the cold-shoulder style might have been a bit too revealing in another time or another place.

"I'm sure any man in the village would say you're enchanting. You look wonderful, Ferrici."

Augurey's remark drew a slow and gleeful smile across her face. Ferrici stood from the bed and drew closer to him. "Really?! Oh, good. I was a little worried that...you would think I was being too forward." She leaned into him, wrapping her arms around him—the gentle tug on his waist indicative of her slender stature.

"Too forward? Why would you think that?" Augurey asked.

Gazing up at him with only her eyes again, she slowly said, “Because...I’m...” One of her arms drew away from Augurey’s waist. “I’m about to hurt you very much.”

As soon as the words left her lips, Ferrici’s arm flew back toward Augurey’s side. He saw, from the corner of his eye, a silver object clasped in her hand—a knife. She was wielding it with clear intent to harm Augurey.

At such a close range and practically detained in her embrace, most men would have been stabbed without a chance to react. Augurey, however, was an adventurer, and a Silver-class one at that, which was a sign of distinguished talent among them. The mere fact that Augurey could follow the sudden strike of the blade with his eyes was proof this was far from life-threatening for him. On a near daily basis, Augurey took on monsters that moved faster than her, or bandits that fired magic spells at him undetected.

Augurey thwarted the girl’s desperate strike as he snatched her wrist and squeezed with enough force to leave a sting but not a mark, making her drop the knife.

It was clear that any more resistance on Ferrici’s part was futile, but she did not grow quiet. On the contrary, she began screeching and thrashing about, not like the young woman she’d presented herself as in the bar and up to now, but like a rabid animal.

Augurey noticed something in her and lightly tugged her toward him so that she swayed, revealing her fine, slender neckline. Augurey swiftly struck her neck with the side of his hand; the almost nonchalant movement was enough to rob Ferrici of her consciousness and she crumpled.

To keep her from hitting the floor, Augurey caught her under her arms. He made sure she was knocked out clean, then gently laid her down on the bed. He produced a spool of rope from his tool bag and tied Ferrici up, utilizing rags to prevent the rope from leaving marks. This way, she couldn’t attack him again if she came to.

“That takes care of it, I guess, but...”

Was she Siren? The thought had crossed Augurey’s mind. It certainly seemed like he had things under control, but there were a few glaring oddities. The first

was how tactless the attack seemed to be. The honey trap was a time-tested tactic that couldn't be underestimated considering how often men fell for it. They couldn't help it. It was in their nature. It made sense that this method would be Siren's specialty.

If Augurey hadn't expected the approach, he might have even seriously considered the possibility that Ferrici had fallen for him. Maybe there was nothing more to this attack. But if that had been her aim from the start, Ferrici should have been more forward in the bar and at least shown some interest in him. She hadn't made any moves toward him at the time, though.

Nevertheless, here she was. It didn't make sense, and neither did Ferrici's lack of strength. Siren must have been trained as a saboteur and therefore should be a capable fighter. She at least should be strong enough to make it alone from the point in the woods where Rentt had eavesdropped on their conversation, through possible monsters and bandits, all the way to the village.

Ferrici, on the other hand, had the typical physical strength of a girl her age, and how she'd tried to stab Augurey was completely amateurish, from her grip on the knife to the way she drew it away from him before striking. Augurey would have simply pushed the knife in if he'd been in her shoes. That was quicker and forceful enough to wound the human body. The drawback was overkill. He knew Rentt and Lorraine would do the same, but Ferrici had neglected such a basic maneuver.

Augurey couldn't shake the feeling that Ferrici was not Siren. If not, then why did she attack him? That, he didn't know. He had a few theories, but nothing definitive.

Augurey concluded that his predicament called for a conference. Leaving Ferrici alone in his room, whether she was Siren or not, seemed precarious, so Augurey threw her over his shoulder and went to knock on Rentt's and Lorraine's doors.



Even the hallways of the inn, which had been primarily constructed with older lumber, looked cozy. Tallow candles lit the walls, filling the hall with a gamey smell. This scent was familiar to adventurers and residents of remote villages,

but Augurey suspected it might seem a bit pungent to those from the city. These candles were commonly used in Maalt as well, but the more expensive, plant-based candles were preferred in the capital. In higher-class establishments like five-star inns and brand-name clothing shops, they used magical items for light for fear of starting a fire, and of course, those were more expensive than any candle. Augurey preferred the soft-lit tallow, but he had to admit he could go without the smell. It clung to your clothes.

“Not that I can do anything about that,” he muttered to himself as he arrived at the door to Rentt’s room.

Augurey knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” A voice answered, sounding slightly on guard.



I sensed someone walking up to my room. In my current position, I had reason to fear for my life if someone were to enter, so when the footsteps stopped outside my door and a knock came, I was a bit short with my reply.

“Who is it?”

When I heard the voice that answered me, my concern was eased. It was a familiar voice, I mean.

“It’s me, Augurey. I know it’s late, but I need to talk to you about something. If you could let me in sooner rather than later... I’m worried that someone’s going to see me.”

Discovering the identity of my midnight guest was comforting, but Augurey had shared a strange sentiment. In a remote village like this, one wrong move could be publicized to the entire village in a single day, but walking down the hall of an inn in the middle of the night hardly constituted an idiosyncrasy. Yet Augurey had sounded...

Whatever. I’d open the door, but I obviously had to warn him first. “Sure, but you can’t freak out when you see my room. Just to be clear, I’m innocent.”

“I will never doubt your innocence in anything. I’ll say the same to you, though. I’m innocent.”

That exchange told me that we'd both experienced some sort of disturbance, probably of a very similar nature.

With a sense of relief—which was weird given the situation, but at least we were already on the same page—I said, “Then come on in,” and opened the door.



“I see,” Augurey said. “No wonder you were so concerned that someone might get the wrong impression from *this*.” He gestured to the thing strewn beside my bed.

“Right back at you. Why do you have her in a roll-up?” More specifically, she was tied up, but that was semantics. The fact that he had used pieces of fabric under the rope attested to Augurey’s gentlemanliness. That wouldn’t be the case if he’d just kidnapped the girl and brought her here, but that wasn’t a possibility I entertained—not with Augurey.

“You know the answer, don’t you? She attacked me. By the looks of it, you had a similar issue.”

Augurey’s eyes were on the thing on the floor, which was a woman in her undergarments. It went without saying that the woman wasn’t Lorraine. That would have caused a whole slew of other problems, but I wouldn’t get into that.



The woman was one of Ferrici's friends from the bar. Speaking of Ferrici, Augurey laid her down on my bed.

Allow me to explain how Ferrici's friend ended up on my floor without her clothes. She came knocking on my door in the middle of the night without warning, saying she had to talk to me, so I'd let her in. I was hoping that she might know some secrets about the wyverns or the lake, but I didn't get the chance to ask. She stripped herself down and made some advances on me. Then the knife came out. Unfortunately for her, stabbing me by normal means usually didn't produce the desired effect.

I'd used Splintering—I'd been practicing—to detach the part of my skeleton where the woman tried to stab me, so the knife had only caught the air before I knocked her out and tied her up. I wouldn't die from a few stab wounds, and I could heal them ostensibly, but I knew full well that any damage to my body was cumulative. I'd seen how Splintering worked out for that vampire in Maalt's new dungeon. I had no intention of letting this woman stab me, even if she was clearly an amateur with a knife. Just as I had tied her up and put her on the ground to decide my next move, Augurey had knocked on my door.

I gave him the rundown, and he gave me his version of a similar story. We just had to share a look, and we knew we had a consensus. We kept the name Siren and any other keywords out of our mouths, though. There could be prying ears just beyond these walls. If Lorraine had been here, she could have set up a Sound Barrier, but...

That reminded me. "If you and I were attacked, Lorraine could be in a similar predicament, right?"

"If they're after you and me, they're definitely after our whole party," Augurey agreed.

"We should go check on her."

"Right. But what do we do with these two?"

We observed the detained women for a few moments. Leaving them here seemed like a bad idea, but so did carrying them on our shoulders. The former, though, was just not an option. If these two were Siren and/or her accomplices,

they would bolt. If not, it was possible that they would be silenced while we were gone. No way we were letting them out of our sights.

“Let’s take them with us,” I concluded. “If one of us carries them and the other keeps ahead to check the hall, we should be fine. If push comes to shove, we’ll have to tell the truth.” If we bumped into the innkeeper or any other guests, I meant. Lying about it could lead to more trouble down the road.

“Would they believe us?” Augurey asked.

“I don’t know, but what choice do we have? Let’s pray no one spots us.” That’s all I could say.



“We’re clear. Come on.”

I waved Augurey forward after checking that there was no one around the corner of the hall. Augurey had decent night vision—though not as good as mine—so he easily spotted my wave and came over. I moved to the end of that hall, and repeated the process.

“I feel like we’re abducting them or something,” Augurey muttered, glancing at the ladies on his shoulders.

“This is the best we can do. We’re almost there. Let’s go.” I went around the corner and stood before Lorraine’s room, waving Augurey to me. He came shuffling over, when...

Lorraine’s door opened. I hadn’t knocked, so Lorraine must have opened it. She poked her head out of the door and said, “It’s you, Rentt. Good timing...” She turned her gaze to Augurey, who was still shouldering two young and half-naked ladies. “Oh.”

“No, I’m... I can explain, Lorraine...” Augurey started, clearly flustered.

“Don’t worry, I get it,” she said with a little sigh. “Come on in, both of you.”

Augurey looked like himself again as he walked into her room, half-naked ladies and all. I double-checked that no one else was out in the hall before sliding inside and securely closing the door behind me.



“We thought you might have gotten one too,” Augurey said as he dumped his cargo onto the bed that was already occupied by another captive. Unlike our catches, Lorraine’s assailant was bound by rings of light around their wrists and ankles—very high-level magic, if I had to guess. Neither Augurey nor I could have cast anything like that.

Magic spells became more difficult to maintain the farther away you were from the spell and the longer the spell was active. Magic items were another story, but maintaining a spell like this for a long time with no aid was much more difficult than it looked.

The assailant, just to clarify, was a man. A decently good-looking fellow that looked a bit out of place for a remote village. Beautiful people were often taken to the city when they were young. Not as slaves or anything, but they tended to get more opportunities like an apprenticeship or adoption. I supposed some were taken into slavery in more unruly places, but slavery was, at least on paper, outlawed in Yaaran. There was no open slave trade, and you’d have to chalk up any illegal operations as the product of sick people. Knight orders and constabularies tried their best, but there would always be some crime that went unpunished.

“Exactly,” Lorraine said. “So even if Augurey is carrying half-naked women on his shoulders and following a man in an eerie mask, I would never think that some human traffickers were trying to abduct these women into slavery. Besides, slavery brings more trouble than money in Yaaran. For you two, adventuring would be far safer and more profitable.”

I couldn’t tell if she was trying to make us feel better somehow, or if this was her way of saying she trusted us—even though she made it sound like Augurey and I would jump at the chance to traffic humans as long as the money was good. This time, I was pretty sure she was joking. Anyway...

“Did he make advances at you?” Augurey asked, ignoring her previous comment.

“Yes. He said he had something to talk about. We did talk for a short while until he tried to pin me down, so I just decided to knock him out with Gie Vieros.”

Augurey shuddered. “Yeesh. That thing hurts pretty bad if it’s a clean hit.”

Gie Vieros was a simple, basic spell that shot out a clump of earth. By the same token, it was said to be a good indicator of a mage’s skill. Someone as talented as Lorraine could easily make that clump of dirt punch through a few sheets of metal. I imagined the effect the spell must have had on the ordinary, albeit better-looking than average, villager.

“Hey, is he alive?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Of course he’s alive. Even I know that murder on our first night in such a small village, for any reason, is a bad idea. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Augurey chimed in.

It was an obvious conclusion, and even if common sense hadn’t stepped in, we had more reasons to keep our assailants alive.

Lorraine quietly set up a Sound Barrier and cut to the chase. “So, I think one or all of them are Siren, or a combination of her and her accomplices. Thoughts?”

Even though we were pretty sure our three captives on the bed were out cold, Lorraine had set up the spell to only include the three of us within it.

With confidence brought on by guaranteed privacy, I answered, “That’s what we’re thinking. But if we’ve found three of them already, it muddles our next move. There could be more of them, and... Doesn’t this feel off to you?”

“It does. It was like a switch had flipped when he attacked me. It didn’t seem like he was acting until the attack, but rather...” Lorraine trailed off and rubbed her chin.

Augurey chimed in. “Ferrici was my attacker. Do you remember her?”

“The girl we were introduced to in the bar, right?”

“Right. She was acting weird too. I didn’t knock her out right away. Once I detained her, she started thrashing like an animal. Like she’d lost her mind. It didn’t even look like she was acting of her own volition.”

That was it. Lorraine and I had knocked out our attackers relatively quickly, but it still felt weird, like they weren't conscious of their actions. It felt like they were a puppet master's marionettes. It was still too early to call it for sure, but we had to confirm.

"I don't sense magic on them, but it's very possible that they were being controlled," Lorraine said. "We'll have to test our hypothesis. Should we wake one of them?"

"They might go berserk again," Augurey noted.

"We can't help that. Even if they do, I wouldn't know how to snap them out of it if it's not magic. In that case, we'd have to knock them out again by force or magic and capture Siren herself as soon as possible."

She had a point there.

"Then we should pretend we're still none the wiser," I suggested. "I don't want them making a run for it. We should scope out the village too. There may be others that have turned like this."

"What if *all* of the villagers have?" Augurey muttered.

Lorraine nodded and said, "I see. Preparing the stage. Maybe it means that all of the villagers are made into actors."

