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Yu Okano

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The ancient ent.



“The view is nice  
from up here, Rentt!  
Hurry up and get on!”





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# The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Author Yu Okano

Illustrator Jaian





# Characters



**Sheila Ibarss**

A receptionist at the guild.  
Knows Rentt's secret.



**Lorraine Vivie**

A scholar and  
Silver-class adventurer.  
Assists Rentt after  
he became undead.



**Rentt Faina**

An adventurer seeking to reach  
Mithril-class. Turned undead  
after being eaten by  
a dragon in a dungeon.



**Edel**

A monster called a puchi suri  
who lived under an orphanage.  
He sucked Rentt's blood and  
became his vampiric servant.



**Alize**

A girl who lives at an  
orphanage. Her dream is to be  
an adventurer. She became  
Rentt and Lorraine's disciple.



**Rina Rupaage**

A novice adventurer  
who helped Rentt and  
dragged him to town after  
he became a ghoul.



**Idoles Rogue**

A knight in service of the  
Kingdom of Yaaran. He has a  
younger sister named Rina.



**Isaac Hart**

A man who serves the Latuule  
family. He's powerful enough  
to survive in the Tarasque  
Swamp.



**Laura Latuule**

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





## Clope

Owner of a smithy called the Three-Pronged Harpoon. Creates special equipment that takes advantage of Rentt's unique properties.



## Isabel Cariello

Loris's wife. She and her husband manage the Red Wyvern Pavilion.



## Loris Cariello

Manager of a restaurant called the Red Wyvern Pavilion. When Rentt saved him in a dungeon, he offered to let him eat for free.



## Myullias Raiza

A Lobelian saint who has been blessed by a divine spirit. She has the power to control divinity and specializes in healing and purifying.



## Nive Maris

A Gold-class adventurer and vampire hunter. She's currently considered the closest person to reaching Platinum-class.



## Luka

Clope's wife. She's the clerk at her husband's smithy, the Three-Pronged Harpoon.

## Story

Rentt, the eternal Bronze-class adventurer, became undead after he was eaten by a dragon. Recalling that monsters have the capacity for something called Existential Evolution, he successfully evolved into a ghou. After receiving help from Rina, he ended up living with Lorraine in the city of Maalt. Going by an alias, he once again began to work toward becoming a Mithril-class adventurer. Rentt and Lorraine were welcomed in Rentt's hometown of Hathara, where Gharb and Capitan told them about the village's secret. Then they used teleportation circles to travel from Hathara to Vistelya, the capital of the Kingdom of Yaaran.



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**Chapter 1: Vistelya, the Capital**

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# Chapter 1: Vistelya, The Capital

Crowds flooded in and out of the gate to the capital. It was only natural. For as small as the Kingdom of Yaaran was, it was still a proper country; it would have to see a fair number of visitors. However, as a less advanced country, their security was sloppy in some places.

“Where’s your identification?” one of the gate guards asked a man standing in line before us. His clothes were worn out, a straw hat sat upon his head, and he carried some vegetables wrapped in cloth. He looked like he could only have come from a small village.

“Oh, uh, I don’t have none of those,” he said, but his accent was thick and hard to parse.

The guard seemed used to this, however. He sighed, shook his head, and asked, “Where are you from?”

“I’m from out in Yanga. Came to town to sell these.” The man opened the cloth to show off his vegetables, asserting that he possessed nothing suspicious.

“I’m sure you did. Go on through,” the guard said with a nod, letting him enter the gate.

“Do you think he should have done that?” Lorraine asked. “He could easily have been hiding illegal material inside those vegetables.” She was judging based on her perspective as a citizen of the Empire.

“I don’t know. I’m sure it’s fine. When you enter the aristocratic district near the castle, they apparently perform a more strict inspection. Besides, the guards have dogs that’d probably smell anything illegal,” I said as I looked around, unsure as to whether I was right or not. Older adventurers always told me how lax the capital’s security was, actually. They seemed to be right.

“I’m impressed they’ve gone so long without being destroyed by any of the surrounding nations,” Lorraine muttered.

“It’s not like there’d be much use in destroying Yaaran. They could expand



their territory, maybe, but there's hardly any decent land around here."

Some of Yaaran's cities were actually big enough that they might be worth attacking, but the other countries in the region weren't much different in the first place. They were too laid back to engage in the sort of grandiose power struggles that took place in the center of the world. Well, maybe they weren't that laid back, but they came across that way when compared to the strict laws and regulations of the Empire. There was a reason these countries weren't major players on the world stage.

"Next!" the guard said, so I stepped up. He took a look at my face. "Have any identification?" he asked, surprisingly not mentioning my mask. Plenty of people had wounded faces they wanted to hide, and this guard was evidently polite enough to not ask questions. I showed him the ID listing my name as Rentt Vivie. "I see, an adventurer? And what brings you to the capital?"

To be honest, I had no reason to be here other than that I came along with a group that immediately split up. "I'm here to see the city," I said, for lack of a better excuse. "I do adventuring work in another city, but I want to work in the capital eventually, so I figure I should check it out."

"I see. Bronze-class, are you? Once you reach Silver-class, you should be more than good enough to work in the capital. Just keep working at it. All right, you may pass!" the guard said and patted my shoulder.

He seemed to take his job seriously, but as far as I could tell, he didn't keep any records of who came and went. I had to assume they would for those who went to the aristocratic district, but maybe writing down the names of everyone who entered the outer city would take too long. It did seem kind of careless, but Yaaran was that kind of country.

After I was done, Lorraine got questioned by the guard too. I was already pretty far from them, but my vampiric ears were strong enough to hear them clearly.

"Where's your identification?" the guard asked, so Lorraine presented an ID from the Empire. "You're, uh, from the Empire?" the guard said very respectfully.

The Empire was far from Yaaran, but everyone knew it to be a great and



powerful nation. As a citizen of Yaaran, I could see why he would have trouble standing up to a visitor from the Empire. One wrong move could start a war.

“Yes, but don’t mind that. I’m only here to see the sights. You don’t mind letting me through, do you?” Lorraine asked confidently.

“Of course not. Just know that regardless of your country of origin, you’re not allowed to cause trouble,” the guard asserted, still retaining some pride.

“I know, I’ll be good. Farewell,” Lorraine said and walked up to me. “That guard is a bit too humble for his own good.”

“Yeah, probably. But nobody from the Empire comes to Yaaran for the most part. It’s like how Riri and Fahri felt when we visited them from Maalt.”

“Because I come from a metropolis? I’m not even particularly a city person compared to others in the Empire, but oh well. Here we are in the capital, so we may as well take a look around. Is there anywhere in particular you’d like to go?”

“I want to check out the guild, I guess. But maybe I shouldn’t.”

The simple identity check at the gate was one thing, but if I went to the guild headquarters dressed like this, I had to imagine they would keep a record of it. Not that robes and masks were that uncommon, but my mask did more to put people off considering it looked like a skull.

“What if you change the color of your robe and cover the mask with a cloth or something?” Lorraine suggested. “I can alter the color with magic. Although, your robe is highly resistant to magic, so I don’t know if even the surface will be affected.”

At least if I visited them looking like that, they might not recognize me the next time. It was worth a try, and we could simply not visit the guild if it didn’t work out, so we headed to an empty alleyway.



“I think that’ll do it. Not bad, right?” Lorraine said. Thankfully magic seemed to at least work on the surface of the robe, so the color was changed all over. It was as black as a void before, but now it had a purple base with a fancy,



complicated pattern drawn on top.

“I didn’t know you had a knack for designing clothes, Lorraine.” I thought she was just going to make the robe red or yellow or something, not give it a proper design.

Lorraine shook her head. “I don’t. These kinds of clothes are just popular in the imperial capital as of late. I don’t wear them, but they seemed appropriate for the occasion.”

If this style was big in the imperial capital, that made it the most cutting-edge style in the world. Yaaran wouldn’t be at all familiar with it yet. Maybe I could strut my stuff and act like I was hip and trendy. That didn’t sound like my kind of thing, but there was a right time for everything.

Strange thoughts ran through my head until Lorraine said something to snap me back to reality. “Anyway, are we going to the guild headquarters or not?”

“Oh, right. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you do something too? Unlike me, you’ve been there a few times, haven’t you?”

Lorraine was a Silver-class adventurer, so she could take jobs escorting clients from Maalt to the capital. There were also alchemy materials that couldn’t be obtained in Maalt, so she occasionally went to the capital for those. She came to the guild headquarters during those visits, of course, so there could be issues if she went without a disguise.

“I don’t know, how about this?” she said and cast a spell on herself. Suddenly, she gave off an entirely different vibe. Her hair was wavy, and she wore makeup that heavily emphasized her features. She also wore glasses, but they only increased her allure. Even her clothes were no longer the unfashionable robes she usually wore; they were replaced by flashy clothes that were commonplace in big cities. These were presumably also popular in the imperial capital. I had never seen anything like this in Yaaran, but even I could tell this was refined fashion. My overall impression was that she seemed like a rich, powerful magician of unknown age who maybe had one or two quirks. It felt like if you approached her, you’d get burned down to nothing but bones, like me two or three forms ago.





“That’s pretty, uh, different. Bewitching magic’s got some diverse applications,” I said.

Spells intended to change one’s appearance or clothes were generally called bewitching magic or transformation magic. They were barely good for anything when you first learned them, but as you gained more proficiency in them, their uses increased. In the end, you could change everything about your appearance, including your height. It was as crucial to stage magicians as illusion magic was, but changing your entire appearance for a sustained amount of time was pretty difficult, so it was limited to tinkering with outfits for the most part. Lorraine, however, gave herself a complete makeover. Rather than a scholar or adventurer, her talents could have provided her greater opportunities as a performer, I thought.

But Lorraine shook her head. “What are you talking about? I’m not using bewitching magic. I just changed my clothes and hair, and put makeup on,” she said.

I didn’t see how that was possible, so I stared right into her face. “Oh, it’s true. Nothing else has changed,” I said. Her hair color hadn’t changed at all, though it was styled more extravagantly. Magic accelerated the process, but she had actually, physically changed her appearance. “An actual transformation. Amazing.”

“Please, I know how to get dressed up if I want to.”

“I’m not saying I think you can’t. I mean, you have a pretty face; I know you can look gorgeous if you want. I just thought you didn’t think it was worth the trouble, so I’m impressed. Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked. She had turned her back to me while I was talking for some reason. Maybe I said something wrong, but I didn’t think I said anything that problematic? I remembered adventurers from Maalt with wives or girlfriends telling me that you should never tell a woman she looks that different with or without makeup, so maybe that was it.

“Oh, it’s nothing in particular. Let’s go to the guild,” Lorraine said and walked off.

I guess she wasn’t especially hurt, judging from the sound of her voice. Rather, she sounded somewhat lively. I didn’t know what that was about. She



said it was nothing, so I decided not to ask any questions.

I walked by Lorraine's side as we left the alley, and unlike when we entered, I noticed we were getting tons of looks. I thought their attention was drawn by Lorraine's flashy beauty, but the magicians seemed to be looking at me. It probably had something to do with how we were wearing the latest fashion. We must have stood out, but if it was just our clothes they were looking at, then we were still safe. It'd be bad if we were causing some sort of problem, but I didn't get that feeling.

We arrived at the guild. It was much bigger than the one in Maalt, so simply standing in front of it made me shiver. After a decade of effort, I was never able to make it here. Strange circumstances brought me to the place now, but I was still happy about the chance to visit.

"Let's go inside," Lorraine said and went on ahead. I followed her.



The guild in the capital was the administrator of all guilds in Yaaran. If one were to ask where the guild headquarters in Yaaran was, you would point to this one. It also cooperated with guilds in other countries to some extent. They shared information on adventurer rankings and job completion, and the adventurers from this guild could also take jobs in other nations. Guilds couldn't cooperate more than that due to regulation by their local governments, however. These organizations obtained and transferred information from other countries on a regular basis, but they were too big for any one country to fully control, so they seemed to have constant power struggles. That was why governments often distrusted the guilds. But because they were highly effective, they were permitted to exist. None of this meant much to a low-ranking adventurer like me, but it was always interesting to hear stories about it.

Not only was this guild massive compared to the one in Maalt, but it was also cleaner. Even the front desk looked classy, whereas the one in Maalt's guild was made of cheap wood. Many of the receptionists were beautiful women for some reason. Not that the ones in Maalt weren't, but the ones here were attractive in more of a metropolitan way.

“Hey, don’t stare,” Lorraine said.

“I’m not staring. Just noticing how different this place is.”

I kind of was staring, to be honest, but I was just charmed by what I saw. I’m sure Lorraine understood. She scoffed and left it at that, thankfully.

“Anyway, I’ll show you around. Not that it’s much different from what you’d find in Maalt. Over there you have a bar and diner that’s run by the guild, there’s the front desk, there’s where you go to dissect monsters, there’s the appraisal counter, and that just leaves the job board, I believe.”

Like she said, all of these things were in Maalt’s guild too. The tables, chairs, and interior design were a cut above Maalt’s and made it feel like an entirely different establishment, but after hearing Lorraine talk about it, it sounded exactly like what I was used to.

I walked up to the job board, and it indeed looked just like the one in Maalt, with one exception. “There are a lot of tough jobs here,” I said. “Oh, except the one for picking herbs; that seems easy.”

“Maybe it’d be easy for us, but it’s on the harder side as far as these jobs go. For the average adventurer in the capital, it’d be quite difficult. Look at the date it was posted.”

“Three days ago? Personally, I would’ve taken this one right away.”

“The adventurers in Maalt wouldn’t leave it for three days, I’m sure. Thanks to all the education you’ve offered, many of them are knowledgeable about herbs.”

Before I became undead, I occasionally held lectures for beginners at the guild in Maalt. They weren’t about anything especially difficult because I wouldn’t know how to teach anything complicated, but most adventurers started off earning money by picking herbs. I taught them how to tell different herbs apart, how to find where they grew, and how best to traverse mountains and forests. I actually brought in herbs for them to sort and had them test what happens when you use similar but incorrect herbs. I even had the adventurers at the lectures eat the herbs personally if they would only make them a little sick. If they could potentially kill a man, though, I fed them to a puchi suri to



demonstrate instead.

When the newbie adventurers saw that, they began to take picking herbs seriously. Ever since then in Maalt, whenever herbs were in season, jobs related to picking them were immediately taken from the job board. Unfortunately, I made much of my money from those jobs, so I sort of sabotaged myself with that idea. But the new adventurers seemed to share the jobs, at least. I could still take requests to hunt goblins, slimes, and skeletons, so I could survive without that income.

“I’d love to take the job if nobody else will, but that’s probably not a great idea,” I said. If I took a job looking the way I did, they were going to keep a record of it. I didn’t want to risk that. Lorraine also only had her own adventurer’s license with her.

“Oh well. Are we done checking out the guild? Let’s go outside,” Lorraine suggested.

At that moment, somebody approached us from behind. “Hi, folks. You didn’t just say that job was easy, did you?” he asked.

I turned around to see who it was and gasped. This person was wearing insanely garish clothes with all the colors of the rainbow. A peacock feather extended from his hat, and the hilt of the sword at his side was engraved with a blindingly colorful pattern. I also happened to recognize his face, because this adventurer was active in Maalt until a short time ago.

“Oh, uh, maybe,” I stuttered.

“Well, I’ve been checking that job since the day it went up, and nobody’s taken it,” the man said. “I’ve never cared for jobs as bland as picking herbs, so I avoid them as much as possible, but I feel kind of bad about how long this one’s been up there. It’s been an issue for the guild too, apparently. While picking herbs is easy, picking the right ones is tough even for an appraiser. It’s common for someone to do the job and discover they did it wrong, so most adventurers avoid these. I was wondering what to do about it. I actually knew a guy back in the day who knew a ton about this stuff, so I’ve considered asking him, but he lives in Maalt. I can’t just ask him to come all the way here, so what else can I do?”

I had forgotten how much he liked to talk. “I think I understand the situation. Before I commit to anything, though, tell me your name,” I asked. I knew his name, but I just wanted to make him stop talking.

“Oh, right, sorry. I’m Augurey. Augurey Ars, a Silver-class adventurer. Nice to meet you.”







Augurey Ars used to be an adventurer in Maalt. I knew him since way back, and we got along nicely as fellow solo adventurers. He didn't seem to recognize me in this getup, however. He couldn't see through Lorraine's disguise either. We both looked more or less like different people, so thankfully for us, it was to be expected. I didn't know he had become a Silver-class adventurer, though. Back in Maalt, he was still Bronze-class. He was always pretty talented, and a good man aside from his eccentricities, so it wasn't that surprising, but I sort of begrudged how he had surpassed me. I wanted to become a Silver-class soon, but I still hadn't completed enough jobs to take the exam.

"So what do you want with me, Mr. Ars?" I asked Augurey, trying to sound as unfamiliar with him as possible.

He waved his hand, the shining gold of his glove hurting my eyes. "Please, we're friends. Call me Augurey. If only everyone could be so friendly with each other, the world would be at peace! What was your name, by the way?"

I was a bit surprised to hear him call me his friend, but he ended by asking my name, so I realized he was just saying that. He acted like this when I first met him too, so he could be hard to understand in some ways.

Unsure what name to use, I looked to Lorraine. Her expression told me that I should make something up. That would be for the best, since he might guess who I was if I said Rentt. Despite how he was, Augurey had oddly strong intuition and could be shockingly perceptive. Taking those kinds of risks with him wasn't a good idea.

"The name's Purple," I said simply based on the color of my robe. It sounded like an obviously fake name, but I could always claim that I wore these clothes because of it. Maybe. The name did exist, so I thought I should be safe. I looked at Lorraine and she seemed appalled, though.

"Purple, you say? I see, because purple clothes are stylish! And who's the woman?" Augurey asked, looking at Lorraine.

"I'm Olga, his companion. Pleased to meet you," she answered. Unlike me, she picked an exceedingly safe alias. She also carried herself entirely differently



from normal. While she was introducing herself, she wrapped her arm around mine.

“I see, are you dating? Or are you married, perhaps? You certainly seem close. Purple, quite the beautiful woman you got to marry. You’re one lucky guy!” Augurey said with exaggerated surprise. He was wrong on all counts, but it was hard to say so, and Lorraine didn’t deny it either. She was grinning about the whole misunderstanding.

Everything we said was a lie anyway, so I decided it might be easier to go along with it. “Making her my wife certainly wasn’t easy,” I said. “You don’t often see women so beautiful, refined, and pleasant to spend time with. I’m a happy man. Anyway, we traveled here from the Empire for our honeymoon. Just the two of us, of course. I heard that unlike the capital of the Empire, the beauty of nature is still present in the streets of Vistelya, so I wanted to come see it for myself. Oh, I’m afraid all this talking has taken up too much time. We have to be going now.”

I was trying to think of a way to get out of there, and that was what I came up with. While I was talking, it felt like Lorraine’s arm began to squeeze mine tighter, but maybe it was my imagination.

When I tried to walk away, Augurey grabbed my other arm. “Hold it! I still haven’t gotten to my main point!” he cried. “My goodness, you walked off so suddenly I almost let you go. Would you mind listening to what I have to say?”

It didn’t seem like we’d get the chance to escape. I could tear myself free from his grip, but then he’d chase after us as a matter of pride. There was no peaceful way to say goodbye, so we had to stay and hear him out. It was bad enough how his outfit drew attention, but it’d be even worse if some weird adventurers suddenly started playing tag in the streets.

“Fine, so what is it?” I asked, relieving him.

“Well, you said that job would be easy,” he said, as I expected. “I was wondering if you’d like to accompany me in tackling it. You’re free to take the entire reward. I’m a Silver-class adventurer, after all. I’ll even take care of any monsters we encounter. All you have to do is find the correct herbs. Not a bad deal, if I do say so myself.”

Considering I didn't want to take any jobs from this guild myself, I couldn't have asked for more favorable conditions. "Why go so far for this job, though?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious! For the clothes!" he answered.

I cocked my head. "What are you talking about?"

"The herb-picking job, of course."

"What does that have to do with clothes?"

"Look at who posted the job."

"'Michel's Boutique'?"

"Yes. I ordered new clothes from them, but the dye is a bit unique. They absolutely need those herbs! To be honest, I thought they would be relatively easy to obtain before I placed the order, but then I found out it was rather hard to get them in this city. I need to stop assuming that everything is the same as in Maalt. I could import them, but I was told it would take a whole month. I want to be in those new clothes within the week! And yet they're out of my reach! I can't stand it!"



I was left wondering why I should care to help. There was no way to see this as anyone but Augurey's problem. If he could get the dye in a month, then he should have just waited.

"Is that everything? Goodbye, then," I said and tried to leave.

However, Augurey refused to loosen his grip. "No, no, we're not finished here! Why not help me out?! I'm giving you the whole reward! I'm acting as your guard! This job should be a breeze!" Augurey pleaded desperately. His yelling was drawing attention, so I gave up on trying to break free.

His offer was certainly in my favor, but still. "There are reasons why we don't want to take jobs from the guild," I said. "Besides, I just told you that we're on our honeymoon. We don't have much time to spare."

I decided that convincing him to give up would be the best option. Augurey was pushy, but he wasn't completely unreasonable. If I explained myself, I



thought he would understand. Not that we were actually on a honeymoon, but it was true we didn't have much time. We had to meet up with Gharb and Capitan later.

But against my expectations, Augurey still refused to give up. "There are reasons, you say? That makes it sound like taking a job from the guild would in itself be a problem. In that case, what if it was simply a personal request from myself? And as far as your honeymoon, you'll get to go places no honeymooners have gone before!"

"You're awfully persistent," I said. "You need these herbs that badly? Why not just wait a month?"

Augurey shook his head and begged in a grave tone, "I want them as soon as possible. Please. I'll pay you even more than the reward listed here. It shouldn't take long. I know they grow in a forest not far from here, so as long as you can tell the herbs apart, it should be done in a matter of hours."

I hardly ever saw him act like this in Maalt. I didn't know he was so obsessed over clothes, but looking at what he was wearing, I shouldn't have been surprised.

"You think we'll make it in time?" I asked Lorraine.

"If it's only a few hours, then probably. Don't tell me you're actually going to accept," she said. She didn't sound very enthusiastic about the idea, but Augurey did a fair bit for me back in Maalt. He told me about some nice hunting spots and provided the locations of monsters I could handle. I couldn't turn down such an impassioned request from him. The frivolous nature of his request was somewhat astonishing, but maybe he was in some crisis that we ordinary people couldn't understand.

"If I don't have to take the request through the guild, then I suppose I'm willing to help," I said. "But if it looks like we'll be late for our plans, we'll have to go back. Also, don't tell too many people about us. We don't want to stand out."

"Of course. Thanks! Then I'll accept the job myself, and you'll simply be helping me with a personal request. You say you don't want to stand out, though? When you're wearing that? Honestly, the reason I approached you was

I thought you'd understand my passion," Augurey said, confused.

Our clothes did stand out a lot, admittedly. But unlike Augurey's, we were wearing the latest popular fashion from the Empire. I wanted to make sure he knew we weren't like him, but before I could explain that, he went to the counter.

"Are you sure about this, Rentt?" Lorraine asked. "They won't keep records as long as we don't take the job through the guild, yes, and I suppose it will kill time until we need to meet up again, but still."

"I'm not that interested myself, but I do owe him to some extent. I don't mind helping him out a bit as long as we don't expose our identities. It'll be an easy job anyway."

"You're too nice for your own good."

"I guess. Sorry, Lorraine. We had the chance to see the capital, but now I've given us some work to do."

"It's fine, I've been to the capital plenty of times. There's not much left for me to see."

"Really? If there's somewhere you want to go, you can go there while I attend Augurey. He's not looking for help with fighting anyway; he just needs someone who knows herbs," I said. Apparently Augurey had become strong enough to be a Silver-class adventurer since I last saw him. He had to be far stronger than he was in Maalt, so there was no particular need for both Lorraine and I to go with him.

"As much as I'd love to sit this out, I suspect you'll spill the beans if you go alone," Lorraine said, pointing out my carelessness. I had just accepted a request for not much reason, so I couldn't argue.

"Sorry. I'll make it up to you later."

"Oh, will you? Then take me out to dinner at a restaurant called All Flevne on the main street in Maalt. I've always wanted to try their full course dinner at some point," she said.

That restaurant was famous for being the most expensive one in Maalt. The

prices were, of course, exorbitant. A full course dinner from there wouldn't be impossible for me to pay nowadays, and considering everything I asked of Lorraine, I felt like I at least owed her that much.

"Sure, we can go next time we're in Maalt," I said, to Lorraine's surprise.

"I was kidding. Are you sure?" she asked, looking worried now. But as an adventurer, I couldn't go back on my word.

I pounded my chest and said, "Leave it to me. You'll get to eat all you want." Then I smiled.



"I believe this should be the place," Augurey whispered as we walked through a forest outside the walls of Vistelya.

After Augurey finished the paperwork to accept the job at the guild, we immediately set off. It had been a little over an hour since then. Just as Augurey told us earlier, it looked like it would take a few hours total. He knew to research the destination in advance, as any Silver-class adventurer should, so we never got lost on our way. Thankfully, the forest was close to the capital, so few monsters were in the area at the moment. The kinds of monsters that would appear here were perfect for new soldiers to train on, so they were frequently exterminated. That was why it was relatively safe to walk around here. From an adventurer's perspective, though, they were systematically eliminating our source of income. But that also meant the guild in the capital had tougher, more rewarding jobs than the others in the region. That made it hard for new adventurers to work in the capital, so there were advantages and disadvantages.

"There does seem to be a lot of different herbs here," I said. "We're looking for fire spirit madder, right?"

"Yes, but I couldn't say what it looks like. They all look the same to me," Augurey answered, his head in his arms. He stared at the plants but couldn't seem to tell them apart at all.

There were a lot of little plants with yellow-green flowers, and at a glance, they all appeared identical. But I knew they were all different. "Fire spirit



madder can be identified by the shape of its leaves and flowers, the number of leaves, the shape of the stem, the scent, and the roots. This is a good chance for you to learn that,” I said, explaining the unique features of the plant to Augurey. There were three or four similar types of plants, and they all grew in mostly the same places. They could be hard to collect, but not if you knew how to distinguish between them. I described them repeatedly until Augurey could also tell them apart after a few attempts.

“I see, so that’s how you do it. I’ve learned something today,” he said.

I didn’t teach him for his sake. I did it so that requests like these wouldn’t be left untouched in the capital. Augurey was a solo adventurer, but he was a relatively compassionate one, so he would probably pass this information on to the next generation.

If the fire spirit madder was meant to be used for dye, then he must have wanted the clothes to be red. Dye could be collected from the dried roots of the plant, producing a bright red color. It was as red as the setting sun on days when the power of the fire spirits was especially strong, which is where the name came from. He was dressed in rainbow colors now, but this would make clothes that were glaringly red, apparently. I didn’t like the sound of that, but there was no accounting for taste.

“Shall we return, then? I think you’ve gotten enough,” Lorraine said.

Augurey and I nodded. This would be plenty to use for dye, so we had no reason to stay here any longer.

## Chapter 2: Backup

The three of us were walking back to the capital when I suddenly smelled blood. When I came to a stop, Lorraine and Augurey looked at me with confusion.

“Is something wrong?” Augurey asked.

“Yeah, I smell human blood from over there.”

Augurey sniffed the air. “I don’t notice anything. You must have the nose of a dog,” he said with a shrug.

My vampiric abilities actually made me frightfully sensitive to the scent of human blood. I knew the odor of other creatures as well, but human blood was especially fragrant. I knew from this smell that it had to have come from a human.

“Why don’t we check, if you’re so curious,” Lorraine said. “This outing was quicker than expected, so we should have the time.”

“Do you mind?” I asked Augurey.

“Not at all,” he said. “In fact, if someone’s being attacked, I’d like to help. Let’s hurry.”

We decided to do what any adventurer would do. We ran to the destination, with me leading the way because I could sniff out the exact location.

When we arrived, we found a carriage toppled over. It was surrounded by about twenty forest wolves and ten rock wolves. Forest wolves were a size larger than the average wolf and commonly appeared on the third floor of the New Moon Dungeon. They weren’t that powerful individually, but in packs they were dangerous enough to compete with a Silver-class adventurer. Rock wolves were even more threatening, dwarfing the forest wolves in size. Their bodies were coated in a layer of stone that acted as armor. Despite that, they were as agile and coordinated as other wolves. You never wanted to run into these monsters on the road.

The wolves were ganging up on this carriage. A few armored men were defending it, but they were greatly outnumbered. A few were lying on the ground and seemed to already be dead. If nobody interfered, they would probably be wiped out.

“So what should we do? Leave, or help?” Augurey asked me.

“Sorry, but mind if we help? You can go hide somewhere if you don’t want to.”

“That’s quite all right. I can offer backup too. Honestly, I’ve been itching for a fight.”

“Then shall we begin?” Lorraine said without needing to be asked. “I’ll scatter them with magic to create a path.” She cast a spell that launched blades of wind from her wand and attacked the wolves.



Lorraine’s wind blades blew the forest wolves away. That attack alone killed five or six of them, so it must have packed a punch. Then we ran through the space she cleared and approached the carriage.

“Who are you people?!” the oldest of the armored men asked when we suddenly appeared. He didn’t let his guard down, of course. He kept slashing at the monsters to keep them at bay.

“We’re adventurers,” I answered. “We’re here to offer backup.”

It was a brief explanation, but it seemed to be enough to convince the man. “You have my gratitude!” he said and then continued to fight. His skill was nothing to scoff at, but against this many monsters, it didn’t quite match up.

The other men seemed to be having a rougher time, so we decided to split up and help them. We cleared out the monsters until I finally slayed the last one, ending the battle.

“Phew, looks like that worked out somehow,” the older man said. He was clad in silver armor and wielded a sword. It was the same equipment as the other men, but his armor was different in that the shoulder of it displayed a crest that was presumably a mark of his status. He was clearly a knight, so I could guess



what this carriage might have held. I sensed danger.

“There don’t seem to be any more monsters, so I think we should be returning to town,” I said. “Bye.”

“Wait a moment! I can’t let you go unrewarded after all your help,” the man replied, not unexpectedly.

His generosity was only a hindrance in this case, but I couldn’t say so. Regardless, I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. “Well, we were in the middle of a job,” I said, trying to sound like I had no choice.

“In that case, perhaps you could be rewarded another day,” he insisted.

“Yes, please allow me to reward you!” a precious girl in a dress said from behind the man. She looked to be around fifteen or sixteen and a bit sickly, but she gave us a firm look.

The knight looked at the girl and frantically ran toward her. “Princess! How many times do I have to tell you to hide in the carriage?”

“The fight is over anyway. Besides, my saviors are about to leave. It would bring shame to the royal family if I didn’t thank them somehow,” she responded.

“What should we do?” I asked Lorraine and Augurey as I watched them from afar.

“I think we ought to find a way to leave as soon as possible,” Lorraine suggested. “It sounds like she’s someone of considerable status. But whether she’s of Yaaran royalty or some other nation, I don’t know.”

“I agree,” Augurey said. “They may certainly offer plentiful rewards, but getting involved with royalty could be bothersome. Still, though...”

They were both of the same mind, but judging by the princess and the knight’s exchange, it wouldn’t be easy for us to get away. We could have just turned and left immediately, but that would probably create problems for Augurey in the future. Lorraine and I were acting under false identities, but he was an adventurer who worked in the capital normally. If he ran off now and was contacted through the guild later, and they asked him who we were, it

could be a serious issue. He could simply say he didn't know, but then they might undertake a detailed investigation into us. Considering that possibility, peacefully turning down their offer would be the only safe way out of this.

"Apologies for the wait," the knight said. "The princess wishes to thank you. She would like to invite you to the palace."

The princess stared at us from behind him, her expression implying that she'd give us the greatest possible hospitality. I appreciated that and thought it was commendable coming from royalty. If I were acting under my true identity, I would have accepted the offer. But now wasn't a good time.

I didn't know what to do, so I bought some time by asking a question. "Uh, to the palace, you say? Who are you two, exactly?" I knew the answer, more or less. They were a knight and a princess, and they were unfortunately attacked on the road. It felt like associating with them would go nowhere good, but maybe I was imagining things.

"Oh, my apologies, I should have introduced myself sooner. I'm Nauss Ancro, captain of the Kingdom of Yaaran's Royal Guard. And this is..."

The Royal Guard was supposed to be among the most powerful groups in Yaaran. There may have been a lot of monsters, but they shouldn't have done as much damage as they did. Some of the knights who did survive were heavily wounded, and those wounds didn't look like they came from forest wolves or rock wolves. Maybe they were harmed by something else beforehand and then were attacked again. That would leave them with little remaining stamina, which would explain why they struggled against relatively weak monsters. Whatever the case, it seemed like a nasty situation.

"I'm the second princess of Yaaran, Jia Regina Yaaran," the princess said after the knight.

We kneeled before her. I may have grown up in the middle of nowhere, but I knew that was the proper etiquette around royalty. In the off chance that a noble would come to the village, they wanted to avoid any potential disasters, so they beat these things into us.

"You don't have to do that," Princess Jia said. "Maybe if we were in the palace, but this is a public road. Besides, you saved us. More monsters could

attack at any moment, so I could never demand that you bow to me in this dangerous place.”

But accepting her generosity at face value and raising my head could get it chopped off, as has happened in numerous instances before, so I kept my head down. Not that severing my head would necessarily kill me, but it wouldn't be ideal.

“You really can raise your heads,” Nauss said. “She's not like the corrupt nobles you're thinking of.”