That was a terrifying thought.



We tried various methods to wake at least one of our three captives, but our efforts were in vain. No magic nor brute force had awakened them. When Lorraine slapped her attacker—who appeared to be the most durable of the three—full force and the guy didn't so much as stir, Augurey and I shared a look of disbelief. It didn't take us long to conclude that any normal means of snapping people out of unconsciousness was going to be a waste of our time.

"That one was a bit harsh. The mark on his cheek looks like a lymes leaf," I said. A lymes, by the way, was a tree that produced leaves about the size and shape of a human hand.

"I was nearly taken advantage of, regardless of whether he was being

controlled. I should be allowed a slap or two,” Lorraine countered. She didn’t want us to misunderstand her intentions, though, so she soon added, “Jokes aside, some hypnoses are so powerful that they need that much of a shock. I thought it was a possibility since none of my spells has worked on them. I can’t very well do that to the two women, hence my choice. But if he has nothing to do with Siren, he’ll understand once we explain ourselves.”

Apparently, her slap wasn’t just a violent method of stress relief. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that Lorraine would never do such a thing, but she wasn’t the type, so her rationale made more sense to me.

“Oh, good,” I said. “I mean, we’re not *good*, since they’re still out cold. I do have one idea left... We need to bag Siren.”

“Looks like it,” Lorraine agreed. “The question is, where is she? Is she one of these three, hiding out in the village, or is she somewhere farther away? She might even be long gone.”

All options seemed plausible, which would turn our search into quite an ordeal.

Augurey gave his two cents. “I don’t think she’s gone. She wouldn’t leave without seeing the end results, and the Goblin is still around. It does seem like the three of them plan and work together. They’d probably have another meeting if they knew their plan had failed.”

“True. Worst case, even if she is gone, we can ask Goblin about her whereabouts. I have him marked, so we can track him wherever he goes.”

To “mark” someone, as Lorraine so casually mentioned, was to track them through magic. Unlike the normal method of just searching for someone’s mana, marking someone with a specific spell would allow the mage to keep track of them much more easily and at a greater distance. It was another very high-level spell, if you hadn’t guessed already. Casting it in silence was difficult enough, and the tracking radius of the spell depended on the caster’s skill level. Since Lorraine said she could track Goblin “wherever” he went, she was confident that she could find him in a very wide range. Once Lorraine got her fingers around you, she’d chase you down to the pits of hell. Imagining myself on the receiving end of her ire chilled me to the bone.

“Another option is to interrogate Goblin now,” I suggested.

Considering that Siren was his accomplice, you’d think Goblin would know who she was and how to snap her victims out of this stupor. It was tempting to say that this was our most efficient solution, but I doubted either of them would go for it.

As if to prove me right, Lorraine shook her head. “If we question him now, they could take Ferrici and the others hostage. We still need to feign ignorance about Goblin’s scheming. If we decide to cut our losses with these victims, it’s another story, but that’s not really an option.”

“They’re only here because we are,” Augurey noted. “I’m not heartless enough to say that I don’t care about their lives.”

I wasn’t serious about my suggestion either. I just wanted to confirm that we were on the same page.

“That makes it difficult,” Lorraine said. “Should we start with...looking outside? She might just jump out at us from some bush.” She was joking, but it wasn’t entirely impossible. The only hiding places around here would be bushes and woods.

“We have to check on the other villagers too,” Augurey added. “However, we can’t leave these three here. Lorraine, could you watch them? Rentt and I will go look outside. If we don’t find anything, we’ll regroup. What do you think?”

Lorraine and I mulled it over for a minute and agreed, both knowing that we had no better option at that time.

“I don’t mind watching them, but can you move this guy to the sofa? The ladies will be in for even more of a shock if they wake and see they’re lying in bed with a man,” Lorraine said.

The unconscious trio were sprawled on the bed. Waking up inches away from a stranger’s face, no matter how handsome it was, would be quite surprising, I imagined.

“Not a problem,” Augurey replied. He hoisted the man onto his back and took him to the sofa.

I could have done it just as easily, but Augurey happened to be closer. He was more muscular than he looked, even among adventurers, so it was always best not to judge a book by its cover.

Augurey then cocked his head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I recognize... Oh, well. It’s nothing,” Augurey said meaningfully and set the guy down.

We then left Lorraine with the three unconscious people and went to scope out the village.



“Where’s the innkeeper?” I asked.

We didn’t want to bring any undue suspicions upon us for leaving the inn without a word, so I’d decided to look for the innkeeper. When adventurers came from the city and stayed in remote villages like this, it wasn’t uncommon for them to party too hard or go out in the middle of the night to have their way with the girls of the village. I just wanted to speak with the innkeeper so he didn’t mistake us for thugs like that.

“I don’t see him,” I muttered.

The innkeeper, who’d been at the reception desk when we checked in, was nowhere to be found. Even in the middle of the night, family-owned inns usually had someone manning the reception. It would’ve been a tough schedule if they had to do that every night of the year, but these businesses could turn a profit if they got one or two stays a week. The night concierge not only attended to the needs of the inn’s guests, but also protected the establishment from the very real dangers of customers stealing from them or sneaking out in the dead of night to avoid paying for their stay.

“Strange. Maybe he fell asleep?” Augurey peered over the counter, but suddenly sensed an attack. He pulled his head back, then drew his sword and stood on guard.

I followed suit. “What’s going on...? Oh, come on.”

Beyond the counter stood the innkeeper with a hatchet in hand. He was glaring at us with bloodshot eyes, foaming at the mouth like a rabid beast.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Augurey asked.

I nodded, but clarified. “Don’t kill him.”

“Of course— Whoa!”

The innkeeper had vaulted the counter and was now charging us at full speed, raising what must have been his log-chopping hatchet. His movements were inhuman, which made them difficult to predict. We had some opportunities for a counterattack, but I hesitated to go at him with my sword when I wanted to contain him with as few injuries as possible.

Augurey blocked the hatchet with his sword. “He’s stronger than I expected, but not as much as any adventurer!” He parried and closed the distance between him and the innkeeper, then drove the hilt of his sword into the innkeeper’s sternum. The innkeeper groaned, his head rolled back, and he crumbled to the ground. Augurey ensured that he was unconscious, then said, “Cute little surprise.”

“Yeah. But not entirely unexpected.”

“Right. Who knows how things are outside.”

“Not good, if I had to guess.”

Imagining the worst, we shared a look and a sigh. Staying inside wasn’t an option, though, so we left the innkeeper where he was and stepped out of the inn. Siren could still come in and silence the innkeeper, but the chances of that happening seemed slim now. Of course, nothing was a guarantee.



“I *did* have a feeling we’d find ourselves in this situation,” Augurey said.

“What a coincidence,” I replied.

When we stepped out of the inn, we were faced with a sight that made us want to groan—ten or so villagers surrounding us. We’d half joked about the entire village being under mind control, but it wasn’t so funny anymore. On the other hand, the fact that they were a small group might be a good sign. That

wasn't enough to fill the entire village, no matter how remote it was. Besides, these were average Joes from the village; a Bronze-class adventurer like me could handle them without much trouble. Even when I was alive—pre-undead, I mean—I could've handled myself in a situation like this, so when the villagers charged us with perfect coordination, we were able to take care of them with relative ease, carefully knocking out each of them without causing any injury.

When only one was left standing, he bellowed and went to stab himself in the neck.

“Wha—? Stop!” I whacked the knife out of his hand and knocked the guy out.

Out of concern that the others would follow suit, Augurey and I double-checked that all of them were out cold before letting out a sigh of relief.

“That was close. I didn't think he'd try to kill himself,” Augurey said.

I shook my head. “I doubt he would have, if he had a say in it. Our man-eater friend has gone a bit far. We'd be in a world of trouble if any of them died.”

How much trouble? Maybe not as much as I'd made it out to be. Usually, ordinary villagers held no power over adventures, but in cases like this, the government could investigate and decide to arrest us. Of course, we could say we were attacked unprovoked until we were blue in the face, but...

Just then, it occurred to me. “Maybe that's what she's trying to do.”

“What do you mean?” Augurey asked.

“Force us to hurt or kill the villagers so we'd be arrested.”

“Oh, I see. That wouldn't be fun.”

I was sure Siren wouldn't have minded if her puppets had killed us, but that was the backup plan in case we proved to be a challenge. She'd swoop in while we were immobilized and kill us. Pretty clever, all things considered. I could splinter my way out of any bindings, though. Lorraine could get herself out of trouble too. There were bindings out there that could disrupt its captive's mana, but Lorraine was the kind of woman who would've prepared for a glaring weakness like that. Augurey, on the other hand... He might be screwed.

As we searched the village for more disturbances, we whispered to each

other.

“All this is shedding some light on who’s pulling the strings behind the curtains,” Augurey remarked.

“Yeah,” I concurred. “Bad move going to see the princess.”

Suddenly, Augurey sniffed the air. “Oh, I remember now! Wait here, Rentt! I’ll be right back.”

He ran off without giving me a chance to ask him what he was talking about. Silver-class adventurers were fast—not that Silver-class jobs were merely foot races or anything. Swift feet were crucial for getting away from a monster that outclassed you, so higher-ranking adventurers typically ran fast.

In any case, since Augurey told me to wait, I was going to wait. I just stood there...in my skeleton mask. Wearing my dark, hooded robe. How conspicuous could I get?

After some time, Augurey returned. “Thanks for waiting, Rentt!”

“Where were you? Wait... Who’s that?”

Augurey was carrying a woman in his arms—a woman whose shabby clothes didn’t quite conceal her allure.

“Siren, probably,” Augurey answered.

Naturally, I went slack-jawed at his response.



“*She’s* Siren?” Lorraine asked as soon as we finished recounting our outing to her.

I couldn’t blame Lorraine. Anyone would be confused as to how we’d gotten here. I was still wondering how Augurey could tell that she was our culprit, myself. He could’ve identified her if he’d been working with Goblin, but he’d have no reason to bring Siren to us unconscious if that were the case. Augurey would’ve had to be working a double-crossing plan that spanned *years*. Unless he somehow knew how I’d turn out, it wasn’t even worth tricking me into a friendship back then. I could have been at the wrong place at the wrong time, but the chances of that seemed slim. Long story short, Augurey identified and

detained Siren, somehow.

“I’m not completely sure,” Augurey admitted. “Just a thought she might be. I could have snatched the wrong person.”

“Intricacies aside, why’d you think she’s Siren?” I asked.

“When I picked up the guy who attacked Lorraine earlier, I caught a whiff of this scent.”

“Scent?”

Lorraine and I went up to our sole male captive and sniffed him. I detected various smells: grass, dirt, and his body odor—like any member of this rural village, I assumed. Otherwise...

“I smell a faint perfume...I think,” Lorraine said.

Now that she’d mentioned it, I noticed it too. I had a decent sense of smell, but I wasn’t connecting the dots. Even this village in the middle of nowhere had a corner shop with a bottle or two of perfume. They were locally made, of course, probably from wildflowers in the area, but nothing was unusual about that.

Augurey, thankfully, had some wisdom to share on this. “Right. They’d have some perfume out here, but the one I smelled on him is only sold in the capital. I lined up to buy it once. When I picked him up, I thought I recognized it. Then I finally remembered.”

Lorraine summarized, “You thought it was weird you found that scent on a villager out here, so you suspected he’d picked it up when he came in contact with someone from the capital. In other words, Siren. That was your reasoning.”

That made sense, except...

“How sharp is your sense of smell, Augurey?” I asked. “Making that connection is one thing, but sniffing it out from who knows where in the village...”

I could’ve pulled off the same thing if it’d been blood, but not with any perfume. My nose just wasn’t equipped for that sort of thing; strictly speaking, I was some sort of vampire. Maybe I could do it with the smell of meat? I’d have

to try.

“Just one of the thousand specialty tricks up my sleeve,” Augurey quipped in a way that made it hard to tell if he was joking or serious. He could color me impressed if that was true, but I doubted it. Why was Augurey loafing around in Silver-class when he had a thousand tricks up his sleeve?

“You’ll have to tell us all about it sometime,” Lorraine deflected. “Our next step, I suppose, is interrogation. We have to wake these people from their hypnosis.”

“You think she’d tell us?” I asked.

“She just has to be persuaded. Can you both leave the room? Oh, and take those three with you. I’ll handle the interrogation alone.”

“Are you sure, Lorraine?” Augurey asked with concern. “She’s got brainwashing powers. You may not be safe on your own...”

I wasn’t too worried for her. “*She’s* fine. I’m more concerned for Siren, even. Take it easy, Lorraine.”

I threw the young, unconscious man over my shoulder and walked out of the room and down the hall to Augurey’s room. He hurried after me with the two women on his shoulders.



After a while, a gentle knock came at Augurey’s door. “It’s me, Lorraine. Can you open the door?”

Augurey and I shared a look before opening the door. I’d considered the possibility of someone else standing there, but it was her, all right.

Lorraine stepped inside and began reporting her findings. “She told me most everything we needed to know. First, Siren’s powers.”

“Hypnotizing people?” I asked.

“Yes. She can completely control up to twenty or so people at once. However, it requires some form of preparation—giving them a whiff of a certain drug, holding a conversation with them... And when the victim is too physically or mentally durable, her hypnosis won’t work. I suppose that wasn’t much of a

factor when mind controlling these villagers, though.”

“Uh-huh. It’s not magic, then?”

“No. You could call it a special ability or maybe a talent. It’s a very rare power that doesn’t involve mana. There is no commonality among those that exhibit them, so research has been moving at a snail’s pace. Very intriguing. I wouldn’t mind dissecting a specimen like that.”

I had no qualms about Siren being dissected, but I hoped it could wait. We weren’t digging for a scientific explanation of Siren’s abilities; we just wanted to know how to snap her victims out of it. Lorraine seemed to be on the same page, because I could see her rein in her scientific curiosity.

“The method to dispel her hypnosis is surprisingly simple,” she said. “In fact, it’s already done. When she loses consciousness, the mind control fails. Since Augurey already knocked her out, her victims can be woken up normally.”



“Then let’s wake them up,” I suggested. “I don’t totally believe their minds are unshackled, but that should be the only thing to look out for.”

Lorraine and Augurey nodded in agreement.

The ten villagers who’d attacked Augurey and me were tied up in a pile in the inn’s dining hall, along with the innkeeper. Who knew what they would’ve been made to do if we hadn’t bound them. We hadn’t really had a choice.

“I concur,” Lorraine said. “Just to be safe, we should wake one of the three, first. Explaining ourselves to one of them and having them pass on the message would be better than trying to explain ourselves to a mob.”

“I know I’d be surprised if I woke up in my local inn tied up,” Augurey remarked. “Oh, do they remember what happens when they’re hypnotized? If they do, we wouldn’t need to explain much.”

“According to Siren, they remember nothing while they’re under mind control. Her usual tactic is to move her victims into positions where it wouldn’t be implausible to suddenly come to their senses, which means that she can snap her victims out of hypnosis at will.”

Augurey nodded. “I see. Then we do need to orientate them. Now, who to wake first... My vote’s for Ferrici.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“We had a full conversation last night. She should be the easiest one to convince.”

“Oh? I don’t think she has the best impression of us considering how we parted yesterday,” Lorraine countered.

Our current situation sure made us look like a band of adventurers who were desperate to get into mating wyvern territory and who’d just kidnapped and tied up a girl who knew the trick to slip in. It was hard to believe Ferrici would take our word for it.

“That’s exactly why we wake her,” Augurey said. “I think we can gain her trust easier if we untie her and thoroughly explain how we got here.”

“That’s one way to do it...” Lorraine replied, not entirely convinced. “We can wake the others if that doesn’t work. She would have lost time, anyway. If we go with that angle, she might not find us as suspicious.”

We had no better idea at the moment, so we would wake Ferrici first.



“Hey... Hey...” I called, shaking her by the shoulder. We’d tried this method many times before we detained Siren, but she’d never responded. Now, though...

Ferrici murmured and slowly opened her eyes. When her vision came into focus, she screamed.

I couldn’t blame her. Who wouldn’t be scared if they woke up to a guy in a skeleton mask, an adventurer dressed like a peacock, and a mage who looked like a mad scientist? I’d be scared. If we’d been kidnappers, we might’ve covered Ferrici’s mouth and told her to shut up, but we were most definitely *not* kidnappers.

Since we were within Lorraine’s Sound Barrier, I *could* ponder the fact that not a soul would hear, no matter how loud the girl screamed. Mwa ha ha ha ha!

This might've been a real fear for Ferrici, though. We stood there waiting for her screaming to diminish until she seemed a little calmer. She glared at us, silently asking, *"What are you going to do to me?!"*

"What are you going to do to me?!" Ferrici shouted.

Never mind. She said it out loud.

"Nothing," I said. "First, we're going to untie you. Then we'll explain what happened here. You can decide what to do after that."

When I approached her, she skirted away from me.

"I'll do it," Lorraine said with a sigh.

Maybe it was intimidating for a guy to approach her while she was tied up. No hard feelings. No hard feelings at all.

Ferrici kept a wary gaze on Lorraine as she came near, but she didn't try to distance herself this time. At least, she seemed to believe that we were untying her.

When she saw the loose rope and the pieces of fabric used to protect her wrists, she thawed a little bit. "What's going on? Just to be clear, I won't spill a word about the wyvern habitat." Her voice was steely, however, indicating that she clearly remembered our last conversation.

Truth be told, Lorraine had a million ways to make Ferrici talk whether she wanted to or not, but there was no need to remind Ferrici of that. It would just scare her unnecessarily.

Seeing as how I wasn't the best delegate for this particular negotiation, Lorraine stepped up to bat. "We're not going to ask about it," she reassured her. "Can you tell me the last thing you remember? Anything."

So that was where we were starting. It probably was the best way to get through to Ferrici about Siren.

Ferrici looked taken aback, but she searched her memory—she must have been a nice person—until the realization hit her. "I left the bar to go home, but...I don't remember anything after that." Still confused, she hadn't considered the cause of her memory loss just yet.

“To clarify, we did not abduct you on your commute. You can verify this with the barkeep later, but we stayed and drank at the bar for another hour or so after you left. Your memory loss was someone else’s doing.”

“Who would... Why would...”

“We don’t know for sure, except that someone hypnotized you, those two knocked out over there, and others in the village. We were fortunately able to apprehend her. This culprit, Siren they call her, was after us. She hypnotized you to make you kill us. You knocked on Augurey’s door—he’s the man over there—and attacked him with a knife.”

Ferrici went wide-eyed.



“A knife...?! I never did that!” Ferrici protested.

Lorraine continued to tell her the facts. It was best not to feed someone lies, white or otherwise, in this sort of situation. Truth could hurt more than lies.

“You did. We know it wasn’t of your own volition. As I’ve said, someone put you under hypnosis.”

“Hypnosis...” Ferrici repeated, apparently having glossed over that part in Lorraine’s initial explanation. The shock of being told she’d attacked Augurey might have buried that nugget in her short-term memory. You’d be in denial too if someone had told you, “Hey, I bet you don’t remember, but you tried to stab me.”

Ferrici looked Lorraine in the eyes, searching for a more detailed answer. There was no sign of scorn in her expression, though, only curiosity.

“Do you understand what hypnosis is?” Lorraine asked.

“I’ve heard of it...” Ferrici replied.

Even in this remote village, that word wasn’t entirely foreign. Circuses that traveled from one desolate village to another sometimes had a so-called hypnotist on their roster, although most adults saw them for the hacks they were. If the hypnotist used magic, that would be another story, but not many mages could cast mind-controlling spells, the intricacies of which were a well-

kept secret. Therefore, in villages like this one, most people saw hypnosis as a cheap gimmick.

Lorraine continued, “Hypnosis comes in many varieties. The displays you have seen of it were mostly parlor tricks, I presume. Most of them use a plant in the audience to fake the effect. Things like preventing the hypnotized from standing up, making them laugh uncontrollably, convincing them that a food tastes different...”

Lorraine’s examples jogged Ferrici’s memory. “I used to believe it when I was a child, but as I grew up and realized that most often the members of the same traveling circus were being hypnotized, I stopped believing. One time, someone from our village was hypnotized, but I also saw the hypnotist slipping him some coin.”

“That sounds about right,” Lorraine said. “But not all hypnotists are snake oil salesmen. Although very few in number, some are the real deal. There is also a decent community that researches their skill. It’s not my field of study, but I requested to undergo hypnosis once. When I say that it’s a real phenomenon, I speak from firsthand experience.”

That must have been one of her adventures from branching out to all corners of academia back in the capital. I thought it was pretty obscure territory, but Lorraine was curiosity incarnate, so I guess it was right up her alley.

Ferrici looked at Lorraine doubtfully. “Really...?”

Lorraine nodded, perfectly serious. “Yes, really. Even so, such suggestions aren’t too strong, nor do they last long. Not even a powerful suggestion can force others into complex actions. For example, the kind of mind control you underwent, Ferrici, is supposed to be impossible to instill by ordinary hypnosis. You were commanded to kill Augurey, and you performed a complicated sequence of actions: coming to Augurey’s room, approaching him suggestively, embracing him to close your distance, and trying to kill him with the knife you had kept hidden.”

Now that Lorraine laid it out like that, it *was* a complex series of actions—a far cry from being unable to stand up out of a chair. Each step of the assassination had required dynamic decision-making. If this was possible by hypnosis, you

could create an army of soldiers who held no regard for their own life. A king or someone of similar status would go to great lengths to get their hands on that resource.

Considering that, I wondered if Siren was one of the mastermind's more valuable employees? Their whole operation felt too lackluster for that to be true, though. Maybe we were that much of an outlier.

I doubted Siren had considered that anyone would sniff her out just from the trace of a scent she'd left on one of her victims. None of us were dogs, after all. Augurey just had a nose as sharp as one. I'd taken a whiff of Siren when Augurey brought her in, but the smell was nowhere near overpowering. In fact, she'd probably tried to avoid wearing any recognizable scent. This wasn't a misstep on Siren's part, just bad luck.

"I really...did that...?" Ferrici uttered, stunned by the gravity of her unconscious actions. Her cheeks then went red with embarrassment. She sat pondering this for a few seconds before turning to Augurey. "Um... I don't remember any of it, but I'm so sorry I did those things! Attacking you with a knife... I don't expect forgiveness for something like that. Are you really all right?"

I, for one, didn't think she owed any of us an apology. She was being controlled, and our rolling into the village had caused the whole thing. Still, Ferrici seemed to feel responsible for the attack.

"It's not your fault at all," Augurey said. "I don't have a scratch on me. Besides, I'm not much of an adventurer, but I've trained enough to stave off an attack, no matter how surprising, from a village girl. Are you all right?"

"What?" Ferrici asked, looking confused.

"You went berserk during the attack, so I had to knock you out with a strike to the neck. I tied you up in case you came to and still weren't yourself. I hope neither left a mark, though I tried my best to prevent that."

Ferrici checked her forearms. There were no marks, thanks to the fabric that had cushioned the rope.

As for her neck, Lorraine took a look. "No mark. It's a pretty neck."

Coming from her, I couldn't help but imagine some sinister subtext. Maybe she was imagining Ferrici's decapitated head in a jar. Lorraine had jarred monster heads in her room by the dozens...

"I'm glad," Ferrici said. "But even if there had been a mark, that's all right. You were protecting yourself."

"Really? That's a relief," Augurey replied. "But all blame lies with the one who hypnotized you. You shouldn't feel bad about it."

"But..."

"If you insist, can you help us explain ourselves to the others who were hypnotized? If possible, we would appreciate it if you could spare them the part about us possibly being the root cause of all of this. We'd have nowhere to go if we were kicked out of the inn. What do you say?"

Augurey had asked for her help very casually. Playing the jester suited him well. By injecting some lightheartedness into the conversation, he made Ferrici smile.

"Yes. Is that all?" she asked.



After that, we started waking the villagers we'd knocked out, beginning with the two that had attacked Lorraine and me. They and Ferrici must have known one another, because they accepted her explanation—only that a dozen or so villagers had been under hypnosis—without much question. Ferrici left out the details about whether the hypnosis was magical and about who the culprit was targeting. Some of the villagers must have been left with unanswered questions, but people in remote settlements tended to be realists, for better or worse. They were resilient, ready to accept the information they were given and focus their energy on moving on.

Even though Ferrici had kept the fact that we were the hypnotist's targets a secret, we couldn't expect the other villagers not to connect the dots when something like this happened the night of our arrival. The more experienced villagers—middle-aged or older, like the innkeeper—were surely the wiser. No one pursued that suspicion, though, thanks to Ferrici's heartfelt retelling of the

events and her emphasis on the fact that we'd freed them from their hypnosis. We wouldn't regain their trust completely, but we took the fact that no one was kicking us out of the village as a win.

Once she'd gone through all of the villagers who'd been hypnotized and they returned to their homes or jobs, Ferrici turned to us. "Um, I kept a lot of things from them, but..." She trailed off, still looking nervous. She knew how this looked for us.

Lorraine said, "Some of them realized that we caused this. None of the younger ones, who seemed more happy-go-lucky, realized, but I did catch a glance from the innkeeper, for example."

"I thought so... I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. We're asking you for a favor. And even those who must have their suspicions haven't demanded we leave the village." Lorraine paused, then looked at Augurey and me. "Now, we may need to expedite our quest, because it's possible our welcome will only extend until tomorrow, so let's take care of business first thing in the morning. Thoughts?"

I figured we'd spend a couple days completing the job with some time to spare, but I agreed that we'd lost that luxury. We could camp out in the woods if we had to, but I'd rather save that as a last resort.

Just as I was about to answer Lorraine, Augurey interjected, "Oh, sorry, Ferrici. We were about to discuss our business with you still here. Thank you for helping us out. I'm sure your parents are worried sick, so let me walk you home."

Ferrici had slipped my mind. If Augurey was going to walk her home, our discussion would have to wait until he returned.

However, Ferrici shook her head. "No, after all I've done, I can't trouble you anymore."

"Ferrici. Like I said, that's behind us. You already helped us enough. Besides, I don't want to walk you home only for your benefit. We did apprehend the hypnotist, but there's no guarantee she doesn't have an accomplice out there. Worst-case scenario, if we let you walk home alone at this hour and you get

attacked, it won't feel right to us. So, for our sake, could I walk you home? If you're uncomfortable with me, I can offer up the services of Skull-Mask or She-Mage here."

We knew for a fact that Siren had at least one other friend at large. Lorraine was tracking Goblin's whereabouts, but we didn't even know who the older-sounding accomplice was, the one I'd overheard at their meeting. I hadn't sensed him since either. The mysterious third member of their group could very well be the most dangerous of them yet, so it wasn't a good idea to send Ferrici home unchaperoned. Not that I thought they'd abduct a plain-Jane villager when we had Siren at our mercy, but better safe than sorry. I could have done a deep dive into all the slim chances of danger, like Ferrici's entire family being attacked after we walked her home, but that wouldn't have been very productive. We couldn't keep an eye on every single villager twenty-four seven; we just wanted to do what we could. It wasn't like we were trying to save the world.