Yaaran did have corrupt nobles, but relatively few compared to other countries. There were many reasons for this, but one big reason was that the majority of the country belonged to the Church of the Eastern Sky. It was built around living a modest life and showing compassion to others, so if nobles belonged to that religion, they were more likely to care for their people. Nauss surely knew this of Yaaran as well, but it sounded like he felt strongly about the nobles he spoke of.

I was only getting more suspicious and didn't particularly want to go with them, but it was hard to directly reject a request from royalty. Maybe it would at least be possible to postpone this. Then there might be some ways to deal with this. If nothing else, it would be better than going there right away. I decided to try and carry the conversation in that direction.

At any rate, I was told to raise my head, so I did. It didn't matter if my head was lopped off, and I was the one closest to them, so I figured I would act as the representative. Nobody tried to remove my head, and Nauss and Jia just watched me, so I seemed to be okay. I was relieved about that, but I tried not to show it.

“Princess, Sir Nauss, thank you for your generosity,” I said.

“Oh, it's nothing,” Jia replied. “So, will you accept my invitation?”

This was the kind of question that was more like a demand. But it was framed as a question nonetheless, so I hoped that if I asked if the invitation could be pushed to a later date, it would be allowed. If not, then so be it.

“We're adventurers in the middle of a job, so we have to go report about that



first. Also, as you may see from how we're dressed, we're not in the proper attire for entering a palace. If possible, we'd like some time to prepare first."

All three of us were in flashy outfits. Mine and Lorraine's were certainly on the trendy side, and Augurey's was hard to look at but still well-made. Regardless, I had been told that visiting a palace in outfits like this would be improper. When going before someone of high prestige, many preparations were required, even with regards to clothing. We didn't meet those standards. As such, I thought this would be a good excuse to ask for more time. This wasn't simply for our sake, as Jia most likely didn't want to be embarrassed by us either.

Nauss was the first to express that he understood what I was saying. Only a noble could become the captain of the Royal Guard, but because he had the duty of protecting the royal family, I heard there was more emphasis placed on his skill with a sword than his status. Maybe his standing as a noble wasn't as high as some others, judging by his interactions with us.

"Yes, you might be right," he said. "Your clothes are somewhat painful to the eye, if you don't mind me saying. And once you've taken a job, you must see it through to its end. Normally the royal family should be the top priority, however. Princess, what do you think?"

"Father always said not to interfere with our citizens' work. You can leave this for another day, of course."

This perspective probably came from the compassion that the Church of the Eastern Sky preached. The royalty of other countries would be happy to intrude on the lives of its citizens and wouldn't even comprehend why they shouldn't. They viewed the work of the masses as trifling compared to the demands of royalty. Thankfully, Yaaran was different. It was a small country either way, so the royalty was far closer to its citizens than other nations were.

"Then let's do that," I said. "What should we do when we're ready?"

"I'd tell you to simply visit the palace, but ordinary adventurers aren't allowed past the guards. Take this with you. Show this to the guards, and they should open the door for you," Nauss said as he handed me a medal. It bore the same crest that was engraved on part of his armor.

The crest depicted a rather violent image of a unicorn impaling a monster on its horn. Maybe knights looked at this and thought it looked gallant. I wouldn't know how knights thought, but it was kind of cool, I guess. My family never had a family crest or anything. Actually, considering everything I now knew about my village, maybe they did have one somewhere. It could be worth asking about next time I returned home.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It is what it looks like. A medal that features the crest of my family. I hand them out at times like these, when someone needs to present proof that they have business with me. I have a few, but they're magic items made of fairly rare metal, so hopefully you don't run off with it." Nauss kind of sounded like he was joking, but his eyes looked serious.

Lorraine was staring curiously at the medal and nodding, so it must have been a pretty decent magic item. Even I could tell that the metal was of high quality. It could sell for a high price, but then I might get my head lopped off, so I decided against it.

"Understood. Then we'll be sure to visit the palace at a later date," I said. "Also, will that carriage be all right?" The carriage was completely turned over on its side, and while we weren't far from the capital, it would still be at least an hour of walking. The knights might be able to handle it, but not so much the princess.

"Fortunately, it simply toppled over. It should still be usable once we pull it upright. It was built for the royal family, so it's quite durable. But it might take some time."



They were so exhausted that it might have been tough for them to lift the carriage. "Should we do something to help?" I whispered to Lorraine and Augurey. Nauss and the princess were ordering the other knights to pull the carriage upright.

"Offering to help might bear the most fruit in the future," Augurey said. "But you two don't want to draw attention, do you? Then, if necessary, I could go to the palace by myself and ideally earn enough of their gratitude that they allow

it.”

In other words, Augurey would go tell them that we went off somewhere and couldn't come to the palace. But I didn't want to make him do that. It was me who said we should help them in the first place. Making Augurey deal with the aftermath of that didn't sit well with me. Although, we were only here at all because of Augurey's unreasonable request, but I was the one who'd accepted it. I couldn't push the blame on him.

“That might be convenient for us, but it'd hurt your standing in the capital,” I said. “And we only just met. I couldn't ask so much of you.”

Augurey looked a bit surprised. “I'm the one who dragged you into this. How nice of you. Well, I appreciate the thought, but what should we do, then?”

“Whatever the case, earning their gratitude should be the right choice. Fortunately, getting that carriage upright again will be easy, if you don't mind me taking care of it,” Lorraine suggested.

She intended to use magic. Some of the knights could probably use magic too, but because of their jobs, they would have focused primarily on learning offensive magic. Lorraine knew those spells too, but she also knew some more convenient and highly specific spells.

“That's fine with me, but don't make too big a show of it,” I said. The outfits she'd picked already stood out enough as it was.

“Fine, it won't be too showy. But it might be a bit wriggly,” she answered.

I had no clue what that meant, but as long as it wasn't showy, I didn't care. Most magicians knew a couple of bizarre spells that matched their personal inclinations, so I assumed it would be something of the sort.

“You do that, then,” I said.

Lorraine walked up to Nauss. “Sir Nauss, may I offer to help lift the carriage?”

“No, no, you've already saved our lives. I can't ask for more than that. This will take a while, but we should make it back to the capital before sunset,” Nauss insisted.

But then we couldn't earn their gratitude, so Lorraine pushed further. “This



may be no concern for such mighty and honorable knights as yourselves, but I don't think you can expect the precious princess to wait in this bloody place for so long. I believe it would be in your best interest to lift the carriage as soon as possible. I happen to know some magic, including a spell that's perfect for accidents like this. If you leave this to me, I can take care of it in a matter of minutes. You need only ask."

I thought her flattery was kind of excessive, but she always told me about her efforts to coordinate with other scholars in the Empire. Maybe this was a skill she picked up from back then.

Nauss seemed like he was going to object at first, but when Lorraine mentioned the princess, he appeared to change his mind. And when she said it would only take a few minutes, he looked surprised and then a bit conflicted.

"I hate to ask this after you saved our lives, but please do offer your aid. We actually had to fend off another attack before this one, so our stamina and mana have run dry. This would usually be easy for us, but not right now," he admitted and bowed his head.

"Based on your wounds and mana, I thought as much. I take it that asking for more details would be audacious of me, so I won't. Anyway, I'll pull the carriage upright for you. Can you have your knights stand back?"

"Hey, she's going to lift the carriage for us!" Nauss shouted to the knights. "Stand back!"

Once the knights did as told, Lorraine cast the spell. She was talented enough to cast many spells without reciting the incantations, but she generally did so anyway when she was in public. That was partially to avoid showing the extent of her abilities, but it was also considered polite among magicians, apparently. Talented magicians were always swarmed by the rich and powerful, so it was probably intended to avoid that.

When Lorraine finished casting the spell, thick, green vines slithered out of the ground and wrapped around each other to become even thicker and stronger. Then the vines coiled around the carriage, picked it up, and set it down in an upright position. I guess that was what she meant by a wriggly spell. It was fast, too. If she had made these strangle a person or monster, they could

probably be knocked out immediately.



Elves specialized in these plant-based spells, but I knew that Lorraine could use them too. She had demonstrated how she could use smaller plants like whips before. As an aside, my ability to accelerate plant growth with divinity differed from this in a few ways. When it came to magic, the plant would disappear the moment it no longer received mana. Also, it was possible to use spells to harvest fruit and such, but they tended to either have no flavor or a horrible one. They also provided no nutrients, supposedly. When using divinity, though, the plant grew and stayed grown permanently. That was why people tended to be thankful to be blessed with divinity. It was also why I had value as walking fertilizer, but I couldn't say I ever wanted that.

"Oh, magnificent!" Nauss exclaimed. "I hear that plant magic is difficult to cast."

"Well, it just happens to be something I like to study," Lorraine said humbly. That was actually true, but being able to control so many plants was the mark of a great magician. Plant magic was difficult because it involved controlling living creatures. Elves were good at it because they spent their entire lives living closely with the forest, but for Lorraine to be capable of this magic, she needed incredible skill.

"No need to be so humble. Well, now it seems we can make it back to the capital right away," Nauss said.

"I'll call them, then," Jia said and whistled.

Just when I wondered what she was doing, I heard something running toward us from afar. I looked to see what it was and saw two pure white unicorns. These were probably the animals that drew this carriage. They were hard to train and highly temperamental, so they weren't often used the way horses were. But their speed and stamina dwarfed that of the average horse, so trained unicorns were treasured.

They came when Jia called, so these unicorns probably only listened to her. They were supposed to be intelligent animals, so maybe they'd obey other people if Jia told them to, but it would be best not to get too close to them. Around humans other than their master, they acted like any other wild animal.

Jia tied the unicorns to the carriage. It looked like she was quite familiar with



this task, so she seemed to be more than just a sheltered princess. Considering she also came out of hiding in the carriage despite Nauss’s instructions, Jia didn’t come across as the most docile sort. They were attacked twice, yet she was relatively nonchalant about it.

The knights began to inspect the carriage, but they didn’t seem to find any significant damage. It couldn’t have been completely unharmed after it fell over, but it was as durable as Nauss claimed. The carriage would be able to move perfectly fine.

“Then I think it’s about time for us to depart,” Nauss said.

“Right,” I answered. “Would you mind if we attend you to the capital?”

I’d discussed this decision with Lorraine and Augurey beforehand. Essentially, it was another push to earn their gratitude. The knights had probably somewhat recovered, but not completely. We weren’t that far from the capital, but if the knights had to defend the carriage on the way there, it would likely take about an hour, as the knights now had to travel on foot. They were originally on horseback, but unlike the unicorns, most of the horses were injured or killed in the attacks. They only had a couple left, but at least that was more than nothing.

“You’re willing to escort us?” Nauss asked.

“Yes, if you’re not offended by the offer. I think it would be best for the princess, if it’s not too much trouble.” He placed the greatest emphasis on the princess’s safety, judging by his earlier conversation with Lorraine.

“Yes, you’re right. If you can help us, please do. You’ll be rewarded, of course.” As expected, Nauss seemed easily swayed when it came to the princess.

“Understood. We’re not knights, though, so I do worry that we’ll draw attention. We’ll follow from behind, if you don’t mind.”



Thankfully the path to the capital was extremely safe. It was rare to encounter so many monsters on a public road in the first place. Whatever first attacked them probably left the scent of blood for the wolf monsters to sniff

out. When you slay monsters in the forest, you have to quickly change locations if you want to avoid getting swarmed. There didn't seem to be anything more that came to the road, but those monsters were plenty. I'd certainly seen more than enough wolves for the day.

"They should be safe here," I said.

"Yes, this may be a good time to depart," Lorraine agreed.

I walked to the front of the carriage and told Nauss, "We're almost to the city gate, so we'll be parting ways now."

"Oh, are you?" Nauss said. "I suppose there's nothing more for you to do now. If anything does happen, the gate guards can handle it. Thank you for everything. Please remember to come to the palace soon. I will tell His Majesty of your achievements."

I didn't want that to happen, so I tried to indirectly reject the offer. "Oh, protecting the princess was simply the natural course of action. That won't be necessary. Goodbye now," I said and hurried away. Nauss seemed to want to say more, but I felt like listening more would bring needless trouble, so I acted like I didn't notice.

Lorraine, Augurey, and I rushed to go stand in the commoner line. The carriage, of course, went to the line for greater nobles. There were a few different lines at the city gate. Some were divided by class, such as the commoner, lesser noble, and greater noble lines; there were also lines for pedestrians or carriages. The gate itself was enormous enough to make this possible.

Naturally, the line for commoners was pretty busy at this time of day. The line that the princess used, on the other hand, was mostly empty. There weren't that many greater nobles in the first place. We could have entered with them to make matters easier, but then they would keep some records of our entry. When it came to nobles, they actually kept track of things. There was a good chance that they would remember the few people attending them too, so we decided it would be best to separate outside the gate.



“We finally made it back,” I said with a sigh after we got inside the city. Even after getting in once before, I didn’t feel confident about using that ID again. I was actually pretty anxious about it.

Unlike me, Lorraine was so used to visiting the capital that she wasn’t at all concerned. We had Augurey enter the city a bit before us, but he had proper identification, so there was no reason it’d be a problem for him.

I was the last to enter, and as soon as I got through the gate, I met up with Lorraine.

“There you are. You really don’t need to be so nervous,” she said when she saw my face, noticing how I felt.

I was hopelessly timid and knew I was doing something wrong, so that was difficult advice to follow. But they didn’t find me out, so I must have dealt with the guard well enough anyway. If I’d acted more suspicious, they would’ve showered me with questions. At places like these, it was best to act confident no matter how guilty you were.

“They didn’t suspect me of anything, so it’s fine. Anyway, where’s Augurey?” I asked. He was supposed to wait for us, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

“Oh, he went to the guild to report that the job is complete. He wants to talk to us about the reward, so he told us to wait.”

“He wants us to wait here?” I asked. Standing around in one place for a long time might make us stand out, so I wanted to avoid that.

Lorraine shook her head. “No, he said to go wait at a particular store. He told me the name and location, so we should find it after wandering around a bit.”

“All right, let’s go,” I said and walked off with Lorraine.



“Well, this shop looks suspicious,” Lorraine noted.

“Agreed,” I said, nodding.

After walking for a while, Lorraine and I arrived at a store in a back alley far from the main street. The sign at the entrance bore the name that Augurey told to Lorraine, but it was covered in vines and extremely difficult to read. Had he

not described the store's location in detail, we would've undoubtedly passed by it. But now that we found it, leaving wasn't an option. I timidly opened the door. It swayed with a loud creak.

When I peeked inside, I was surprised to find a pleasant room full of elegant furniture. A variety of plants decorated the shop, but not so many that they became an eyesore. The tables and chairs were well-worn and amber in color, but they were polished and of decent quality. Standing at the counter was a skinny old man with tidy short gray hair. He was cleaning dishes like he had done so a thousand times.

"This is a surprise," Lorraine said. "If someone like Augurey came to this place, I'd think he would stand out." I couldn't help but nod, but you never knew what kind of tastes a person would have.

In any case, I approached the man who seemed to be the owner.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"We were supposed to meet with an adventurer named Augurey here," I said. I wanted to know if he was already here, and if he wasn't, I wanted to know where to wait.

The man seemed to recognize what I meant and nodded. "He isn't here yet, but come this way, please," he said and led us to some seats far in the back of the room. It was hard to see this location from the entrance, so it was a good spot for avoiding attention. "Would you like to order something?" he asked, so Lorraine and I ordered some random drinks which we received a while later. They tasted good enough that if I worked in the capital, I'd happily frequent this place. I was glad to be introduced to such a nice shop.

After waiting so long that we finished our drinks, we heard the door creak open and the owner say something. Then we heard someone walking toward us.

"Sorry I kept you," Augurey said as he showed himself. "How do you like this place? I'm quite fond of it myself."

His appearance shocked both Lorraine and me. "What are you wearing?" I asked.

“Something odd about my clothes?” Augurey said and cocked his head.

To be honest, there was nothing odd about them. That was what was so odd. I thought that no matter what Augurey wore, he would always be blindingly flashy, but now he looked downright normal. He wore a brown overcoat, and his outfit overall consisted of dark colors. Even his shoes matched. Not a shadow of his bright, striking appearance from earlier was left.

We looked at Augurey like something was wrong with him, which he must have noticed, because he laughed. “Look, even I know how to read the room. That outfit wouldn’t be appropriate here. Besides, I have to consider you two. You said you didn’t want to stand out, so I’m trying to help. Was that unnecessary?”

I could say I was surprised to hear that from him, but I wasn’t. He was like this in Maalt as well. He didn’t seem that perceptive of his surroundings, but he always knew where to draw the line. He seemed like he couldn’t be considerate, but he was always reserved when it counted. That hadn’t changed since he came to the capital, evidently.

“It’s fine. I’m sorry we concerned you, if anything. So did you report to the guild?” I asked.

“I did, yes,” Augurey answered as he sat in a chair. “I collected two gold coins for it. Here you are.” Augurey had said beforehand he would give us the entire reward, so this wasn’t that unexpected, but I didn’t know how to feel about him actually doing it.

“Hey, are you sure?” I asked. “I know this whole job was for you and all, but the reward is being paid by the tailor. I think you have a right to take some of it.”

“Maybe so, but a promise is a promise. And I said I’d offer something extra, so here’s another.” Augurey added a third gold coin and pushed them over to us.

I glanced at Lorraine to see what she thought and saw that she wanted to accept his generosity. Then I took a close look at Augurey’s face; he seemed more serious than usual. Perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to refuse, so I decided to accept the three gold coins.



As to whether this was an appropriate reward for collecting fire spirit madder, it was actually rather high. In Maalt, a silver coin would have been plenty for this job. It was the sort of job any Iron-class or Bronze-class adventurer could take, so that was only natural. Putting out jobs in Maalt to collect plenty of this plant and then selling it in the capital might have been a decent way to turn a profit, but there were similar enough products available to use as a replacement, so it wouldn't go so well. Fire spirit madder wasn't in particularly high demand unless someone like Augurey insisted on obtaining some for special reasons. So while it was worth a lot, there probably weren't many people willing to buy it. With that in mind, maybe this was an appropriate price. It was hard to find anyone who wanted fire spirit madder, but it was also hard to find anyone who would collect it.

"We'll happily take it, then," I said. "I do think this is too much of a reward, though, so at least let me pay for the food here." I planned to pay with some of the reward money I just got, of course.

Augurey didn't seem to mind. "Oh, thanks. You don't mind if I order something? The food here is actually great."

As an aside, the drinks we'd ordered were a luxury item called arouzal. It was made from the crushed roots of a plant called kazuki grass mixed with fluid extracted from dried and roasted beans called loa. The extraction device looked very peculiar and was hard to use, so this drink could taste wildly different at any given shop, but this one was a success. If you weren't that particular about the flavor, though, this beverage was available just about everywhere. But because it was relatively popular in Yaaran, the local population was often picky about the taste.

According to people from other countries, it was apparently too bitter and sour to be drinkable no matter what, but Lorraine seemed fine with it. In fact, she drank it so often she almost seemed addicted. She even had an extraction machine at home. It cost a lot to get one for personal use, but that was just how much she liked this drink. People who didn't care so much for the flavor tended to add milk or honey, including me, because it was just too bitter. Augurey seemed to drink it straight, though.

"Order whatever you want," I said. "But in that case, maybe we should get

something too.”

“Right,” Lorraine agreed. “I was feeling a bit hungry.”

We called the owner over and asked him to cook something up.



“Oh, would you look at the time? I have to get going,” Augurey said. I looked outside and noticed that the sun was approaching the horizon. We had mostly finished the food and had moved on to just chatting.

It turned out that I had a lot in common with Augurey. We never ran out of topics to discuss. We were both solo adventurers and had drank together plenty of times before, so I felt comfortable around him. But this was our first meeting from his perspective, so maybe he was just quick to make friends.

“Yeah? Should we leave, then?” I asked.

“Sounds good, Rentt. Remember, you’re paying for everything.”

“Right, I got it. Hm?” I answered, belatedly noticing something was strange. I looked up from my wallet and saw Augurey smiling and Lorraine looking at me like I was an idiot.

“I knew it. So you’re Lorraine, I take it?” Augurey asked her.

She thought to herself for a moment but seemed to see no sense in hiding it. “I am, yes. Goodness, when did you figure it out?”

“Just now, if I had to say. I wasn’t entirely certain, but the way ‘Purple’ here fought was just like Rentt. If I hadn’t seen him fight, I doubt I would’ve noticed anything.”

“Is his swordsmanship actually that unique?”

“No, I’d actually say there’s little unique about it. I suppose you could say it looks very clean. Like he does everything by the books. It all seems very practiced, so maybe you could consider that unique. Anyway, why are you visiting the capital in disguise?”

I didn’t know how to respond, but I had to say something. I couldn’t mention the teleportation circle, so there was no way to be fully honest, but I decided to

say what I could.

“There are reasons we can’t leave any records that we were here. As far as why we came to the capital, I guess you could say we’re sightseeing,” I said. It was the same claim I made to the guard at the gate, but it wasn’t untrue. Gharb and Capitan just brought us here out of nowhere, and if there was anything we were doing, it was sightseeing. That and checking out the guild headquarters.

“I’d love to hear what those reasons are. But, well, asking another adventurer for too much information is against the rules, I suppose. So you want me to keep quiet about this, I assume?” Augurey asked, getting the idea without us having to explain. He was similarly considerate when we encountered the knight and the princess, so it stood to reason.

“We’d appreciate it if you did.”

“Got it. If you’re still uneasy, we could use a magic contract,” he offered, but it was my fault he found out.

“No, I trust you,” I said, thinking about how I’d have to be more careful about the way I fought in the future. “But now that you know, you might end up in danger, so I really recommend you don’t say anything.”

The simple fact that we were here wouldn’t prove we used a teleportation circle, but if someone found out about that, there was a fair chance they’d try to obtain it for themselves by whatever means possible. If that happened, we wouldn’t be the only ones in trouble. Augurey only had some minute amount of information, but that was enough for him to be threatened too.

“I think we should use a magic contract then,” Augurey suggested, a bit frightened by what I said. “If we use a good one, it should prevent any little mistakes.”

With that, we walked off to obtain a magic contract.



Magic contracts varied greatly in quality and had all sorts of uses and effects. The most basic and common use for them was to penalize whoever broke the contract. Even the standard variety could vary in quality, though. They were generally available for purchase at adventurer’s guilds or commerce guilds, but

what Augurey meant by a 'good one' was a little different. Those kinds didn't simply impose a penalty; they had the power to force all who signed it to obey the terms of the contract for as long as it existed. These types were a bit special even among magic contracts as a whole, and for pieces of paper, they were pretty expensive. They were extremely dangerous if used with ill intent, so they weren't available at guilds and could only be used in certain places.

"Here we are," Augurey said as we arrived at a grand building. "This is our local temple dedicated to Hozei, the God of Contracts."

White pillars held up the heavy ceiling of the massive building. It was so large that it had to be constructed far from the center of the city, closer to what might be considered the outskirts. When the king had business with the head of the temple, he went to an office for priests that was located in the center of the capital, apparently. Then they sent a message to this temple, and the head of the temple traveled from here to the castle. It all sounded like a hassle. I started to feel bad for priests.

But anyway, despite the enormous size of this building, it wasn't even this god's main temple. The main temples of the gods were located all over the place, whereas this temple's location was determined by the city. I'd heard that the main temples were sometimes smaller too, so it made sense after thinking about it. However, the God of Contracts had a close relationship with humans, so maybe that was the reason for such a huge temple in a city like this. I had no idea where the main temple was, though.

"Considering you moved here from Maalt, you've got the layout of this city down pretty well," I said to Augurey as we entered the temple.

"I've been here for quite a while," he replied. "I've done plenty of walking around town for jobs and such, so by this point I have the map memorized. When it comes to back alleys, though, I'm not so confident."

Adventurers sometimes had to meet with their clients directly for some jobs, like I did for Laura. In those situations, it was common knowledge among adventurers that you should know the layout of your city. But it was questionable as to how many adventurers actually did. The young ones in Maalt did, at least, thanks to the lectures we held for new adventurers. Augurey may

have been an adventurer in the capital now, but he had his roots in Maalt.

The temple was filled with tranquil air. Not only did it feel that way, but all temples of this scale housed a fair number of divinity users who purified the air daily, so the place was actually full of clean air. A vampire enjoying that air was kind of strange, but so was a vampire who could use divinity at all. Maybe that was why it didn't affect me. I also liked gloomy places, though.

"Welcome to Hozei's temple. What brings you here today?" a priest asked after we progressed a fair ways inside.

At the back of the spacious room, there was a giant statue of Hozei, and I could see people praying to it. Hozei held a staff that delivered justice in one hand and a scale for guaranteeing impartiality in the other. She wore her hair long and her clothes loose. Her eyes stared straight ahead, showing the strength of her convictions, like she would never forgive any injustices. She asked those who stood before her if they were prepared to carry the weight of their contracts or accept the consequences of breaking them. Gods had all sorts of personalities, but Hozei was known for being one of the harshest. I preferred the more laid-back gods, but this was no place to mention that.

"We're here for a magic contract with Hozei's blessing," I said to the priest. I didn't need to specify the quality, because ordinary magic contracts didn't have Hozei's blessing. Hozei's temples knew how to make those standard contracts as well, but it was common knowledge that those were produced through an extension of regular magic. What we wanted, however, was a magic contract that placed a limit on the contractee's actions, and creating those required divinity. That meant they were made by saints and thus received Hozei's blessing.

"Then you will have to use it inside the temple, if that's acceptable," the priest said.

"That's fine. May we have a room to ourselves?"

"Yes, I'll take you to a room enchanted with soundproofing magic. This way, please."

The priest led us past the giant statue of Hozei and into a hallway full of doors. Each door we passed had a sign that read "In Use" in red letters, so there



were presumably people inside. Eventually, we reached a door with no sign.

“Here we are,” the priest said, opening the door and prompting us to go inside.

The three of us entered the room, as did the priest, who then went quiet. I wondered what he was doing until Lorraine jabbed me in the side and whispered that he wanted a donation. I completely forgot about that, but we had prepared a leather bag to offer in advance.

“Offer this to Hozei. We pray that we be granted her blessing,” I said and held out the bag. The priest lowered his head and took it.

“Here you are, then,” he said and handed us a piece of parchment that clearly contained divinity. This was the magic contract we sought. “It’s used the same way as any magic contract. It differs in that it has some control over your actions, however, so keep that in mind. I must be going now. If there’s something you don’t understand, please ring this bell. I’ll come right away.” As soon as he finished his explanation, he left the room.



“How does he hear the bell if the room’s soundproof?” I asked as I looked at the bell sitting in the middle of the table. It was decorated with religious iconography.

“It’s hard to sense it, but it’s actually a magic item with a faint amount of mana,” Lorraine explained. “I would guess this bell has a counterpart that rings at the same time this one does. Soundproofing magic blocks a fair bit of mana as well, but I assume this was specially made with that in mind.”

Her explanation seemed to make sense, but for a first-year magic student like myself, it would’ve been hard for me to come to the same conclusion. I could barely detect any mana at all; it just seemed like an ordinary object to me. It was beautifully crafted and made of valuable materials, so I was more wondering if they had problems with people stealing them, if anything. But if it was a magic item, it was probably hard to steal. Most places like these prevented theft with a spell that set off an alarm as you left the premises anyway. There were groups of magicians that specialized in that. The most common crime in the world was theft, so they were in extremely high demand

and apparently making a killing.

“All right, then we don’t have to worry about the priest not hearing it. Should we discuss the contract now?”

“Let’s. Augurey, are you prepared for this?” Lorraine asked threateningly.

“For what? I don’t think this is anything much.”

“You’re about to learn a lot. If you had just agreed to stay quiet then you wouldn’t need to know, but this contract changes things. If we’re going to write detailed conditions, we’ll have to tell you everything.”

“Yes, I suppose you have a point. If the contract simply forced me to stay quiet about how you came to the capital, and I’d have to continue to stay quiet in the event that you openly came to the capital on other occasions, I wouldn’t be able to say anything. But if you were to apply certain limitations, it’s possible to be more specific about what I can’t say. Wouldn’t that be more convenient for you two?”

“That would place a great burden on you, wouldn’t it? We could make a contract like that, but that would be really restrictive. It could have unforeseen consequences.”

“That may be true, but if I were in your shoes, I’d make the contract without worrying about those consequences. You’ve always been pretty nice for adventurers. Too nice, you could say. Especially you, Rentt.”

That hit me where it hurt.

“That may be true of Rentt, but not me, Augurey.”

“What do you mean?”

“I intend to tell you a number of things, but if you try to run away without making the contract, I’ll chase you to the depths of Hell and make sure you can never defy me again. Now that you’ve entered this room, you’re going to sign this contract.”

Augurey looked a bit intimidated but quickly got over it. “Either way, I’m going to keep it a secret. But I think you’re nice for telling me your intentions. Anyway, I get it, I’m ready; let’s talk. After all that fanfare, this has to be a pretty

big secret. I'm almost excited."

What we were going to tell Augurey was, for the most part, about my identity. We needed to consult with Gharb and Capitan before mentioning the teleportation circles, so that was one secret we were going to omit. Depending on how much we told him, maybe he could guess that part, but Lorraine was thinking up a clever condition for the contract that would force him to keep that a secret too. I was leaving pretty much the entire contract to her. I knew how to write simple contract conditions, but I was useless when it came to anything detailed. I guess Lorraine was good at it because of her work, though. It would probably be fine. And if it wasn't, well, we could cross that bridge when we came to it.

"All right, I guess I'll start," I said. "Augurey, did you know that I went missing for a while?"

"Yes. I believe that was a bit before I left Maalt. I thought you were dead. I missed you, actually. I was planning to invite you to come to the capital with me."

This was the first I was hearing of that. "Why would you do that?"

"We were both solo Bronze-class adventurers, right? But we were both trying to make it to the capital. I happened to find a caravan on its way to Vistelya that didn't mind hiring a solo Bronze-class adventurer. When I asked if they minded if another came along, they said it was fine. But in the end, you weren't there, so I had no choice but to leave without you."

I missed a surprising opportunity from a surprising source. Getting eaten by that dragon and becoming what I did was also a good opportunity, in a way, but if I had gone to the capital with Augurey instead, maybe that would've been nice. It could have been risky, but maybe fighting the stronger monsters in the dungeons around Vistelya would have improved my abilities a bit. Or maybe not. Maybe that was never happening.

"Really?" I said. "It's kind of unfortunate that things turned out this way, then. But you came here on your own and reached Silver-class anyway. That's very impressive."

"That's nice of you to say, but it seems you've improved a lot yourself. I saw

how you fought back there, and it was incredible. Your footwork and swordsmanship itself was always near perfect, so that hasn't changed, but it's like you've gotten so much more powerful. I think you could easily pass the Silver-class exam now," Augurey said sincerely. We both lived lonely lives as solo adventurers, so it looked like he was glad to see how things finally paid off for me. Sometimes we had confided in each other and wondered together if we'd be Bronze-class adventurers forever. We knew how one another felt.



"Yes, I feel the same way. I won't know if I can pass the Silver-class test until I take it, but my skills have improved. There's a reason for that, though," I said, seeing this as a good time to bring up that topic.

"A reason?" Augurey repeated. "Sounds like you didn't just train until you got better, then. You're always training anyway, so if that was going to make you stronger, you should've already been Silver-class. What else could there be, though?"

It didn't seem like he could come up with anything. I guess that was to be expected. No ordinary logic would bring him to the conclusion that I suddenly turned into a monster one day and got stronger. But I had to tell him about this. It could be risky depending on how he responded, but I knew Augurey well from our time together in Maalt. I didn't trust him quite as much as Lorraine, but he was trustworthy enough.

"I don't want to make too big a deal out of this, so I'll make it short. Try not to be too surprised," I said, figuring I should warn him in advance.

"You've made a pretty big deal out of this already."

"Look, I wanted to give you time to prepare mentally."

"Fine, just get on with it." Augurey shrugged like he took my warning as a joke meant to lighten the mood. If he was going to be that way, then I decided to put it plain and simple.

"I turned into a monster."

"Excuse me?" Augurey exclaimed, his neck cracking as he cocked his head. After a moment of silence, my words seemed to sink in. "Wait, what? A

monster? Who?" he asked, so I pointed to myself. Lorraine pointed to me as well. The whole scene probably looked kind of goofy. I didn't want to act too serious anyway. This sort of mood made it easier to say what I wanted. "When did that happen?"

"Back when they decided I'd gone missing. I had the misfortune of encountering a dragon in a dungeon. Next thing I knew, I'd become a skeleton."

Augurey calmed down and laughed. "Oh, so this is a joke. I'm looking at you right now, and you're clearly human. I can only see the top half of your face due to that mask, but you've got eyeballs, a forehead, and eyebrows, don't you? What kind of skeleton has those?"

"I'm not a skeleton anymore; I'm a vampire. I'm indistinguishable from a human. You're right that now I look more or less like I did before I transformed, but I'm not human. Look," I said and scratched my arm until it bled. The wound immediately sealed. This would be impossible for any human. Healing magic or divinity could produce mostly the same result, but it was obvious that I'd used neither. That meant this had to be thanks to natural regeneration, and only so many beings could heal this fast.

"Well then, I was wondering what I was about to hear, but I sure wasn't expecting this," Augurey said, holding his head like he finally had to face the fact that I became a monster.

"Are you afraid? Or disgusted?" I asked.

"Neither, really. Maybe it would be different if I had some particular disdain for monsters, but I don't. Monsters are generally the enemy, but that's because I'm an adventurer and slaying them is my job. My friend may be a monster now, but as for whether I look upon that friend with hatred, my answer is no."

I feared otherwise, but it wasn't like I could have ever asked about his past. He wouldn't have answered if I did either. Even if he had, he could have been lying. You had to be very close with an adventurer to receive that kind of information, and even then it was a maybe. I knew Augurey for a long time, so we could have had a relationship like that, but the truth is we never discussed our pasts. That was out of respect for each other.