Ferrici smiled. "Well...in that case, Augurey, I'll take you up on your offer. Lorraine would be fine, but if Rentt walks me home at this time of night, my parents may keel over."

"Right," Augurey said with a chuckle. "They'd think he was coming to reap their souls."

This was an outrage. I was a quasi-vampire, not a reaper...which probably still kept me at the top of everyone's wish list of things to avoid in the dead of night.

Augurey and Ferrici soon left the inn, so Lorraine and I engaged in productive conversation.

"How's Siren?" I asked.

"After she answered my questions, I put her to sleep. She won't be up for another full day. I could wake her, but not without a spell. It's possible that Goblin or his elderly accomplice might dare a rescue, though. How should we prepare for that? I did lay some booby traps."

Magical booby traps, she meant. By the sound of it, they were powered by some sort of catalyst or magic item and would remain effective until the mana contained in them ran out. That seemed good enough to me. If the traps

worked on them, we'd have them detained. If not, we'd have a better idea of what we're dealing with.

"I supposed we don't need to apprehend them all," I answered. "I wouldn't want to get into a skirmish here and end up destroying the inn."

Lorraine's priorities might have been off, but we came to an agreement. Even if all of them got away, she could continue to track Goblin.

"Then we're all set on Siren," I said. "As for Goblin..."



I lightly knocked on the door and waited a few moments.

"Who is it...?" a sleepy voice called.

"Oh, Yattul. You're all right. Thank goodness," I responded with audible concern.

Yattul—nicknamed the Goblin—asked, "Rentt? Did somethin' happen?"

Like he didn't know. As much as I wanted to point out that his trio had made us deal with that rigamarole in the middle of the night, I knew I couldn't spill the beans yet.

"I'll tell you all about it. Can you let me in?"

"Sure thing. Now you got me curious..." He trailed off into a yawn as he opened the door. "Lorraine too. Must have been quite the ordeal if you both are up."

Was he being genuine? There was a chance that he was. Maybe the details of when and where to make a move had been left up to each individual operative, and Goblin wasn't happy that Siren had interrupted his sleep by pulling the trigger this late in the night. In any case, he had to have guessed as to why we were knocking on his door so soon.

We entered his room.



"Wow... That's incredible. Sorry you had to deal with all that," Yattul said with some exaggerated surprise.

We'd given him the less-specific explanation that we'd been attacked but didn't know why. Lorraine and I had discussed prior to knocking on his door whether or not to tip our hand about Siren's capture. We'd settled on including a trickle of the truth. Goblin was sure to realize that Siren had been captured, if he hadn't already, but just mentioning her capture wouldn't tip Goblin off to the fact that we knew more than we were letting on. We'd decided to tell him that we hadn't gotten anything out of her, which I figured would work since she likely had been trained to resist normal interrogation techniques.

"We did capture someone who may be the culprit, but we've barely gotten any information out of her," I said.

Yattul asked, "How'd you figure out she was the culprit?"

"She looked suspicious, so we knocked her out, and all the villagers who were acting strange and wouldn't wake up just...woke up, and they seemed like themselves again. We don't know how, but our guess is they were under some kind of hypnosis."

I gave Goblin a half-truth I thought was believable, and if he was frustrated that Siren had gotten herself captured, he didn't show it.

"Hypnosis... I thought that kinda stuff was all hocus pocus," he stated.

"Some of them are real," Lorraine explained. "I've been hypnotized once myself. It's rather interesting being on the receiving end of it."

Lorraine probably meant that. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious to see how it felt, but I didn't want to snap out of it in the middle of a murder scene. If I was going to be hypnotized for the fun of it, I'd have to go with the entertaining kind, not Siren's.

"Interestin'... You got some guts, Lorraine," Yattul said.

"Not really. I only asked to be hypnotized precisely because I knew it couldn't have much of an effect on me. If I had experienced something like this, I would have greatly hesitated."

The fact that she still would've considered undergoing hypnosis was a testament to the overpowering strength of Lorraine's curiosity. It'd be terrifying if someone hypnotized her to be an endless magic-firing cannon.

“But that’s a tangent,” Lorraine continued. “Anything out of the ordinary with you, Yattul? Anyone else knock on your door last night?”

“Don’t think so... But unlike when we’re campin’, once I hit the sack in an inn like this, it takes a lot to wake me. Someone *might’ve* knocked on my door, but if I wasn’t awake to hear it...”

“You answered when we knocked.”

“I was already half-awake. Thought I heard a lot of noise. Otherwise, you woulda been knocking till mornin’.”

Was he telling the truth? Doubtful. He was up during the entire ordeal, which meant he knew that this would happen. Things had gone according to their plan, but now, with Siren’s failure and capture, they’d be forced to improvise—unless they could continue their initial scheme without Siren. There was no way to tell, but given that we had traps in place around Siren, our best move would be to wait and see.

We were off to Lake Petorama tomorrow to complete our job, which would look like an opportune time to rescue Siren. Now that we’d fed Goblin all the clues, we just had to wait for them to make their move. Even if they deactivated all of Lorraine’s traps, we could always track Goblin, and I figured Lorraine had marked Siren too. The last of their trio remained an unknown factor, but we couldn’t do much until he came out of the shadows.

This just about wrapped up what we could do here. I shared a look with Lorraine and turned to Yattul. “I’m just glad you’re okay. We caught the culprit, so I don’t expect any more trouble, but be careful. We’re going to get some rest. We have an early morning since we have to go out to the lake for our quest.”

“Shouldn’t you keep a watch over the culprit?” Yattul asked.

“She’s tied up real good. No way she’s getting away.” I resisted the urge to add, “*Without anyone’s help,*” and left the room with Lorraine.

Out in the hall, I asked Lorraine, “You think they’ll bite?”

“We’ll see. Either way, it works out for us. If they don’t, we’ll hand over Siren to a peacekeeper knight or constable. It means we’ll let the last member of

their group slip, but there's not much we can do if they don't come to us."

"Guess you're right..."



The pair trod toward Ferrici's house. Ferrici had fallen into a contemplative silence after leaving the inn, so Augurey had waited to speak until it felt an opportune time.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Ferrici snapped out of her thoughts. "Oh, sorry. I must be a bore to walk with..." Flustered, she fluttered her hands about in a manner that seemed very genuine.

Augurey smiled, knowing that he would be hard-pressed to find any girl in the capital who could pull that off. As meager as Yaaran was, its capital was a sizable city, and women there were much more adept in the nuances of romance than men. Too often did men fall into a false sense of control with a woman only to realize that they were playing perfectly into the woman's hands—a shuddering thought.

Men usually had the upper hand when it came to physical strength, but a good number of chivalrous adventurers and skilled knights populated the capital. Any disturbers of the peace would be met with swift public intervention, leaving men with no choice but to pursue their romantic interests by legal means. As a result, the capital's plazas were often filled with men catcalling passing women, who had plenty of experience with this and deftly turned them down.

Augurey imagined that if Ferrici found herself in one of those plazas, she would be swept away by some sweet talker within the hour. On the other hand, considering how she'd refused to give up information on the wyverns even in the face of adventurers, he wondered if she would be the type of girl to ignore catcalling altogether.

"I'm far from bored," Augurey replied. "I had a very exciting night, actually. It's not every night you have this much fun."

"Fun?" Ferrici echoed, wide-eyed.

“Absolutely. It’s pretty boring going through the motions in the capital, just doing jobs to put food on the table or up my rank. I’m not cocky enough to say that all requests are easy, but they’re same-old, same-old. In the humdrum of cookie-cutter jobs, I can’t help but look for something more exciting.”

This was true for many adventurers since they worked to complete jobs, and requests were only posted because there was some sort of demand for them. Gathering a specific herb, hunting for food, collecting materials for weapons and items—most jobs boiled down to replenishing some sort of supply that’d been expended in the capital each day.

Silver-class jobs were no exception. Of course, you often had to visit a new site each time, and you had to make the appropriate preparations for the job. There were many factors to consider for each request, like the shifting monster habitats that changed with the seasons. Navigating those variables made the job of an adventurer more time-consuming and arduous than civilians imagined. Performing those tasks day after day was no cakewalk, so when the jobs were finished, you felt a decent sense of accomplishment. Augurey wouldn’t go so far as to say he was disgruntled, but he still hoped for a change of pace from the repetitive gigs.

This was due in large part to Augurey’s aversion to boredom. Silver-class adventurers made enough money that a decade of hard work and saving could result in a nest egg fat enough for an early retirement. It wasn’t uncommon for adventurers to complete repetitive yet well-paying jobs to safely progress toward retirement rather than pursue glory or a higher rank. That was what “smart” adventurers did.

Those who pursued a rank higher than Silver—Gold, Mithril, and Platinum—had a screw or two loose. They were special kinds of idiots who sought after the thrill and the rush rather than payment. They craved danger and close calls with death over the bliss of peaceful boredom.

Augurey, with no uncertainty, was one of those idiots. Rentt, and most likely Lorraine too, were birds of a feather. Even though Augurey recognized his humdrum jobs were a stepping-stone in his pursuit for excitement, he couldn’t help but find it dreary.

After hearing an abridged version of this, Ferrici sanely said, “I would rather live a safe and comfortable life where I don’t have to worry about putting food on the table.”

Any normal person would agree with Ferrici. Those who didn’t became adventurers, and only those adventurers who strongly believed in their personal philosophy could climb the ranks. An adventurer’s rank was both an indication of their strength and of their foolishness. Adventurers, protest as they might, would agree with that sentiment, at least deep down.

“If only I could feel that way,” Augurey said with a sigh. “I wouldn’t have run away from my hometown and the peaceful life laid out for me.”

“Is your family rich, Augurey?” Ferrici asked.

This question coming from a young lady in the capital would’ve made Augurey wonder if she was prospecting for gold, but Ferrici’s tone was clear of anything but genuine curiosity.

“I never would have had to work a day in my life,” Augurey remarked.

“But you gave it up to be an adventurer...?”

“I did, and I don’t regret it. I’m having a blast every day. I’m not bored when I’m with Rentt and Lorraine. Excitement like this keeps falling into my lap, one after another.”

“An excitement like a girl you met at the bar trying to stab you with a knife?”

“Right. Well, maybe not *that* fun.” Augurey shrugged and gave Ferrici a smile, which she returned. It brought him some comfort to see she was feeling well enough to make light of her situation.

“That’s my home over there,” she said, pointing to a house.

They approached the dwelling, which had been built somewhat on the outskirts of the village, where no other soul could be found. Augurey was happy to see that he’d made the right choice in walking her home. He’d also hastened his pace, purely to save Ferrici’s parents from worrying about her for another minute.



“Ferrici! Where have you been this late?!”

Despite Augurey’s best efforts, when they arrived at Ferrici’s house, they were greeted by a man running toward them. Beside the man stood a woman who looked how Augurey imagined Ferrici would look in thirty years.

“You must be Ferrici’s parents,” Augurey said. “You have my sincerest apologies. Ferrici’s late return isn’t her fault. There was a complicated situation...”

Augurey’s eloquence must have made him sound suspicious, because Ferrici’s father gave Augurey a look. There was no meaning behind it at first glance, but Augurey had a feeling that the man was gearing up to hold the man who’d kept his daughter out accountable.



“What kind of situation are you in?” asked Leo, Ferrici’s father.

He and Lenora, Ferrici’s mother, had just introduced themselves to Augurey, and now they were all seated around a table in their house. Augurey had told them that he was an adventurer who’d come to the village to complete a job.

“Dad, I think you got the wrong idea!” Ferrici protested, which only earned her a glance from her father.

He faced Augurey with a very calm expression, but Augurey sensed outrage boiling beneath the man’s tranquil exterior. Noticing that Leo did indeed have the wrong idea, Augurey decided he would clear up the misunderstanding as quickly as possible.

Having been ignored by her father, Ferrici moved to confront her mother, but Augurey stopped her with a hand on her shoulder before giving her a look that said, *“Leave it to me.”*

Even that interaction seemed to stoke Leo’s rage; his fists tightened almost imperceptibly, which would have passed unnoticed by anyone less observant than Augurey. He respected Leo for keeping his emotions in check and being willing to hear him out despite being convinced that he was some random guy who’d taken advantage of his daughter.

Judging that they could hold a rational conversation, Augurey started, “As I said, it’s not Ferrici’s fault that she hasn’t come home until now.”

He spoke in a sincere and straightforward manner, forgoing his usual lightheartedness. He could compose himself when he wanted to, out of necessity. Silver-class adventurers often completed jobs for nobles and were even invited to some high-society parties, so they had to be equipped with a decent sense of etiquette. Some adventurers stubbornly refused to adopt any etiquette or even interact with any nobles, but Augurey wasn’t the stubborn type. As long as he kept his conscience clean, he was willing to do anything it took.

“So whose fault is it?” Leo asked with an admirable lack of accusation in his tone, despite no doubt wanting to blame Augurey and bash his face in.

Thankful for Leo’s composure, Augurey continued, “The person who caused tonight’s events. Let me start at the beginning...”

Augurey then gave Leo an account of what had happened. Leo, who’d been expecting some excuse for why Augurey had taken his daughter out at night, was shocked to hear a completely unexpected story. The information that his daughter had been used as a pawn in a nefarious plot involving their idyllic village had struck him like lightning. He rushed to his feet, faltered, and sat back down.

After a deep breath, Leo asked, “Did all of that...really happen?” In contrast to his previous tone, which had been full of certainty, Leo now sounded anxious, shocked, and even apologetic.

“I couldn’t fabricate a story like this,” Augurey replied. “I assume that news hasn’t reached this far out in the village, but it should be the talk of the town tomorrow.”

“I see... I don’t believe you have a reason to lie about this, anyway. I just can’t believe it.” Leo stared at Augurey with determination in his eyes. “I beg of you...”

“Yes?”

“Please forgive Ferrici for what she has done. I will do anything in my power

to make this right. If you tell me to pay for her crime with my life, I'll—!"

"No, honey!" cried Lenora.

Tears in his eyes, Leo put a hand on her shoulder. "Lenora, keep Ferrici safe!"

Apparently, Leo thought Augurey had accompanied Ferrici to demand some sort of reparations for the attack. True, more than a few adventurers would have done so in Augurey's shoes, but he had no intention of extorting them.

He hurriedly said, "No, I wouldn't ask anything of you! Ferrici and I have already discussed this!"

Unfortunately, that was a poor choice of words. Leo turned to his daughter and pleaded, "Ferrici! You have so much to live for! Think of your future!"

Augurey writhed internally as the misunderstanding worsened. In hindsight, he realized this was a natural conclusion for her parents to reach. Adventurers were the epitome of violence. The whole village could take up arms against a single adventurer, but they wouldn't stand a chance.

An outrageous demand suddenly became difficult to refuse when it came from an adventurer. Now that one had suddenly knocked on their door—with the revelation that their daughter had nearly killed him, albeit under the influence of mind control—Ferrici's parents lost their rationality. In their defense, though, plenty of adventurers would have resorted to extortion.

Augurey regretted not thinking his line of conversation through beforehand. Regardless, he would strive to de-escalate the situation.



Half an hour later...

Leo smiled in relief. "Oh, now I understand! Why didn't you say so? I thought I'd have a heart attack."

"Dad, I told you to listen," Ferrici said.

"I apologize. Nothing like this has happened before, and I lost my composure. I just wanted to protect my family."

"I'm happy to say there's no need," Augurey assured him. "I only came to

explain why Ferrici hadn't come home, not to demand anything for it. Just be careful for a while." Augurey also wanted to warn them, since one of the culprits was still at large, and he felt a little remorseful that he couldn't be more open with them about this matter.

"We will," Leo assured him. "And, Augurey?"

"Yes?" Augurey answered, tilting his head to the side.

"Thank you, really. From what I hear, Ferrici could have been killed. Is that right?"

"She..." She very well could have been, if Augurey was being honest. He would have killed her had his life been threatened, and an adventurer with a shorter fuse would have done so just for being attacked. That would have been much easier than detaining Ferrici alive.

As if he could hear Augurey's thoughts, Leo said, "I cannot thank you enough, Augurey. I owe you my daughter's life..."

Augurey shook his head. "Please, there's no need for that."

Lenora, and even Ferrici, who realized that she'd only made it back alive because of Augurey, began to thank him profusely. Since Augurey knew that his party was the reason all of this had happened, he pleaded with them to stop.

Once the family stopped expressing their gratitude, and after much persuasion, Augurey attempted to excuse himself.

"If there's anything we can do for you, please let us know," Leo said. "There may not be much we can do for an adventurer, but we will do everything in our power to assist you."

Augurey smiled. "Really, there's no need to do anything for me. Have a good night."

Ferrici and her parents watched Augurey walk away.

Once he was gone, Leo said to Ferrici, "You're very lucky that you happened to attack an upstanding adventurer."

"Yes. Augurey's a Silver-class adventurer, I'm told."

“S-Silver-class?! That’s impressive.”

An adventurer of that rank was almost legendary to beings of a remote village—practically a monster. Leo wouldn’t have pegged Augurey for one.

“From what they told me, I tried to stab him from behind, but he detained me without giving me a scratch.”

“A young girl like you may not have been much of a threat, but that’s still impressive. I’m really grateful that Augurey was the one you attacked. I wish we could have thanked him properly, but an adventurer like that could easily buy anything we could offer. What can we do?”

“The only thing I can think of now is to pack them a meal to take when they leave the village,” Lenora suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea. They must get sick of preserved foods. Yes, let’s do that,” Leo agreed as they went back into the house.

“Thank him... Right...” Ferrici muttered to herself as she followed her parents in. Her house was warm, and she looked forward to a good night’s sleep, but she made a mental note not to oversleep.

Chapter 5: A Token of Thanks from the Village Girl

Augurey returned late that night and told us how it'd taken some time to clear up a misunderstanding with Ferrici's parents. Considering how unusual our circumstances were, I wasn't too surprised to hear this. Regardless, we would have to properly execute the job tomorrow—technically today.

Augurey went off to bed shortly after coming back to the inn, so we never conducted our prep meeting. I wasn't too worried about it, though. We'd already decided on how to take care of the request before we arrived at the village, and the only thing I had in mind for the meeting's agenda was to review our plan.

They weren't easy jobs, and we'd probably fail if we underestimated the difficulty, but neither Augurey nor Lorraine would do that. For example, Augurey hadn't rushed off to bed because he was lazy. He wanted to get enough rest so his performance wouldn't be affected tomorrow. Lorraine quickly followed suit for the same reason.

I'd already gotten enough sleep, so I was left with nothing to do but kill time until the sun came up. I could go to sleep if I really wanted to, but there wasn't much use in it. Sometimes that would make me more tired than staying up.

My body came with a few perks, but the loneliness at night wasn't one of them. No pain, no gain, they said. In exchange for blissful sleep, I gained the chance to reach Mithril-class. I couldn't complain, all things considered. Nonetheless, I still wanted to be human again. If only I could be a human and maintain these powers. That was me being too greedy, I guessed. One day, I'd have to choose; I just had a feeling that would be the case. I'd have to really think it over.

It seemed I was always brooding about something when I was alone. I wished the sun would rise already.



“Let’s get going,” Lorraine said.

The three of us were standing outside the inn. After Lorraine’s and Augurey’s power naps, morning had come. Even after everything that had happened, the innkeeper graciously cooked us breakfast, which we had graciously accepted.

The three of us were all prepped and dressed for the job. We were wearing our armor and carrying our weapons and the necessary tools. We’d stored our travel wear in a magic bag so we wouldn’t be leaving any luggage in our rooms. We had some trust in the innkeeper and the other villagers, but none for Goblin or Siren. Better safe than sorry, we’d decided.

“I think we’re ready. Do you remember our objective?” Augurey asked, double-checking.

“Of course,” I answered. “Capture an aqua hathur alive, gather the mud or clay of a luteum golem, and gather some wyvern elata.”

Augurey nodded. “And how will we do that?”

Lorraine took over. “We need to locate the aqua hathur first. It’s been spotted around Lake Petorama, but this monster is practically a fae. As long as we can find it, I’ll take care of it with magic.”

“Right. We’re counting on you, Lorraine. Rentt and I aren’t going to be much help.”

You might think it was presumptuous that Augurey included me in his comment, but he was absolutely correct. I couldn’t make many adjustments to the few spells I could cast, and none of them were high-level magic. Augurey didn’t fare much better in the spellcasting department; the sword was his method of choice. He had a little bit of magic up his sleeve, much like I’d had before turning into a monster. Most of those spells were used to improve quality of life, like starting a fire or securing some drinking water.

Lorraine shook her head. “I wouldn’t say that. The plan is for me to cast the net and for you two to chase them into it. You’re in for more work than I am.”

“All we got is physical endurance. Much easier than magic.”

“You said it.”

Augurey and I puffed out our chests—to Lorraine’s exasperation. She didn’t disagree, though.

“I can’t argue that I don’t have the endurance,” Lorraine said. “Let’s just say we put ourselves in the right roles. As for the mud or clay of a luteum golem...”

“It’s tricky,” Augurey replied. “Taking down the golems is one thing, but we need to get our hands on what they’re made out of.”

“It’s a coin toss whether or not we get a mud-based or clay-based golem, depending on how much moisture is in them. Let’s hope for clay.”

A luteum golem could be a slimy blob of mud or a solid structure of clay. Both were considered to be the same monster, despite their difference in form. I could think of a few choice words to share with whoever the researcher was who’d decided this, but the nature of the luteum golem’s mana, as well as the material they were composed of, were apparently near identical. Drying out a mud-based golem would turn it into a clay one, and adding water to the clay-based variant would turn it into a mud one.

The material you could dig out of the earth in this area was clearly distinct from mud and clay, so there was more to their composition than met the eye. That was why our job called for either a clay or a mud golem. Our research told us that both variants had been spotted around Lake Petorama, which left our prospective encounter up to chance. If we hadn’t needed to complete our three jobs by the end of the day, we could’ve hung around and waited for a clay-based golem, but instead, we’d have to take the first encounter we could get. Clay made the collection easier and less messy, so fingers crossed.



Lorraine grunted, her arms crossed. “There’s the wyvern elata.” Her concern lay more with the effort than the difficulty that the job required.

“Going through the front door... We have to keep our head in the game. We need to deal with this to get to our other materials, anyway,” Augurey stated.

Our only way in was straight through the mime wyvern mating grounds. They were considered relatively peaceful any other time of the year, but during their mating season, going anywhere near them would most likely trigger them to

attack. Making our way through their mating grounds meant that we would have to go through hundreds, maybe thousands of wyverns. I couldn't think of a more time-consuming task at the moment.

"Well, we knew what we signed up for," I said. "We just have to keep our guard up and march through. If we're lucky, they'll stay away once we knock out a few of them, right?"

"There's no guarantee, but let's hope so. We can't do anything until we get there, at least." Lorraine sighed and began to trod reluctantly, solely driven by professional obligation.

Just as Augurey and I moved to follow her, I heard a voice calling from the great beyond. "Wait!" More accurately, the familiar voice had called from down the street.

"There's Ferrici," Augurey observed.

It was Ferrici, sure enough, holding something in her hand.

She eventually reached us, out of breath. In contrast to the thick skirt suited for village living that she'd been wearing at the bar, her outfit was more formfitting, allowing for ease of movement.

"What is it? Did something happen?" I asked. We still didn't know where Goblin's other accomplice was or what they were up to. I was concerned that they'd attacked Ferrici, her family, or others in the village, somehow.

Ferrici shook her head. "Oh, no. I just wanted to... Here." She produced a basket woven out of dried vegetation.

Augurey accepted it, and peeked inside. "You packed us lunch? It looks amazing." He turned to us. "Look."

Lorraine and I leaned in to see an array of fresh food we wouldn't have dreamed to take on our long expedition: roasted ham and cheese sandwiches, a salad of vegetables so fresh they must have been picked that morning, and some perfectly ripe fruit. We did have a decent ration of food with us already, but the majority of it was preserved. We couldn't keep fresh food in our packs for days on end. Some of it was fresh, but we always underestimated the quantity we'd need because we never wanted to waste food. Once those ran

out, we exclusively ate preserved foods. They tasted decent with a little bit of cooking, and a little foraging in the forest earned us edible greens. At this point, we still had a sliver of perishable food with us, but it was nothing compared to a basket full of freshly prepared food.

“Are you sure this is for us?” Augurey asked.

It obviously was, but Ferrici hadn’t said so explicitly. The chance that she had just showed us the food to make us jealous was, well, zero. She’d have to be one vindictive lady to do that.

Ferrici answered, “Of course. My parents put it together. As thanks.”

Augurey chuckled and muttered, “I told them they didn’t have to do anything.”

“Should I not have brought it?”

“No, I love it. Right, guys?” Augurey prompted.

“We would’ve had to settle for wyvern stew without it. Thanks,” I said.

“It doesn’t taste too bad,” Lorraine explained, “but it can get too greasy, so it’s not my cup of tea. We rarely have the luxury of enjoying our meal while on a job. Thank you so much, Ferrici. Please give our thanks to your parents as well.” Her grandiose speech of gratitude was probably more genuine than it sounded, given how she had a surprisingly large appetite.

“Please...” Ferrici shook her head. “It was nothing.”

I turned to Augurey. “I’ll hold on to that. I’d feel bad if we fought with it in our hands and shook it all up.”

“Your magic bag’s a little bigger than ours, isn’t it? I’ll take you up on that,” Augurey responded.

With a little bit of finesse, my bag would fit a tarasque, so the basket didn’t pose a problem. I held the basket to the opening of the bag, and it slipped inside, much to Ferrici’s amazement. I didn’t expect her to have seen something like this before in her remote village; it cost over two thousand gold coins, after all. You could buy a house for that much money.

“We should get going,” Augurey said to Ferrici, but she took him by his sleeve.

“One more thing!”

We stopped, and Augurey asked for all of us, “Yes? What is it?”

Ferrici hung her head for a moment, hesitating, but then she spoke with determination. Well, she mostly spoke to Augurey, but whatever.

“You want to know how to get past the mime wyvern mating grounds, right? I want to tell you how to do it.”

Her offer came as a surprise. We knew that she most likely had this information, but we just didn’t think she’d be willing to share it because of the importance and the potential danger of that information. Now it seemed she’d changed her mind. This was very good news for us—too good, even.

“You don’t have to share that information with us, Ferrici. Isn’t it a dear secret to you?” Augurey asked with concern.

If we had been a less communicative party, one of us might have felt slighted that he went and ruined our chances of breezing through our job, but we always reached a general consensus when it came to principles like this. If Ferrici didn’t want to talk, we didn’t want to pressure her, so neither Lorraine nor I had a problem with Augurey double-checking with Ferrici.

Ferrici nodded and quietly said, “It is. But, Augurey, you saved my life. Rentt, Lorraine... You didn’t kill anyone from the village either. I know that killing them would’ve been much easier for you than detaining all of us unhurt.”