He didn't seem to have any rough memories related to monsters, thankfully. I



actually did, but I wouldn't say that I hated all monsters either. I just hated that silver wolf, but I found others fascinating in some ways. Many had interesting customs and lifestyles, including goblins. Much like with humans, there were good ones and bad ones. Most of them did attack humans on sight, but intelligent monsters were an exception.

"That's good to hear," I said. "I've become a monster in body, but I haven't given up my human spirit, and it'd hurt for an old friend to view me that way."

"Well, I'm sure it would. A vampire, though? So do you suck blood?" Augurey asked out of personal interest.

"Sometimes. Not that I can't eat regular food, but blood tastes better."

"Don't tell me you've been attacking young maidens. If I go to Maalt and find that there aren't as many beautiful ladies as there used to be, I'm going to be mad."

"I'd never do such a thing. Lorraine just offers me a bit of her blood. Consensually."

"I suppose that would be the only way to legally obtain human blood. Is that enough? If not, I can share some of mine. As long as you don't drink so much that I pass out."

Augurey really didn't seem to be put off by this revelation at all. Maybe it hadn't fully hit him yet. I looked pretty much like I always did, so from a visual perspective I was just wearing a slightly more suspicious outfit. As long as I didn't do anything monstrous, I guess that treating me the same as ever was the normal thing to do.



Augurey went as far as offering his blood, but I had no intention of taking it. Lorraine's was enough for the time being, and Sheila was giving me some of hers too. I had no need for more. Besides, the more blood I drank, the less human I felt. Preferably, I wanted to stay mostly human. And if I started to drink more, I might get picky about it. I didn't want to turn into a blood sommelier, complaining about the subtleties of flavor. Well, that could be interesting, I guess. But Lorraine might use me to research the taste of blood in detail if I did

that. I absolutely would rather not be involved in any such experiments.

“No, you don’t need to do that,” I said, pushing those thoughts aside to respond to Augurey. “Lorraine’s blood is enough for now. That could change in the future, though.”

While I was a lesser vampire, I didn’t need that much blood for some reason. There was no guarantee it would always be this way, however. Much like when I thirsted for flesh and attacked Lorraine in the past, there was no telling when my monster instincts might take over and force me to assault someone. Lorraine would probably stop me like she did before, so maybe it wasn’t worth worrying about, but ideally I’d be able to prevent such an incident from happening at all.

“Are you sure? If you say so. By the way, how did you turn from a skeleton into a vampire?” Augurey asked.

I had neglected to mention that part. “Oh, right. Have you ever heard of the Existential Evolution that monsters go through? That’s how,” I explained.

“Existential Evolution? Like how normal slimes can become poisonous ra’al slimes?”

“That’s an awfully specific example, but yeah, I think so?” I said without much confidence. I turned to Lorraine for confirmation.

“Yes, that’s mostly correct,” Lorraine said. “But when slimes undergo an elemental change, it doesn’t necessarily improve their physical abilities. It’s arguable as to whether that should be called evolution, so that’s something of a shaky example. Think of it more like how a skeleton becomes a skeleton soldier.”

That did sound like an easier example to understand, and with less room for argument. Everyone knew about those two monsters.

“Yes, well, I like slimes. Those amorphous creatures are so cute. I used to want one as a pet, but I couldn’t find an appropriate container to keep it in,” Augurey confessed.

It sounded ridiculous, but he wasn’t the only person who felt that way. A surprising number of women and children liked slimes. They often appeared in

legends and picture books, and those slimes looked soft and adorable. For most adventurers, though, slimes were despised. The slimes you'd find in dungeons and forests tended to be in the middle of digesting a carcass, and you could see it floating inside the transparent fluid. When there were only bones left, that wasn't so bad, but a half-digested corpse was just horrifying. It was hard not to hate slimes after you saw that. In that sense, Augurey was a rare exception to the rule. Lorraine was too, though. She also liked slimes quite a bit.

"A container?" Lorraine asked. "I suppose slimes do consume most things. An ordinary bottle wouldn't work."

"Exactly!" Augurey replied, happy that she understood. "I tried all kinds of containers, but they never lasted more than two weeks. Everything I didn't try was too expensive for a poor Bronze-class adventurer. Perhaps it might be worth attempting it again, though."

That meant Augurey had been engaging in these dangerous experiments in Maalt. Thank goodness he gave up eventually. But anyway, we were getting off topic.

"Enough about slimes," I said. "At any rate, that's how I became a vampire. My goal right now is to become human again."

"Is that why you came to the capital?"

"Well, no, but maybe that's somewhat related."

In reality, the connection was somewhat tenuous. I did want to become human again. That was why I returned to my home village, to learn about my roots. But then I discovered an incredible secret and ended up in this city thanks to the teleportation circles that lay within that secret. But it was only by putting aside my life of slaying monsters, of moving up the adventuring ranks, and focusing instead on investigating everything I could that I ended up here. It wasn't impossible to tie my efforts to become human again to my coming to Vistelya.

"Ah, I can see why you can't tell anyone you're here then. If they found out a monster entered the city and started searching for you, it would mean trouble if you'd told anyone your name."

“Right.”

The fact that I was also supposed to be far away from here right now was also an issue, but I couldn't talk about that yet. I couldn't decide whether to reveal the secret of the teleportation circles until I spoke to Gharb and Capitan. Besides, the limited information we'd shared already was probably enough to avoid misunderstandings when it came to the magic contract.

That was the problem with magic contracts compared to normal ones that didn't enforce magical penalties. It was said that the interpretation of a magic contract was determined by the subconsciousness of those who signed it. Non-magic ones could be interpreted by the head of the local government or their appointed judges. But for magic ones, interpretation had to happen the instant that part of the contract was breached, so there was no time for any legal officials to pass judgment.

Let's say, for example, that Augurey and I had a contract that said I wouldn't eat any of Augurey's snacks, and if I did, I would have to dance naked in front of him. If I then ate one of his snacks, the contract would take effect immediately. The next time I was around Augurey, I would be forced to dance naked against my will.

The question of who interprets the contract and when was debatable. There were a number of theories about this, but the most common one was that the contract was subconsciously interpreted by those involved the moment it was broken. In other words, because I knew I shouldn't eat Augurey's snacks and did so anyway, I would be penalized. Lying wouldn't be an option. It was said that the truth would be determined by a god, and they would see through any dishonesty. For these reasons, in the event that one tried to use a magic contract while avoiding misunderstandings, some degree of shared information between both parties was required. They were difficult to use. Legal scholars, magic scholars, and divine scholars were researching how they worked, but for the rest of us, this was how we understood it. That was why they were seldom used, and if they were, some determination was necessary.

“So, we've told you most of the story,” I said. “I'd like to make the contract now, if you don't mind.”

“I guess that’s fine,” Augurey said. “Who will write the exact conditions?”

“I’ll do it,” Lorraine offered. She started writing down ideas on the scratch paper provided in the room. After Augurey approved them, we moved on to the actual contract.

This was a special magic contract, but it was used the same as any other. Once the conditions were written down and the contract was signed by all parties, it would activate. The question of who should sign first could sometimes be an issue, but only if one of the parties was untrustworthy. You wouldn’t want them walking off with a contract that they could choose to activate at any time. That wasn’t much of a problem right now, though. I had known Augurey for a long time, and I knew his personality. Besides, even if he wanted to run off, Lorraine was closer to the entrance. If she cast a spell to keep him away from the door, even a Silver-class adventurer wouldn’t be able to leave. If Augurey had some secret weapon we weren’t aware of, that might be different, but there was no use worrying about that possibility.

“I’ll sign first, then,” I said and wrote my name down. Strangely, my name seemed to be glowing on the paper.

“Rentt, is something wrong?” Lorraine asked.

“No, it’s nothing. Go on, Augurey,” I said and handed him the contract and pen. Even the paper seemed to be special, and it felt oddly good in my hands. It felt like paper but also like metal somehow. It must have been produced through some highly unique method. I thought I might be able to figure it out by looking at it, but I still had no idea. If I’d been able to see how these were made, surely someone else would have too by this point.

“Right, got it.” Augurey took the contract from me and wrote his name.

“That’s one long name,” I said. I thought it was just Augurey Ars, but it went on a good while past that.

“Don’t look, it’s embarrassing,” Augurey complained.

I felt like I was breaking the unspoken adventurer rule of not probing into one another’s histories, so I quickly pulled away. “Sorry. I don’t see a lot of names that long, is all,” I said, though I had seen some. Some countries apparently

made it easy to change your name, and some people decided to make theirs horrifically long. Maybe one in a hundred adventurers had an abnormally long name. They thought it made them seem more dignified or something silly like that. For a moment, I thought Augurey might fall into that camp, but he didn't seem like the type.

"Well, I suppose you can look if you want. I was young and foolish when I came up with it," Augurey replied, seeming to confirm my initial suspicions. I had met him about three years prior, and it seemed like he had already grown into a sensible person by that time, aside from his fashion sense being a little odd. But if he had introduced himself by this insanely long name and expected me to memorize it, I might have gotten fed up with him. Thankfully he had become more reasonable by the time I met him.

"All right, that should do it. Rentt, Lorraine, now the contract will activate and —" Augurey started to say, but then the magic contract began to shine unusually bright. I watched as the light gradually condensed and an image formed above the contract. It took a familiar shape.

"Is this Hozei?" Augurey asked.

It was a faint, transparent image of a long-haired woman holding scales and a staff. When she closed her eyes as if in prayer, light rained from her staff and soaked into the words on the contract. After the light settled down, the image dissolved into the air like it was gradually losing focus and then disappeared entirely. What remained was the contract we wrote. It was kind of terrifying and I was hesitant to touch it now, but somebody had to, so I poked it with my finger.





“Doesn’t seem like anything’s happening,” I said. Augurey and Lorraine touched it too.

“What the heck was that?” Augurey asked. “Is that supposed to happen when you sign a contract blessed by Hozei?” I could understand Augurey’s confusion. Regular magic contracts also glowed after they took effect, so if one assumed that this was an extension of that phenomenon, then there was nothing to fear.

But Lorraine shook her head. “I’ve witnessed one of these being used, and that one just shined the way any ordinary magic contract does. The light did seem somewhat brighter, but that was it. There were no images of anyone.”

“So what does it mean?” I asked.

“This could be an extremely unique phenomenon. I think now would be a good time to use this bell,” Lorraine said and pointed to the bell the priest gave us.

“But what if he sees what we wrote in the contract?” Augurey asked, but then all the writing disappeared. Nothing remained on the parchment aside from our signatures, but even those had become too blurry to see that well. I could make it out because I knew what was written, but otherwise I wouldn’t have even noticed any words.

“Neither of you seem to have much to say about this godly phenomenon we just witnessed,” I stated.

“I’m too stunned to say much of anything, I suppose,” said Augurey.

Lorraine added, “I’ve just decided to accept that anything can happen when you’re around.”

I wanted to point out that I didn’t cause this, but considering my luck as of late, I couldn’t be so sure. I shrugged and said, “Well, I guess we should call the priest.”



“It’s full of holy energy?!” the priest exclaimed as he entered the room. He arrived so soon after we rang the bell that I wanted to ask if he had been waiting outside. I looked at his dumbfounded face, and it told me that, whether

the image was actually Hozei or not, it was at least something that unleashed holy energy.

Detecting holy energy apparently required some training that we lacked, but I did notice how the air in the room had become exceedingly pure. If I were to compare air cleaned by divinity to the air of rural mountains, this would be more comparable to air in a completely enclosed and sterilized space. I felt the presence of a strong, fierce will that had no tolerance for the wicked. But I was a vampire, a pretty wicked creature, so it wasn't very convincing.

"So there is something strange about this?" I asked the priest as he repeatedly took deep breaths. He gave me a sharp look and grabbed me by the collar.

"What is this?! What in the world happened here?! Tell me!" he shouted and shook me. He was completely losing it.

"Would you mind letting go?" I asked.

The priest finally came to his senses. "Oh, my apologies. I got a bit too excited," he said and let go. I felt like my life was spared. Not that I could have been killed by being grabbed by the collar, but I felt like I was going to die spiritually, I guess.

Now that I took a closer look at the priest, he was actually a priestess. Her robes fell loosely, her hood obscured her face, and her voice sounded androgynous, so I was unable to determine her gender and just assumed she was a man. But as she shook me, her hood fell off, revealing her face. Because the purpose of Hozei's temples was centered around contracts, the clergy refrained from showing their faces, so she probably didn't intend for that to happen.

"Hey, your hood came off," I pointed out. The priestess gasped, pulled it back over her head, and calmed down. I thought it was too late for that, but I didn't want to bring that up.

"Isn't it too late for that?" Lorraine asked instead without thinking much of it.

The priestess slumped and took the hood back off. "I suppose you're right," she said. She seemed strangely scatterbrained. Back when she was guiding us

around, she acted smoothly and explained everything effectively, though. Maybe the air in this room was revealing her true nature. Even clergy were only human, after all. But enough describing this priestess.

“You were saying something about holy energy?” I asked her.

“Oh, yes. I don’t know if any of you can sense it, but this room is full of holy energy. It’s as if the gods have been here. I would almost want to declare this room holy ground.”

Her response made the rest of us look at each other. We probably could slightly sense the holy energy. I knew that something felt different, but that feeling wasn’t as clear as when magical energy or divinity were present. I didn’t understand why she would declare it holy ground, though. It was a room in a temple, so they could do that if they wanted to, but I didn’t see the point.

“Putting holy ground and all that aside,” I said, “let me explain what happened. We used the magic contract, and then an image of what looked like Hozei appeared and probably blessed the contract or something. Here it is.”

She graciously bowed as she accepted the contract from me and then held it in the air to give it a look. “This was definitely blessed by Hozei,” she said.

“Aren’t they supposed to be blessed by Hozei anyway?” I asked.

“They are, but in certain more specific terms, they aren’t. These contracts are created by saints who were blessed by Hozei, so they indirectly have Hozei’s blessing. But if you simply say they were blessed by Hozei, they seem more important,” she explained.

That really wasn’t something I needed to know. But the priests at Hozei’s temples came across more like merchants than regular clergy, so I wasn’t surprised. And it wasn’t like they were lying to people. It was publicly known that these contracts were made by saints. What was actually important was whether they worked or not, and they did, so there was no need to criticize the temples.

“But this contract you used actually has her blessing. That may mean this contract was important to the gods.”

“Does Hozei personally bless important contracts?” Lorraine asked.

“Yes, but this is the first time I’ve seen it myself. One example I’ve heard is that Hozei personally came and blessed a contract regarding the lending of a divine sword. There are many other examples, and they’re all passed down as legends. May I ask what your contract was about? I won’t force you to tell me, of course. But as a servant of Hozei, I would love to know if possible.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you,” I answered, left with no other options. “But compared to the example you gave us, our contract isn’t anything that important.”

“I see,” the priestess said with a sigh. “Then at least tell me your names.”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you that either.” Now the priestess looked to be in utter despair, but I had no choice. Lorraine and I aside, though, maybe Augurey could share his name.

This was a temple dedicated to the goddess of contracts and justice, so the clergy were said to take confidentiality seriously. Even when asked by governments or other powerful entities, they never revealed secrets. There were a number of such examples throughout history. In the case of the divine sword the priestess mentioned, the identity of the person who received it was a secret at the time. A powerful noble under the control of one of the dark lords used the influence of his nation to demand that the temple reveal the identity of the wielder, but they refused. But even if that was true, it was best to not say our names.

The priestess seemed sad, but she must have felt that asking further questions would be the wrong thing to do as a servant of Hozei.

“No, you have nothing to apologize about. In fact, I’m sorry for asking. But if anything happens with your contract, please contact one of our temples. Whether it’s the main one or a branch, we’ll be sure to assist you. Here, show this card at any of our temples, and you’ll be allowed to speak to the head of the temple personally. Please make use of it,” she said and handed me a card.

It was incredibly hospitable, but I wondered why she would go this far. I also wondered why just some random priest would have this.

“Oh, I should have introduced myself sooner,” she said as if she knew the question on my mind. “I’m Josee Meyer, the head of this temple. I’m pleased to

meet you.”

We greeted her back and shook hands, remembering not to give our names in return.

For being in charge of a temple, she was awfully young. Josee looked to be in her mid-twenties, around the same age as Lorraine and me. The Kingdom of Yaaran might not have been that significant of a country, but being the head of a temple in the capital still made her pretty accomplished. It was supposedly easy to move up the ranks as a priest if you had divinity, and she seemed sensitive to holy energy too, so she probably had divinity. In other words, she was a saint. If so, her position wasn’t much of a surprise, but it didn’t make much of a difference to us regardless. Augurey was the only one who would have to worry about running into her again because he worked in the capital, but Josee would probably be the one to avoid him if that happened.

Now that we’d asked what we wanted to ask and done what we needed to do, it was time to go. We were running out of time, and Augurey had also said he had his own things to do.

“We need to get going right about now,” I said.

“Oh, is that so?” Josee replied sadly. She looked like she wanted to know more, but it was too late to ask questions. We left the room and headed to the exit of the temple.



“Well, a lot happened, but now there shouldn’t be anything to worry about,” I said as we left the temple.

“Right. Now even if someone comes to me with questions, I can use the contract as an excuse not to say anything,” Augurey said. “That’s a relief. I feel better knowing I can’t spill the beans whether I want to or not.” The contract still left Augurey some room to talk if I or Lorraine gave him permission, but providing a way to prevent mistakes that could silence him forever was better than making him worry about that for the rest of his life.

“Well, we could be worrying too much,” Lorraine said. “I doubt anyone is going to try and seek out the information this contract covers up anyway, but



after what happened with Nive, I don't want to take any chances."

Now that I looked identical to a human, not many people would be able to tell that I wasn't one. Even if we weren't this cautious, it was highly unlikely I'd be exposed. But we always had to consider that possibility. That was why I only told my secret to either people I already fully trusted or people who used magic contracts to earn that trust. Maybe one day, as I found out more about my body, I would have to explain everything to someone I had little connection to, but I would have to think long and hard about it first.

"Nive? As in Nive Maris?" Augurey asked.

"Yeah, she came to Maalt chasing after a vampire. She was pretty suspicious of me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But from the sound of it, she didn't give you too much trouble in the end, surprisingly."

I was more surprised about that than anyone, of course. It turned out that she was searching for a different vampire. I had to wonder if she found it yet. When she arrived from the west, she was full of passion for the hunt. Maalt was fairly large for a city in Yaaran, but if she was indiscriminately using that Holy Fire every day, no vampire could hide.

"Well, I was safe in the end, and that's what matters," I said. "By the way, Augurey, you said there was something you needed to do. How much time do you have?"

Augurey checked the position of the sun. "Uh-oh, not very much. I'll have to go for the day. Will I get to see you again? I've also been through a lot since I left Maalt. There's a lot to talk about, and if you two are ever in the capital again, I'd love to go on a quest with you."

I generally stuck to solo adventures, but that was because I thought fighting on my own would be the most efficient way to get stronger. Now my ideas had changed a bit. Besides, back when we were both poor solo adventurers in Maalt, we sometimes took jobs together. I had no reason to say no, and it looked like neither did Lorraine.

"Sure, I'll get in touch with you next time I'm here," I said. "I'd contact you

through the guild, but I don't think I'll be able to."

"Then contact this inn," Augurey quickly replied, understanding my hesitation. "It's where I always stay. See you later." He handed me a piece of paper that listed the name of the inn and its general location, then he waved goodbye and left.



"Should we head to the meeting place now?" I asked Lorraine.

"I think so. It's not quite time yet, but we're cutting it close. I'd rather not make Gharb and Capitan angry."

"Good point, let's hurry," I replied.

We rushed to the meeting place. Of course, we didn't forget to change our outfits back to normal beforehand. I didn't have the guts to let Gharb and Capitan see me in that flashy getup. They would make fun of me for sure.



"Oh, right on time. Wait, actually, a little past time. Were you just enjoying sightseeing that much?" Gharb asked as we arrived. It seemed to be a sincere question.

"Sorry. It wasn't Lorraine's first time in the capital, but it was mine, so it was fun to see. But that's not why we're late," I said.

I told them about our encounter with Augurey and everything that had transpired after that. But I left out anything regarding me being a vampire, of course. To explain why we went to Hozei's temple, I just said that I didn't want Augurey telling anyone that we came to the capital. It wasn't the full truth, but it wasn't false either. Gharb and Capitan started to narrow their eyes at me at some point in the story, so maybe they knew I was lying, but they didn't say so.

When I finished talking, Gharb sighed. "All you were doing was taking a walk. How did you get yourself in so much trouble? Lorraine, you must be exhausted."

"No, I enjoyed myself the entire time," Lorraine answered positively.

"Is that right? I see, I see. You didn't tell him about the teleportation circles,

did you?”

“No, we didn’t,” I said. “I figured we shouldn’t mention it without your permission. Maybe we could have told him after we made the contract, but I decided against it.”

When it came to my own secrets, the choice of who to tell what was entirely up to me. As a result, even if I was killed by someone like Nive, I would only have myself to blame. But the teleportation circles were ultimately Hathara’s problem. Revealing that secret wasn’t my decision to make.

“I said we’re leaving you in charge of the place, didn’t I? That includes those teleportation circles, whatever you want to do with them,” Gharb said, to my surprise.

“That means we can choose who to tell about them?” Lorraine asked.

Capitan nodded. “Yeah, that was the idea. I guess we didn’t convey that very well...”

“But if that leads to the teleportation circles being discovered, what will happen to Hathara?” Lorraine said with concern.

“You don’t need to think about that too much,” I said. “In the event that anything happens, the teleportation circles on Hathara’s side can be erased. Can’t they?” I asked and turned to Gharb.

“Yes, I’ve been told the method. If I wanted to do it, I could. After that, Hathara would only have to feign ignorance. There would be no teleportation circles to find anymore, so no problems should arise.”

“Teleportation circles can be destroyed by human hands?” Lorraine asked. She sounded shocked, but there was a reason for that. The standard teleportation circles found in dungeons had never been destroyed by humans before. They would vanish when the dungeon’s structure changed, but while human weapons or magic could temporarily scrape away parts of the circle, it would instantly regenerate. These magic circles were extremely persistent.

“Yes. It’s easy as long as you know how. I’ll tell you two about it later. There’s quite a bit I have to tell you about, including the exits to the teleportation circles in that ruined city. You had better commit it to memory,” Gharb said.

Her tone reminded me of when I trained under her. It still intimidated me a bit even now. Gharb could be a pretty ruthless old lady. I had to work like hell to memorize everything at the time, so I never had a moment to think about how brutal it was. I'd definitely find it tiresome now. But even though she pushed my mind to the limit back then, if I had to do it all again, I would.

Lorraine, on the other hand, seemed to think this was a good chance to learn something new and interesting. "I can't wait!" she said, her eyes shining. If she could find a way to enjoy this, then she could enjoy anything.

If the teleportation circles could actually be destroyed, though, that meant that even if someone heard about them, Hathara could pretend they had nothing to do with it. Maybe it would still be bad if someone found out they were in Hathara before they were destroyed, but then we would just have to make sure that whoever found out could never tell anyone. If possible, I wanted to be able to destroy the teleportation circles before that. Maybe it would be a good idea to think up some way to make that possible. Or maybe there already was a way. I didn't know, but I felt a little less worried now.



"Hm?" Lorraine said on the way to the city gate.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Isn't that Augurey?" she replied. I looked where she was looking, and Augurey was indeed there. He was talking to a small girl and trying to give her something.

Now, I knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but this was the middle of Vistelya's main street. Assuming it wouldn't be too big a deal if I listened in, my curiosity drove me to activate my Vampire Ear. That wasn't the name of any actual ability, though; it was just what I called my improved hearing.

"Here's the fire spirit madder. Take it," Augurey told the girl.

"But I don't have the money," she said.

"Don't worry about that. This is just what's left from the madder I picked for the clothes I'm having made for myself. I honestly had so much left over that I didn't know what to do with it. Feel free to use this. Your mom needs it, doesn't

she?”

“Yeah, thank you. Oh, Uncle Augurey! Um...”

“You don’t need to pay me back. Hurry and bring that to her. Next time I see you, I’ll unveil my greatest fashion of all time. If any of you are sick, it won’t be much fun. Go on now,” Augurey said and pushed the girl from behind. She was reluctant to leave, but she ran off somewhere in the end. Augurey smiled as he watched her go and then turned around and disappeared into the crowd.

“How kind of him. You’d never expect this from how he dresses in the slightest,” Lorraine said.

“Well, that’s how he is. It’s why I spent so much time with him,” I replied, but it sounded like Augurey was making them watch his fashion show as payment. That sounded typical of him.





## Chapter 3: Numerous Secrets

“Are we back?” I asked after the scenery around us completely transformed. No longer in the sewer we had been in a moment ago, we were now inside a cave. This was one of the many caverns in the wall of the ruined city.

The four of us came here from Vistelya, and unlike when we went there, the soldiers didn’t give us a second look when we left. The inspection for exiting the city was even simpler than when we entered. We didn’t even have to present identification. I hated to criticize my country, but they didn’t seem vigilant enough. I guess they didn’t care about anyone who left unless they had been to the aristocratic district. They checked us when we entered, so they didn’t need to bother when we left. Maybe that was the logic, but that seemed too lax. It was just one example of why Yaaran wasn’t a more significant country.

“So we went from Vistelya to this dungeon in the Empire, and now we’re teleporting again to get back to Hathara? Now that I think about it, we’re traveling ludicrous distances in the blink of an eye,” Lorraine whispered.

Something about what she said made me think twice. Not that there was anything strange in it, but something stood out.

“A dungeon, huh? I wonder if I can use the Map of Akasha here,” I said. Lorraine’s wording reminded me of my magic item that automatically mapped out any dungeons I went to. If its powers applied to all dungeons, then it also had to apply to Good King Felt’s underground city, the sixtieth floor of the Old Insect Dungeon in the Empire. But maybe mapping out the sixtieth floor by itself didn’t mean much, and I had no way of getting down here from above. For just walking around the underground city, though, there might be some use in it.

“Now that you mention it, you should check and see. I’m curious too,” Lorraine replied.

Gharb and Capitan looked confused.

“The Map of Akasha? What’s that?” Gharb asked.

I had no reason to hide it, so I told her. “Oh, it’s a magic item that a strange person gave me in a dungeon. It’s very useful. Here, this is it,” I said and took the rolled-up piece of old parchment out of my magic bag.

“Just looks like some ordinary parchment to me,” Capitan said as he crossed his arms.

“It looks like that, yeah, but its effects are incredible. All you have to do is walk around the dungeon, and it’ll accurately map it out for you. For an adventurer, no tool could be more convenient.”

“What? I want one too. Can you buy these at the stores in Maalt?” Capitan asked. My insufficient explanation seemed to have given him the wrong idea. Capitan used the teleportation circles to go all kinds of places, so he probably did his fair share of dungeon diving. He would know how helpful the Map of Akasha was. But I couldn’t tell him what he wanted to hear, unfortunately.

“Sorry, but Maalt’s a way smaller city than Vistelya. If someone had invented a map like this, it’d already be on sale in the capital, I’m sure. But no, it was just given to me. The person I got it from was pretty odd. She gave me this robe too, and Lorraine says it’d be impossible to make something like this. The same goes for the map, of course,” I answered.

Capitan gave me an extremely disappointed look. “All right, then I’ll duel you for it,” he said.

“No way. I wouldn’t win; I’d just get torn to shreds. Leave me alone!” I shouted.

“If Lorraine’s illusion magic is anything to go by, then I don’t think that’s true. I’d never challenge someone way weaker than me,” he replied, surprising me with a compliment. Maybe I really had gotten a bit stronger, even from Capitan’s point of view. I almost felt better about myself, but I took a glance at Capitan’s face and he was looking a little mean.

“This is a trap, isn’t it? Lay off me. I don’t stand a chance,” I said, calmly rejecting his proposal.

Capitan was also joking. Mostly. “Fine, I’ll give up on the map,” he said. “But

we're going to have a bout anyway. I need to see how much stronger you got. And there are things I want to teach you."

If there was nothing on the line, then it was hard for me to say no. "Fine, just go easy," I requested, then I opened the Map of Akasha to give it a look.

"Oh, turns out that it works here too. It's mapping the place like it's supposed to. Not only that, but the path we took with the shahor melechnamer was recorded as well. I guess it even works when you ride a mount," Lorraine immediately speculated upon looking at the map.

Most items of this sort would only work when walking on your own two feet, or they would have some other strict limitations. The Map of Akasha didn't seem to have any such limits, so as far as magic items went, it was amazingly handy. If I could mass-produce it, I would be rich. But even Lorraine didn't know how it was made and thought reverse engineering it would be nearly impossible. I was a novice in magic and alchemy, so mass-producing the Map of Akasha was a pipe dream. Anyway, the fact that it recorded the path we rode down on the shahor melechnamer wasn't as deserving of our attention as another fact that became clear after we looked more closely.

"It says 'To Hathara Ancient Kingdom Fortress Ruins' here, and 'To Vistelya Founding Era Sewers' here. Does this mean what I think it means?" I asked.

"Well, those are definitely the destinations for the teleportation circles," Gharb said. "I'm shocked that it lists those too."



"If we made a map like this that featured all of the teleportation circles, we could easily travel anywhere from here. We could almost start up a travel business," I said with amusement, but the other three were too deep in thought and didn't hear me. I knew how they felt. The Map of Akasha left us with a lot to think about. I just wanted to try and lighten the mood, but they were a tough crowd—the kind of crowd that'd kill me if I was an entertainer, but I wasn't good enough at entertaining to deserve that title.

"These teleportation circles weren't always part of this dungeon, were they? They were added by the people of Hathara?" Lorraine asked Gharb.

“Yes, that’s right,” Gharb said. “There are no records of a teleportation circle that goes to Hathara, but back when we moved to that location, we probably added a circle to help travel between here and there. The one that leads to Vistelya’s sewers was left by the village chancellor long ago, as I think I mentioned.”

“Right. I see. Then I wonder where the Map of Akasha is retrieving this information from. Magic items like this use all sorts of methods, but they generally take advantage of their user’s senses and knowledge to obtain data. I don’t know about this one, though,” Lorraine explained and looked at me.

I thought for a bit then shook my head and said, “This is probably different. I might have had some idea that that fortress was from an ancient kingdom, but I had no idea that the sewer in Vistelya was from the founding period. I’ve heard it’s centuries old, but nothing more than that.” If the map did use my knowledge and senses to gain information, then the listed locations would have just been “Some Fortress Near Hathara” and “Really Old Sewer in Vistelya.” I would have preferred somewhat cooler names, but if it was using my senses and knowledge, then that’s what it would have come up with.

“I think so too,” Lorraine said. “Even I couldn’t have guessed when the sewer was built. You have zero knowledge on that subject, so of course you wouldn’t have known. As such, we can assume the map isn’t basing anything on your knowledge. But if so, where in the world is this information from?”

Gharb was the one to answer Lorraine’s question. She was also a magician and alchemist, so she had some knowledge of magic items too. “First, I would consider the possibility that it’s based on the knowledge of the magic item’s creator,” she said. “That would mean that whoever created this map knows about this place.” That did seem like the most logical explanation.

Lorraine nodded, but then she mentioned another possibility. “Yes, but I have another idea. This may be crazy, but it could be pulling information from the Akashic records.”

I had never heard of the Akashic records, and neither had Capitan, from the look of it. Only Lorraine and Gharb seemed to know what it was. We were more on the brawn side than the brains side. We did our fair share of thinking, and

sometimes we had some decent input. Sometimes. But we had question marks over our heads at this moment, for sure.

“The Akashic records are really just a concept,” Gharb said, appalled at our ignorance. “It’s where the records of all existing phenomena are stored. But this isn’t a place that the eye can see. It’s another dimension, one might say. Lorraine is right to say this is a crazy idea, but that place is extremely important to magicians and alchemists. All of the inner workings of magic are recorded there, so if one were to make contact with the Akashic records, it’s said that there is vast knowledge to acquire. But no magician in history has ever reached it.” She peeked at my Map of Akasha. The name “Akasha,” it now seemed, came from Akashic. If that was correct, then it meant Lorraine’s hypothesis was correct.



“Well, this is only a theory. The map may have only been named that to make it seem more remarkable. It’s like how one might name a sword the Dragonslayer when it’s never slayed a dragon before,” Lorraine said, reducing the tension in the air.

Weapons and magic items did tend to have exaggerated names, to be fair. In addition to Dragonslayer, there were plenty of weapons that bore names like Giantslayer and even Godslayer. When I went to the weapon shop in town, ones like that were always in stock. There were probably more weapons with those names than there were dragons, giants, and gods in existence, and they weren’t likely to be killed by random equipment forged in a little shop, so these names could only be lies. Maybe a skillful warrior could kill them using one, though. But until the sword was actually used to slay a dragon, it would best be called the Theoretical Dragonslayer or something. In a similar way, the Map of Akasha might have simply had abilities incredible enough to convince someone that it accessed the Akashic records, even if it didn’t.

“Well, you may be right,” I said. “But if so, then whoever made the map must’ve known about this place. What do you have to say about that?”

“We would have to ask the creator to find out. There’s a good chance that the person you encountered was the creator of this map, but I doubt she’s easy to find. I think we’ll just have to put this question aside for now,” Lorraine said.

“Right. I can’t get back to where I found her anyway.”

The path to the depths of the Water Moon Dungeon had closed. I couldn’t break through the wall, so there was no way for me to get back there. All I could do was look for clues elsewhere, but I had nothing for the time being. There was no use thinking about it further.