That was true. Lorraine could have burned the whole village down before the night was out. I supposed I could have drained the blood from every soul around. Augurey would have just killed them one by one, I guessed. Still, he could’ve wiped out the village in less than half a day. We’d have walked away with no loose ends.

We weren’t barbarians, though, and it was doubtful whether that would really leave no loose ends. We could have gotten away with leaving no witnesses if it hadn’t been for Goblin and his crew, but they would have made sure to bring us more trouble than it was worth. In short, leaving the villagers unharmed was largely for our own sake, so we didn’t deserve all this thanks.

Ferrici continued, “That’s why I want to repay you somehow, but I’m not a

good cook, and I couldn't think of anything else. But the way to slip through a mime wyvern mating grounds..."

She must have thought that this was the only token of gratitude she could offer. It was endearing, and she seemed sure of her decision.

Augurey saw the same thing I did. "We'd love to hear it, if you're sure. We'll swear that the secret stays between us. Are you *really* sure?" he asked one more time.

"Yes! I trust you all!" Ferrici said.



The mime wyvern mating grounds was on the shore of Lake Petorama.

"There's a few thousand of them, easy," I said from behind a bush along the woods near the lake. "Anyone who tries to walk straight through that is dumber than a bag of rocks."

Lorraine rolled her eyes. "Tell it to the mirror. Although, I agree, for the record. But the view is beautiful. The mime wyverns' sky-blue color really shines against the deep blue of the lake. And look at that fantastic array of floating stones. The theory is that minute magic crystals in the stones produce this effect."

Directly above Lake Petorama and in the air around it floated stones of all sizes, from pebbles to boulders. They reminded me of the fourth level of the New Moon Dungeon. That one was as big as a house, and some of them here were as big as it was.

Mime wyverns clung to each floating stone, fashioning nests out of materials like branches, rocks, and what looked like monster bones. There were eggs in many of the nests, no doubt, but I couldn't get a good look from where we were. I could fly over with my wings and check, but then I'd be swarmed by mime wyverns and crash-land, only to become their snack. No thank you.

The floating stones were a major reason the wyverns chose this area to breed in, in addition to the lake. Every confirmed mime wyvern mating ground had very similar conditions.

“The height of the stones must give their nests protection,” Lorriane posited. “Since they’re floating above ground, nothing can climb up there. You could crawl up the vines that are dangling from them, but then you’d only make it easier for the wyverns to swarm you.”

It was the wisdom of their species. All creatures, from animals to monsters, knew so much without being told. When the cliché thought that the most foolish species must be humans popped into my head, I returned to the matter at hand.

“We would’ve gone on that suicide mission if it wasn’t for you, Ferrici. Are you sure you’ll be safe?” I asked as I turned to my side where Ferrici crouched.

She had followed us this far, despite lacking any combat skills, yet she had done so because the way to sneak through the mime wyvern mating grounds was her.



“Yes. I do it all the time. Oh! Make sure to stay close to me,” Ferrici said as she stood and started walking.

The wyverns not only populated the floating stones, but the shores of the lake and the area between the lake and us as well. From what I’d been told, they positioned themselves to make sure they could attack any threats as quickly as possible. We would have been Exhibit A of that theory, except...

“I don’t believe it. It’s like they don’t notice us at all,” Lorraine said, wide-eyed, which was a rare sight indeed.

I shared her sentiment, though. All we were doing was walking closely behind Ferrici, and the mime wyverns were going about what they did with their day as if we weren’t there at all—fluttering their wings, nuzzling up against one another, and the like.

“They’re kind of cute when you see them like this,” said Augurey. “Almost as if they’re normal birds.”

I agreed with that too. I was tempted to reach out and pet one of them, but I definitely wasn’t taking the risk.

“You could touch them gently, but they’re so big that you might get hurt. Well, none of you will, I’m sure,” Ferrici said. Maybe she’d tried petting one of them before.

I hesitated, but then I asked, “Ferrici, you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but why are the wyverns so oblivious? If we’re doing something special to be undetectable, I have no idea what it is.”

“I’m not really sure,” she answered. “I can just tell they won’t attack me. When they’re really angry, I can sense that I’d be attacked if I got close too. But when they all are relaxed like they are now, I can sense that they won’t attack.”

That sounded suspiciously like blind intuition. Did all of our lives hang in the balance of it?

Lorraine interrupted my fatalistic thought with her own assessment. “This must be another example of a special ability, like Goblin’s or Siren’s.”

“What makes you say so?” Augurey asked.

“I have met people who have these kinds of powers, and I have heard stories of more. Many of them describe their powers in a similar manner. That is a major reason why research for the cause of these powers has stalled. People are born with these special abilities, and they’re mostly used intuitively. That’s why they’re less practical than magic. Besides, most of them are useless.”

“What do you mean, ‘useless’?”

“Levitating a pebble for a short amount of time, for example. Magic can replicate the result very easily. On top of that, mastery of theory and technique can improve your spell casting until you can lift a boulder, but that isn’t a guarantee with special abilities. In fact, most powers remain stagnant throughout the user’s life. Some other examples I know of are changing the color of a glass of water, or levitating just a tiny bit...”

I guessed those would be pretty useless, especially if magic could easily substitute for it. If I had to think of an effective use, I’d choose cooking. Changing the color of water (or possibly any food) without any additives would probably be popular among restaurants. Even the power of levitating a pebble could be useful to break eggs while keeping your hands clean. I wondered if

anyone used their special ability for cooking. Maybe some did use them for that, but these powers were so rare that there'd be no way of finding them.

"A special ability..." Ferrici muttered. "That's what this feeling is? I never knew."

Ferrici looked at Lorraine, clearly moved by her explanation. Her ability had just been clarified and validated by someone else. I knew how that felt. When Lorraine analyzed what I was and how I'd gotten this way, I found it comforting. Not knowing was the scariest thing, especially when it came to your own power.

"Really?" Lorraine asked. "I suppose that's natural, when these powers are rarely acknowledged even in the capital. I heard that a larger population wielded these powers, back in the day."

"There aren't many of them now?" Ferrici asked, leaning forward.

"Not since magic flourished. In fact, there is a theory that defines magic as a system designed from special abilities. It's not a very popular theory, but some people do manifest magic spells naturally. Nevertheless, special abilities do not utilize mana, but I'm sure there have been many mages who have tried to recreate the effects of various special abilities. The theory that they are two distinct skills is more mainstream."

"Wow. I feel like a fog has lifted. I've wondered so many times how I'm doing this..." Ferrici reminisced, indicating that she didn't entirely see this power as a blessing. At least now, Lorraine had given her a clear label for it.

"I can't answer that question either," Lorraine replied. "These abilities, though, have been around for a long time. They kept humans alive before they started using weapons or magic. Sometimes I hypothesize that the legends of old, which tell of heroes, mages, and gods with powers that far outweigh any human's abilities today, were based on special abilities. It has also been said that the special abilities manifested in our time pale in comparison to their forms from ages ago. In any case, your power is not a foul one. Case in point, it's a great help for us now." Lorraine was trying to quell Ferrici's doubts in her own way.

"Yes. I feel much better about it. Not that I can proudly tell the whole village

about my power.”

“I agree with you there. You should keep your ability a secret,” Lorraine said.



“So, one of our jobs is to harvest wyvern elata. How do you usually go about that?” I asked. Those shipments of wyvern elata that came through during mime wyvern mating season must have been Ferrici’s doing.

Here was the conundrum: regardless of Ferrici’s ability to approach the wyverns without being attacked, it still wouldn’t be easy to get to where the elata was. Wyvern elata grew by their nests, which were exclusively on the topside of floating stones. Why were they so inconveniently inaccessible? That was because the plant was said to grow from wyvern droppings, and wyverns only dropped atop of floating stones during mating season.

You could find some wyvern elata in the middle of the woods here and there, but those instances were attributed to wyvern droppings that fell mid-flight and landed away from the floating stone. The elata never grew too impressive in size, but I’d always gathered any I came across. In this area, however, the elata exclusively grew on the floating stones. Other vegetation grew on the stones as well, so climbing up some of the vines could be one way up to our objective, but I doubted Ferrici could pull it off, hence my question.

Ferrici answered, “Usually I pick one to bring them to me.”

“What does that mean?” Lorraine asked, sounding as if she didn’t want to believe what she’d heard.

Ferrici decided to show us what she meant. “Well... That one looks good. Hey!” She waved her hand at a mime wyvern that had been daydreaming, and the creature turned to Ferrici before flying over. It landed next to us and nuzzled at Ferrici’s face.

“Her ability lets her do more than get close to them...” Lorraine muttered.

“She’s a perfect fit for a dragon knight or a wyvern stable keep. I’d hire her on the spot,” Augurey added.

That would be her calling if she could access how a wyvern was doing just by

getting close to them and even issue basic commands without so much as training them. Both of the occupations that Augurey had listed came with decently high salaries and status too. Ferrici would be immediately hired for either of those sought-after professions.

“I couldn’t do anything like that,” Ferrici said. “I can just ask them for a little favor. Oh, that one over there looks nice too.” Ferrici soon gathered four wyverns in all. “Now, please ride on their backs. They’ll take us up there.”

She pointed at the largest floating stone we could see, adorned with so much vegetation that it looked like a little forest stood atop it, especially when compared to the other floating stones in the vicinity. We could see mime wyverns flying to and from the stone, so it was a good bet that there was elata on its topside.

“Are you sure we can ride them?” I asked.

Ferrici nodded. “It’s safe. Unless you fly too far from me, but some of my friends from the village have done it before. Do you remember the two girls I was with at the bar?”

“Those two. They’ve ridden a wyvern too?”

That meant they knew about Ferrici’s special ability. I remembered how neither of them had spilled a word about this when we asked them some questions after Ferrici had left the bar. She had good friends.

“Right. And they’ve taken them all the way out to that island. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Turning this offer down would ruin me as an adventurer. Who’d hire an adventurer more cowardly than an average villager girl? Well, I doubted I’d be out of work, but I’d never live it down. *Rentt the Coward. Rentt the Scaredy-Cat.* I could hear the mocking monikers now, and I wasn’t about to make them a reality.

I bucked up and hopped on the wyvern’s back. It was surprisingly comfortable, and I felt secure. I’d expected wyverns to be more slimy, but I stood corrected. Wyvern skin was dry and smooth to the touch, but not so much that I’d slip off its back. It felt like sitting on a well-made leather sofa.

“This isn’t half bad...” I remarked.

“I’d say,” Augurey agreed.

Lorraine and Augurey both looked as amused as I was.

These wyvern didn’t have any reins on them, of course, so I was wondering where to hold on when Ferrici called, “Everyone! Hold on to their horns so you don’t fall!”

Each mime wyvern did boast sizable horns. The ones on my wyvern were just the right size to grab, unlike the horns on some of the larger wyverns around.

Watching us timidly reach for the wyvern horns, Ferrici smiled and shouted, “Here we go!”

Ferrici’s wyvern leaped up first, and ours followed suit. They didn’t ascend too quickly—a bit slower than me flying with my own wings—but Lorraine and Augurey seemed slightly shocked by the newfound sensation. Still, they were enjoying themselves, just in a different way than I’d expected.

Augurey shouted, “This is awesome!”

“This would be very convenient for cartography,” Lorraine mused.



“Here we are...”

After a leisurely flight, we landed on one of the floating stones. By “we,” of course, I meant the mime wyverns. I was the only one among us who could have made a landing unassisted. Well, maybe not.

“What an experience. I never dreamed I’d fly on the back of a wyvern,” Lorraine said, sounding satisfied.

“Will the wyverns wait for us here?” Augurey asked Ferrici, apparently more concerned about our situation than the significance of the experience.

She nodded. “Yes. I just need to ask them to.”

“Good. We won’t have to find our own way back.”

If the wyverns were to ditch us, our only way off the floating stone would be jumping off. Lorraine could feasibly finagle something with magic, but it was

reassuring to know that our return trip would be by a familiar method.

“Now that we have our exit plan, let’s get our hands on some wyvern elata. Do you know where they grow?” Lorraine asked Ferrici.

“I do. I’ve gathered it many times. Right this way.”

Ferrici began walking. We rushed after her, knowing full well that, whether we were on or off the floating stone, we’d be swarmed by mime wyverns the second we were too far away from her.



“A wyvern nest... I can’t believe we’re close to it,” Lorraine muttered, staring at it with great interest.

The nest, constructed out of branches and monster bones, was large enough for a person or two to lie in it. It even seemed a bit small considering how large mime wyverns could get, but I figured that a larger nest might be troublesome because of how many floating stones were in the area and how many wyverns were congregated here. Maybe nature had a way of maintaining balance with these things.

What was inside the nest piqued our curiosity even more, though.

Lorraine quietly gasped. “Eggs and hatchlings. Now *this* is a sight I never thought I’d see.”

Within the nest lay unhatched wyvern eggs and wyvern hatchlings that looked only a few days old. Their mother was feeding them mouth-to-mouth like birds. Their appearance was birdlike too, making them look like chicklets smothered in soft, blue feathers. Their size, however, was very distinct from other birds; the hatchlings were already as large as mature chickens. Even the eggs were too large to carry with one arm.

“I’d like to crack one of those eggs over a griddle,” Lorraine quipped.

Ferrici gave her a dirty look. “No, Lorraine.” It was clear that the wyverns meant a lot to her. They’d be important to me too if I could understand their thoughts somewhat and they obeyed my commands.

“I’m sorry, I meant it as a joke,” Lorraine apologized. “Even if I was starving, I

couldn't finish an egg that large."

Ferrici's glare became somewhat less severe.



"Right around here," Ferrici informed us.