“Well, for now, I think the best thing you can do is see how useful that map is,” Gharb said. When I cocked my head wondering what she meant, she scoffed and explained. “See what it says when you go to the other teleportation circles. Then maybe you’ll see how its mapping works.”



There was no time to check out all of the many teleportation circles in a single



day, so we limited ourselves to only a few. Gharb and Capitan picked out all the ones we went to. They made regular use of some teleportation circles that we hadn't used yet, so they already knew where they led. It was an ideal test of the Map of Akasha's effects.

"Hm, looks like it does map out places you've been before," Gharb whispered. "But until you've used a teleportation circle, the map doesn't seem to display its destination."

The Map of Akasha now said 'To Albasa, Kingdom of Lina' and 'To Daris the Merchant's Abandoned Warehouse, Daris's Island, Republic of Thorn.' Both were written beneath the locations of teleportation circles, which told us a few things.

"It tells us the exact destinations for teleportation circles we've used, but for unused ones, it seems to give more vague information like the name of the city and country," Capitan said.

The teleportation circle to Albasa was one that none of us had used. We only stood in front of it. But we did go to and from Daris's Island via the other teleportation circle. We checked the map before using it, but it just said 'Daris's Island, Republic of Thorn' at the time. When we came back from the island, there were more details.

Daris's Island was beautiful, by the way. The Republic of Thorn was an island nation in the south that was made up of thousands of islands. They had a highly developed marine transportation industry, apparently. If I ever had the time, I would've liked to go swimming in the ocean there. Although, it wasn't like I was actually that busy. I had plenty to do but no real deadlines. I wanted to become a Mithril-class adventurer as soon as possible, but if I tried too hard, I could trip myself up. It was best to fit in some time for relaxation, I thought. But maybe I was just lazy.

"Maybe it'd be best to use every single one of these at some point, just to get their exact destinations recorded," I said.

Lorraine looked unsure. "Maybe that would be a good idea if possible, but we don't know if all the destinations are safe," she said uneasily.

"That's a valid concern, yes," Gharb agreed. "But even if, say, an exit was

blocked by rubble, using that teleportation circle wouldn't fuse us with the rubble or anything of the sort. I don't think that's anything to worry about. But perhaps one of them would take us straight to some country's throne room, so we should keep that possibility in mind."

That was frightening to consider. It was nice to know I wouldn't get teleported inside a wall or something, but ending up in a throne room didn't sound like a good time.

"It seems to be that while the teleportation circles to Hathara and Vistelya are only a few centuries old, some others could be as ancient as this city itself," Lorraine added. "In fact, I would guess that most of them are. If so, it's possible that buildings were constructed on top of the teleportation circles at their destinations, with nobody even knowing they were there. We all know that they couldn't have destroyed them. Or rather, they would just regenerate if they tried. Based on some experiments, a blocked teleportation circle will teleport you to the nearest safe position above the exit."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"To put it simply, say that the teleportation circle on the other side is drawn on the floor. Then let's say that the teleportation circle is paved over with stone. What happens when you teleport to that teleportation circle?"

"It wouldn't work, right? The teleportation circle would just be stuck under there, so you couldn't teleport to it."

"In theory, that makes sense. The magic circle is completely blocked off in this example. But if you tried this, it would actually do something rather interesting."

"What?"

"It would teleport you onto the stone pavement."

That sounded convenient, but from our perspective, it could be scary. If a building were built on top of a teleportation circle, we could end up inside of some place. That meant that what Gharb said about being warped into a throne room was a realistic possibility. Not only that, but if the teleportation circle on the other side was blocked, then there might be no way to return to this city.

“I’m sure that there are some circles like that,” Gharb said. “And some might be in old fortresses or castles that have been renovated so they can continue to be used even now. Sometimes I hear about the history of some noble’s castle, and they were first constructed an unbelievably long time ago. Most of the time, that history is made up to make their homes sound more significant than they are, but they aren’t all lying. I think some of those buildings must contain teleportation circles to this day. Consider that fortress in Hathara. There are other such forts and castles, and they may still be in use, their history unbeknownst to their users. There could be inactive circles that are simply covered by carpet.”

“If a teleportation circle were covered by carpet, would you still be able to use it?” I asked.

“After everything she said, that’s the question you ask?”

Lorraine questioned me like I was clueless. I didn’t know why she had to be like that; I was just wondering. When I shrugged at her, she sighed and explained for me anyway. I liked that about her.

“If it’s blocked by a carpet or some other cloth, then unlike with stone or other thick material, it can still be used as normal. And if the teleportation circle on the other side is blocked by a carpet, of course, you’ll simply be teleported onto the carpet. I’ve never done this before, so I can’t say for certain that I’m right. Assuming I am, though, then it’s reasonable to assume that we could be warped into someone’s throne room.”



Her explanation was hard to understand in places, but I can try to sum it up. Firstly, if the teleportation circle at the exit was blocked and was activated, the user still wouldn’t collide or merge with the material blocking it. The magic circle would still send you to the exit, just at a location where no matter was in the way. And that location had to be somewhere above the teleportation circle, meaning that it would place you on top of the obstructive material. The teleportation circle at the exit would still be blocked off, though, so there would be no way to return to where you came from. That would be pretty devastating for us.

In the event that a teleportation circle was only blocked by a carpet or some other thin cloth, however, then it would still be usable. That didn't sound like too big of a problem. We could only hope that if the exit was blocked, it wasn't blocked by anything thicker than cloth. That pretty much covered what we needed to know about how teleportation circles behave. Maybe there was more to learn, but it wasn't anything important at the moment.

"So what should we do? Want to try a teleportation circle we don't know anything about?" Lorraine asked, a serious look on her face.

"If we might not be able to get back here, I'm not sure we should," I said.

"Right," Lorraine answered, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"There may be a way to test whether a teleportation circle only works in one direction. I haven't tried it yet, though," Gharb said.

"Will you teach us?" I asked.

"Please do, Gharb," Lorraine requested. We totally jumped at the opportunity.

"It's simple," Gharb said. "Dab a little blood on some rock and place it on the teleportation circle. If the circle works both ways, then it should come back after a few minutes."

That was easy enough to understand. Blood was the key, so any object with blood on it would naturally behave that way. But it sounded like there could be problems with this approach, as Lorraine seemed to immediately notice.

"But if there's a throne room on the other side, they'd see a bloody object materializing out of nowhere. They'd find out that there's a teleportation circle in the room, and may even find out that they can use it. Maybe we could use a small enough amount of blood that it's hard to notice, but if they were to investigate closely, they could find out," Lorraine said.

"Right, that's why we haven't tried it, but it's an option available to you. Maybe there's no way to do it without some risk attached, but you do have a way to reduce the risk considerably," Gharb replied and pointed at the Map of Akasha. The information it displayed was incomplete until we visited the location, but it was at least something even before that. If the map said that a

circle led to the capital of a kingdom or a republic, that one would be rather risky, but if the map didn't say that, maybe it would be worth testing.

Aside from that, I thought maybe I could make use of Edel's underlings. If I were to drip a little blood on them, they would be able to activate the teleportation circles. Then they could return through the circle if possible, and if not, they could use their small size and great agility to escape. If something like that happened, maybe the best they could do would be to get to water as soon as possible. As long as they washed themselves, nobody could use them to activate the teleportation circles or research my blood.

And if they didn't get any results, they would have to give up eventually. Even if they had court magicians and alchemists, they apparently got fired if they didn't get results after a long time. I heard rumors about that on the streets sometimes. I always felt bad when I heard that some kingdom's court magician was dismissed. Life is hard.

"That's true, and maybe if I had Edel and his underlings help, we could do it all in secret," I said.

"Edel?" Gharb asked.

"Oh, Edel is my familiar, sort of."

"Rentt, you're a monster tamer too?" Capitan asked, a little surprised. But only a little surprised, considering the wide variety of skills I had used while at the village. Capitan himself had taught me some of them, even. I might have learned more skills from him than from anyone.

But I wasn't actually a monster tamer, so I shook my head and said, "No, that's not it."

"Then how'd you get a familiar? Doesn't that require some special skills?"

It was true that aside from learning directly from a monster tamer, there weren't many ways to gain the skills to keep a familiar. That wasn't to say there was no way, but those were highly unique circumstances. My case was one of those unique circumstances, but I didn't know how to explain it. I felt like it might be fine if I were just honest with them, but then Gharb seemed to catch on.

“Hm, so you have a secret, do you?” she asked.

There was no need for me to pretend I didn’t. She would’ve seen right through me anyway, so it was better for me to be honest from the start.

“Yes, you could say that. I’m not sure if I should tell you two about it, though,” I said.

“Why not?” Capitan asked.

“It’s not that I mind telling you what it is in itself, really. I’m sure you’ll keep my secret. I don’t doubt that, but it’s the village I’m worried about. You want to keep Hathara a normal village, don’t you? If I told you about it, you might end up embroiled in something.”

Gharb and Capitan had said they wanted Hathara to remain a normal village, despite its great secret. If they needed to keep even more secrets, they would probably find it exhausting. I knew they had much more tolerance for these things than the average person, but no matter how remarkable they were, they were still human. They had to get exhausted at some point, and they already had to shoulder a great burden. I didn’t need to thrust more on them. They were also like family to me, so I was hesitant.

It was different with Augurey because he was the sort who liked to stick his nose in people’s business. Or so I’d like to claim, but honestly, I just wanted the support of a friend. I did already have Lorraine and Sheila, and they were trustworthy, but Augurey was a close friend in a different way. We both suffered as Bronze-class adventurers, so we were like war buddies, in a way. Not that this was any excuse for getting him wrapped up in my business, but I wanted him around to back me up at least a little bit. I didn’t feel quite the same way about Gharb and Capitan. I didn’t want to give them any trouble.



“Is that all?” Gharb said with a sigh. “Rentt, you’re our disciple. If we couldn’t handle something that you could, what would that mean for us as your teachers? Right, Capitan?”

“Absolutely,” Capitan agreed. “Not that I know what your secret is, but knowing you, I can’t imagine you did anything wrong. It’s more like you got

yourself wrapped up in something, I'm sure. Now, if you committed some serious crime, I'd suggest you turn yourself in. But you didn't, did you?" he asked jokingly, simply to signal that he trusted that I didn't. The world was in an age of endless conflict. There was no way to be sure I did nothing wrong, but he believed that in the end, I would always make the right choice. I appreciated that he thought so much of me.

Lorraine seemed to think the same. She patted me on the shoulder and said, "You were blessed with some fine teachers. Nothing at all like mine." It sounded like there was a story behind that statement, but I decided not to pry.

From what I could recall, Lorraine's teacher threw a wand at her when they were making wands. That sounded pitiful, and considering that, I certainly seemed to be fortunate when it came to my own teachers. Gharb made me drink poison, and Capitan tossed me out into the wilderness and just told me to survive, but I guess it could have been worse. To be fair, Gharb took precautions to make sure I didn't die or suffer any lasting harm, and even Capitan was secretly watching me out there the whole time.

"Of course I didn't commit any crime," I said. "Well, some people might consider it a crime."

If the act of being a vampire was itself a crime, then I was a criminal. Nive would have killed me on the spot if she'd found out. She would've pounced on me faster than a kitten pouncing on fresh snow, and that would've been a nightmare. She wasn't even cute like a cat. She looked pretty enough, but that look in her eyes was as fiery as a carnivore's. I guess cats are also carnivores, but those are the cute ones. I feel like I'm going to make someone mad, so I'm just going to stop here and move on.

"Some would consider it a crime? What in the world does that mean?" Capitan asked.

By contrast, Gharb seemed to have some vague idea as to what I meant. It was crazy that she could know with so little information, though. And as soon as I started to think about how crazy that was, she glared at me. Her intuition was off the charts. I almost wanted to ask her to stop knowing everything all the time.



“Capitan, I think I get it,” she said. “But it’s hard to believe. If what I think is true, Rentt, then you must have been through a lot of anguish. And yet you still look like you always did, either thanks to your hard work or that of the people around you. You’re incredibly lucky.”

Now I definitely knew that she knew.

“Gharb, don’t talk like you’ve got it all figured out,” Capitan complained with a shrug. “I have no idea what’s going on here. How do you even know anything based on what he said?”

“Oh, just the experience that comes from old age, I suppose,” Gharb said in jest.

“Come on,” Capitan said and scowled some more. Even the village’s greatest hunter was like a child around this old lady.

But it didn’t seem like Gharb was trying to dodge the question. After thinking for a bit, she said, “I’m sure you’re brave enough to accept what happened to Rentt, but you’ll understand quicker if you see it for yourself. Capitan, fight Rentt. You’ll feel how he’s changed.”

“What do you mean, Rentt’s changed? Because he’s gotten stronger?”

“That’s not all. Rentt, you’ve changed on a fundamental level, haven’t you?” Gharb asked, turning to me.

It was true, I had. I learned the basics of my fighting style as a Bronze-class adventurer, but after my body transformed, I was able to do so much more. For example, I could flail my sword however I wanted without having to worry about my shoulders. That meant I could continuously gyrate my shoulder in all directions. I’m talking about full 360-degree movement. The same went for my neck and legs. All of my joints had become freakish, but I was now a freak, so of course they were.

However, I almost never took advantage of that when I fought because all of the combat techniques I knew were meant for ordinary humans. They were structured around ordinary human joints. If I wanted to use any techniques that weren’t, I would have to come up with them myself. I didn’t know if I could manage that, but if I got myself in serious danger, I’d have to try. I also

practiced such techniques occasionally. Maybe I could just show off some of those, but I didn't want them to think I was gross. I mean, I still had trouble even looking at myself in the mirror. As an aside, this new physiology seemed to have cured my shoulder aches.

"I've changed, yeah, but I don't know if Capitan can force me to use those changes," I said. "Not even the tarasque did that, for the most part."

My body was more durable than before, so maybe all I had to do was demonstrate that. I could show how my wounds would instantly heal. Anything more than that would depend on Capitan's strength. But to be honest, I did think I would have to take him seriously in a fight. We had already agreed to fight each other eventually, though, so I just wanted to rile him up a bit. Capitan was even more muscleheaded than I was. Gharb knew as much, which is why she made this suggestion. He tried to act like somewhat of an intellectual around me or his subordinates, but he had his limits.

Capitan responded exactly as anticipated by saying, "You're on. If you think you're so tough, then yeah, let's fight. But if you want to cry and say you're sorry instead, you've still got time."



So we decided to fight, but not right on the spot. We had done far too much that day and were all exhausted. Whether physically or mentally, I couldn't muster up the will to do anything more. Not only that, but Capitan had a family to get back to. It was almost nightfall, and if he stayed out any longer, he would incur the wrath of his wife. Even for a valiant man like him, his wife was to be feared. It seemed like most of the hunters throughout the years had terrifying wives. When you were in a profession that's constantly exposed to danger, maybe you needed a wife like that to keep yourself going. I never considered if adventurers might be the same way, so I decided to ask Guildmaster Wolf next time I saw him. I suspected that he would bitterly agree.



"Do you have a shot at winning?" Lorraine asked.

"I'm not sure."

We were in the mayor's house, which is to say, my family home. We had returned from the dungeon. Gharb and Capitan had explained in advance that we would be absent, saying that we had business in the forest.

Only Ingo looked at us and asked, "So you know now?" When I nodded, he said, "I see. It's in your hands. Not that we won't be involved at all anymore, but use the place as you see fit. It will be a bountiful treasure for someone in your profession, I'm sure."

Rather than simply handing over the management of the ruins, maybe my foster father intended it to be something of a present. It certainly broadened my capacity to work as an adventurer. However, it could undoubtedly cause problems if not used carefully, so I did have to keep that in mind.

If possible, I would have wanted to unveil this treasure to the entire world, but while that would make me a famous adventurer, it would be absolute chaos. Yaaran held the key to the teleportation circles, so it would go from an insignificant country to a massive target. I could imagine the Empire gleefully attacking in the future. I didn't want that to happen, so I couldn't tell anyone about the ruins. Maybe one day I could reveal it to the world, but if I ever did, it would be best to destroy the teleportation circle in Hathara first. Then only Good King Felt's underground city in the Empire would face problems. The people of Hathara would still be the key, but it was unlikely they would ever find out.

They could also try hardening and processing my blood into some sort of key instead. If they did that, maybe the Empire could actually conquer the entire world. But whether it would function as a key once hardened was a mystery. Even if it weren't hardened, filling the container I'd received from Laura with my blood and using that as a key would probably work. Handing that over to Lorraine might have been a wise idea. Testing whether it mattered if my blood was solid or liquid was likely something we needed to do sooner rather than later. We were the only ones using the teleportation circles for the time being, but it would be good to know for the future.

"So Capitan is strong?" Lorraine asked. "I know he was your teacher and you respect him, but I don't know how powerful he actually is. I've only seen him fight on the way to that fortress, so I wouldn't know."

On our way through the northern forest, Gharb and Capitan defeated most of the monsters while Lorraine and I watched. But it didn't seem like they took those fights that seriously; it was more like they weren't fighting to their fullest. Capitan knew all about the monsters around Hathara, so of course he could beat them easily. He knew their precise behavior, so he had no need to get serious. And while the monsters in the northern forest were strong, none of them were legendary or anything. Any veteran adventurer could deal with them handily, and Capitan did some adventuring work somewhere. The question of how strong he'd be against a human opponent couldn't be answered by his fights with these monsters. At the very least, he would have to compete with someone of equivalent skill to see the full extent of his abilities. This was true of any master of their craft, and Capitan was definitely a master.

On top of that, his main weapon was a hunting knife, so he was a bit different from the average opponent. I learned to use one a long time ago and still practiced with one, but gauging the proper distance to stand from your opponent was harder than with swords or spears. And rather than just attack with the hunting knife, Capitan would also draw close to strike with fists or jujutsu. He was a hunter, so these moves were meant more for fighting humanoid monsters, but he'd said that they were perfectly effective against humans as well. Thinking about it now, these techniques must have been passed down for generations. Many of them were inherited from the Ancient Kingdom, presumably. All in all, he would be tough to fight.

"He's strong," I said. "I could never have matched him back in the day. Of course, I'd always hoped to beat him one day, but now I'm really shaking."

"What, are you scared?"

"No, I'm shaking with excitement. I can't wait to see just how good I've gotten," I claimed, but to be honest, I was kind of scared. Or rather than scared, I worried that I would disappoint him. After everything Gharb implied about me, I had to give him a good showing. I needed to give this everything I had. My spirit, my mana, my divinity, everything. I even intended to make full use of my monster abilities. If I still couldn't win even then, I would just have to accept that. It wouldn't be the end of the world, and I could still pursue my dreams. My sole objective was to become a Mithril-class adventurer.

“Well, good, then. You’re fighting early tomorrow, right? So the villagers don’t see?”

“Right. Very thoughtful of Gharb.”

She knew that if people were watching, I wouldn’t be able to use all my abilities. We were also going to fight near the fortress in the northern forest. There was no risk of a villager happening across us there.

“Then how about we get to sleep for the night? Goodnight, Rentt.”

“Yeah, goodnight.”

Lorraine left the room and went to the room provided for her, so I got in bed. I wasn’t that tired, but today was a day that deserved some sleep.



“Now then, is this a good place?” Capitan asked after we had walked a ways into the northern forest. I figured we were close to the fortress. We weren’t entirely surrounded by trees, though. It was a spacious enough area, perfect for what we came here to do: a match between Capitan and me.

Of course, we weren’t going to kill each other. It would be a serious and dangerous battle, but we would stop before landing any lethal blows. It wasn’t impossible that somebody could get killed, but it was highly unlikely. No ordinary wound could kill me, and Capitan knew how to avoid any killing blows. Even if he were severely injured, my divinity could heal the damage. I didn’t know to what extent, but as long as he didn’t die instantly, I could save his life if I healed him with all my power, probably. Although, after a fight with Capitan, I didn’t know how much energy I would have left.

“Yeah, looks fine. Fighting in the forest feels like it gives you the advantage, though,” I said.

“Well, nothing to be done about that,” Capitan replied with a chuckle. “Not like you haven’t been trained as a hunter anyway. And you go into the forest all the time as an adventurer too, don’t you? I don’t think I’ve got that much of an upper hand.”

It was a reasonable argument, but I still thought I was at a disadvantage.

Capitan knew everything about the forest north of Hathara. This location completely gave him the upper hand. Even so, I had my own secret weapons. That put us on about equal ground, I suppose. However much of a master Capitan may have been, I had the ability to flop my limbs around like wet noodles. Maybe that gave me a chance, or something. I hoped so.

I tried to encourage myself and attempted to act cool as I observed my surroundings. It was a perfectly ordinary forest. Compared to the sparser forests surrounding Hathara, there were different trees here of different sizes, but it would be easy to mistake them as identical.

“I know I said I’ve done some training, but I haven’t spent decades in the forest like you have. And it’s not like I’ve ever once beaten you,” I said, hoping that would make him let his guard down.

“You think I’ll go easy on you? I know you’ve got something up your sleeve. You’re not the same kid you used to be,” he responded. It would’ve given me a better chance if he had underestimated me, but it didn’t look like that was something I could anticipate.

If you think I’m a coward, just remember that winning is all that matters. Well, maybe that was going a bit far, but it was a lot better than losing. If I could make him take it easy, then I wanted to do that. And if I saw any other opportunities, I would take them. I learned that from none other than Capitan. Problem was, that meant he could see right through me. Oh well. I had no choice but to fight fair, then.

“Can we get started now?” Gharb asked as she rubbed her eyes. “I would say I’d be the judge, but these old eyes can’t see so well nowadays. Instead, I’d like to leave it to Lorraine, if you don’t mind.”

Capitan and I looked at Gharb, both questioning if her eyes were actually that bad, but she just glared back at us, so we turned away. Even as we walked through the forest, she could point out birds that were pretty far away and tell Lorraine their species, their color, and the materials they could be made into. Calling that bad eyesight was an insult to bad eyesight. But we didn’t have the guts to say that to her face.

“Fine by me,” Capitan said. “You all right with that, Rentt? Might give you an

advantage.”

“Lorraine wouldn’t judge me more generously just because she knows me. She’s very serious about the facts.”

That was probably because of her job. As a scholar, she wanted to know the actual results, no matter the subject. Maybe Lorraine would support me in spirit, but she wouldn’t deny the results of the match. If she could accept that I’d turned into a monster, then she could accept that I might lose. That was how she was.

“Good to hear. Might as well get started, then, if that’s good with you,” Capitan asked of Lorraine instead of me, for some reason.

“That’s perfectly fine,” Lorraine answered tersely.

“No hesitation, eh?” Capitan said with surprise. “You that convinced Rentt’ll win?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. But whether he wins or loses, I’ll value him as much as I ever did.”

“I see. Now that’s passion. Reminds me of when I met Cami.”

“Hey, what are you talking about now?” I asked before he could go off telling some story. “Let’s fight.”

“I was in the middle of some sweet reminiscing here. You didn’t have to interrupt.”

“I’ve heard about how you met your wife a hundred times already, for the love of god.”

“Oh? Have you?”

Capitan was usually pretty calm and collected, not to mention a dependable boss when we were out hunting, but when he got drunk, he was an absolute mess. He’d drone on with stories about his family. They were more about his children than his wife lately though, apparently. That was sure what he talked about during the banquet the other day. I only had to sit through these stories on the occasions I returned home to visit, but I felt for Capitan’s subordinates. None of us wanted to know, and you probably don’t, either.



“Well, should we start, then?” Capitan said, seeming to also recognize that nobody was interested. “Prepare yourself, Rentt. Don’t go down too quick, you hear?” He drew his hunting knife and held it with an underhand grip. Capitan knew how to wield it both underhand and overhand. He’d taught me the basics of fighting, but that was a long time ago, and I couldn’t imagine that his fighting style hadn’t changed at all since then. I had to watch his movements closely while we fought.

“Don’t get beat too quick yourself, Capitan. Let’s do this!”



I shouted and leaped at Capitan in an attempt to land the first strike, but next thing I knew, he had already gotten in front of me. I saw his fist rapidly approaching, but he wasn’t actually trying to punch me. For some reason, I was sure of that. He was going to slash with his hunting knife instead. But knowing that didn’t necessarily give me an advantage. Capitan’s underhand grip made it extremely difficult to gauge the potential distance of the attack. He held the blade such that his arm obscured it from my eyes, so if I didn’t already know he was holding it, I wouldn’t have known it was there to begin with.

That level of skill could only have been achieved with practice against humanoid monsters. Not only did they resemble humans, but their range of vision was similar as well. I would know, because I was one. This technique of Capitan’s was designed around hiding his weapon from such eyes. Of course, this couldn’t have been honed overnight. He had to be able to predict his opponent’s movements and line of sight, whether consciously or subconsciously, and be able to do so on command.

But in spite of all this, I knew the position of the hunting knife and could follow how it moved. This had nothing to do with me being especially talented or anything. It was simply a vampiric ability that gave me this advantage. Vampire eyes sure were something else. But as for whether I could actually react to Capitan’s attacks, that was a separate question.

The attack finally reached me, and with a loud clang, I somehow managed to deflect Capitan’s hunting knife with my sword. I saw the attack coming well enough, but I still only barely managed to block it. It was hard to predict his

movements and gauge the distance of his weapon. He also knew all about my habits in combat, and this attack was probably meant to take advantage of them. This was an especially bad match-up for me, but in any case, I did avoid this attack.

If he had now decided to rethink his approach and back off for the time being, that would've been nice, but of course that's not what happened. Rather, Capitan seemed to know that was what I wanted and kept up the pressure instead. I felt it from both his blade and his fist, but first I had to be sure I blocked his blade. Maybe his fist could have smashed my face, but the hunting knife could gouge my flesh. And it didn't look like I could expect him to stop before critically injuring me either. Capitan was serious. To prevent such an incident, I moved my sword as he did his hunting knife.

Then, just in front of my face, Capitan's fist came to a stop. I looked and saw that his hunting knife had been caught on my sword. Had he stopped just a moment later, either his knife or fist would have struck me and dealt major damage. He had used both for a two-layered attack. I could probably have done the same if I'd tried, but the scary thing about Capitan was how he could get so close and unleash this attack within a matter of seconds. Not only that, but his onslaught didn't stop there.

Capitan chuckled and then jumped into the air above me. It didn't seem like a good move to me, at least not right away. Placing yourself in the air at close quarters is generally not advisable because of the lack of control one has in midair. Seeing this as my chance, I thrust my sword at Capitan's most vulnerable area, his stomach.

But just before my sword could pierce his abdomen, Capitan somehow dodged the attack by moving unnaturally parallel with the ground. My sword hit nothing but air. I squinted to try and see what had happened and noticed something shining in the direction that Capitan had moved. It was probably some sort of string.

I recalled that for his job, Capitan used some sturdy string made of monster parts. It could be utilized for repairing tools or for hanging up prey. There was a good chance that he had used some of that. It was strong enough that his weight wouldn't break it. However, I had never seen him use it in this manner

before. He must have developed this ability in the time since I'd been gone. I was impressed. I looked around and didn't notice anything else out of the ordinary, but after seeing this, it seemed safe to assume that there were other traps about. He was the one who had taught me that anything goes as long as you win, and he was putting that into practice. But I would've appreciated it if he'd held back against his disciple.

I shouted with all my heart and chased after Capitan. Now I was determined to use everything at my disposal. By using my monster abilities and the power of my spirit, I caught up to Capitan in no time. He looked somewhat surprised, but he was also smiling a little, as if to say that now things were getting interesting.

I thought I had gotten back at him a little for that first attack, but I thought wrong. Maybe Capitan expected this much from me to begin with. I never could have turned the tables like this before, though, and Capitan knew my skill level from back then quite well. He must have thought a lot of me, but I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Either way, I had no intention of giving up, and there would be no sense in doing so. This may have looked like a serious fight, but it was a mock battle. Losing the match wouldn't lose me my life. I had no reason to surrender.

I swung my sword at Capitan. No matter how talented he was, he was still in the middle of traveling through the air by string. I didn't see how he could avoid this. And yet, he easily surpassed my expectations. Just when I thought that my sword struck him, I sensed spirit energy condensing on the surface of his skin. My sword struck him with a metallic clang, a sound no human body would make.



Clueless as to what had happened, I looked at Capitan's body. My sword had certainly struck him, but it left no wound. Capitan was a hunter and far more hardy than the average adult man, but to take a heavy strike from a sword and come out of it without a scratch was, of course, strange. And yet, that was what had happened.

Admittedly, I had some inkling as to what he did. Just before my sword

touched him, I sensed spirit energy condensing on his skin. He probably used that to massively increase his defensive power. That had to be it, but I didn't know if such a substantial physical enhancement was possible.

To be honest, there was a lot I didn't know about spirit. I knew it could be used to enhance one's stamina, physical abilities, and natural recovery speed; that's how I used it. But the idea of hardening the skin so much it could deflect a sword sounded impossible to me. Regardless, I couldn't deny that Capitan seemed to have done just that. I wanted to ask how, but we were still in the middle of a fight.

After my weapon bounced off him, Capitan realized that my offense couldn't break through his defense, so he shifted to a more aggressive stance. His flurry of slashes, punches, and kicks forced me to back away. I wouldn't say the tables had turned quite yet, but if he kept repelling me, it wouldn't end well. I had to fight back.

My last attack didn't work on Capitan, but that didn't mean it was hopeless. It was probably just a poor choice of attack against this opponent. Most of the time I found it easiest to imbue my sword with mana and fight that way. A sword enhanced by mana simply cut better. Imbuing a weapon with spirit, however, might make the opponent explode if I didn't control it perfectly. And while divinity was powerful, I didn't have that much of it at my disposal. Because of that, I'd used a slash enhanced with mana for my last attack. Now I wondered what would happen if I tried other forms of energy.

First, I decided to fill my sword with spirit instead. It used to take me a while to switch between types of energy, but by now I had grown so accustomed to it that I could switch instantaneously. Capitan grunted, apparently noticing that something was different. A mana-imbued sword performed differently from a spirit-imbued one, so when our blades clashed, he could feel that something was off.

Capitan was already using spirit on his hunting knife as if it were normal, but most adventurers would use mana. They differed in strength, but even on a more fundamental level, they felt different. Crossing blades with a mana-imbued sword felt like you were being drawn toward it by gravitational force. Spirit did the opposite and pushed you away. Everyone had their own

preferences, but if one weren't aware of these differences, fighting an opponent who switched between them would undoubtedly catch one off guard.

But Capitan adapted to the situation surprisingly smoothly. I'd thought I would shake him up a bit more than that, but he surpassed my expectations. Either way, my intention with switching from mana to spirit wasn't to confuse him. It would've been nice if it had, but that would've only been a bonus. The important thing was to test whether this spirit energy could harm him.

Capitan managed to react to my sword, but it slightly broke his tempo. I took that as an opportunity to leap at him. I figured he'd be able to counter it if I tried an overhead slash, so I just thrust to give him as little opportunity to react as possible. But Capitan almost seemed to know it was coming, he looked so confident. He blocked my thrust with the flat of his hunting knife.



I'd considered the possibility that he'd pull that off, knowing him. This was the man who'd taught me about spirit skills and the basics of combat. His performance so far wasn't unpredictable, but now I had an idea. I filled my back with tons of spirit energy.

Capitan thought he had successfully guarded against my sword, but now he was in a panic. He couldn't hold it back. The combination of my physical strength, the pressure from my spirit energy in my sword, and the inhumanly powerful propulsion pushing me from behind was too much for even him.

When he could no longer take it, the attack flung him backward. It also flung me forward along with him. His back crashed into a tree, knocking it down with a loud roar.

A cloud of dirt hung in the air, but I could still see clearly enough to know where Capitan was. I probably couldn't have seen him with normal vision, but my eyes were special. Whether in darkness or debris, I could precisely pinpoint the location of other lifeforms. It was a unique skill of mine.

Maybe it was a cheap move, but I took this chance to unleash an overhead slash. However, Capitan rolled out of the way.

"What the hell?! How'd you know I was attacking?" I asked to the cloud of dirt.

"The air is moving. I used that to determine your location," he answered, looking right at me.

He was able to tell where I was despite the cloud of dirt. Now I began to fear that he had no weaknesses at all. But at least this seemed to be enough to startle him.

"And what about you?" he said. "What in the world was that just now?! Your power increased out of nowhere. Couldn't have just been your sword or your footwork that did that. It was like a hundred men were pushing you from behind. That's impossible!"

Capitan's shock made me happy. Since I came to Hathara, both he and Gharb had been constantly surprising me. I was hoping to turn that around on them at least once this visit.



The cloud of dirt cleared. Capitan was staring at me. His eyes soon turned to look at my back. “What is that?! Is that how you did it?!” he exclaimed.

What he saw was my special equipment, a pair of wings.



These wings didn’t burst out of my clothes or anything, by the way. They came out of two perfectly sized holes in the back of my robe instead. I tested this out in the past, and the robe automatically created holes big enough for the wings. And when the wings retracted, the holes instantly sealed themselves.

This robe happened to have a lot of functions. I was glad it did, but thinking about it alongside the Map of Akasha, there was probably a lot more I didn’t know. Unfortunately, the robe’s magic resistance was so high that it limited how we could research it. We would just have to ask about it at the God of Appraisal’s temple. It was doing no harm, at least, for now anyway.

I did have to cut holes in my clothes, though. That let a bit of air through, but the robe was enough to protect against the cold.

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” I answered Capitan. “You’re not about to explain your secrets either, are you?” By that, I meant how he enhanced his defenses using spirit. I wanted to learn that technique for myself. It’d give me another secret weapon.

“So you’ll tell me about it later, is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” I said as I attacked Capitan.

Most of the dirt cloud had cleared away, so we could see perfectly now. In my case, I could see Capitan pretty well either way, but Capitan was now able to follow me with greater accuracy. It turned out that limiting his vision wasn’t totally meaningless after all. It just didn’t keep him from dodging everything I did. Even now, it was hard just to graze him. There was no use in holding back anymore. I had to try everything at my disposal.

Next, I tried divinity. Just in terms of energy output, divinity was the best.

When Capitan noticed my attacks were hitting harder, he started to lose his composure. His defenses were so great that I thought I might never get a good

attack in, but now it looked possible. My inhuman nature gave me boundless stamina. I was far from immune to mental fatigue, but I barely ever felt physical fatigue. However superhuman Capitan may have been, he had to reach his limit eventually. I just had to hold out until then.

But it looked like holding out might be rough. Besides, Capitan probably already figured out I wasn't getting tired. He was giving me a puzzled look. Generally, someone who displayed as much stamina as I had would have to be using illegal drugs. But he likely knew I wouldn't use any of those. At least, I hoped he wouldn't think so.

But stamina aside, my divinity was finite. I didn't have enough to keep using it forever. I had to use it sparingly and throw other energy sources into the mix while I fought. I could simply use mana or spirit by themselves, but it appeared they weren't enough to tire Capitan out. Instead, I began to fill my sword with mana and spirit at the same time. Mana-spirit fusion, in other words.

I raised my sword over my head and swung it down at Capitan's hunting knife. My intended target wasn't Capitan but his weapon itself. This was because of a unique feature of mana-spirit fusion.

But when Capitan saw how I was moving and where I was looking, he realized I was up to something. He had been trying to keep his blade against my own, but now he suddenly lowered his hunting knife and pulled it away. As a result, of course, my sword missed. Mana-spirit fusion attacks didn't do anything special when they missed, so it looked like a normal attack. Capitan looked confused as to what I was trying to do, but I remained on the offensive. I merely had to hit him with my sword.

I focused on flailing my sword, but now Capitan had fully switched to avoiding my attacks rather than blocking them. I kept missing by a hair's breadth. I thought just one hit would do it, but it was tough.

Regardless, he had a limit. As Capitan kept retreating through the forest, he eventually lost his balance for a moment. Seizing my chance, I swung my sword straight down. Unable to avoid doing so any longer, Capitan held his knife up to block the attack. And as soon as my blade touched his, there was an explosion.

The unique property of mana-spirit fusion I mentioned earlier was that it

destroyed its target from within. Maybe it could also do more if I knew actual techniques, but this was all I could pull off given my lack of knowledge. And even if I wanted to learn more from someone, hardly anyone possessed these skills. Nevertheless, this packed enough of a punch by itself. When I tested it out before, it blew up the training dummy. The human body wouldn't be able to withstand this attack, so I figured I could destroy his hunting knife instead. And it seemed like I'd landed my attack, judging by the explosion.

Or so I thought, but neither the hunting knife nor Capitan himself looked especially damaged. I was stupefied, wondering how that could be. Then I heard something whiz toward me. I frantically backed away as an arrow flew past where I had been standing. I had triggered a trap, but I didn't know when I did it. Then I saw something shining on the ground. It was one of Capitan's strings.

"Don't tell me that's what I just cut," I muttered.

"I set up that string, yeah," Capitan answered. "It looked like you were up to something, so I figured I'd lure you into a trap. Man, that was a close one. Was that mana-spirit fusion?"

Apparently I was pretty predictable, considering Capitan had picked up on my plan. He successfully trapped me, whereas I didn't catch on to his strategy at all. That brief moment when he appeared to stumble was probably intentional. He just wanted to make me cut the string. He had to figure out my intentions and get me to trigger this trap all in the middle of a fight for this cunning plan to work, but he did it with ease.

But even so, I still had the upper hand. Capitan was forced to dodge, meaning that as long as I managed to land a hit, it would be effective. There was no way he could keep setting up traps forever either. As long as I took my time to corner him, I could win this. And he by no means knew about everything I could do. I had more at my disposal.



I still had the option of utilizing mana, spirit, and divinity all at once. The one big problem with that was my weapon wouldn't be able to take it. Clope had specially made this sword for me, and even he said not to use that technique. Regardless, it was a secret move available to me, and I did have another

weapon on hand that could handle this technique in case I wanted to use it. However, it was a dagger, since the swords were too expensive. Even the dagger was pretty expensive.

But if I landed one of those attacks, it would be a guaranteed victory. That was why I always wanted to be prepared to use it. It would destroy the weapon I used it with, so the cost usually wouldn't be worth it, but maybe now was the time. The only question was whether the time it took to prepare would give Capitan a chance to attack. But I had to try. And if it didn't work out, I would have to accept that. I'd already used my wings, so I decided to pull out all the stops.

With that in mind, I started using the power of my wings as well. They allowed me to move faster and more freely than when I ran around on the ground. But Capitan was even able to counter this. He never ceased to amaze me. I flew through the sky and used the propulsive power of my wings to swoop in and swing my sword at Capitan, but he saw it coming.

Maybe I should have expected as much. Capitan was a hunter by trade. He fought flying animals and monsters regularly. The little flying I could do was nothing to him, as I wasn't exactly that mobile in the air. I didn't even have the ability to fly until recently, so I couldn't do much about that. Not that I hadn't practiced, but Capitan did battle with creatures that had been flying for their entire lives, so maybe my maneuvers looked simplistic to him.

But I never expected this alone to do Capitan in. All I wanted to do was hit him with a blow packed with mana, spirit, and divinity. Filling my sword with all of that took longer than simply using mana or spirit, and Capitan seemed able to sense when these energy sources were triggered. If I let him get too close, he might have realized what I was doing. So I figured that flying would be a good way to hide that I was using all three.

Capitan was surprised to see me flying at all, so he didn't seem to notice that I had something else in store as well. But he still didn't fully let his guard down, so I had to stay alert. I was using an excessive amount of mana and spirit, so I wasn't in the best position myself. The end was near.

"Man, you can even fly? Guess I can see why Gharb said you've changed. But

whatever crazy plan you've got up your sleeve, it won't be enough to best me. If there's more to this, then bring it on!" Capitan shouted as I glided around like a flying squirrel, charging my sword with energy. What he said made me think that this would be the final clash.

This was the most draining fight I'd had since becoming a monster. Now I realized that I had gotten too conceited in a few ways. Capitan had far more experience than I did. Simply in terms of pure strength, I probably outmatched him by a bit, but his superior skills and greater combat experience kept me on my toes for the entire fight. He'd always used trickery rather than brute force, but I had forgotten that. Maybe over the decade I remained a Bronze-class adventurer with no improvement at all, I had actually regressed in ways I didn't even realize. I already knew I had failed to improve physically, but maybe there were at least some tricks I could have used. You should never forget the basics.

Unfortunately, my only option right now was to win with brute force. He had defended against every trick I could throw at him. If this didn't work, then I had nothing left. If it did work, I could probably even follow up with a couple more attacks; but if not, it was all over.

Once the dagger was filled with enough power, I sent spirit energy to my back. I could only really fly in a straight line, so to get near Capitan, I had to travel at a speed he couldn't react to. I would need to do a bit more research on these wings in the future. The way I used them thus far was pretty powerful as it was, so I'd kind of slacked off on that. I at least had to work at it until I knew everything these wings could do. I was gaining power at a greater rate than ever before, so I got by without trying to come up with special tricks or anything. Maybe it showed that I was an amateur.

I needed to change my approach to these things. After the battle was over, I planned to talk with Capitan and Gharb about it. They would likely have some good advice. But before that, I wanted to show them everything I had here.

I considered shouting to psyche myself up before I moved in to attack, but then Capitan would definitely avoid me. Instead, I decided to take a silent approach.

The spirit energy in my wings produced such powerful propulsive force that it

momentarily warped the surrounding scenery. I couldn't even comprehend how fast I was going before I found myself right in front of Capitan. He didn't understand what had happened either, looking at me wide-eyed as if I had just teleported. But despite his surprise, his hunting knife was already on its way toward me. I also held out my sword, or dagger rather, and stabbed at him.

Then we crossed blades. For Capitan, he probably would have been better off dodging. He must have known as much, but I had driven him into an inescapable corner. In other words, my strategy was a success. If he had managed to dodge, though, I would've planted myself in the ground. I'd never gone so fast with my wings before, so that was entirely unexpected. The only reason I used so much energy was because I thought this surely wouldn't work on Capitan otherwise. Had he been any average opponent, whether human or monster, then I probably would have pierced a hole in him or blown him to pieces.

When my dagger struck Capitan's hunting knife, it began to make a strange creaking sound that no blade would normally make. The tip and hilt of his weapon suddenly began to twist like spirals, then the whole blade started to implode. Capitan immediately noticed that holding onto it could be dangerous and tossed it out of his hand. I suspected that he would, so I threw my shattering dagger aside and punched at Capitan. Seeing this, he smirked and punched back.



I'd say it was a cross-counter, but it wasn't anything so fancy, really. Capitan didn't have the energy to unleash any sort of effective attack. We just ended up hitting each other simultaneously. Our fists pounded one another's cheeks. My fist hit his skin directly, of course, but his fist bashed my mask. The mask didn't break, so it looked as if it had completely blocked the attack, but the impact actually extended into the mask by way of his spirit energy.

He could pour spirit into his hunting knife, so there was no reason he couldn't do the same with his fist. Using this technique with a weapon carried less potential risk in the event that you lost control over the energy, so I only ever did it with a weapon, but I probably should have been training on how to do it with my fist in the event of something like this.

In any case, I wasn't expecting this to turn out the way it did. I was physically incapable of running out of stamina, but I ended up taking a beating. The wounds instantly healed, but not without paying a price. It consumed a proportional amount of mana or spirit. Now that I had been so thoroughly drained, healing was difficult. I would still mostly recover within an hour, but not right on the spot.

My fist slid off of Capitan's cheek, and I fell to my knees. Capitan did similarly, his chest heaving as his legs buckled.

"So it's a draw, eh?" he said with a laugh. His stamina and spirit energy had seemed limitless, but now he was at the end of his rope. He looked like he couldn't move much more. He came across as perfectly fine until now, but he had been refusing to show weakness to the enemy until the very end, presumably.

My teacher was clearly on a level beyond your typical village hunter. Now that I thought about it, I questioned why our village even needed to bother hiring adventurers to slay monsters, but it was likely just a means of deception. Any ordinary village would seek help from adventurers when they were threatened by monsters. Well, Capitan also was away from the village at times when he was using the teleportation circles. His subordinates were strong, but only in an average way.

Capitan and Gharb were special because they'd both inherited special roles in Hathara. That made me wonder if my foster father was also strong. He'd inherited the role of the king, so maybe it didn't involve any special combat skills.

"It's a draw," I muttered after Capitan.

"What, not satisfied?"

"I wouldn't say that. I wasn't expecting to win, so this is good enough for me. That's not to say I wasn't fighting to win."

"Oh yeah? Rentt."

"What?"

"You've grown strong."



That took me completely by surprise. It wasn't the first time Capitan complimented me or anything, but something about hearing that from him at that moment made me deeply emotional. It was like I had his unbridled approval. I felt incredible warmth in my heart, and I finally thought I could act confident around my teacher.

I left the village to become a Mithril-class adventurer ten years ago and spent all that time on the lower rungs of society. I didn't know how I was supposed to show my face to the other villagers with pride. They were all still happy to see me, so I came to visit on occasion, but each time, I felt like a failure. I still couldn't say I had accomplished that much, but now I was starting to feel some hope for the future. A path I never saw before had opened up to me. It felt like it was Capitan who showed that to me just now, so I was glad we had this fight.

Both of us had now lost a weapon, though. Capitan's hunting knife was even one he'd been using for ages, so I felt kind of bad. But I couldn't go easy on him, so there wasn't much choice.

"Thanks for saying so," I said. "This is the first time I've had such a close match with you."

"I've never struggled so hard against one of my disciples, actually. Only high-ranking adventurers or monsters in the uncharted hinterlands could put up more of a fight. But looking at you now, I'm sure you'll be a match for them one day."

Capitan was strong, but there were stronger beings out there. Some Platinum-class and Mithril-class adventurers were so powerful that they were virtually inhuman. Those sorts couldn't be found just anywhere, so there was seldom a chance to encounter them. Capitan had met some before, so maybe he got the chance to watch them fight. I also saw one fight once, but it was hard to imagine how I'd ever reach his level. Either way, I had to try.

"Well, from what I've seen here, you're plenty strong now," Capitan continued. "I can rest easy letting you go off adventuring now. I thought you were doomed until just recently."

"Uh, really?"

"Yeah, I mean, I know you were doing the best you could. But your goal's not

something just anyone can achieve, after all. I thought you'd call it quits eventually, or worse. Well, turns out I was worried over nothing."

Capitan cared more about me than I thought. I only returned to the village periodically, but maybe I didn't look in the best shape on those occasions. I tried to act relatively cheerful, but he knew me for long enough that he probably saw right through the act.

"Anyway, we have something else to talk about," he said.

"What?"

"You were going to explain some things, right? Like those wings, or the inhuman ways you moved during our fight."

From the sound of it, Capitan already had the general idea about my secret. Unlike when Gharb guessed based on almost nothing, he had now seen me transform in a monstrous way. No human being had the ability to sprout wings from their back. Winged folk existed, but they were a type of beastfolk. My situation was fundamentally different. They knew I was human initially, but somehow I had grown wings. That was the problem.

## Chapter 4: Vampires of Days Past

“That’s what I wanted to ask,” Gharb said as she came up behind us. She was here to confirm that the match was over, presumably. Lorraine had also been watching from a short distance away, but she approached us too.

“But you already more or less know, don’t you, Gharb?” I asked.

“I suppose I do. Part of it is your appearance right now, but even when you first got here, I felt something was off. You can learn to sense an individual’s mana and spirit, and your mana is much different from the last time I saw you. You have a lot more of it than before, but that wasn’t what concerned me. It’s not uncommon for people to go through experiences that rapidly increase their mana. In your case, however, the quality of your mana has changed. That doesn’t happen except in very extreme circumstances.”

I was still a novice at magic and couldn’t comment, but Lorraine looked disgruntled. “What she’s talking about isn’t normal,” she said. “It is possible to sense someone’s mana waveforms, yes, but that requires a complex magic item. I can see mana, but I can’t analyze it in such detail. What Gharb is talking about would be like licking water from the earth to determine if the land was good for growing crops. Does that sound easy to you?”

That sounded impossible; I didn’t need to think twice about that. Maybe if the water had certain obvious qualities, like if it was refreshing or if it was carbonated, something could be determined from that, but not much. You couldn’t say in detail if that land was good for agriculture. And not all land had water, but tons of people had mana. I didn’t know what it felt like to sense mana in the first place, but there had to be plenty of people whose mana was similar to that of others, so distinguishing between them sounded like a challenge. But apparently Gharb could do it.

“I’ve been hiding my mana for ages, so I’ve become highly attuned to sensing it,” Gharb said. “This is a skill I’ve been honing for decades, so if it weren’t easy for me by now, I’d be disappointed in myself.”

“Is that because you need to hide that you’re a magician from the rest of the Hatharans?”

“Yes, and my teacher could do this as well. Perhaps it’s one of our unique skills. In any case, Rentt, I sensed that your mana is quite different than it used to be. It wasn’t hard to see that you had changed somehow. To be honest, I’ve been suspicious about what happened to you in Maalt. Your physical constitution has changed, you have a familiar—all these things kept me wondering. And then it hit me.”

I guess it hit her that I really had transformed into something peculiar. That would explain why my mana was different, why my combat abilities had increased, and how my physical constitution had changed. Maybe I gave Gharb too many hints. It was still incredible that she figured it out, though. I saw no use in hiding it any longer, so I decided to spill the beans.

“You’re right, I have changed. My body’s no longer human. I’m probably a monster. That’s why I can grow wings, go without sleep at night, and keep a familiar—or a servant, rather. I feed primarily on human blood, but I can eat regular food too. And take a close look at my eyes. They’re red, right?”

Even though Gharb already seemed to know most of my situation, she and Capitan both opened their eyes wide when they heard this. Then they peered into my eyes.

“Yeah, I do see some red,” Capitan said. “The mask makes your eyes look too dark for it to stand out, but now that I look closely, the color’s different.”

“So it seems,” Gharb agreed. “A blood-sucking monster with red eyes that can turn other monsters into servants? Interesting. You’re not just any monster. Does this mean you’ve become a vampire?”

Not even Gharb had figured out which type of monster I was until now. She was astonished yet amused and far too calm for someone who’d just heard that her disciple was now a monster.

“Yeah. I’m not completely sure, but I think I’m a lesser vampire, a type of undead. But I can also use divinity, and I can go to churches without any issue. Holy water doesn’t burn me, and neither does the sun.”

“Well, that’s certainly convenient. How are you not completely sure, though?” Gharb asked.

“I’m sure you can tell from Rentt’s explanation just now, but while he might be a vampire, he differs from ordinary vampires in quite a few ways,” Lorraine explained. “It’s hard to say with any certainty if he’s actually a vampire. But there are many varieties of vampire, after all. I suspect he may be a subspecies that we’re not aware of, but that’s all I know.”

“His mana does seem to be different from the average vampire. Their mana feels stickier. You can feel the darkness in them. But I sense no such thing in Rentt,” Gharb said as if she were a mana connoisseur.

I looked at Lorraine to see if she knew any of that, but she bitterly shook her head. This must have been an ability unique to Gharb. And if she knew enough about vampire mana to appraise it, I had to assume she’d met one up close before.

“Have you met a vampire?” I asked her out of curiosity.

“Yes, but not recently. Back in my day, you’d see them fairly often at caravans. The humans in the caravan would often knowingly take them along, in fact. Vampires are frequently treated as villains nowadays, but when it comes down to it, they’re not so different from humans.”



“You saw them that often?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say often, but every once in a while, yes. But about forty years ago, humans started to put a lot of energy into hunting vampires. Some hunted them even before that, but not on the same level they do today. Ever since then, you don’t see vampires so much. Maybe most of them have been hunted down and slain, or maybe they’re hiding somewhere. I don’t know, but they weren’t bad people.”

“Why did things change, though?” I wondered aloud.

“The Church of Lobelia is most likely to blame. They were always exclusionary toward vampires. Forty years ago, the current Great Church Father began to gain prominence. I don’t know exactly what happened within the church, but

after a prolonged power struggle, he became the Great Church Father. Ever since then, the church's teachings became more radical and fundamentalist. Vampire hunters are just one part of that change. They've also ramped up their efforts to find and recruit new saints, and they use their power to influence politics more now than they used to. But I'm no expert on this."

Not every religion was opposed to vampires. For example, the Church of the Eastern Sky was neutral to them. But the Church of Lobelia had followers across much of the world, and they had a lot of powerful connections, so they strongly influenced the beliefs of the general public. That was part of why most people had a tendency to view vampires as evil. As a result, many followers of the Church of the Eastern Sky had a negative opinion of vampires as well, despite their church's official position. It was easiest to assume that virtually nobody liked vampires.

"Why does the Church of Lobelia hate vampires so much?" I asked. It was the first question that came to mind. "You'd think they had killed their parents or something."

"Well, a lot of folks don't take kindly to how they suck the blood of humans, you know. If you think of yourself as their food, it's easy to conclude that it's a matter of kill or be killed. Aside from that, there may be some degree of envy involved."

"Envy?" I repeated and cocked my head.

"Yes, envy. Vampires are undead. They can survive for a long time. Their lifespan is more or less indefinite, and as long as they keep drinking blood, they have eternal youth. But humans have no way of becoming a vampire. They can drink a vampire's blood to become their servant and gain power from that, but that's about it. If we're being honest as humans, this is an aggravating thought. Once a human already has wealth, power, and fame, all that's left for them to covet is eternal life. That's a treasure no man has ever obtained, but we can see that vampires have it already. It's hard to feel anything but envy."

The desire to become a vampire and obtain eternal life was one that persisted to this day. I knew this because there were still rich and powerful people searching for a way to do it. Vampires weren't exactly in good standing in

society, but their blood was still highly sought after and went for a high price. This was proof enough on its own. For the same reason, there was some demand for methods to become a lich, but then you'd be nothing but bones. Having been nothing but bones previously, I wouldn't want eternal life if that was the price to pay. But these rich people probably wouldn't be convinced by that argument anyway.

"Envy, huh? I don't think this is so great, though," I said, comparing what I had gained and what I had lost by becoming a vampire.

"Oh, really?" Gharb asked. "Well, I can imagine why. Magicians have always said that if you seek too much power, you'll destroy yourself. The Akashic records are that way. They're everything, so if one were to access them, all their wishes would be granted. Everyone wants to see the Akashic records, of course, and there's nothing wrong with wanting something. But it's said that no small number of people have lost their minds during the pursuit. With power comes responsibility. And that doesn't mean you have some duty to uphold; it means that trying to obtain power inevitably comes with a price. That's difficult to avoid. But to someone ignorant of this, to hear a person with power say all that may simply come off as arrogance."

Gharb neither had access to the Akashic records nor knew of a way to become a vampire or lich. She probably didn't even want those things, but she knew of the danger inherent in acquiring them.

"I'd suggest testing out being a vampire just once to see what it's like, but that's probably not easy," I said.

"Hm, is that so? How did you become a vampire in the first place, Rentt?" Gharb asked, getting to the key question. Capitan appeared interested too, so I described what happened in the dungeon that day.

"Well, to put it simply, I was eaten by a dragon I found in a dungeon. Next thing I knew, I was undead. At first I was a skeleton, but I evolved over time and now I'm a vampire. I know this sounds ridiculous, but it's the truth."

I wouldn't have believed it if I heard it, but just as I imagined, Gharb and Capitan both readily accepted my explanation. Judging from their reaction, they must have expected something of the sort. They weren't the least bit uneasy.

The only thing that surprised them was my mention of a dragon.

“Even I’ve never encountered a dragon before,” Gharb said. “What about you, Capitan?”

“Me neither. They’re actually real? I thought they only existed in legends.”

Most people would never see a dragon in their lifetimes. I knew what they were implying, but it was what it was.

“I really did run into one. That I’ve become what I am is proof of it. Maybe not very good proof, but still.”

It was nearly impossible for an ordinary human to mutate into a monster. Some went out of their way to obtain vampire blood for that purpose, or searched for the materials required for the ritual to become a lich should they learn of one, but Gharb and Capitan knew I wouldn’t go out of my way to do either of those things.

“Well, I suppose so. I can at least see that you’re not lying. So, what do you plan to do now?” Gharb asked.



“This hasn’t changed my plans,” I answered. “My goal is to become a Mithril-class adventurer.”

Gharb saw it coming, but she was appalled nonetheless. “Becoming a monster hasn’t changed you at all,” she said. “Well, what else should I have expected?”

“Of course, I’m still going to search for a method to become human again. But my plans for the future won’t change that easily.”

Gharb nodded, a look of relief on her face. “You’re going to try that, then? Staying a vampire could make things easier for you in some ways, but your fellow adventurers may try to slay you. Is that the idea?”

“Right. Well, not that many people know I’m a vampire. Just the people here, one novice adventurer I happened to encounter in the dungeon, an adventurer friend I’ve known since before that, one member of the guild staff, and the guildmaster in Maalt. There are some others who’ve noticed I’m a little different from before, but I haven’t told them anything.”



Clope and his wife probably knew something, but I never explained the situation to them. It would probably be better for them if I didn't. If I did, they would presumably react like everyone else I confessed to so far, but there was no need to give them that knowledge. Clope was satisfied just knowing his weapons were serving me well. Maybe he would appreciate having data on how well his weapons worked for monsters, but that wasn't worth worrying about for the time being.

"That's not even ten people. But considering the nature of this secret, it's hard to say if that's a lot or a little."

"Maybe I shouldn't have told anyone, but I know I make mistakes, and I wanted to get support from some people."

I tried and failed to do things by myself for ten years, after all. At some point, I started wanting to rely on others. I still preferred to dungeon dive solo, but that was the exception now. I didn't think that I could do everything on my own anymore.

"Was Lorraine the first one you told?" Capitan asked.

"Yeah. When I became a monster, she was the first person I depended on. She knows a lot about monsters, and if I could trust anyone not to treat me differently after becoming undead, it was her."

"And she didn't?" Gharb asked, directing her question at Lorraine.

"Rentt turning into a monster isn't a big enough problem to damage our relationship," she said. "Besides, I research monsters. This gives me assistance from an actual monster, so I have even less reason to turn him away. If anything, I would have insisted on keeping him around."

"Oh, really?" Gharb said. Then she whispered something into Lorraine's ear. I couldn't hear her, but Lorraine nodded and shook her head a few times. Her face went through a wide range of emotions.

"What are those two talking about?" I asked Capitan, who seemed as left out as I was.

He shook his head. "When Gharb starts doing that, it's best to keep quiet. Sticking your nose in that business won't end well." He looked listless. When I

cocked my head, he explained. "One time at a banquet, Gharb and my wife were having a conversation like this. I tried to figure out what it was about, and, well, it was a disaster."

"You mind if I ask what happened?"

"My wife had found something in my room. It was something a woman gave me a long time ago, and I still cherished it. She was asking Gharb for advice on what to do with it."

"Well, that doesn't sound great."

That was the last thing you'd want your wife to find. He should have thrown it out after he got married. He was free to hold onto it if he wanted to, but the polite thing to do would be to at least hide it where it would never be found.

I gave Capitan a critical look, which he apparently noticed, because he frantically shook his head. "I wasn't actually keeping it because I cherished it! I just forgot I still had it, is all. I hadn't touched the thing in over a decade. It just looked to her like I was holding onto it for safekeeping! I ended up having to explain this all to Gharb and my wife while my subordinates were drinking at the same table. It was horrible. It all worked out in the end and I made up with my wife, but I never want to go through that again. So, you want to try it? I'm just telling you, you're better off standing by."

Capitan looked deadly serious as he grabbed me by the shoulder and described all this. His grip was painfully strong. I definitely got his point; I shouldn't interrupt. Not that I had anything I felt the need to hide from Lorraine anyway. We weren't even married or anything either, so if I was hiding something, I didn't see why I'd need to feel guilty about it.

But even so, I sensed danger. It was like some sort of wild instinct. Something told me that I should let sleeping dogs lie. These sorts of instincts had grown sharper since I became a monster, so I decided to follow that sixth sense and stay out of Gharb and Lorraine's conversation. Some time later, they finished.

"Sorry we kept you waiting," Gharb said.

"It's fine, but are you done now?" I asked, opting not to ask what they had discussed.

“Yes. It wasn’t about anything that important anyway. So, back to talking about you. Your dreams haven’t changed and you wish to become human again; we’ve covered that. So, here’s a suggestion. What if you and Lorraine trained in the village for a little while?”



“Train to do what?” I asked. “Not that I couldn’t use more training, I guess.”

Adventurers, as with anyone else who fought for a living, had to spend their lives training. There was no point when you became satisfied with your strength and stopped training altogether. Especially in my case, since I had a specific goal in mind. If I thought I was good enough already, I would never reach my objective. Sometimes I felt like I did enough for one day and called it quits, but that was about it.

“I know I don’t need to tell you to do ordinary training,” Gharb said, “but I was thinking we could pass down the special skills that came with our roles in Hathara. We’re not supposed to, but we did already show you the teleportation circles. If we’re going to break one rule, we may as well break them all. You don’t mind, do you, Capitan?”

“Nah, I was thinking the same thing. These skills are meant for protecting the teleportation circles in the first place. You’re the perfect people to teach them to.”

“Are they really?” I asked Capitan.

“That’s what we were told, at least. They’re from longer ago than anyone can remember, though. Maybe they served some other purpose at one point, but this is all we know now. It’s been much too long.”

Lorraine seemed disappointed to hear that. “If we looked into it, maybe we could learn something about that ancient city too, but that may be difficult.”

Gharb replied, “Well, there aren’t many stories left from those days, but those of us who hold special roles in Hathara do have some old documents. A lot has been passed down from magician to magician in particular, so you should be able to learn something by reading those. But it’s written in an ancient language and some pages are missing, so deciphering it could take a

while.”

“I enjoy spending time on such things, actually. If you would show it to me later, I’d appreciate it.”



“Now then, should we get started?” Capitan said.

We were still in the middle of the forest, but not in the place where we had our match. We had returned to the village briefly, but then we entered the forest again, so we were relatively close to town. As for why we went back to the village, it was because of Capitan’s hunting knife.

Specifically, it was because I had destroyed it. But he didn’t seem to have a problem with that in itself. I thought he cared about that weapon considering he’d been using it for years, but apparently not. He used it for everything from fighting to cutting grass; he even used it for dissecting monsters. Capitan had used it so extensively that it would only have lasted a few more years anyway.

Maybe it still would’ve been fine against regular animals after that, but not monsters. They were made of sturdier stuff and were shrouded in mana, so you couldn’t use the same weapon against them for long. Adventurer equipment was made for fighting monsters to begin with, so they used a lot of special ore and often lasted quite a while. But Capitan’s hunting knife was forged from regular iron by a Hatharan blacksmith; it was an ordinary weapon.

He could use a teleportation circle to go to a city and pick up a sturdier hunting knife meant for adventurers, but it was likely he already had one. Even so, it presumably would’ve made him look more suspicious to the villagers if he had used it too often in Hathara. Maybe he could have used it when in the forest alone, but when working with a group of hunters, he used the hunting knife. However, Capitan had the power of spirit, so his weapon lasted quite a while anyway. If not for that, an iron hunting knife might not even last a year.

But getting back to what Capitan said, the two of us were getting started with the training. Lorraine and Gharb weren’t here because they had their own training to do. Gharb was teaching Lorraine magic, and as a novice, it was likely too advanced for me to comprehend. We decided that it would be better to split up. I probably wouldn’t learn anything from watching either, and if I ever

needed to learn those spells, Lorraine could teach them to me later.

Anyway, I wanted to learn to use spirit like Capitan did. Specifically, I wanted that defensive skill he used. I had no idea what that was, but I looked forward to finding out.

“So you’ll teach me the skills you used during our match, right?” I asked.

“Right. That and all my other spirit-based techniques. I taught you the basics back in the day, but exactly how much can you do now?”

First, he needed to see how much I was capable of. We did have our match already, but it wasn’t like I showed him all of my skills. I gained a lot more powers when I became a monster, and it was best to start by showing him my current abilities in detail.

“When my body transformed, I gained a few new abilities using mana and divinity, but nothing much has changed as far as spirit goes,” I said.

“Well, what can you do?”

“Improve my basic physical abilities, enhance my regeneration speed, strengthen my weapon, and that’s about it. Oh, I can also use it in combination with other types of energy to do something special.”

Capitan was quick to remember. “Right, that. That’s how you wrecked my hunting knife.”

I nodded and decided to demonstrate. But for now, I went with just mana-spirit fusion and left divinity out of it. Divinity-mana-spirit fusion was insanely costly to use.

I filled my sword with spirit and mana and then slashed a nearby tree. A chunk of the tree’s trunk opposite to where my sword touched suddenly exploded. Unable to hold up its own weight anymore, the tree collapsed. I did know how to slash something without making it explode by now, but it was hard to control. Besides, this flashier showing made it easier to see what I could do, so I figured it was fine.

Capitan was appalled by what he saw. “Well, it seems the same as using spirit, but more powerful,” he said. “This is mana-spirit fusion? Doesn’t look like the

same thing you did when you destroyed my hunting knife.”

“That technique destroys my weapon too, so it’s kind of hard to show it off. It involves fusing divinity, mana, and spirit, so I just call it divinity-mana-spirit fusion.”

# Chapter 5: Laura, Head of the Latuule Family

On the outskirts of Maalt, there was a grand and ancient mansion with a gigantic garden. Those who saw the head of that mansion for the first time were often surprised. That was because she looked like a sickly girl around twelve or thirteen years old. She mostly wore old-fashioned black or white dresses. Her family had held a substantial amount of influence in Maalt for ages, and as members of these old families often were, most would presumably perceive her as quite gloomy. However, few people ever actually got to meet her.

Her name was Laura Latuule, by the way. And because I’m talking about myself, that’s also my name.



“Why?! Why won’t you help?!”

In the parlor of my mansion stood a boy. He was shouting at me. My servant, Isaac, was standing behind me, staring at the boy much like I was.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I’ll do what I’m able. Isaac.”

When I addressed Isaac, he handed me a bottle of red fluid. It was a medicine produced from dragon blood blossoms. This medicine was extremely difficult to preserve, and the flowers had to be freshly harvested for it to work, so it wasn’t easy to get my hands on. But luckily I had met an adventurer who would bring me some dragon blood blossoms periodically. He was away from Maalt for the moment, but I had a magic item that slowed down time for certain objects to some degree. The medicine I already had would be enough for a while.

I accepted the dragon blood blossom medicine from Isaac and handed it off to the boy. “Dilute this in water a hundredfold and drink it once a day to suppress the urges. That should be enough for you to live comfortably among humans. However, you must leave Maalt. A demon is here in search of you. I can’t recommend that you remain in this town.”





“What good will this do me?” the boy said, nearly tossing the bottle aside.

“That medicine is how your kind has managed to live among humans in secret for so long. I expect it will be more difficult now that you have fewer avenues of obtaining more, but surely it won’t be impossible. There should be extra stock available where you come from.

“But I must ask why a young boy like you decided to leave your village to come all the way here. You say you want to demonstrate the existence of your people to the world and you want my help. But if you were able to do that, there must be far more powerful individuals than yourself who are doing the same already. What is it you’re thinking, then?”

When I asked him that, the boy slowly lowered his arm before he could throw the medicine. I seemed to have convinced him that he needed it, thankfully.

“I just can’t stand living in the village anymore,” the boy said. “I hate having to hide from humans. We haven’t been wiped out yet, but we have to pretend we don’t exist. But we do. We live in the same world as everyone else. Why does it have to be this way?”