We had followed her lead past the cluster of mime wyvern nests to a clearing. She'd told us that most wyvern elata could be found some distance away from their nests, and true enough, we let out a collective sigh of amazement as we came to a thicket of more wyvern elata than I'd ever seen.



The proportions of the plants were just as impressive as the quantity before us. They were bulbous, with thick stems and flowers along their tops and sides. Right off the bat, the girth of each elata surprised us; most specimens were considered fully grown if the stem was as thick as a thumb, but each elata we could see had stems several times thicker. While the average height of the plant was about up to my waist, several of these grew above our heads.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Lorraine muttered in awe. She turned to Ferrici and asked, “You’ve been selling these? I would expect someone to take notice. Anyone who sees these would ask where they grow, and I’d imagine any herbalist or alchemist would scour for these at all cost.”

Ferrici replied, “I may live in a remote village, but I’ve thought of that much. I always gather and sell ones like those in the corner that are the smallest.” She pointed toward the edge of the thicket where the specimens in question were smaller—like the ones you’d find at a market, or maybe a little smaller.

“How do they grow so much?” Augurey asked.

“I think because the wyverns that nest on this stone only leave their droppings here. I’ve heard that they fertilize the elata, and there are a lot of wyverns on this rock. I’ve checked many of the other floating stones, but none of their stock grows as much as this one.”

Lorraine nodded. “Nature finds a way. The results should be similar in other environments with floating stones of this size. Perhaps I’ll seek out more locations one day,” she muttered, likely serious. Wyvern mating grounds were hard to come by, so the task should prove challenging, to say the least.

“Let’s gather some of them,” I said. “The small, inconspicuous ones, of course. But do you mind if I take a few of the larger ones for personal use?”

“Not at all,” Ferrici answered. “If you can keep a secret.”



“Here we go,” I muttered, sounding like an old man getting up from his chair, and dismounted the wyvern.

After harvesting the wyvern elata, we’d walked back to our parked wyverns

and ridden them down to ground level.

“Solid ground is reassuring after a while,” Augurey remarked. “Not that we would have died if we fell from there.”

The floating stone we’d harvested the elata from was right above the lake, so we wouldn’t have died from hitting the water. We would’ve been soaked, though, and forced to swim to shore. Moreover, without Ferrici at our side, we could’ve been attacked by wyverns on top of that. A run-of-the-mill adventurer might not have survived such a fate. I could have flown with my own wings, but I’d never tried flying with a swarm of wyverns on my tail. Suffice to say, I was glad we’d made a safe landing.

“One quest down, and it went even more smoothly than we hoped for. What next? Shall we keep up the pace?” I asked.

I’d expected this task to take more time because we would’ve had to dodge angry wyverns and find the elata bushes ourselves. Ferrici getting us past all of that was huge. This had all happened not only because Ferrici lived in this village, but also because Siren had hypnotized those villagers, giving us an opportunity to rescue them, thereby earning Ferrici’s gratitude. Maybe we should’ve been grateful for Goblin and his crew. Considering we’d expected something to go down, it almost felt like we’d fixed the match ourselves. Oh, well.

“We just need to capture an aqua hathur and grab some mud or clay of a luteum golem,” Augurey noted, “but we don’t know where we can find either one. Guess we just have to wander about the lake.”

These creatures, unlike wyverns, had no specific habitat.

“I know where an aqua hathur is,” Ferrici stated.

“What?!” Lorraine cried, surprised that Ferrici had said that so calmly.

Even adventurers had to spend some time hunting for an aqua hathur, and this normal girl from a village just *knew* where one was? Well, she had her special ability and all, but I believed the descriptor “normal” still applied here. She wasn’t particularly muscular or anything, even though she’d proven on our way here that she had way more endurance than girls from the city.

“It’s not a guarantee,” she added. “I just saw one the other day. It may still be there.”

“That’s vital,” Lorraine replied. “Once an aqua hathur settles at a spot, they won’t stray far from it.”

“Really? I thought feline monsters could travel dozens of kilometers a day,” I asked.

That was the accepted theory and also why alarms were often raised when a feline monster was spotted close to town. They could easily travel from village to village overnight.

Lorraine nodded. “That is true, but an aqua hathur is closer to fae than feline. You know that creatures with the water fae element are drawn to clear water.”

“Right,” Augurey muttered. “Once they find a water source they like, they won’t go far.”

“Yes. That’s why Ferrici’s information is valuable to us. Can you show us the way?”

Lorraine had asked for confirmation because we were about to venture beyond the area where Ferrici’s ability kept her safe from wyvern. As adventurers, we would put Ferrici’s well-being above all else, but not even the best adventurers in the world could guarantee absolute safety, so we couldn’t insist on Ferrici’s cooperation. I figured she’d tell us its general location, and we would go search from there.

“Sure. It’s this way,” Ferrici said and just started walking.

We once again hurried after her.

“Aren’t you concerned about the danger you’re putting yourself in?” Lorraine asked.

“She went there and back just the other day. I think she knows it’s not that dangerous,” I said. It was my best guess.

Augurey chimed in, “That too, but she must trust us. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have agreed without a second thought.”

“We need to protect her if things go south,” I insisted. “Especially after what

happened.”

Lorraine agreed. “I’ll set up a strong magic shield. She must remain unharmed, even at the cost of our own safety.”



“It’s really here,” I murmured.

There it was—a real-life aqua hathur before my very eyes. Its appearance was that of a transparent cat, its entire body made of water. Behaviorally, it was indistinguishable from an ordinary cat. It was currently washing its face.

What’s more, there were *multiple* aqua hathurs. They were hanging about a small spring created by a rock formation. It was slightly elevated from the lake, and water seeped out of the cracks. It must have been one of the several bodies of water that fed into the lake.

People who liked cats might have been happy just to watch these liquid felines laze about the spring all day, but we had a job to do. Even if this monster was mostly harmless, we were going to capture one of them. And like I said, they were *mostly* harmless.

“Let’s get to work, just like we planned,” I suggested.

Augurey pointed to a spot on a map he held in his hand. “We corner them over there.”

“You can do this!” Ferrici cheered as we started toward the aqua hathurs.



The aqua hathur sensed our approach and turned to Augurey and me very much like a cat would have. The trouble came with its next move. I sensed the mana in the air contract and saw a thin blade of water form in front of the monster, but not because the aqua hathur was thirsty or anything.

“Augurey!”

“Yep, I know!”

We exchanged looks and dove to the sides. As soon as we did, the blade of water created a chasm across the ground and sliced the trees at the end of it

vertically in half before thundering to the ground.

That little projectile of water could have been our guillotine. Humans could cast a spell called Yidle Swiff of that produced a similar effect, just much more slowly and at a much smaller scale. In addition, a human mage would require an interval of anywhere from a few seconds to half a minute in between spells, but an aqua hathur could cast water magic as effortlessly as we used our limbs, allowing them to quickly repeat the spell.

A series of deadly liquid blades flew in our direction. Dodging them all, we gained ground toward the aqua hathur. Luckily for us, it was just a dumb animal. That might sound insensitive, but it wasn't smart enough to see a directional pattern in our movements and use its spells to block our path. This creature would have been a terrifying foe had it possessed the intelligence of your average human. It was still plenty deadly, though. It was just that, no matter how fatal a spell was, it wouldn't do any good if it never hit.

"Now! I got it!"

I jumped in front of the aqua hathur before Augurey got a chance and reached out to the little monster. Of course, the aqua hathur was made up of water, so I couldn't grab it by normal means, but mana held its body together, just like how mana held the bones of a skeleton in place.

As long as you contained the hathur's mana, you could pick it up—supposedly. A person had once hypothesized and proven this theory long ago, and thanks to their research, we now had magic items that allowed us to touch and interact with less solid monsters like the aqua hathur. Augurey and I each had a pair of the magic items on our hands, courtesy of Lorraine. Our first plan was to wield these and catch the hathur if we could.

"Whoa! No dice!"

I had made a solid grab for it, but the hathur escaped my grasp in a slithery twist. It fled, scampering away somehow and scattering what was a cluster of several hathurs. When our original target bounded past Augurey, he reached for the creature but couldn't so much as touch it. It wasn't that Augurey was incompetent either; the aqua hathur was just that quick.

Even on the run, they continued to fire off their water blades. Dodging those

and catching a hathur was simply not going to happen. There were some work-arounds to kill the monster, like spells that would target an area rather than a specific monster, but... I guessed that was probably why this job had collected dust until Augurey took it.

Once an adventurer took a job, they were duty bound to see it through. Both Augurey and I had failed to catch an aqua hathur, but this was only our first endeavor. Our best shot was yet to come. We zeroed in on one of them that had fled in the right direction for us to initiate our approach.



“What are you doing?” Ferrici asked Lorraine, clearly puzzled by Lorraine’s handiwork.

The two of them were in a dead end formed by rocks, on which Lorraine was drawing magic circles of great intricacy. The way her slender finger magically glowed and flickered across the rocks was like an artist painting a masterpiece. At the moment, though, the magic circles hadn’t taken effect as far as anyone could tell, so it was only natural that Ferrici grew curious.

Lorraine explained, “I’m weaving a net to cast around an aqua hathur. I could conjure up a net with magic alone, but they’d noticed that, and they were going too fast. I might have been able to cast it at the right time, but this is safer. With magic circles, I can set it to activate the moment an aqua hathur passes through here. After I put my mana into these, I might as well take a nap.”

Lorraine’s brazen display of sloth aside, everything she’d told Ferrici was true, even though she’d omitted one thing: she didn’t want to risk creating and controlling a magical net while also casting a shield on Ferrici to protect her for fear of falling short on the latter. And if Lorraine could make her job easier with extra prep work, she chose that option every time rather than waiting around and worrying about what could go wrong.

“That should just about do it,” she said as she stood. “The circles are set. Let’s step back and enjoy the comedy starring Rentt and Augurey.”

If either of them had heard this remark, they might have been outraged by it.

Lorraine and Ferrici moved to a spot some distance away but close enough to

observe the trap. Soon after, an aqua hathur bolted into view, followed by a man in a skeleton mask flapping his black robe and another man in a peacock-patterned outfit that hurt your eyes after prolonged exposure.

The aqua hathur wasn't just running from the pair, but continuously firing water blades to its rear, forcing its pursuers to dodge them.

"Stop right now, you little...!"

"Just give up, already!"



The scene was comical, to say the least. However, the show reached its curtain call when the creature arrived at the dead end where Lorraine had been working. As soon as the aqua hathur stepped foot in the area, the magic circles emitted lights that resembled an electric shock, forming a cage around the elusive water cat. The creature attempted an escape nonetheless and made contact with the electric wire. Lights flashed, and the hathur collapsed on the spot.

The adventurers might have been concerned that it was dead if they hadn't been aware that aqua hathurs did not retain their shape when they died. When they returned to nature, they simply became a mass of water and seeped into the ground. Consequently, the party could tell that this aqua hathur was unconscious but alive.

"That worked out well. Let's go join them. Rentt and Augurey can't do anything without a cage," Lorraine said, carrying a cage that seemed to have materialized out of thin air. It was clearly intended for the hathur, because it was visibly distinct from a run-of-the-mill cage designed to hold regular animals. The top and bottom were ornately designed, and the bars were not metal but the same electric streaks that had trapped the hathur within the rock formation.

In fact, Lorraine walked right up to the unconscious aqua hathur, grabbed it with her gloved hand, and placed it into the cage. The creature awoke, cried loudly, and charged the electric bars. After a crackling shock, it relented and settled in.

The electricity of the handheld cage was definitely less powerful than that of the trap on the rocks, but the hathur still looked rather pitiful in its current state. Even though the monster had just been unleashing deadly water blades against the party, something about its appearance drew unconditional sympathy.

Lorraine saw it on Ferrici's face and added, "This aqua hathur will be kept by a noblewoman in the capital. It'll wear a magical collar that prevents it from casting spells, but it won't be treated badly. Don't worry."

Ferrici looked visibly relieved.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. It is I, Yu Okano. We're finally here with the big *tenth* volume. We've hit double digits, all thanks to dedicated readers like yourself. I began writing this series just to write what interested me, but the story grew more in-depth, the characters took on a mind of their own, and the world of the series kept expanding. I wouldn't be able to continue writing such a large-scale series without your support.

By the time this volume is published in Japan, the anime adaptation should be officially announced. I never expected what is arguably the most ambitious dream of any light novel writer to come to fruition for my work out of all things. When I was first offered the adaptation, I spent a day or two wondering when I'd wake up, or when they'd finally tell me it was all a joke.

But as preproduction went on, I was forced to accept the reality that, with so many people involved in the process, it was no joke. By now, I'm at peace with the reality that this is really happening. I am an anime viewer myself, but I didn't know much about the production process. Now that I have the privilege of being involved in the anime, every day is a new adventure for me.

One difficulty that came with this amazing development, though, was that I was not allowed to tell anyone until the project was publicly announced. I'd always been good at keeping secrets, but even I was tempted to spill the beans to somebody. Anybody. I didn't, of course, especially when all of the other people involved were keeping it secret.

Imagining that all novel writers felt the same way I did, I'm impressed that none of them have ever let it slip about an animation project. I had signed NDAs in the past, but there was something different about the anime. Maybe I could feel how special it is for my very own story to be animated. At the end of the day, I just want all of you to enjoy the anime when it's released. Once again, it would not have happened without your support. It's almost like I have nothing left to accomplish in this world.

Well, this afterword is long enough. Thank you for your continued support.

Bonus Short Stories

Rentt and Augurey, Birds of a Feather

“Hey, Rentt, can you help me out with a job today? I could definitely use it.”

Back when we were both in Maalt, Augurey had nonchalantly invited me along on jobs like this all the time. I didn’t really mind either. Even though I mostly worked solo in and around Maalt, adventurers forming a temporary party wasn’t uncommon, so I always said yes if I felt like it. This instance was no exception.

“Sure,” I replied, “but it’s not often you say you can’t handle things on your own.”

That was the simple truth, since Augurey was more than capable as an adventurer. At the time, he was a Bronze-class, so Silver-class jobs and higher might have tripped him up, but he’d always stuck by one of the basic adventuring rules—don’t bite off more than you can chew. He would sometimes take on bizarre requests out of curiosity, but he never overestimated his abilities. Now, however, he was approaching me with a job with which he needed help.

“Oh, it’s not that challenging,” Augurey said. “Just hard to do it single-handed.”

“Yeah? I’m cool with that. You want to get going?”

“Yes, of course.”



Once I was in the middle of said job, it all made sense. This would have been tricky to pull off on his own.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Good on my end!” Augurey replied. “Are you running low on holy water?!”

“Not yet, but we’re getting there.”

We were in an old, abandoned cemetery far away from Maalt. Augurey was ceaselessly attacking the skeletons wandering about. For some reason, undead rarely came into being in Maalt—and Yaaran at large—but they still emerged at certain locations. A long-forgotten cemetery like this one was a prime example.

I knew from personal experience that skeletons were not too formidable of a monster, but they were quite annoying to deal with when they increased in numbers. Especially in places like this where dark energy filled the air, they would continue to get back up no matter how many times you smashed them to the ground. While they didn’t completely regenerate, they would keep moving even if all of their bones had been shattered. Deterring them required constantly dispersing holy water or casting purification spells. Taking out the skeletons *and* purifying them was an exhausting combination of tasks to perform alone, so that’s where I came in.

“That’s the last one!” Augurey called after he cut down the last of the dozen or so skeletons. “Ugh! It’s still moving. Rentt!”

“I got it. I got it.” I ran over immediately and poured some holy water on a pile of bones, which then turned to dust.

“I’m really glad I asked for your help,” Augurey commented.

“I still think you could have pulled it off on your own.”

“Well, I would have been running myself ragged, and I might have even failed my objective.”

“True. Did you find it?” I asked.

“Right here.” Augurey held up a necklace he’d taken from one of the skeletons. It must have been wearing it when it died.

“Your mission was to find the one wearing it, so you’re done, right? How much are you going to make? With a request this annoying, you should be getting a decent payout.”

Augurey hadn’t taken this job through the guild, and I was only here to help out, so I hadn’t put in any paperwork.

Augurey cocked his head. “Hm? I’m not getting paid. Oh, but don’t worry. I’ll pay you for your time out of my pocket.”

“What?”

“Well, an old lady in Maalt said she wanted to see the necklace again before her time came, so I promised I’d bring it back to her without really thinking about it. She was telling me not to worry about it, but...”

“Augurey, that’s...” It was a charity case, and an incredibly tiresome one at that. I was beginning to question Augurey’s sanity when he looked at me like he’d read my mind.

“You take on some of these too, Rentt. You have no room to talk.”

“I guess so. So you’re saying we’re birds of a feather.”

“You bet I am.”

Maybe that’s why we were friends.

We delivered the necklace to the old lady, who was over the moon to have the piece again. She tried to pay us a decent sum for it, but we turned it down, obviously. Out of consideration for her feelings, though, we took a few bronze coins...which paid for our bar tab that night.

“Here’s to a job well done. Cheers!” Augurey said, raising his glass.

Lorraine, the Mysterious Scholar

Life in the capital wasn’t always hectic. On this particular day, Lorraine was taking advantage of a bit of free time by taking a stroll around the city.

“Even Yaaran’s capital seems empty compared to the empire’s capital. Of course, it’s bustling by Yaaran standards.”

Lorraine couldn’t help but feel like the city was lacking in entertainment. She much preferred spending time with Rentt to taking a walk through the capital streets.

When she arrived at the plaza, she began hearing a bizarre discourse. She followed the sound to find a crowd circling something.

“What’s going on?” she asked someone nearby.

“Oh, looks like some scholars got into a sort of heated debate. They’re apparently experts on puchi suri, but their disagreement led to fisticuffs.”

“Interesting. Do you mind if I get by you?”

“What? Are you sure? They may be scholars, but they deal with monsters. They look pretty burly.”

“I should be fine. I’m an adventurer myself.”

“Really! But a young girl like you... Well, be careful.”

“I appreciate your concern.”

Lorraine squeezed through the crowd to find a pair of muscular scholars grabbing at each other’s shirts, debating on something.

“Puchi suri are not intelligent! They only group together for mutual aid!”

“Nonsense! They only look like they form a group because they congregate at locations they find optimal! Monsters with low intelligence cannot comprehend the long-term benefits of forming a pack!”

Lorraine was familiar with both sides of the debate, as they had emerged in the academic field some time ago, although she recalled how both theories had been disproved. Then she remembered that she was in Yaaran.

“May I interject?” Lorraine asked.

“Who are you?!”

“Stay out of it! This is a highly specialized discussion...”

“I understand both of your theories. You are speaking of Doctor Wesler’s theory of puchi suri independence, and you are supporting Doctor Idestra’s survival-by-the-moment theory.”

The two scholars stared at Lorraine, their eyes wide.

“H-How do you know...?”

“This is knowledge restricted to literature within the Academy and the Towers.”

Lorraine continued, “This very debate occurred in the empire over ten years ago. The discourse itself carries some historical significance, but both theories have been shown to be inaccurate. It is said now that puchi suri are highly intelligent and may form a pack around an alpha. When they do, the pack of puchi suri demonstrates complete obedience to the alpha, which is very natural, seeing as the same behavior can be found among many animals.”

“Monsters are no animals!”

“Indeed! I’ve never heard of something so—”

Lorraine smiled with amusement and pointed at something behind the stubborn pair of academics. “You say that, but there is a pack of puchi suri just behind you, led by an alpha.”

“What?”

They turned to see a larger puchi suri leading five smaller ones. As they watched them march, the puchi suri drifted out of their single-file formation, only for the larger puchi suri to squeak in reprimand for them to reform the line. The interaction proved to everyone who was watching that Lorraine’s theory was correct. The scholars fell silent.

“Wasn’t that lucky? You were able to find the truth through observation. Excuse me, then,” Lorraine said and turned to leave.

The crowd followed Lorraine’s cue and soon dispersed, leaving the scholars befuddled.

After walking for some time, Lorraine said to the ground, “You guys made a fun entrance. Thanks.”

Six puchi suri scuttled in. They had sneaked into the city under Edel’s instructions and had heard Lorraine’s whispered request before making their appearance. The puchi suri chirped in response and left.

“The capital isn’t so much of a bore, after all,” Lorraine muttered to herself.

After Lorraine returned to the inn later on, Rentt said to her, “I heard some *brilliant* researcher outsmarted a pair of palace scholars.”

Lorraine kept her cool and only said, “How curious.”

“Probably someone from the empire,” Rentt added, and Lorraine realized that he knew.

Time, Eternal

“The black dragon then admitted his wrongdoings, kissed the princess on the hand, and left,” Augurey concluded.

The bonfire before them crackled, illuminating the dark forest around them. Augurey had prefaced this story to be an old fairytale, but I’d never heard of it. Of course, it wasn’t unusual for each region to have their own repertoire of folklore, and I thought nothing was unusual about this until Lorraine interjected with surprise.

“That was a variation of the White Princess and the Black Dragon of Rien, wasn’t it? I’ve looked into the story before, but yours was different from any regional variation I’ve heard. And it’s extremely detailed. More than any version I’m aware of...”

“Oh, really? If you think so, Lorraine, maybe this version’s close to the original.”

“Most likely,” Lorraine said. “I didn’t expect a story like that from you, but maybe I should have. You used to be a bard in the bars of Maalt.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said. “You wear a lot of hats, Augurey.”

He shrugged. “Look who’s talking. I only did it because ladies dig a bard.”

“You’re never looking for a lady, though,” I countered. “You like dressing up too, but not for female attention.”

“Nothing gets past you. I don’t feel the need for a relationship, I guess. I’m sure it’s the same with you two.”

Augurey gave us a knowing look, but we weren’t innocent enough to blush at a comment like that.

“Those things are put on the back burner when you have a task to complete,” Lorraine explained.

“I second that,” I said.

We weren’t having a deep conversation, but the three of us shared an understanding that we didn’t need to spell out. Something would probably come crashing down if we dared to acknowledge it. The best we could do now was leave it alone, so we just kept talking about nothing important until the sun came up.

What Comes After Adventuring

“Hey, Rentt, can you do me a favor?” Wolf, Maalt’s guildmaster, called as I happened to walk into the guild.

“I’m here to pick up a job, you know.” There wasn’t really another reason to stop by this place. I used to post jobs, once in a blue moon, but not since I’d died.

“I know. I’m *giving* you a sweet job.”

“All right, let’s hear it. Whose job is it?”

“Mine, of course.”

“Why do I feel like you’re handing me the short end of a stick?”

A request from Wolf had to be adventurer-related. When it came straight from him, it usually meant it was too annoyingly complicated for the average schmuck. Since I was the schmuck who’d become a temporary worker for the guild, that made me more vulnerable to these tricky requests.

I started searching for excuses in my mind when Wolf said, “This one isn’t like that. Here.”

I took what he held out. “A pension? Oh, from the guild. I didn’t know people actually paid into that.”

A pension system was available through the guild, where members could pay a certain amount a month and receive a regular monthly income after retirement, but it wasn’t all that popular. Most hunters couldn’t plan a week ahead, and they didn’t want to. In a line of work where they could die any day, many chose to drink their pay rather than invest it for their golden years that

might never come. On occasion, I questioned how they could maintain a system like that. From what I was told, a connection with the guild in the capital made the fund sustainable.

“Take this to Tekara in Donrista village, will you?” Wolf asked. “A notice that his fund’s matured. Payout starts next month.”

“That’s fine. Just pay me the usual,” I said.

“Appreciate it! But it’s pretty far, so I’ll pay you the going price.”

We had a deal.



“Are you Tekara?”

I had asked several villagers of Donrista this question before I found him tilling in a field. He looked nothing like an adventurer.

“I am. You’re an adventurer. What do you want?” he asked, a little apprehensive. Adventurers were a brutish breed, after all.

I pulled out the pension notice. “This is yours. Payout starts next month, he said.”

The cautious curiosity vanished from Tekara’s face. “No way! They really pay it out...”

“What, you didn’t think it would? And you paid into it for twenty years?”

That was how long it took for the fund to mature. It didn’t make any sense for him to pay into something he doubted would pay off.

“I get where you’re coming from, but I just wanted to build a future for myself,” Tekara answered.

“Not many adventurers do,” I remarked.

“You got a point, but...”

“Tekara!” a voice called from afar.

I saw a villager running toward us, and we started toward him.

“What’s wrong,” Tekara asked.

“Liz went into the forest. Toward the lake.”

As soon as he heard that, Tekara bolted.

“Hey, Tekara!” the other villager called out, to no avail.

“Who’s Liz?” I asked him.

“Tekara’s granddaughter. She’s that age when kids want to be an adventurer. She went into a monster habitat she’s not supposed to. Tekara knew where she was going.”

“Gotcha...”

“You’re an adventurer, aren’t you? Can you help Tekara out?”

“Huh? Well...”

“Please! I’ll pay for your trouble!”

“That’s fine by me,” I replied, relenting. “I’ll go after him.”

“Thanks!”



I arrived at the monster habitat thinking that my presence wouldn’t be needed. Despite my rushing to catch up, there was nothing for me to do when I arrived.

“Who’s there? Oh, it’s you. Took you long enough.” Tekara calmly smiled, holding a bloodied sword in one hand and a girl in his other arm.

“You’re just too fast, Tekara,” I remarked.

“Heh. I used to be Silver-class, you know. I haven’t gotten *that* old.”

“I can see that.”

“Hey, I’d love to clean this blood up. Can you watch her for a second? She’ll be knocked out for a while. She’s not hurt, though.”

“Sure.”

“Won’t take long. Thanks.”

Tekara stopped by the lake to clean himself. I watched the girl as promised,

where Tekara could still see me.

I heard him mutter, “My daughter.”

“What?” I asked.

“That pension. My daughter was born when I was still an adventurer. I didn’t know how long I could keep up the career, and it wasn’t like I had another option. After doing some research, it looked like the pension was the way to go. As long as you’ve paid into it for five years, they’ll pay your family if you die on the job.”

“You did it for your family, then.” It made sense.

“And you? Got any kids?” Tekara asked.

“Not yet. Maybe I’ll see where you’re coming from if I ever do.”

“You will. But I have a feeling you’re going to make a name as an adventurer. Might be a while until you get hitched.”

“What makes you say that?” I questioned.

Tekara grinned. “A hunch. From all my years in the field.”

He swiftly put his clothes back on, and we returned to the village. With Tekara’s signature on the pension notice, I headed back to Maalt.

On the road home, I kept thinking about what Tekara had said. “The future... Maybe I’ll start a pension if I see what he’s talking about.” *My* payout would last forever too.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Chapter 1: The Royal Capital and the Church of the Eastern Sky](#)
4. [Side Story: Meanwhile, Back in Maalt](#)
5. [Chapter 2: To the Palace](#)
6. [Chapter 3: The Job with Augurey](#)
7. [Chapter 4: The Arrival](#)
8. [Chapter 5: A Token of Thanks from the Village Girl](#)
9. [Afterword](#)
10. [Bonus Short Stories](#)
11. [About J-Novel Club](#)
12. [Copyright](#)



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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 10

by Yu Okano

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