The boy was so frustrated he started to shed tears. His feelings weren’t hard to understand. However, looking at the state of the world, asserting his existence wouldn’t be wise.

“If nothing else, I acknowledge that you exist. You’re alive and standing here right now, and even interacting with me. And rest assured, you’re not the only ones who have been forced into hiding. Other races have as well to varying extents, including elves, dwarves, fairies, and beastfolk. There’s no escaping this fact. But despite it all, you continue to survive. If you remain here, however, I cannot protect you. It’s highly likely that you’ll perish and disappear. What of that?”

The boy paused for a moment before saying, “I don’t want to die.”

“Then return to your village. I won’t ask you where it is, and I’m sure you don’t want me to know.”

“But how will we stay in touch?”

“Don’t concern yourself with that. Isaac.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Isaac said with a nod and left the room.

“What the heck?” the boy asked.

“We have a way of contacting your people. It will take a bit of time, but it’s guaranteed to work, so there’s no need to worry. The question of which village it is in particular will pose a problem to some extent, but if they’ve lost a boy your age, I expect they’re searching everywhere for you already. It’s more than likely they’ll get in touch with us soon.”

“I heard about you from the elders, but why is it you know so much about us?”

“My family has lived our lives in this way for ages now. Maalt exists as our base of operations for this purpose. Only my family remembers that at this point, but there’s no need to worry. I won’t betray you.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing. Going back to what I was saying before, Maalt is dangerous at the moment. If you’re going to walk around town, be very cautious. Using that medicine will make you much safer, but I can’t guarantee that you won’t be discovered. Just to be safe, I suggest you leave your inn and stay at my mansion as a guest instead. We can provide food for you as well.”

The boy nodded and said he’d go tell the inn he was leaving. Then he turned to exit the room. I had him dilute the dragon blood blossom extract and drink it before he left.

As I was seeing him off, Isaac returned to the room.

“Do you think you can get in contact with them?” I asked.

“Yes. We’ll have to wait for a response, but I estimate that it will come tomorrow.” He paused before continuing. “Is that boy responsible for the missing adventurers?”

I thought for a moment before I answered. “No, I doubt that he is. He came from one of the villages. He might not have dragon blood blossoms, but he does have medicine that suppresses his urges and makes it safe to approach humans.

It does seem that he's almost run out, but regardless, he didn't smell of blood."

"Does that mean he's not the only one of them in Maalt?"

"I think it's quite possible. We'll have to look into this."

"Then I'll get on that. Excuse me," Isaac said and left the room once again.

I leaned back against the couch and sighed. My life had been quite eventful as of late, and it was getting exhausting. If only there was someone to give me a shoulder massage.



"Divinity-mana-spirit fusion, huh? Didn't know there were techniques like that. I can't even use mana-spirit fusion, so I can't teach you anything of the sort," Capitan said, a little disappointed.

Unfortunately, there was no way around that. Mana was mostly something you were born with, and whether you had divinity was entirely a matter of luck. Many religions throughout history would frown on treating the possession of divinity as purely coincidental, but that was the reality of it.

That's not to say that one's faith had nothing to do with it either, though. Gods would sometimes bless people for praying hard enough or performing good deeds, therefore granting them access to divinity. Even in my own case, I was blessed for repairing a shrine.

But if you did good deeds with the ulterior motive of obtaining divinity for ill intent, you would usually get nothing out of it. There was an endless list of stories to demonstrate that. Gods were gods, after all, and they might very well be able to see our intentions. However, blessings from evil gods were supposedly indistinguishable from those granted by good gods, so the validity of those stories was questionable. I'd never seen anyone blessed by an evil god, though, so I wouldn't know. Naturally, nobody would go around boasting about being blessed by an evil god. The most they might say would be that they had divinity, and divinity was divinity no matter the source. You'd think the evil gods would grant some distinct, evil power, but they didn't, strangely.

"Maybe you can't use divinity, but I think you could use mana-based techniques," I said to Capitan. If anything, it seemed unnatural that a man of his

skill couldn't use them.

"If those complicated abilities are needed for something, I just let Gharb handle it. The people of Hathara may be descended from the Ancient Kingdom, but that doesn't mean we all have mana. Apparently we've got a little more on average than most places, but that difference is negligible. The only villagers with much mana right now are you, Gharb, and her disciple Fahri. I don't know if that counts as a lot or a little, but it seems to me that any village could just happen to have three people with mana."

In my case, I barely had enough mana to make use of it at first, so there were only two villagers who were born with a lot of mana. Considering the village's population, it seemed like there should have been more, but most of the other villagers' mana was probably no better than mine used to be. Only Gharb and Fahri had mana to spare, but maybe that was normal.

"It's a strange village, but I guess not everything about it has to be strange," I said.

"I mean, only three of us are still carrying on those old traditions. But it's fine; Hathara's way too small to be responsible for such a huge secret. We're probably better off forgetting it."

"I guess so."

It seemed important to be familiar with the secret in case anything happened, but in the event that a country actually did interfere with their lives, maybe Hathara wouldn't be big enough to do anything about it anyway. The most that Gharb and Capitan could do was deal with somewhat powerful individuals. If a Mithril-class adventurer came, even an army would be powerless to stop them. Facing them was like facing a natural disaster. Not that giving up on fighting back was a good idea, but I could see how they'd get into that state of mind.

"Well, anyway, we've already made our decision when it comes to that. Right now, we should be talking about spirit," Capitan said.

"Right, so what was that ability?"

"You already know that spirit has a variety of uses. The basic ones are enhancements for your physical strength, your weapon, and your healing rate.

Those are relatively simple to learn and use. That move I used during our match, however, is a bit more difficult. If you hadn't left the village, I would've taught it to you at some point, but you had your dreams to go chase. There was no time for that."

When I turned fifteen, old enough to become an adventurer with a guild, I headed off to Maalt. I didn't have the patience to stay in Hathara any longer. I was young, after all. Not that I had grown up that much in some regards, though. If there was no time to teach it to me then, I didn't know if I'd be able to learn it now. I'd planned to stay in Hathara for a while, but not for several weeks, and certainly not for months or years. I guess I was undead and had all the time in the world, but I wanted to actually go on adventures. I was only in Hathara now to get away from Nive.

"How long is this going to take?" I asked. "I appreciate that you're willing to teach me, but I can't stay in Hathara for that long."

"Depends on how well you do."

"What does that mean?"

"It's just a matter of how proficient you are with spirit. I don't think that'll be a problem though. Back when you first became an adventurer a decade ago, you might've needed to train for a couple years, but now you should be able to learn the skill in a few weeks, if not a few days. All your hard work has paid off."

I thought I hadn't progressed at all in ten years, but apparently I had grown more than I thought. I could apply spirit to my weapon a little faster, enhance my strength for a little longer, and heal a little more efficiently, so there was that. I never felt like I gained more spirit than I started with, but I felt like I made as clever a use of what I had as I could.

"I thought it might've all been hopeless at times, but I guess there was some point to it all," I muttered.

"Well, spirit's not like mana and divinity. It's not about innate talent as much as it's about hard work. If you just keep at it, you'll get results. In your case, your total spirit capacity barely increased, so maybe it was hard to sense your growth. That's different now, though. Your spirit capacity's grown a lot, so you should be able to do plenty with it."



“So, as for how to do it, it’ll probably be easiest to just show you. I’ll take it slow so you can observe,” Capitan said and began to focus his spirit within himself. I sensed the same thing I did when he used this skill during our match. Tons of spirit was condensing on the surface of his body. Some time later, Capitan sighed. “There, go on and touch,” he said, holding out his right arm.

It didn’t look like anything had changed. The only difference I noticed was a slightly increased presence of spirit, but that was similar to when using it to enhance physical strength. When I actually tried to touch him, though, I didn’t feel his arm at all. A layer of something was in the way. It felt like static electricity was repelling my hand. When I tried to push back against it, the static just repelled my hand harder in return.

“Now try cutting it with this,” Capitan said and handed me a dagger. It was finely sharpened.

“I don’t know,” I said hesitantly. We weren’t fighting, so I was averse to using it on him.

He gave me an appalled look. “You came at me like you were trying to kill me in our fight. Why do you think you’ll hurt me now?”

He was right, but I didn’t really think about morality in the middle of fights, for better or worse. The excitement of the moment made it hard to think straight. Maybe that made it sound like I was dangerous to be around, but that was the way warriors were. At this moment, though, I felt as reserved as I normally did. Yes, I would describe myself as reserved.

“I’m telling you it’s fine,” Capitan said. “Staying in this state for too long gets pretty tiring, so if you really want to do me a favor, just get on with it.”

It wasn’t clear from looking at him, but this was apparently more draining than I thought. In that case, I decided to make it quick and swung the dagger down at Capitan’s arm. And because I wanted to make it quick, it was a pretty fast slash. I thought I might have cut him a little too hard, but knowing Capitan, I figured it was fine.

As it turned out, the dagger didn’t cut into Capitan’s arm at all. It met with the

same repelling force that my hand had and went flying in the opposite direction. The more force I used, the stronger the repelling force, it seemed. I was impressed.





“I said get on with it, but you didn’t have to cut so hard,” Capitan complained and glared at me. Based on the speed of the dagger, he seemed to get the impression that I sincerely attempted to slice his arm. He did ask for it, so I just stared back at him, to which he sighed. I did cut a little harder than necessary, to be fair. “Well, whatever. You get the idea now, right?”

“So it’s like making armor out of spirit?”

“That’s just how I’m using it right now, but if you wanted to describe it more generally, it’s like turning spirit into something physical. You can do the same thing with mana, right? I know you can make shields with that.”

Now it made sense to me. Even back when my mana was weak, that was one of the skills I could use with it. As long as you understood how it worked, it wasn’t that hard to pull off.

“So you can do the same thing with spirit?” I asked.

“Not exactly. I’m no expert on magic, so this is just what I’ve heard from Gharb. But when you make a shield with mana, you need to decide the form of the shield and how long it’ll be projected and all that before you make it, right?”

That was true. Magic was a highly theoretical power, and if the composition of the spell wasn’t solid, it would instantly fail. Even when it came to just projecting a shield, you had to structure the spell properly and know exactly what you wanted to do.

“Is spirit different?”

“Yeah, it’s more something you feel than something you think about. Rather than construct something based on logic, you need to get a feel for spirit if you want to control it. So to be totally frank, even a moron can learn to use spirit if they keep trying for long enough. Doesn’t take any brains at all.”

That was an incredibly blunt way of putting it, but I felt like I understood. Magic was based on theory, so intellect was crucial. And because of that, geniuses at magic were much like geniuses at academics.

Spirit, by contrast, wasn’t something you could get good at by being good at

studying. In fact, while it might be rude to call them idiots, some of the most famous spirit users were pretty simpleminded. All the work that was required to construct theories when it came to magic wasn't so important when it came to spirit. But being smart was probably still an advantage, of course.

Considering all that, Capitan might even have been on the smarter side when it came to spirit users, relatively speaking. But he probably wouldn't have taken that as a compliment.

"When you learn to manifest your spirit physically, there's a lot you can do," Capitan continued. "You can freely control the form of it. For example, you can even do this."

Capitan knelt down and picked up a short stick. I watched as he filled it with spirit energy, and a moment later, a leaf falling from the trees above was sliced in half.

"What was that?" I asked, surprised by what I saw.

"Didn't look like anything touched it, right? But I extended a spirit blade from the tip of this stick. That's what cut the leaf," Capitan explained as he appeared to touch the invisible blade. He presented the blade to me and prompted me to touch it, so I carefully reached out my hand. There turned out to actually be something there. I couldn't see it, but it felt like a long blade. "When you really get this down, you can do things like this. You can shape the spirit into whatever you want, too. Convenient, right?"

It did sound convenient. In fact, it sounded perfect for sneak attacks. Maybe it said something about me that it was the first idea I thought of, but this seemed like something assassins would treasure.

"But there are drawbacks, of course," Capitan admitted. "It's extremely exhausting to use. If you're just in any old fight, simply filling your weapon with spirit is a lot easier. Might be best off saving this as a last resort."

I could see all the sweat on Capitan's forehead since he started materializing his spirit. Clearly it was draining to use. He was much better at using spirit than I was, so if this was how hard it hit him, I didn't know how long I'd be able to keep it up.

"Anyway, give it a try. As for how to do it, I'll hammer it into you; just keep

trying. If you practice enough, you'll figure it out eventually," Capitan said, looking the part of the ruthless instructor I remembered from years ago. That brought back horrible memories.



After Capitan gave me a rundown on how to materialize spirit, he made me try and do it myself over and over.

"All right, now sustain it like that," he told me.

I was materializing spirit the way I had been taught a moment ago, but I couldn't get it to cover my body the way Capitan could. All I could do instead was have it cover the palm of my hand to create some lame spirit armor. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. The ideal was to create something like another layer of skin on top of my own, but this felt more like a thick glove.

And it was brittle. Capitan struck my weak spirit glove with a stick each time I tried it, and each time, it broke from just a light strike. Capitan was filling the stick with spirit when he did this, which made it about as hard as an iron sword, so maybe I wasn't doing that badly. But my spirit armor still wasn't nearly hard enough, that was for sure. It didn't look like I'd be mastering this overnight. If I kept it up, though, I figured I would get the hang of it eventually.

"Well, not bad for your first day," Capitan said.

"How long will it take until I can cover my whole body in armor like you can?"

"Who knows? Depends on how hard you work. But for you, even just protecting a part of your body should be plenty. Seems like you've got better eyes than you used to."

It was true that my eyesight had improved. That also improved my reflexes, so even if I were to only project the armor over part of my body, maybe I could just use that part as a shield of sorts.

"But even that seems like it'd be hard to use too often," I said.

"That's because you're wasting too much energy. I'm telling you to make the armor thinner because it'll be more cost-efficient. Oh, looks like there's a chink in the armor there," Capitan said and mercilessly struck it with his stick. Having

to repair the armor every time he destroyed it was brutal. After that, I finally ran out of spirit and couldn't project anything anymore. I tried as hard as I could, but I didn't feel any spirit coming. "Looks like we'll have to call it quits for the day. Not much we can do if you're out of spirit. There are ways you could force some more out, I guess."

"There are?"

"Yeah, if you're willing to shorten your lifespan. It'll give you a more powerful spirit than usual, too. But I wouldn't recommend it, for obvious reasons," he said. Capitan's answer to my question was terrifying, but then he thought of something. "Actually, if you don't have a lifespan anyway, maybe it'd work well for you. You don't have a lifespan, do you?"

But I shook my head to express my disinterest. "No thanks. Maybe I don't have a lifespan, but maybe I do; I don't know. I don't know precisely what I am in the first place. If I try anything funny like that, it could really mess me up."

I could instantly heal from wounds and go without sleep, though. Considering all my unique features, it seemed safe to assume that I was undead and a vampire, but I couldn't be entirely certain. If I tested this method of exchanging lifespan for spirit, it could end up killing me, for all I knew.

"Have you ever used that method before?" I asked Capitan.

"Hell no, I value my life. But I've been told how to do it, so if I wanted to, I could. I can teach it to you too."

"Sounds like another crazy skill you inherited."

"It could be useful in drastic situations, is all. It's been passed down as a secret weapon. Couldn't tell you how many people have ever actually used the skill, though. There's really no situation where anyone would need to use it in Hathara."

They were charged with protecting the teleportation circles, so it made sense they would want to pass this skill down in case some sort of massive threat invaded. If Capitan had a skill like this, maybe Gharb had something crazy as well that Lorraine was going to learn. The thought of that was kind of frightening, but maybe I was worrying too much.

Capitan and I continued to discuss this as we returned to the village.



“Looks like another hearty meal,” I said when I got back home and found dinner ready. It was the mayor’s house, so the table was nice and big, but it was completely covered in plates of food. Clearly this food was meant for more than just me, Lorraine, and my parents. That was, in fact, pretty obvious considering the numerous other people in the house. In addition to me, Lorraine, and my parents, Capitan, Gharb, Riri, and Fahri were there too.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

“Well, Gharb and Gilda said they’d teach us to cook,” Riri said with a determined look.

“Did they?” I asked, turning to Fahri.

“Yep,” the sleepy girl said. “They said they’d teach us to cook some important dishes.” Fahri was going to say more, but then Riri dragged her to the kitchen.

“What the heck was that about?” I muttered as Lorraine brought some more food out.

“Well, don’t ask too many questions,” she said. “Anyway, how’s it look? Pretty good, right?”

I had to admit that it all looked pretty good, but I could also tell that Gilda didn’t make it. It was subtly different from her cooking. That’s not to say that this was a bad thing, of course.

“Did Riri and Fahri make this?”

“Yes, as did I. This is Hathara’s traditional cuisine, correct?”

“Yeah. I used to eat this stuff all the time. You’d get the same food going over to anyone’s house in Hathara.”

But unlike the insect-based cooking you’d find in some villages, Hathara used your typical meat and vegetables. That included monster meat, of course, but no bugs. If Hathara did serve bugs, I would probably like eating them more. If I had to give my opinion on it though, I’d have to say I’m not a fan.

“I don’t know how it will taste, but give me your impressions later,” Lorraine said. “Ideally I’ll be able to cook these recipes well by the time we return to Maalt.”

“Right, got it,” I said and then took a seat at the table.

## Chapter 6: Puchi Suri

To this mouse, it was a world of survival of the fittest. Born small, gigantic creatures would often exploit them for their size. Even when they were lucky enough to find a place to sleep, that was taken away from them as well. They had little to eat, and water was difficult to access. That was life for this mouse from the moment he was born. But even so, he never abandoned his feelings. Maybe it was because of his instincts. The mouse thought that sometimes.

By living in a hellish world and depending only on himself to survive, he grew larger and stronger than the average mouse. But of course, he was still no more than a mouse. Only in his wildest dreams could he hope to compete with humans and large monsters. Searching in the darkness of night for scraps of food and unguarded pantries was all he could do to survive.

Sometimes humans found him and chased him away. When it was only one or two of them, he was big enough he could fight back. He was technically a monster, not just a mouse, so he had some means of combating them, however small. But when there were four or five humans, even if they weren't the frightfully powerful ones called adventurers, he had no choice but to flee. The mouse had no pride, as the gods didn't bestow pride upon mice. Survival was all that concerned them.

But because this mouse grew big and strong, other mice gathered around him for protection. There were only about three or four of them. Not only that, but they were all exiles from other colonies.

Puchi suri colonies had extremely rigid hierarchies. Anyone who challenged the boss and lost was forced to leave. It was akin to sentencing that puchi suri to death by starvation. It would be easy to call them harsh, but to mice, this world was hell for everyone. Whether a part of the colony or not, it would be hell all the same.

As such, the big mouse had little sympathy for the others, and he didn't care to make them obey him either. Regardless, they followed him each day without

fail. They searched for food and water and even fought humans alongside him. They shared their food with others who belonged to no colony and sometimes took small children into their care until they grew up.

Puchi suri could reach adulthood within a week of being born. They had the potential to live long lives the way other monsters did, but most of them died right away. Either they failed to find food or they were hunted by humans. That was life for mice, so worrying about the lives of others was abnormal. Only these mice were different. But there were some things that they could never forget. They knew that they would always be exploited, and they knew that humans were so terrifyingly strong that they could exterminate mice effortlessly.

But one day, while the mice had made their homes underneath a human building, a strange being came down to them from above. There were two humans, one of whom was an ordinary girl, but the other was a masked man in a robe who seemed something more than human.

When the mouse saw this, he thought his life was over. He knew this day would come eventually. This man was probably a human, the mouse thought. He had powerful abilities beyond any regular human, so a mouse would be nothing to him. Some adventurers could even destroy giant monsters with ease, so a mouse stood no chance.

However, the mouse refused to go down without a fight. He was more than just a mouse now, after all. He had henchmen. If nothing else, he had to buy enough time for them to escape. Even if it killed him, that was the least he could do. The mouse had never intended to be anyone's boss, but followers gathered around him anyway, so this was the time to put his life on the line. The henchmen stepped up to fight before the mouse could, but he gave them orders in a voice that only mice could comprehend, telling them to hide for a while. Then he leaped at the adventurer.

The mouse was strong, for a mouse. If he were up against a normal human, then while he couldn't incapacitate them completely, he would at least be able to harm them a little and buy time to run away. He was sure that this would work on the adventurer too. But the adventurer was stronger than the mouse thought. He had no trouble keeping track of the mouse, as was clear from the



way his eyes moved. No ordinary human was able to do that.

The human's knife swung faster than the mouse's eyes could see. Before he knew it, the knife sent him flying. Life drained from his body. Never before had he been so outmatched. But the mouse refused to die here. He got back up, hoping to at least bite back at the adventurer. He headed toward the adventurer again, displaying his obstinance.

The adventurer still stood on guard, but unlike before, he showed some brief hesitation. The mouse wondered why but didn't have the energy to think much of it. Either way, his wild charge was no particular threat to the adventurer. Rather than a knife, he used his fist this time. It hit the mouse right in the teeth and launched him away yet again. The mouse felt his teeth scrape the adventurer's fist a little, but it seemed that was all he could do.

Now that the mouse thought about it, his life never amounted to much. He thought he could do something, but he couldn't. It was too hard to even stay alive. But he didn't want to die. And just as that thought passed through his mind, he felt something grow hot deep within his body.



His body was reconstructed. The intense heat from deep within reshaped his insides anew. It didn't take long for him to understand that. He didn't know why it happened, but in any case, he didn't want to die now. He had other mice to protect, and he still hadn't managed to do so. If he died here, that adventurer would get them.

He continued to resist the pain and the heat, and eventually, the mouse found that he had changed. He was now connected to this man. Maybe he should have hated this fate, but the feelings and memories he received through this connection didn't necessarily inspire disdain.

It was true that this adventurer was here to exterminate the mice, but only because they threatened the lives of this building's inhabitants. The mice began to dwell in this building without knowing exactly who lived there, but from the man's memories, it seemed this place was meant for children without parents. In other words, much like this mouse protected young mice, some human built this place to protect young humans. It was only natural to drive out any

outsiders from this place considering that. As such, the mouse felt no anger toward the adventurer's motives.

And their newfound connection told the mouse about the man's personality too. He had always thought of adventurers as weapon-wielding demons who hunted his brethren, but this man seemed different. He did make a living out of hunting monsters, but not more than necessary, and he even spared monsters that didn't threaten the lives of humans. Of course, he would also callously kill those that harmed humans, whether they were children or not. He was like other adventurers in that way, but he didn't go out of his way to hunt innocent monsters, even if they could be sold for a high price.

Many such memories flowed into the mouse. He didn't know if the man also received his own memories, but he seemed to recognize that they were connected now. Their eyes met, and the man looked surprised. They understood each other without words and knew each other's thoughts, so the mouse told the man that he had become something that lived to serve him. The man confirmed by giving him some orders, and he obeyed. But he didn't act like he was forced to listen. Rather, he treated it like a request from a superior, as if he could still refuse if he wanted to. Maybe the man could force him to listen if desired, but the man didn't. Instead, the man's first order was to protect the basement. The mouse and his henchman obeyed.

From that day forth, the mouse's life changed dramatically. Now that he served the man, his power greatly increased. According to the man, the mouse had received his blood and had become his vampiric servant. As a result, he had ascended into a more powerful being. If he tried hard enough, he could actually use the man's vast mana, spirit, and divinity for himself. Of course, he couldn't take that energy by force, but he could if the man allowed it. The mouse received a little energy from the man to help protect the basement, so in addition, he decided to place every puchi suri in Maalt under his control. The mouse figured that this would contribute to the man's objectives.

The man seemed to have a dream. He wanted to become the greatest of all adventurers. As a means to that end, access to all possible information was desirable. Thankfully, the mouse could sneak all throughout a human building without being noticed. He could also listen in on human conversations and tell

the man about them. The man gave him those abilities. The other mice were still just ordinary mice, but the big mouse could communicate with them just as he had before, so that didn't pose a problem.

Sometimes the mouse attended the adventurer, whose name was Rentt, on his adventures. They fought together and gained experience in battle. They fought a gigantic creature called a tarasque, something that could have instantly killed the mouse in the past, but he managed to retaliate. Rentt landed the killing blow, but the mouse did his part. He felt bad about all the energy he borrowed, but he was confident that this monster couldn't be dealt with otherwise. And as the servant, he felt he should be first to risk his life. Rentt was half-appalled and half-impressed by the mouse's actions, but he ultimately accepted his choices and petted him.

The mouse was even given a name. He was called Edel. Names, the mouse was learning for the first time, were some sort of code that humans used to distinguish one person from another, but it also seemed to mean something. The woman that was Rentt's mate came up with the name, and it was synonymous with noble. The mouse knew himself to be more powerful than other mice, and he intended to take command of all of Maalt's mice, so perhaps this name foresaw that future. He liked it.

A lot had transpired since he began to serve Rentt, and it was fun. He had taken over about thirty percent of the mice in Maalt and expanded his information network. Now he would be able to greatly assist Rentt. As a vampiric servant, the puchi suri was given a new lease on life, so he wanted to try his hardest to collect any information possible to pay him back.

Rentt had most recently been interested in a fellow adventurer named Nive, and about vampires. Both were dangerous topics that seemed difficult to research, but not for Edel. He utilized his henchmen to eavesdrop all around town.

Eventually, Edel saw something through a henchman's eyes. At some point, he had gained the ability to see what they saw, even when they were in a separate location. By using this power, he saw a suspicious figure entering a dungeon. The henchman pursued this person and came across a cloaked individual biting a bloody adventurer.

“Oh, it’s not nice to peep,” they said before shooting flame from their hand and blinding the mouse. Edel was watching from elsewhere, but even he felt the force of the blast. Edel got a throbbing headache and fell unconscious in the basement of the orphanage.





I was training in the forest with Capitan again to improve my spirit abilities when I suddenly came down with a headache. The occasional headache wasn't typically unusual, and this was pretty brutal training, so maybe that was all there was to it. But I hadn't felt such human pain since I became undead. My shoulder aches, backaches, muscle aches, and toothaches had all disappeared, so it seemed impossible for me to get a headache now. There had to be a reason for this.

"What's wrong?" Capitan asked. Even he thought something was strange.

After the pain passed, I felt like I was connected to something, as if something inhuman was calling me. I guessed from that as to what caused the headache. "Something probably happened to my familiar. I got a little headache," I answered.

"Your familiar? Oh, the one that's gathering information in Maalt? But can familiars communicate with their masters from such a long distance? A monster tamer I know used to tell me it's not that convenient."

That was likely true of a monster tamer's monsters. The way they tamed monsters was highly secretive, but it was easy to assume it wasn't like what I did. The effects of their taming would also have to be different. If a monster tamer wanted to, they could decline to let their familiar take any mana or spirit. I could try and do the same if I put a limit on my energy, but Edel took what he needed when he needed it. It could make me somewhat fatigued, but it wasn't worth making him stop. Sometimes I would ask myself who was really the master and who was the servant, but I was joking, mostly.

I wasn't aware that Capitan knew a monster tamer. He had a crazy number of connections. There was no need to ask about that now, though.

"The way it works for me is completely different from a regular monster tamer," I answered. "We're connected in a different way. But most of the time, he can't get in contact with me from this distance. If we're maybe one city apart, he can just barely manage to tell me something, I guess."

"Then maybe you're just imagining things."

That was possible, but I knew I felt something. Something that was connected to me had lost consciousness. I doubted that he was dead, but I couldn't say so for sure. In any case, I wanted to check if he was safe. As much as I tended to complain about him, he was still my precious familiar. It might have happened by coincidence, but we had a bond with each other. I didn't mind if he wanted to stop serving me, but I didn't want this to be how we parted ways.

"I'm not imagining it," I said. "But I won't know what happened to Edel without going to Maalt."

"I see, so you're going home now?"

"Yeah. But it'll take five days by carriage at the earliest. I have to get ready right away."

I hated to end our training early, but this was serious. If I took too much time before I went home and found that Edel was already dead by then, he probably wouldn't be able to rest in peace.

"There's a way you can get home in about half a day, you know," Capitan said as I was preparing to return to the village.

"A teleportation circle?" I asked. If there was one that led to Maalt, then I could presumably get back in an instant.

But Capitan shook his head and said, "No, there's another way."

"Another way?"

"Best to just go back to the village for now so we can talk about it. You're in a hurry, right?" Capitan said as he walked off. I frantically followed after him.

If there was a faster way, then by all means I wanted to use it. I was worried about Edel.



"What, something happened to Edel?" Lorraine said with surprise.

The first thing we did when we got to the village was come to the mayor's house, where Gharb was teaching Lorraine. Unlike us, they weren't training in the forest. All magic started from theory, and that theory was best learned in a classroom setting. Alize and I had learned the basics from Lorraine in a similar

fashion. Even with more advanced magic, the basics presumably remained the same.

“Yeah, I don’t know exactly what happened, but definitely something abnormal,” I said. “This has never happened before.”

“What if he’s just sleeping?” Lorraine suggested.

If so, that might technically explain why I couldn’t sense him at all, but I shook my head. “No, if he were just sleeping, I wouldn’t have gotten a headache. He doesn’t seem to need much sleep after he became my servant anyway, but he does sleep for about two hours a day out of habit. When he does, it’s like my connection to him goes quiet, but this time it was more like the connection was ripped apart by force.”

I couldn’t explain it well. Few humans would have ever had that experience. Maybe a monster tamer would get it, but I didn’t know any monster tamers.

Lorraine nodded and said, “In that case, we’ll have to get back to Maalt quickly. Our friend is in danger.”

I thought she only treated Edel like a pet, but apparently he was pretty important to her. I felt similarly, so I was kind of glad she agreed.

“Yeah,” I answered with a nod.

“But a carriage will take five days to get there. If only there were a teleportation circle that led to Maalt, but we don’t know if there is one yet.” Lorraine immediately thought about how we would travel there as well.

“Well, there is a way,” Capitan answered her.



“What way could that be?” Lorraine asked and cocked her head.

Capitan looked away from her and toward my foster father, the mayor, Ingo Faina. “Can you take care of this?” he asked.

I couldn’t fathom how Ingo would be able to help. Maybe that was mean of me to think, but nothing came to mind. He had some power within the village thanks to being the mayor, but I didn’t know what else he could do.



Ingo seemed to see what I was thinking from how I looked at him. “Rentt, I’ve inherited some of this village’s history just as Capitan and Gharb have,” he said, disappointed that I doubted him.

He seemed somewhat saddened that his son wouldn’t depend on him. I felt kind of bad about that. It wasn’t that I didn’t respect him, but I didn’t think he could do anything to help in this situation.

By the way, Ingo, Capitan, Lorraine, Gharb, and I were the only ones here. Gilda was out gossiping with the other village women, while Riri and Fahri were training to be hunters or medicine women. Capitan and Gharb were supposed to be teaching them, but Capitan’s subordinates took over for him, and there was some prep work to be done for the medicine woman training that could be taken care of solo. That meant that everyone here already knew about the village’s secret, so we could talk about it freely.

“You were supposed to be the king, right? But that doesn’t necessarily mean you inherited special abilities like Capitan and Gharb,” I said.

Gharb and Capitan held the roles of the chief magician and knight captain, positions that would naturally come with some magic or combat skills. But I didn’t know what similar ability would be passed down from king to king. I suspected he was taught knowledge and history beyond what the other roles received, but that was about it.

However, Ingo said, “It’s true I can’t use spirit or magic the way that Capitan or Gharb can. But I do have my own special skill. It sounds like you want to return to Maalt as soon as possible. If so, then my skill can help with that.”

“What is it, then?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Anyway, are you ready to go?”

“We can go to Maalt already?”

“Yes. You’re in a hurry, aren’t you? Just try not to leave anything behind.”



“Is this really the right place?” I asked as we walked through the forest.

“Yes, no doubt about it,” Ingo answered.

“But there’s nothing here.” We were far from the ruins with the teleportation circle too, and I had no idea where we were going.

Lorraine walked alongside me, and she looked confused too. “He’s your father. We’ll just have to trust him,” she said.

I didn’t see any reason why Ingo would lie to us anyway. But even so, I couldn’t predict what would happen next, and that made me uneasy. Either way, all we could do was quietly follow him.

“All right, this should be a fine spot,” Ingo said when we suddenly came to a stop. We were in the forest to the north, but it was a spacious area with few trees. There were a few such areas in the forest, so it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, but I didn’t know what we could possibly be doing here. But then Ingo put his fingers in his mouth and whistled.

“What’s he doing?” I asked Lorraine.

“I considered that this might be it, but I didn’t think it was possible,” she said like she knew what was going on.

I looked around to try and find out what it was. Suddenly, a gust of wind hit me from up above.

“What?” I said and looked up. “A dragon?” A creature with large wings descended toward us.

“No, this is a demidragon, much like tarasques. It’s a lindblum, the comet demidragon,” Lorraine remarked.

Lindblums, as Lorraine explained, were a species of demidragon. But they were not to be underestimated. They were as difficult to take down as a tarasque and were best left to Gold-or Platinum-class adventurers.

I didn’t know why such a monster was here, but Ingo explained. “As king, I inherited the ability to tame lindblums, among other monsters normally impossible to tame. I suspect that the intended purpose of this ability was so the king could flee if worse came to worst, but I do regret how much less valiant this ability is than Gharb’s or Capitan’s.”

“So you’re a monster tamer?” I asked.

“In modern terms, yes.”

Capitan mentioned knowing a monster tamer, so presumably he was talking about Ingo. If he was that close with a monster tamer, he probably would have heard all about them. But I had never heard of anyone taming a powerful demidragon like a lindblum. It didn't sound possible.

“It's said that humans can't train anything bigger than a small wyvern, but it appears that isn't the case,” Lorraine said, looking at Ingo and the lindblum.

After the lindblum landed, Ingo started petting it on the nose. The lindblum pleasantly nuzzled its head against Ingo in return, so it seemed to be completely loyal.

“But with this, we can certainly get back to Maalt in half a day,” Lorraine continued. “What would take five days by carriage will take no time at all if we can fly. A lindblum's flying speed is even compared to that of a comet or lightning.”

If we could ride the lindblum, then that was likely true. The only question was whether we could ride it at all.

“Dad, does this mean it'll take us to Maalt?” I asked.

“Yes, it will do anything I say. Are you ready?” he asked in return. We nodded.



I was happy to ride the lindblum to Maalt, but when it came time to actually get on, I was tense. My father had already gotten on its back and familiarly pulled some reins out from somewhere.

“There's no use being nervous,” Lorraine said. “If this were a wild lindblum, we would have to be cautious, but Ingo has this one completely under control. There shouldn't be any issues.” She approached the lindblum before I did, stroked its scales, and got on its back. She had a hundred times the guts that I did. “Rentt, there's a great view up here! Hurry up and get on!” she shouted down to me.

Now there was no way I could refuse, so I walked up to the lindblum. When I got close, I could clearly see it in more minute detail. It had glistening scales,

vertical pupils, sharp teeth with fangs that peeked out of its big mouth, and robust wings that resembled that of a bat. Every part of it was gigantic. It was hard to see why it would obey a human, but clearly it listened to Ingo. I didn't know how they did it, but ancient humans must have had techniques that made it possible. It was a mystery as to how they were destroyed, then.

In any case, I needed to climb on. I got even closer to the lindblum and put my hand on it. It felt rough, but its rugged texture made it easy to climb. Even as I did, the lindblum was docile. It was probably used to this.

Once I got all the way on, I could see a great view just as Lorraine had said. I was, after all, seeing from much higher up than normal. But there was nothing around me except forest, so it didn't feel that impressive. We were about to start flying, so I knew that view would be much better anyway.

"All right, you're on," Ingo said. "Hold on tight so you don't get flung off. We're in a rush, after all."

When Ingo tugged the reins, the lindblum began to flap its wings. Its hulking body gradually rose into the sky. The view around me grew higher bit by bit. Once we were above the trees, I could see the entirety of the northern forest. Eventually, I could even see Hathara in the distance.

"Oh, right," Ingo said like something occurred to him. "Lorraine, can you cast a spell that prevents us from being seen from below? You can do that, can't you?"

Lindblums were a rare sight, but you could sometimes spot them flying through the sky. However, you would never see one with reins attached and several people on its back. Of course, it wouldn't normally be possible to see a lindblum that clearly from the ground, but some adventurers had unthinkable abilities. It was safe to assume that at least a few people had frightfully powerful eyesight. That being the case, we needed a way to avoid attention if we were seen from below.

"I can, but how do you tackle this problem normally?" Lorraine asked as she began to set up the spell, finishing it a moment later.

"I don't ride the lindblum often, but I ask for Gharb's assistance when necessary," he said as he checked out Lorraine's spell. "But Gharb said you'd be

able to do it.”

“Making me do the job so she doesn’t have to, is she?” Lorraine muttered, but that was about what to expect from Gharb.

“It’s hopeless to question Gharb. Nobody in the village can defy her,” said the mayor, theoretically the most powerful person in the village. She was a walking encyclopedia and one of the people who knew the village’s secret, in addition to being a powerful magician and a medicine woman. If the village defied her, it could doom them in many ways.

“It’s about time to speed up,” Ingo said. “The lindblum’s mana can protect us against wind resistance, but there’s still going to be some turbulence. Hang on tight.”

When Ingo tugged on the reins, the lindblum flapped its wings and began to advance.



The scenery passed by at an insane speed as the lindblum raced through the sky. I had never seen anything like this, and it was mesmerizing to watch. Maybe you could see something similar by riding an airship, but I wasn’t important enough for that. Well, rather than importance, money was the real problem. But even if I wanted to ride one, there weren’t any in Yaaran. The Empire had them, so maybe Lorraine had been on one before. But even Lorraine seemed exhilarated by the view from this lindblum.

“This is magnificent,” she said. “You wouldn’t be able to fly this high on an ordinary wyvern. This is an experience few people would ever have.”

Wyverns could fly pretty high when nobody was riding them, but even then, they couldn’t do it for long. They were susceptible to changes in temperature, and if they flew too high, they would fall. By contrast, the lindblum seemed to have no such problems. Ingo said its mana eliminated any air resistance, so maybe it solved any temperature issues in a similar manner. Either that or it was highly resistant to changes in temperature to begin with. I was no expert, so I couldn’t say for sure. It had no trouble with high altitudes, and that was what was important.

Actually, I didn't feel that cold. To be fair, I didn't feel a lot of things after becoming undead, but Lorraine didn't look that cold either. She was also an adventurer and might have been more tolerant of extreme conditions, but even Ingo didn't appear cold. The temperature seemed to be fine. Ingo may have possessed the ability to tame the lindblum, but he still had the body of an ordinary middle-aged man. That was easy to see from the way he carried himself. Even when he got on the lindblum, he moved like a man who was getting on in years.

"We'll get to Maalt in half a day," Ingo said. "In the meantime, enjoy the scenery." He gripped the reins hard and looked straight ahead.



"What's that?" Lorraine asked when the lindblum was almost to Maalt.

Lorraine's perception-blocking spell had kept anyone on the ground from seeing us on the way here, but it was also getting dark, so that probably helped. Perception-blocking wasn't all powerful, so a particularly perceptive magician could have spotted us. But to notice something out of the ordinary in this darkness and then to cast their own spell to break through our illusion while we were flying at such a high speed would have been an impossible feat. Considering all that, of course we weren't found. That meant we got to enjoy our trip through the sky.

But now the party was over. When I looked at where Lorraine was looking, I saw the city glowing bright. And not because of the magic lamps. This wasn't the color those gave off. Magic lamps looked warmer and fainter. The light we saw in Maalt was red bordering on scarlet. It could only be one thing.

"The city's on fire?!"

Yes, it was the color of a blazing inferno. It didn't cover all of Maalt, only certain areas, but there were quite a number of them. Many of the buildings in Maalt were made of brick or stone, but there were a fair number of wooden buildings too. If these fires weren't put out, they could spread throughout town. Magicians who could use water magic were likely running around with mana potions in hand.

"What in the world is going on?" I asked.

Lorraine shook her head. “I don’t know, but we have to help extinguish the fires. Rentt, you can’t use much of any water magic, so go gather information around town. It looks like we have to assume something happened to Edel.”

I could actually use some water magic, but certainly not enough to put out a fire. An amateur like me would probably only make things worse. I couldn’t do much to help. But Lorraine was a perfectly competent magician, and I knew how she could handle situations like these. The way she’d divided up our roles was the correct one.

Lorraine was right about Edel too. Assuming he wasn’t just asleep, it was still possible he wasn’t in serious danger. He could have just overexerted himself and passed out. However, upon returning to Maalt to check on him, we did find a pretty big disaster. It seemed safe to guess that he’d gotten himself in some sort of trouble. We still didn’t know the circumstances, but we needed to find him as soon as possible. Thankfully we were close enough that I could faintly sense Edel’s presence. It didn’t seem like he was dead, so I at least didn’t need to worry about that.

“Right, got it. Dad, can you drop us off near Maalt?” I asked.

“Yes, but considering the situation, they may suspect you of something if I put you down too close to town. How about around there somewhere?” Ingo pointed to a forest near Maalt.

The perception-blocking spell would be easier to see through the closer we got to the ground. If someone saw us riding this lindblum in the middle of this disaster, it could cause quite a stir. Fortunately, the forest wasn’t that far from Maalt, so we nodded.

“It’s up to you!” I said.

Ingo tugged the lindblum’s reins hard.



“I wish I could help somehow,” Ingo said apologetically after Lorraine and I got off the lindblum. But we didn’t mind much.

“Dad, you brought us all the way here. That’s plenty. Besides, we don’t really know what’s going on, so it’s hard to say how you could help.”

Those were my honest feelings. Maybe Ingo had great talent as a monster tamer, but he was in no better shape than the average middle-aged man. He couldn't fight any better than one either. If he tried to do anything in the blazing city, he could die. He possessed rare abilities that could be vital in other situations, so there was no sense in him risking his life here. But now I regretted not bringing Gharb or Capitan along.

"I see," Ingo said. "Well, come visit the village again sometime after things have settled down. I'll be heading on back now."

Lorraine and I nodded. There was nothing more he could do here, so that was probably for the best. If he stuck around and somebody found him, that could get ugly.

Lorraine cast the perception-blocking spell again. It lasted some time after each cast, as long as nobody broke the spell, but the trip here already took a while as it was. It was best to be cautious.

"Thank you, Lorraine," Ingo said, bowing his head.

"Oh, I don't mind. Take good care of the village."

"Right, and you take good care of my son."

"Of course."

"I'm not a kid, you know," I said, but they both looked at me dubiously. I guess I was more childish than I thought.

"At any rate, let's hurry to Maalt," Lorraine suggested.

"Right. See you later, Dad."

"Yeah, don't go dying on me now," he said. Then he flew off on the lindblum.

Once he was gone, Lorraine and I ran toward Maalt. We had no idea what was going on, but we needed to find out.



When we entered Maalt, it was pure pandemonium. The blazing heat was roasting the town. We were hit by a hot gust of wind as the townspeople ran around everywhere.



“Hey, what happened?!” I asked one strapping man among the crowd.

“What?! How should I know?! The town just caught fire out of nowhere! There’s a bunch of adventurers scrambling around, maybe they know something!” he shouted, brushing me off. As far as the civilians knew, this was an abrupt calamity, apparently.

“Let’s look for adventurers, then,” Lorraine said. “There must be some trying to put out the fires.” She ran off in search of them, so I followed after her.



“We need water over here! Don’t let this fire spread!” said the leader of a group made up of what seemed to be adventurers. We finally found some when we got to a particularly fiery area. I looked to see where the water magic was coming from and saw some magicians. I was relieved to find anyone who might be able to answer some questions.

“Hey!” I shouted.

“What?! I’m busy! Don’t talk to me!” the adventurer snarled back, but both Lorraine and I were used to it. All adventurers were like this when lives were on the line. There was no use being intimidated.

“We’re adventurers!” I said. “She’s a magician, and she can help put out the fires! Just give us a brief summary!”

The adventurer looked at us differently now. “The whole city’s short on help at the moment! We’re managing to scrape by here, so if you want to contribute anywhere, try near the main gate! If that collapses, nobody can evacuate! I should also mention that monsters did this. Monsters started the fires!”

“Monsters?”

“Yeah, but if you want to know more, go to the guild. They should be doing something to deal with the monsters. Hey! Not over there! Spray the water more to the right!”

Lorraine and I looked at each other. Any more questions would probably just get in the way.

“Sorry about that. Thanks!” I said to the man and then ran off in the direction

of the guild. Lorraine, of course, went to the main gate. There weren't that many magicians around there. That was due in part to how the fire wasn't so bad in that area, but it was starting to grow and become a concern. Lorraine could at least manage to keep the place safe. I instead did what I could to understand the situation.



"You still haven't found them?!" I heard someone shout as I entered the guild. I knew by the sound of his voice that it was Guildmaster Wolf Hermann. I didn't know if I'd ever seen him on the first floor before that. He was surrounded by guild staff and shouting orders at them. Adventurers were rushing in and out of the building. If I didn't already know there was a crisis, I would now.

"Wolf!" I said and ran up to him.

He looked at me with shock. "Rentt! You came at a good time. Come with me for a second!" he said and dragged me along.

We went to his office. Once he confirmed nobody was outside the door, he slammed it shut, took me to a corner of the room, and whispered into my ear. "Hey, so you're not connected to what's happening here, are you?"

"What do you mean? I only just got back to town and saw this disaster! Tell me what's going on!"

My reply seemed to relieve Wolf. "Right, makes sense. Well, the guild doesn't know exactly what the deal is either, but there are vampires. A group of vampires are rampaging around town. They're setting fire to the place."

I was surprised to hear that. Then I understood Wolf's question. He asked if I was involved because I was a vampire. I wasn't involved, of course, but only I would know that. He trusted me anyway, and for that I was thankful. I probably hadn't fully cast off any doubts, but as long as he was willing to explain what he knew, it didn't matter. I tried to imply my innocence as I asked a few questions.

"So you found vampires in town? I don't know any vampires."

"Well, can't imagine what you'd stand to gain from this anyway. I already knew that. Anyway, the vampires we found setting fires were the lowest level of vampire. Thralls, in other words. There are around ten that we know about

so far, but at the rate these fires are starting, there could be hundreds. Where the hell could they all have been hiding?”

I was a thrall myself until recently, but thralls were generally humans who had their blood sucked by vampires and got a little of the vampire’s blood inside them in the process, causing them to mutate. They looked like decrepit humans. Not quite as rotten as ghouls, but as you could imagine from how I looked before, they were like corpses compared to a normal human.

“They’re starting the fires?”

“Yeah, all over the place. But they just looked like humans at first. Seems like they were using magic to disguise their faces. They covered their bodies with long-sleeved clothes, so you wouldn’t be able to tell. Who knows how long they’ve been in town? Just thinking about it is terrifying.”

“Thralls, unlike lesser vampires, shouldn’t need that much blood.”

“Guess so. They’re supposed to drink blood too, but they’ll eat a lot of things. Whether dogs, cats, bugs, or corpses, they’ll eat it. As a result, they have the easiest time multiplying in cities. Lesser vampires would need a lot of blood, so if there were a lot of those around, we’d know it right away.”

Here was an example of how there could be benefits with weaker monsters. Benefits for the thralls, I mean. It was very bad for us.

“Anyway, the guild’s doing everything in its power to find the thralls and whatever vampire’s probably making them. You should join in.”

# Side Story: Noble’s Trust

“I’ll be going, then. Will you be all right?” I asked.

A hand reached out from the bed in the living room and waved. It was Lorraine’s hand. She’d drunk too much last night, and it left her in a sorry state. She thought it would get worse again if she tried to stand or talk, so she just expressed her will with a hand gesture.

Lorraine didn’t often get hangovers, but when she became sleep-deprived from doing too much research, it could happen. I was probably the only one who knew this, but that was how she was. Not that knowing this particular secret did me any good.

“Well, I made some plain soup and porridge for you. Eat that when you’re feeling better. See you later,” I said.

She raised her arm and shook it in a different way from a moment ago. She was saying thanks, presumably. At this rate, Lorraine would recover to some extent by noon, so I figured she’d be fine. With that confirmed, I opened the front door and headed out to the guild. Considering how Lorraine was feeling, I didn’t plan to go out for too long today.



“I can’t say I expected you to travel down here, Count Robista.”

Inside a carriage approaching Maalt, one man addressed an older gentleman. The older man was Count Curtis Nal Robista, owner of a vast amount of land near the capital. He was one of the most powerful nobles in the Kingdom of Yaaran. The man who casually addressed him was a Gold-class adventurer hired by Count Robista as a bodyguard. His name was Hayden War.

For a count to travel so far from the center of the country, he needed a bodyguard. Hayden charged a bit much for his services, but he was a pleasant man and strong to boot. They were attacked by many monsters on the way to Maalt, but Hayden dealt with them all single-handedly. Of course, they were

attacked by bandits as well, but he made quick work of them too. Even in the capital, only first-rate adventurers held the title of Gold-class, but now Count Robista understood just how powerful they were. Not only was he strong, but he was quick-witted. Count Robista even offered to employ him, but Hayden preferred the freedom of adventuring. Count Robista didn't hold it against him. In fact, he appreciated Hayden's honesty and even came to think of him like a friend.

"I told you before that, yes, Maalt is a small city, but it's actually quite interesting once you look into it," Count Robista said. "Especially recently. Over the last five or six years, the talent coming to my territory from this city has improved drastically. You know how the medicine industry is booming in my territory and makes up most of our income? The quality of our medicinal herbs has a significant impact on our economy. That's why I've asked Viscount Lautner to inspect them on-site. Hopefully something comes of that."

Viscount Lautner was a noble that ruled the territory around Maalt. His family had been around for quite a long time, but they had so little prominence he was mostly unheard of, even in the capital. That also meant that when power struggles took place in Yaaran, they remained at peace. A noble family with so little influence would usually be taken advantage of and eventually eliminated, but that had yet to happen. They were an odd family.

Having met Viscount Lautner, Count Robista would describe him as a truly plain man. If that were an act he put on, it might make him far more terrifying than he appeared. But he reacted positively to the count's request and even volunteered to show him around Maalt. He may or may not have been trustworthy, but he was a fine man to spend time with as a friend. It was enough to make the trip to this rural town worth it. But that wasn't the count's only objective here.

"Well, I'm sure you don't know this, but distant lands like these can have materials unheard of in the big city. In that sense, I think you have something to look forward to," Hayden said.

"Would you say they're rare even from your perspective?"

"Yes. I operate in the capital because it's easier to find good jobs there, but if

you just want to enjoy yourself, you should go out to the countryside. A fair number of people who live out here are adventurers, and they can be surprisingly competent.”

“Interesting. Would there be anyone I may want to hire?”

“I don’t know about that. These aren’t the most polite sorts of people. Might be too crude for a noble’s tastes, you know?”

“That could be interesting in itself.”



That day was the first time someone had ever been knocked onto Count Robista’s table at a bar. Hayden had visited Maalt many times before, so after they arrived and decided which inn to stay at, he took them to a bar he recommended. But as they were enjoying their drinks, it suddenly happened. Luckily, though, the count wasn’t hurt. Just before the man crashed into him, Hayden grabbed him with one hand and threw him back. Then another adventurer opposite him caught the man, also with one hand, and rolled him onto the floor.

After witnessing the whole thing, Robista whispered, “Maalt is a frightening place.”

Hayden laughed. “I think you mean an interesting place. All jokes aside though, I won’t say this is a daily occurrence, but you can see it’s rowdier than in the capital. But in exchange, it never gets boring.”

“So it seems. But why was that man knocked onto my table?”

“Some petty argument, I’d guess. You were watching, right? They were too far away for me to hear the exact details, though. Oh, looks like someone’s here who can explain,” Hayden said and looked at a suspicious man in a mask. He was the one who’d caught the man Hayden tossed.

“Sorry about that,” the man said. “I’ll pay for any food or drinks that got ruined. I already ordered replacements, so they should be here right away.”

Hayden heartily laughed. “You don’t have to pay for a thing. Not like you’re the one who threw him over here. I mean, you just knocked that other guy out

cold.”

It was true. The man who’d ended up on the table had been punched and sent flying by another man. And that man wore a satisfied grin for a brief moment before this masked man knocked him unconscious. When Count Robista described Maalt as frightening, that was what he’d seen. It made him think that master fighters were all around him.

“You’re not wrong,” the masked man said. “But he was an acquaintance of mine. He’s fine when he’s sober, but looks like he drank a bit too much. He started a fight over some nonsense. Sorry.”

Hayden shook his head. “It’s no big deal. Just the way adventurers are.”

“So are you an adventurer too? I can tell just looking at you that you’re great in a fight. And who’s this here? Oh, my apologies. I had no idea a noble was present.” The masked man quietly bowed his head.

Count Robista was wearing perfectly ordinary traveling clothes, so he was surprised that this man had immediately identified him as a noble. Some people could tell at a glance, but he didn’t expect that of someone so far from the capital. Not only that, but the count was keeping quiet to avoid attention, and nobody else seemed to notice him at all due to the fight that broke out.

“I’m here in secret,” Count Robista said. “Please act naturally.”

“Right, got it,” the masked man replied. He proceeded to treat the count the way he would anyone else on their first meeting.

Based on this series of events alone, this was clearly a man who knew a lot. Count Robista felt his impression of adventurers changing greatly. That was also because of Hayden, but most people weren’t this quick-witted. Not even most nobles. But while adventurers were usually known for being crude and violent, there were two adventurers of this nature. It was a real shock.

“I appreciate it,” the count said. “But what were they fighting over in the first place?”

“Oh, so they were having fun drinking at first, but when they told each other where they live, they got into an argument over which was more of a country town. One said it was their town because they had giant frogs around, the other

said it was their town because of all the poison spiders, and it just got more heated until they decided to settle it with a test of strength. I should have stopped them, but I do think they should be satisfied after that little scuffle. I'm also at fault for letting it go that far, though, so I figured I had an obligation to pay for your food."

"I understand why you'd argue over which is the bigger city, perhaps, but over which is more of a country town?" The count cocked his head, being from a big city himself. He had argued with other nobles over which of their cities were more developed, so he understood that. But this was beyond his comprehension.

Hayden laughed and said, "Well, city people have their pride, and country people have theirs. They probably wouldn't have gone as far as a fight if they were sober, but that changes when you're drunk. I'm from a country town myself, so I kind of get it."

"Is that right?" asked the count, unable to understand.

"Yes, but I'm happy to pay for the food," the masked man said cheerily. "And if you're here in secret, you must have some business here, right? If you need any local adventurers, just tell me. I'll work for cheap. I won't say I'm that strong, but I know the area pretty well."

The count bitterly smiled at this act of self-promotion. He thought the masked man did a pretty good job of it. He turned what at first appeared to be a big mistake into a business opportunity. Of course, it was possible that the count could have gotten angry with him, but he must have noticed that the noble held no such feelings. He wouldn't have said anything otherwise. And it seemed like at least in part, he sincerely wanted to apologize.

Count Robista looked to Hayden. He wanted to know if this man could be trusted. From the count's perspective, this masked man seemed fairly interesting and perhaps even trustworthy, but adventurers weren't to be taken lightly. Ones that seemed fine at first glance could turn traitor, especially in rural towns, as Hayden had explained on their way here. Hayden would be the judge. Nobody had approached as smoothly as this masked man, but adventurers had tried to sell themselves to the count in the past, and Hayden



had ignored them all. In most cases, the reason was they were quite likely to be assassins sent by enemies of the count. This masked man seemed like he might be one as well. Considering how readily he approached, he might have been the most suspicious of all.

But Hayden nodded to the count. It was a gesture indicating that he was fine to trust for now. The count was surprised, as this meant that the masked man's actions so far were all unplanned and he simply reacted to the circumstances. The count wanted to learn a little more about this masked man.

"We don't have any specific plans yet, but we want to collect materials in Maalt for a while," he said. "An acquaintance is supposed to show us around tomorrow, but that will likely be a haphazard affair. Would you be able to show us around the day after tomorrow?"

Viscount Lautner was supposed to show them around, but that would be entirely from a noble's perspective, so he might not know much about the lives of commoners or certain specific materials. The count intended to make up for that himself by finding another guide. If he could ask a trustworthy local, then he would have no problem doing so. The masked man had already shown his skill and personality, so there seemed plenty of reason to pick him.

"Two days from now?" the masked man said. "Understood. Oh, and can you tell me what materials you want in advance? It'll make my job easier." He couldn't show the count every material in Maalt, so his question was understandable.

"We mostly want materials used in medicine, or anything that could potentially be used in medicine," the count admitted. "That's why I don't want to limit our search area too much. Would that be difficult?" However talented this adventurer may have been, it was unlikely he would know everything that could potentially become medicine. The count asked knowing it would be a challenge.

"Medicine? Ordinary medicine or magic medicine? And as far as materials with potential, there are some that would only be found in Maalt and not the capital, if you don't mind those. Or do you specifically want materials that could be found elsewhere?"

The masked man continued to inquire in great detail. The count was taken off guard at first, but he was an expert on this, so he answered every question. They even used complex medical terms.

“Understood,” the masked man said. “If we start in the morning, I think we can get to every location in town within the day. There are a number of goods we’ll have to go outside of town to collect because they won’t be sold in stores during this season, so we’d need to go to some dangerous places as well. Visiting those will take a few days.”

“I’ll protect him,” Hayden said. “You only need to lead the way.”

“Right, then. And as far as magic medicine goes, I know somebody who’s been a researcher in Maalt for a long time. She naturally knows a lot about materials in the region. There may be things I can’t explain on my own, and I’ll have to check her schedule, but would you mind if I brought her along at some point? Of course, if you meet her and decide she’s untrustworthy, then you don’t have to hire her.”

“Then we’ll decide when we see her,” the count said. “A researcher, though? There’s a surprising variety of people in Maalt.”

“Small towns like these draw a lot of oddballs. That’s part of what makes them interesting,” Hayden remarked.

“I’ll admit I’m getting kind of excited for an old man. I haven’t felt this way in ages, so this is a fresh experience. Shall we sign the contract now?”

“Sure. Officially it needs to be done through the guild, but we can take care of that on the morning we start. I have the documents with me,” the masked man said.

“No, we’ll submit the forms tomorrow,” Hayden insisted. “If we’re going to start on the morning of the day after tomorrow, then this should be less trouble. I’m going to put out a request for you by tonight, so you just need to take it. What is your name, by the way?”

“Oh, right. My name’s Rentt Faina.”

“I’m Hayden War.”

They turned to the count, who thought to himself for a bit. “I’m Curt,” he said, making Hayden burst out laughing at the alias.

Rentt seemed to realize it was a fake name as well, but he went with it. “Curt, huh?” he said. “Nice to meet you.” Then he held out his hand for a handshake.

The count grabbed it tight. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”



“Hoh, so you took a job from a noble from the capital, did you? Well, I suppose you haven’t officially signed a contract yet.”

I described today’s events in detail to Lorraine. Normally a request from a noble would demand some secrecy and discussing it over dinner would be inappropriate, but because Lorraine was going to join us, I had to tell her.

“Yeah. Tomorrow they’re going to ask for me at the guild. The plan is to show them around starting the day after tomorrow. So, think you can join us?”

I’d told them I’d bring Lorraine along without actually asking her first, so I was a little worried about her schedule. We knew about a week’s worth of each other’s plans for the most part, but we also both had a tendency to make new plans at the last minute. Like going to the bar and leaving with a new job as I did today, for example, or Lorraine heading off to some other region to gather materials. But I did also tell Curt and Hayden that I’d check with her first, so if it turned out she wasn’t available, it wouldn’t be an issue. Maybe they would think a bit less of me if that happened, but that would be all. It sounded like I’d be able to help them just fine on my own anyway. But I wanted to do a satisfying job, so I hoped to prepare for any eventuality.

“I don’t mind helping out,” Lorraine said. “I have no particular plans scheduled for then.”

“Oh, good. Thanks, Lorraine.”

“No need to thank me. We’re friends, after all. You’d do the same for me. But this client is just a bit bizarre, don’t you think?” Lorraine asked after thinking for a bit.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve determined that this Curt person is a noble, right?”

“Yeah. I can’t say so for sure, but Curt’s clothes were of pretty high quality. I can’t see mana directly the way you can, so I don’t know exactly what spell was on those clothes, but I knew it was some pretty remarkable magic. I don’t think it was any average spell those clothes were enchanted with. Also, there was a small insignia on them, one that you wouldn’t be allowed to bear if you weren’t at least a viscount. Considering what he was wearing, he’d have to be a noble.”

“And you say that other man, Hayden, is quite powerful?”

“Right, he seemed pretty impressive himself. I couldn’t gauge the full extent of his abilities, though. I think he’d have to be above Silver-class, probably at least Gold-class.”

“That strong? If he’s protected by a man with such power, he must be a noble of high standing.”

“Yeah, so what’s bizarre about that?”

“To be blunt, such people don’t typically bother to visit towns as irrelevant as Maalt. They’re clearly suspicious.”

“I don’t think you need to insult Maalt like that, but fair enough. I admit they’re kind of suspicious. Typically, a noble would come with a much larger group in tow. They’d put themselves in danger otherwise, not to mention it makes them look bad.”

Nobles had to keep up appearances in a variety of ways. Traveling with only one other person could start rumors that he was poor, and traveling incognito raised his chances of being targeted. If he wasn’t where he was supposed to be, it would be hard to deal with any problems that arose. That was why nobles didn’t care to travel like this. But this one was, so he had to have a good reason.

“I asked them about it but didn’t get a real answer. They’re not going to tell us,” I said.

“But you decided to take their request anyway?”

“Might as well. They didn’t look like bad people. In fact, it kind of looked like they were in a bind, so I wanted to lend them a hand.”

Those were my honest impressions. I could have turned them down, but after hearing about the job, it sounded like the only ones in Maalt who could do it right were me and Lorraine. It wasn't strength they needed but someone with a breadth of knowledge about materials and medicine, as well as familiarity with the region. Of course, a high-ranking adventurer who'd lived in Maalt for years could probably do it too, but this was where Maalt's insignificance really hurt. When most adventurers got good enough, they would move to the big city, so there were next to no high-ranking adventurers around. As such, it would be hard to find others that could fulfill their request. What they were asking for was also unique. It would be one thing if they just wanted specific materials, but they also wanted to find other materials with potential. Virtually zero adventurers had exhaustive enough knowledge to meet that demand.

But Lorraine was an alchemist and magic medic more than she was an adventurer, so she possessed deep knowledge of medicine. And thanks to my lasting relationship with her, I knew more about materials used in alchemy and medicine than the average adventurer. I also spent enough time at Lorraine's house to read plenty of her books on the subject. That gave me some extremely specific knowledge not even high-ranking adventurers would necessarily have.

As to whether the two travelers lacked that information, I would guess they didn't. Their plan was probably to have the hired adventurer show the noble around the region so they could check the materials themselves. Not that I could prove this, but it had seemed to me that Curt possessed a great deal of medicinal knowledge, clearly more than I did. I didn't know if he'd be a match for Lorraine in that department, but he certainly knew more than the average noble. It was easy to imagine that he specialized in medicine. If so, then he could probably identify useful materials just fine on his own.

But if that were the case, why did Curt seem a little panicked? I knew he wanted to find some useful medicinal materials, but that didn't explain much. There was no use in trying to think about it anyway. Sticking your nose in your client's business would be rude. If his concerns were important to the job, then he would presumably tell me about them and I could simply do what he asked.

"You're always too kind, Rentt. That mask doesn't match your personality in the least," Lorraine said with a gentle smile. She was probably right; nobody

would look at this skull mask and think I was kind. But I hadn't changed on the inside since back when I was human, and people had called me kind all the time.

"I'd wear a more appealing mask if I could, but unfortunately, this mask isn't willing to come off. At least I can reshape it to some extent."

"But the base design still looks like a skull. You can make it a cool skull or a scary skull, but your only options are skulls."

"True, but whatever, it's fine. It keeps some people away, so it kind of keeps me out of trouble."

Back when I was human, I'd looked relatively delicate for an adventurer, so certain nasty adventurers from outside Maalt would drag me into some annoying business. Of course, it wasn't too much of a problem after I showed them what I could do. But it was irritating nonetheless, and I didn't want to have to hurt or traumatize people. I thought a lot about what I could do to prevent that, but after I ended up with this body, nobody underestimated me anymore. In fact, they avoided me because I was creepy. Maybe if I'd just dressed like this when I was human, that would have worked too, but I never would have thought to wear a skull mask.

"I feel like it's getting you into all sorts of new dilemmas, though."

"I can't deny that. I just hope this job isn't one of them."



In a spacious bedroom, a young girl was panting with anguish. A doctor sat at her side, assessing the situation.

Eventually he sighed and said with a grave expression, "This isn't easy to say, but if nothing changes, your daughter will lose her life to this eventually, Count Robista."

"Is there nothing I can do?!" Robista cried. "She was just fine a month ago! How did this happen so quickly?"

"That's how diseases are. You know plenty about medicine yourself, so I shouldn't need to tell you this."

“But I don’t even know the name of this disease.”

“Not even I know of every disease in the world, but your daughter’s symptoms don’t match any I’m familiar with. I’ve never seen anyone covered with specks like this.”

Count Robista’s daughter, Elaine, had dark purple spots resembling ink all over her face. The doctor and the count could both think of diseases with similar symptoms, but the shape and color of the spots were different. That combined with the other symptoms made this disease extremely difficult to identify. This was a doctor of high esteem whom the count trusted, but he had called other esteemed doctors from the capital to look at her with the same results. He had exhausted nearly all his options.

“Sorry, I don’t blame you. I just don’t know what to do.”

“My apologies, but there’s nothing I can do either. I can at least tell you that while Lady Elaine’s health is deteriorating, it’s happening gradually. It’s already been a month since these specks began to spread, but she still sometimes feels well enough to walk around the garden. I did say eventually, but that day could be very far from now. There will be time to test a number of things. Don’t give up hope, Count.”

Elaine seemed to be in pain at the moment, like she could die as soon as tomorrow, but after a bit of rest, she would be healthy enough to go out and eat. That didn’t mean there was nothing to worry about, however, because the specks were still spreading across her body. It felt as if the moment those specks covered every inch of her, they would take her life. The count couldn’t let that happen, but he didn’t know how to stop it. His anguish was unending.



The count sprang up in bed with a terrible fright. He was pouring cold sweat.

“Are you awake, Count?” someone asked from next to him. The count looked and saw Hayden tending to his weapon.

“Hayden, I...”

“That must have been a dreadful nightmare. Was it what I think it was?”

“It was about my daughter, yes. Same as every day. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, but don’t lose hope. I’d ask you to relax, but I’m sure that’s not easy to do.”

Count Robista grimaced. “This is my daughter we’re talking about. I can’t hope to relax yet. But at least I feel better now than when I thought I could do nothing.”

“Which changed thanks to a prophecy, you said? I remember you mentioned it when I took the job, but is that true?”

“Indeed it is. Well, whether it’s legitimate or not, this is all I can do. I have to try.”

“You were praying for your daughter’s recovery when a god spoke to you, right? Where were you when this happened?” Hayden asked.

“I was in the chapel in my mansion.”

“Right, nobles have those. And that’s where you had this premonition?”

“Correct.”

“What was the god like?” As was typical of adventurers, Hayden had no particular reverence for gods. He believed only in his own skill.

“To be honest, I don’t know whether it was a god. I had placed a number of my daughter’s dolls on the altar, and one of them suddenly came to life and spoke to me. ‘If you wish to cure your daughter’s illness, search for materials for medicine in Maalt. Then you will eventually find the cure. Whether you make it in time or not depends on you,’ it said.”

“It could have been a demon,” Hayden suggested.

“Perhaps. But if so, then the gods have done nothing for me. I’d be left with no choice but to believe in the demons instead.”

“I’m sure you’re kidding, but for a god, that’s an irritating task to give someone. Why have them look for the materials and not simply the medicine itself?”

Count Robista nodded. “I thought the same thing, but if the medicine doesn’t



currently exist, then maybe that's all they could tell me. Nobody has seen a disease like this before, after all."

"Well, that's true. But that means you've been foisted with a lot of work. To even research whether it works or not will take considerable time."

"Maybe that's why the god said we have limited time. At any rate, there's something I can do. I simply have to do it."

"Right. Let's hope that this adventurer can help."



As expected, yesterday's excursion with Viscount Lautner was lacking. This wasn't because the viscount was lazy or cut corners; it was because he couldn't find what the count needed. He did take the count to drug stores with recipes for rare medicine and the ingredients they required, for which the count was thankful, but none of it seemed like it would work on Elaine's illness. But just in case, the count burned that knowledge into his memory so he wouldn't forget it. He planned to test those recipes when he got home, but his expectations were low. Count Robista only hoped that today's adventurer would live up to his potential.

Count Robista and Hayden waited outside the guild where they agreed to meet until the man in question approached.

"Sorry, have I kept you waiting long?" the masked man asked.

"Only because I was so impatient that I came early. It's fine."

In actuality, it was common among nobles to come to negotiations early to get the psychological advantage, so he had done it out of force of habit. Hayden had said he would have been just as well off coming later, but the habit had been ingrained for many years and was hard to shake off. In the end, Hayden gave up on convincing the restless count.

"That's good. Now, let me introduce you," Rentt said and glanced behind him.

There was a beautiful woman. She looked intelligent, but with a callous look in her eyes, and she had an aura of powerful mana. She must have been the researcher Rentt mentioned the other day.

The woman faced the count and quietly opened her mouth. “Greetings, Count. I’m Lorraine Vivie, a Silver-class adventurer. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’ll be helping Rentt introduce you to potential medicinal materials. I’m a magic medic myself, so I consider myself fairly familiar with the subject. I believe I’ll be of some help.”

Her self-introduction was masterful and without a hint of self-abasement. She had clearly recognized that she was speaking to a noble of high standing, so she was probably comfortable with such situations. In other words, she was just that knowledgeable about medicine. Her ranking of Silver-class meant she had talent as an adventurer, but high-ranking nobles didn’t employ Silver-classes especially often. Her skill as a magic medic seemed more likely to be of value. The count was pleased to meet Lorraine.

The count looked to Hayden to make sure he had no complaints. He didn’t appear to express any, so the count turned back to Lorraine and held out his hand. “Thank you for the polite greeting. I’m Curt. You seem to know just who I am, but as you can see, I’m trying not to draw attention. Treat me with no more civility than you would anyone else, please.”

“Got it. How’s this, then?” Lorraine switched from the previous polite language to more of a casual demeanor. Much like Rentt, she seemed quite adept at reading the room.

“That will be fine. Now then, we only have so much time. Can I ask you two to show me around?”



“I never expected such useful materials to be hiding here,” the count remarked after they had finished walking all around Maalt.

“None of these things are that rare in this city,” Lorraine said. “But it’s hard to keep them fresh, so they don’t get shipped to the capital. I thought you might be interested in these, but are they to your satisfaction?”

“Of course. Viscount Lautner introduced me to a number of drug stores and wholesalers yesterday, but today has been far more fruitful.”

“The viscount is a noble, so I take it he only took you to stores with expensive

goods. If so, a lot of these materials wouldn't be included. Marketplaces and back alley stores have a surprising number of quality goods as well, but they may be too sketchy for a noble."

"Interesting. Maalt is quite nice, I must say. I have visited stores of this sort in the capital, but they didn't carry anything so curious as this."

Lorraine nodded. "That's something unique about Maalt. A lot of expert material collectors live here. Even the novice adventurers can perfectly distinguish between different herbs, so I imagine that's a big part of it."

"Is that right? I'd love to learn from them, then."

"It's not so simple. At any rate, can we consider this job finished? This only leaves some materials that we'll have to leave town for to collect directly, since they're out of season and not in stock."

"Oh, yes, let me think about it."

Thanks to Rentt and Lorraine, Count Robista learned about and acquired many useful materials. They explained everything from the effects of the materials to the changes they went through when made into medicine. They were so helpful that the count considered hiring the two for a lengthier contract. There were even a number of materials that seemed like they could help Elaine.

In a village not far from Maalt, there was apparently a disease with symptoms much like Elaine was experiencing, and they had discovered an effective medicine for that illness and the materials to produce it. Naturally the doctors in the capital were unaware of this, as not only did the disease only appear around this village, but it never resulted in death. It didn't take long for patients to fully recover.

It was, of course, Lorraine who taught him this. She was familiar with all the local diseases in the villages around Maalt. The count found her knowledge to be absurdly extensive, but she was humble about it, claiming it was simply the result of living in Maalt for a long time. Regardless, it would be able to help Elaine. The count was so thankful he wanted to kneel to her.

With a cure in reach, there was no need to ask even more of Rentt and

Lorraine. The count started his farewells.

“Well, I’ve obtained what I came here for. I don’t think there’s any need to go anywhere dangerous. This job is complete, you may—”

“Hold it! No, not yet,” a voice said from out of nowhere.

“What? Did somebody say something?” the count asked, but Rentt, Lorraine, and Hayden shook their heads. “Then who was it?”

“Yeesh! Here, over here!” the voice said louder.

The count felt a creeping sensation in his chest from the shock. “What in the world?” he exclaimed and looked closely at the thing floating in the air and staring at him. It was the talking doll from his mansion. He had brought it with him.

“Are you... Are you that god?”

To his surprise, the doll shook its head. “No, no, I’m just a divine spirit with no name. These two are my followers. But you’re a follower of Viroget, aren’t you? Viroget’s power still remains in this doll, so I can go inside it too.”

Viroget was a god of plants and fertility. The main business in the count’s territory was medicine production, so he worshiped Viroget, the god with dominion over the plants that served as materials for many of those drugs. Only now did he know that the doll had been inhabited by Viroget and that his first visitation had been from a god after all. But if so, that didn’t explain why this other mysterious spirit was now inhabiting the doll and speaking to him.

“I’m a piece of Viroget,” the spirit explained. “I exist mostly independently at this point, but I still receive orders sometimes. And I was told to help you out.”

“Me?” the count asked.

“Yeah, you. The boss is a real slave driver, you know. But, oh well. I need to tell you that if you go home now, you won’t be able to help your daughter.”

“What? Why is that?”

“Her illness is a variant of an infection caused by monster bugs local to that village Lorraine told you about, to be sure. The cure can be made with the materials you have now, too.”

“Then what’s the problem?” the count asked.

“There wouldn’t be a problem if you used it on the villagers from Chiweb where this disease shows up all the time. They’ve adapted to life around the monster bugs and sort of coexist with them, so they don’t need too much help. It just suppresses the bugs so they don’t do too much damage. But your daughter’s not like those villagers, so that cure’s not good enough.”

“Oh no... Then, is there no way to save my daughter?” The medicine was meaningless. They had discovered what the illness was but had no method of curing it. The count thought that his daughter was as good as dead.

“Now just wait a minute,” the doll said. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There’s a way to save her. If you make that medicine even stronger, you can force the bugs out of her. You want to know which materials you need for that, don’t you? That’s what I’m inhabiting this doll to tell you.”

“Really?! Then yes, please do!” He couldn’t help but grab the doll and shake it furiously

“I will, I will, just let go of me,” the doll pleaded. After the count let go, the doll sighed with relief. “So, human, if you travel northeast from Maalt for two days, you’ll find the Ancient Woods of Rasta. Go deep within those woods, defeat an ancient ent, and take its leaves. If you add those to the medicine for the monster bug infection, your daughter will be saved. Anyway, see you later.” With that, the doll crumbled to dust. It couldn’t hold the divine spirit any longer, presumably.

“Did you hear that?” the count asked the other three. “I wasn’t dreaming or hearing things, was I?”

“No, I heard it too,” said Lorraine.

Hayden nodded. “Me too.”

“Then our job isn’t done yet,” said Rentt. “We’ll have to show you the way there. Shall we head to the Ancient Woods of Rasta tomorrow? I’ll have horses ready by then.”

The count nearly shed tears when he heard that. They didn’t have to do that. He did need a guide, but this was far from what their original job was. It would

also be dangerous. Ancient ents were a serious threat. And yet they were fully willing to help.

“I’ll reward you heartily. Also, you don’t have to do anything too rash for me. But if you’ll show us the way, then thank you.”

Feeling that this request was unbecoming of a noble of his standing, the count bowed deeply. The two adventurers nodded, and Hayden patted the count on the shoulder.



“That being said, I’m starting to regret having come here,” the count said with a bitter smile.

They were surrounded by dense trees. Only the path ahead was spacious, a bit unnaturally so, but the reason for that was self-evident to the four travelers. In the center of the open area stood a giant tree. It was dozens of meters tall at least, and its trunk and branches were frightfully thick. It looked like no more than an ordinary plant, but in truth, it was something else.

“The flow of mana tells me that this is a monster,” Lorraine said. “It’s an ancient ent.”

Lorraine possessed eyes with the ability to see mana. It wasn’t that rare of a trait, but few people could make proper use of it. It demanded talent too great for most humans, but Lorraine was able to use it just fine. She was a rare sort of magician.

“Can that creature be defeated? Not that I don’t believe in all of you, but look at it,” the count said.

It looked too large for any human to take down. The three adventurers had encountered and slaughtered many monsters on the way here, but nothing as massive as this. It looked impossible to the count, and for good reason. But the adventurers rose from the grass in which they were hiding.

“If we don’t take it on, your daughter is doomed. I’ll give it a go, at least,” said Hayden.

“Size alone doesn’t mean much from a monster,” said Lorraine. “Well, ancient

ents can also use magic, though, so they're powerful foes."

"We haven't even started the fight. Don't give up hope yet, Curt. We'll manage, just watch. Should we get started?" Rentt asked.

The three adventurers made no particular plans before they jumped into the open area. Just then, the ancient ent rose from the ground, causing the earth to split beneath it as its full body was revealed. It was like a giant made of trees. A swing of its arm unleashed a blast of wind, and when it focused its mana, pointed trees sprouted up from all over to be launched like arrows. It was beastly.

The count wondered how they could possibly win, but the adventurers he hired were brave. Others might have been intimidated by the ent's mighty arms, but Hayden ran right under them and stabbed the trunk with his broadsword.

"Can't miss a target this huge!" he said with a laugh, but then branches like porcupine spines sprouted from the stab wound and nearly impaled him. "That was a close one. Guess we can't just chop it down and be done with it."

"I thought a Gold-class would have at least researched how an ancient ent fights. They can sprout those needle-like branches from any part of their body," Lorraine explained.

"Ancient ents are pretty rare; can't say I've had the chance to fight one before. I wouldn't know about them. In fact, I'm surprised you do."

"I'm a scholar who studies monsters. Adventuring is a side gig," she said as she cast a spell.

Lorraine unleashed several fireballs several times as massive as an ordinary Foteia Borivaas. The count feared that they could set the forest ablaze, but they didn't. A few of the fireballs missed and hit the trees behind the ent, but they were only burned a little. However, the three that hit the ancient ent incinerated its branches.

This made the count panic, for the fire could have also burned away the leaves. But in reality, no such thing happened. The blaze stopped before it got that far. Even the count knew why this was. Lorraine was controlling the spread

of the fire. It was difficult to control a spell once it was far from its caster, and it seemed unthinkable that she could manipulate it after it already struck the enemy. The magicians in the count's army couldn't do that because it was such an advanced technique. But Lorraine could do it and talk at the same time. Her skill with magic was awe-inspiring.

"Huh, not bad," Hayden said as he swung his sword. "You said you're Silver-class, but with talent like that, you could hold your own against a Gold-class."

"I'd like to think so."

"Honestly, I thought you and your friend there were gonna be dead weight, but you betrayed my expectations. In a good way."

Hayden looked at Rentt, who stood closest to the ancient ent and acted as a distraction while hitting it with every little attack he could. Each of Rentt's individual attacks did only minor damage, but he gave Hayden and Lorraine ample opportunity to fight without fear of retaliation.

"That's good to hear. And it looks like he's enjoying himself," Lorraine said. Rentt was in fact having a ton of fun, despite being the closest to the ancient ent.

"I'm pretty confident in my evasion, but even I don't have the guts to stay that close to such a monster for so long. Does Rentt not feel fear or what?" Hayden asked with an appalled look. He spoke of Rentt like he was a mysterious being.

"Fear? Maybe he doesn't," Lorraine answered with a vague smile.

"Oh? But that can't be, can it?"

Every adventurer, no matter how much they boasted, had at least some fear left in them. To trample their fear through sheer willpower or to ignore it and fight anyway was what defined bravery. That was how Hayden saw things, but he also knew there were exceptions. Some people's senses were completely broken. In other words, they were a sort of lunatic. Hayden suspected that Rentt might be one of those types.

"Rentt has been a Bronze-class for a long time, you see," Lorraine said. "He's probably happy just to get to fight a monster like this. That's why he's forgotten



his fear, that's all."

"What? He's Bronze-class? Ridiculous. With strength like that, I thought he was up to Silver."

When an adventurer was specified for a job request, they only had to sign their name. They didn't have to write their rank. It was presumed that the client would have already spoken with the adventurer, so the guild staff saw no need to ask for their rank. That was why Hayden never heard about Rentt's rank until now. He had just assumed he was Silver-class. But he wasn't.

"Well, it's a long story. But it doesn't change how strong he is."

"Of course. Not even any old Silver-class could do what this guy's doing. Even I'd have trouble pulling that off."

"He's only gotten so good recently. That's why he's happy."

"So he broke out of his shell, eh? The excitement can mask your fear at times like those, to be sure. I see now."

Most adventurers never got past Bronze-class. A surprising number spent years, even decades without moving past that rank. But a select few would eventually figure something out after years of trying and go through a rapid growth in strength. Such people were said to have broken out of their shells. Hayden thought Rentt to be one of them.

"But those folks have a tendency to hurl themselves into danger. The way he's fighting right now doesn't seem too hazardous, but it's probably best we settle this soon."

"Right. I'll create a path. Hayden, I want you to pierce the ancient ent's forehead."

"Is that its weak point?" Hayden asked.

Lorraine nodded. "From what I've observed just now, yes. Each individual ancient ent has a different weak point, but I can see this one's mana is focused in its forehead. I can't see it moving from there either, so that's probably the place."

"But you're not totally sure?"

“Nothing’s ever certain in combat.”

“Fair enough. All right, I’ll try it.”

“Then here goes!” Lorraine said as vast amounts of mana spread throughout the area and thick, wriggling vines appeared from the ground. Hayden thought this was the ancient ent’s magic at first, but they ignored him and went after the monster, restraining its thrashing branches.

“I see, so that’s how you’re creating a path,” he said as he raced toward his destination. When he reached the wooden giant, he leaped and raised his sword high above his head. “Rentt, stand back!” he shouted.

If he was as excited as Lorraine said, then Rentt might not have heard Hayden, but he was surprisingly quick to retreat. Maybe he wasn’t in such a frenzy after all. Maybe Rentt was fearless for other reasons. Hayden had his questions, but this was no time to think about them. Rentt and Lorraine seemed to have some sort of secret, but they did their job admirably and showed how open-minded they were as adventurers. There was no reason not to trust them now. All Hayden could do was hammer his sword down on the monster.

“Take this!” Hayden roared as he thrust the sword into the ancient ent’s forehead. The bark he’d cut through earlier was much tougher, so he was surprised by how easily the sword pierced through. It reached all the way into the depths of the monster. The ancient ent let out a cry that would even make a mandragora turn pale, and with a loud boom, it collapsed to the ground.



“I’m so glad to have met you two. Perhaps it was the will of the gods,” the count mused after they returned to town, brimming with admiration. He asked Lorraine and Rentt for a handshake, and they happily obliged.

“It sounds like Viroget actually inhabited that doll, so probably so,” Rentt said.

“The divine spirit said it was a piece of Viroget too,” Lorraine agreed. “But why did Viroget deliver this message to you?”

“Most likely out of necessity,” the count said. “You said that disease is contagious, Lorraine? That means we’ll have to produce quite a lot of medicine before it spreads, and I’m the only one in the capital who can do it.”

“I see. Does that mean you’re Count Robista?”

“Did I give too many hints?”

“I was right, then? That makes sense. The gods must have been concerned about an epidemic.”

“Probably so. Thankfully we obtained a large number of ancient ent leaves on this outing. No doubt they’ll run out eventually, but we know that we just have to make the medicine stronger. I’ll try developing other recipes that don’t require ancient ent leaves,” the count declared. That was probably easier said than done, but the count was determined to make it happen. He was granted this opportunity, and he intended to use it. “We’ll be leaving soon, then. If I ever visit Maalt again, I hope you’ll meet with me. Thank you so much for the help!”

With that, the count left Maalt.



“You were pretty reckless on this job,” Lorraine said to me as we were having dinner at home after Count Robista left.

“You think so? I thought I put up a pretty good fight, considering how big of a foe that ancient ent was. Got to make use of my experience fighting shrub ents.”

Ancient ents were rare monsters, but it was said that shrub ents could grow into them after hundreds, maybe thousands of years. That made the two monsters similar, and I had fought plenty of shrub ents, so I was used to them.

But Lorraine shook her head and said, “Well, I don’t think you were in much danger in the fight itself, but that’s not what I’m saying. Hayden noticed something bizarre about the way you fought, so I was a bit worried he would find out what you really are.”

“Oh. Really?”

“When you were in a somewhat dangerous spot, you used an ability you shouldn’t have been able to use, didn’t you? Your robe was hiding it, but when I used my magic eyes, I could see that part of your body disappeared for a

moment.”

“Sure, but I doubt anyone but you could have seen that.”

“You realize that Hayden is Gold-class, right? It wouldn’t be surprising if he had magic eyes too as a secret weapon.”

The stronger the fighter, the more likely they would hide their greatest abilities and use them only in emergencies. Lorraine wanted to point out that this might have been true of Hayden, and she was right to do so.

“I get it. Maybe I was a little careless. If he did happen to see something, I thought maybe I could claim it was an effect of the robe.”

“I see, that’s not a bad excuse. Even I can’t fully figure out that robe. He might have been forced to accept that explanation. I’m glad to hear you at least thought it through somewhat.”

“Look, I do think sometimes. But either way, I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“As long as you understand. You don’t want to draw too much attention.”

“I sure don’t.”



A month passed.

“Hey, Rentt! Look at this,” Lorraine said when I returned home from a dungeon. She was holding a letter.

“What’s that?”

“Can’t you tell from the insignia?”

The wax seal on the letter did look familiar. It was the same symbol that was on Curt’s clothes. That meant this was a letter from Count Robista.

“So he made it back home okay.”

“Yes. Hopefully that medicine worked,” Lorraine said as she opened the letter and gave it a read. I peered at it from behind her and read it at the same time. She could have read it before I got back, but apparently she wanted to read it with me. How thoughtful of her.

“Sounds like the medicine worked fine,” I said.

“Yes, and thanks to how they mass-produced it, they had medicine for others who caught the disease later too. Seems like the count was right about why he received that message from Viroget. But I didn’t expect that it was caused by migration from this region. If moved to another area, the bugs that cause the disease normally die before symptoms manifest, but for some reason, they adapted to Robista’s territory.”

“Pretty terrifying, but it sounds like the count will be able to keep producing medicine, so that settles this whole incident.”

“Not necessarily. He also wrote that the infection rate hasn’t died down. The battle is only just beginning, I’m sure. That’s the way diseases are. But Count Robista’s the head of this territory, and he knows the correct way to combat the disease, so I’m confident he’ll put an end to it eventually.”

“Right. Should we write a response? We could tell him to get in contact with us if he needs to hunt another ancient ent.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Let’s do that. Although, we’ll probably need Hayden’s help again.”

“If we can fight alongside each other again, that’d be fun. Hopefully it won’t be necessary, though.”

As we chatted with each other, Lorraine finished writing the letter and sent it out. Two weeks later, we received another letter from Count Robista saying that the disease caused by the monster bugs had been stopped. We also got a letter of thanks from his daughter. Lorraine and I celebrated with some fine wine that day.

## Afterword

Thank you so much for reading *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* 7. This is the author, Yu Okano. As always, it's a relief to get this seventh book published without a hitch. I always worry about whether I'll get to put out another volume, but once most of the work is done and I'm writing an afterword, it really hits me that the book's coming out. It still feels strange to me that my stories are being published. But they get released because a fair number of people read them, and for that I'm deeply thankful. If my stories help you pass the time even a little bit, then I'm glad. Looking at the state of the world over the past several months in particular, it's gotten hard to go outside, so I feel like all I can do is write.

Now, on the subject of this volume itself, I think you could sort of consider it a turning point in the story. I don't know if you could quite call the previous volumes peaceful, but they did more to put a spotlight on Rentt's past, while in this volume the story has shifted focus largely to current events. For example, the convenient means of travel Rentt obtained through the trust he built with his home village and the incident taking place in Maalt have great implications for the present and future. The story has taken place almost entirely in and around Maalt so far too, but Rentt goes to the capital in this volume, expanding the world a bit. That also means Rentt and Lorraine will find themselves with more relationships, and not necessarily ones they like. But their adventures will continue, and I'll be happy if you keep following them.

I also wrote a bonus episode for this volume. This story actually takes place a bit after the events of the rest of the volume, but it should be enjoyable as a short story on its own. I generally tell the story from Rentt's perspective, but I wanted to show how others looked at Rentt too. Maybe that'll make this story feel fresh. It also mentions Viscount Lautner, a character who won't appear much in the main story for a while.

The fifth volume of *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* manga also came out at the same time as this volume, if you'd like to check that out too. I think the

art is impactful and the story is structured in a very digestible way, making for a wonderful manga all around, so I'd love it if you could pick that up as well.

Lastly, thank you for reading this afterword, and the whole book, all the way to the end. If possible, I hope we'll meet again in the next volume.

# Bonus Short Stories

## A Strange Request

“Rentt, can you see it?”

In the dim forest, hiding between the short vegetation, my current client leaned in and whispered to me. He was an artisan named Dylas from a town called Kikal.

I looked to see what was up ahead. “Yeah, doesn’t look like there are any problems right now. This is a strange request, though. I know crystal wolf pups are supposed to be cute, but they’re still monsters. Well, they’re fine as long as you approach them with caution, I guess.”

What I saw was a monster. Inside a large, hollow tree lay a wolf bigger than an adult man. The translucent crystals all over its body glittered like jewelry, giving it a mysterious beauty. This monster was called a crystal wolf.

Cuddled against the large wolf’s stomach were three smaller ones, about the size of cats. They were wolf pups. These had clearly just been born, and if I had to guess, they were drinking milk from their mother. Unlike their parent, they had no crystals yet, but they would grow them as they got older.

Crystals from a crystal wolf were valuable in advanced alchemy and blacksmithing, and the guild had recently received a request to obtain some. But these were powerful monsters that called for an adventurer of at least Gold-class. In other words, they were too much for me. I wouldn’t take such a risky job. You might wonder, then, what I was doing here.

“We’ve confirmed that they’re safe, so let’s give them some space. What about the guys I told you about in town? How are we doing as far as where they’re at?” Dylas asked.

I sniffed for the scent of blood and got a general idea of their location. “It should be fine. I don’t think we’ll have to do anything about them. I think



they're injured, and even if they aren't, neither of them would stand a chance against a crystal wolf."

"But you heard what they were saying in town, right? They want to snatch some crystal wolf pups. I just can't tolerate that. They're not even doing anything. I know they're monsters, but they deserve respect."

Dylas and I had overheard a couple of adventurers talking about this in town. There was nothing especially strange about it. I couldn't even call them evil. This was normal for adventurers. But Dylas couldn't accept it. I could kind of understand how he felt. If these were goblins that made their living attacking humans, that would be one thing, but these crystal wolves hadn't harmed anyone. Crystal wolves would sometimes even clear away other monsters in their territory, so if anything, they were beneficial to humans.

Not only that, but this crystal wolf was raising children. Dylas knew this, so he told me that he wanted to stop the adventurers from hunting them. As to why he told me in particular, we just happened to be in the same location and were both put off by what these adventurers said. Dylas got the sense I would understand and take his request, according to him. And I did, so it turned out he was right.

"Well, I took the job, so I'll see it through," I said. "Besides, now that I'm actually seeing the pups, I'm feeling pretty sympathetic. Oh, there they are."

We followed the scent of blood until we found the two adventurers from town. They didn't look that strong. My guess was that they had only just become Bronze-class. Stealing crystal wolf pups at their level was a little much. And it looked like I was right about them being injured too.

I thought we might be able to ask them to leave without a fight, so I came out of hiding.

"Who are you?!" one of the men asked.

"Calm down, I'm an adventurer too. Look, I'm Bronze-class."

"Looks like it, yeah. But why are you here? You after the crystal wolves too?"

"You too, eh? Well, that was my intention, at least." I forced a bitter grin.

“What, did something happen?”

“I found their den, but there were footprints from several male crystal wolves around it. I didn’t see that ending well, so I decided to turn back. Maybe you two know this already, but I figure you’ll appreciate a warning. Most crystal wolves are raised by just their mother, but sometimes other wolves hang around to protect them. That makes them immensely more dangerous to approach. Going after the pups is way too risky. I won’t stop you if you want to try, though, so I can tell you where their den is. What do you think?”

If I simply told them to leave with no explanation, they would just argue, so it helped to make a courteous offer as well. I also didn’t make up what I said about crystal wolves. When there were other wolves guarding the mother, they could be exceedingly dangerous. Had I lied, the adventurers could have returned to town, done some research, and found me out. Then they would just come right back here, making this all pointless.

The two adventurers discussed what I told them. Then they slumped their shoulders and said, “Thanks for the warning. I don’t think we want to risk it.”

“Are you sure? There’s a lot of money in it if you manage to get the pups. You can get good materials from them. They’re in high demand as pets from nobles too.”

“I know, that’s why I thought we got lucky when a mother with pups was found in the forest. But I got hurt just getting here.”

“Right, I see your left arm is injured. The crystal wolves might smell your blood, I guess. All the worse if you come across the guard wolves.”

“Exactly. But we had come so far, so we trudged the rest of the way here instead of giving up. Now that we’ve heard your info though, we’re calling it quits. We’ll do the smart thing instead of getting greedy.”

“Going back, then? Well, that’s probably for the best. Need help with anything? If I return to town and hear from the guild that you guys never made it back, it’d keep me up at night.”

“No, I know this looks pretty bad, but I’ve halted the bleeding. And while I’m hurt, he’s doing fine. Not like there are any dangerous monsters around here

aside from crystal wolves anyway. Getting back should be easy enough.”

The taller of the two men did all the talking while the other remained silent. Even when the taller man looked to him, the short one kept his lips sealed. He did nod a lot, though. Most adventurers who used to be hunters were like this, so it wasn’t out of the ordinary. When you were hunting animals that would flee at the sound of a single breath and using only a bow and arrows, this was necessary.

“Yeah?” I said. “Then this is where we part ways. If we see each other in town, though, maybe we can get some drinks or something.”

“Sure, let’s do that. Thanks for the info. Bye.”

The two adventurers left the area. In situations like these, you wanted to wait for the other group to be out of sight before you got moving yourself. Otherwise, you might present yourself as a threat. However, if you were in a desperate situation or knew that monsters were around, then both groups would want to leave as soon as possible. But there was no such danger at the moment.

“All right, you can come out now, Dylas,” I called.

“Sounds good,” Dylas said as he came into sight. “Wow, you really convinced them. When you said you’d tell them where the den is, I wanted to strangle you.”

I wasn’t even sure if I could be strangled to death anyway, so I just said, “Scary.”

“Haha, sorry. Well, either way, I’m glad that ended peacefully. Besides, they kind of seemed like normal folks. They really looked like bad guys to me, but maybe that was my bias showing.”

“Probably. From their perspective, they were just trying to hunt some monsters. They don’t have a special connection to crystal wolves like you do.”

Dylas’s eyes widened with shock, and he asked, “When did you notice that?” He’d never mentioned anything about a special connection with crystal wolves and thought it was odd that I mentioned it. But Dylas simply wasn’t that careful to hide it.

I pointed to the small gem on Dylas's necklace. "That was made from a crystal wolf's crystal, wasn't it? I can tell."

"That's ridiculous. This is green; crystal wolf crystals are transparent."

"I hear that when crystal wolves are pregnant, a single green crystal appears on their bodies. Few people have even seen it, though, so not many would know."

"Right, and I'm surprised you do." Dylas sighed. "Yes, I got this from that crystal wolf."

"That's incredible. I sure wouldn't want to get near a pregnant crystal wolf." They were even more dangerous then than while they were raising the newborns.

"I raised that crystal wolf outside town when she was little. I happened to find her when she was hurt, and ever since then, she's been comfortable with me."

"So you tamed a monster?"

Dylas shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. It's more like she treats me as a friend."

"That's still pretty remarkable. A monster like that wouldn't typically be friendly with a human."

"It just happened by coincidence. Anyway, that's why I wanted to help her and her pups. Sorry I asked this of you for such personal reasons."

"Most requests are made for personal reasons. Want me to tell you about a few silly ones I've taken? I've done everything from cleaning toilets to acting as a butler."

Dylas laughed. "I guess mine's relatively normal compared to those, since it's about monsters."

"Exactly," I said. "Now that that's taken care of, I think we should head back to town. I want to see if those two made it back in one piece. Oh yeah, and I said I'd go drinking with them too. Dylas, you should join in."

"Why me?"

“Because you got in the way of their job. You at least owe them a drink.”

“When you put it that way, yeah,” Dylas said, nodding. “Alright, fine, it’ll be my treat. And I want to see you drinking plenty too, Rentt.”

“I plan on it.”

## **The Senior Staff Member Is An Adventurer?**

While I was at the guild one day, I pulled a job posting off the bulletin board and took it to the reception desk.

“I’d like to take this job,” I said.

The receptionist checked the posting and cocked her head. “Huh? I feel like someone just took this job a minute ago. Hold on a second, maybe we made a mistake somewhere,” she said and stood up from her chair.

The guild managed requests in the form of job postings, but sometimes problems like this happened. The listed reward or the job description would be wrong, or jobs that were past their expiration date would be left on the board. It didn’t happen often, but it did happen. The guild staff were only human, so I couldn’t get mad about it. Some adventurers did, but they were wasting their time and energy.

I preferred to make use of the wait time by reading the books the guild made available. They had encyclopedias on monsters and medicinal herbs, pamphlets detailing the guild’s rules, and literature on a number of topics. I’d read them so many times already I had them memorized, but I figured it was better than doing nothing, so I picked up one of the pamphlets full of rules.

As was typical of the guild, the rules were extremely broad, but they were painstakingly made to maintain order to the greatest extent possible. But they were careful not to infringe on the freedom of their adventurers, too. Whoever made these knew adventurers well. A fair number of adventurers still ignored them, though. Wherever you went, you’d always find people who didn’t follow the rules.

“Um, excuse me,” someone said from behind me as I was reading the pamphlet. I turned around and saw an unfamiliar face. Her outfit told me that

she was a guild staff member, but she was a very young girl. She must have been new.

“What?” I asked.

“I have a question about the rules in there. Specifically regarding Section 15, Article 7, on paying compensation for incomplete requests.”

“Oh, that?”

I answered the girl’s question at length. The pamphlet didn’t explain it in detail and the rule was hard to understand without reading the annotated edition, so I could see why she would have questions. I had the same experience back in the day and only understood after reading the annotated edition.

“I see!” the girl said. “Now I get it. Oh, and there’s more I’d like to ask.” I had nothing else to do, so I answered the rest of her questions. When she finished asking them all, she looked like she understood thoroughly. “Interesting! Thank you! Now it all makes sense. The people that’ve been working here for a while are really something else! See you later.”

The girl thanked me and left. I was about to say something, but she ran off before I could.

“I’m not even a staff member here,” I muttered to myself, but nobody was around to hear it.

“Rentt? What’s wrong?” the receptionist asked as she returned from confirming the details of the job.

“Nothing, really. So what about the job?”

“Oh, we made a mistake after all. It looks like this job was posted twice. Somebody else has already taken it, so you won’t be able to. I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine, I’ll look for another job.”

“Will you? That would help. Oh, in that case, I have one to suggest.”

“What?”

“This one, if you wouldn’t mind? I don’t know if it’s something you’d like, exactly, but we’d really appreciate it if you took this job.”

The description said it was a simulated job for new guild staff. I didn’t know whether this was a thing in other regions, but in Maalt, the guild had a tradition of making new staff members take a job at least once, whether they could fight or not. Not that they forced them to fight, of course, but they wanted everyone to go along for the experience. The guild decided what the job would be, and it didn’t have to be anything difficult. It was usually nothing more than slaying goblins or picking herbs. But that didn’t mean it was completely safe, so they would send a trustworthy adventurer to attend them. I was trustworthy enough, apparently. They had asked this of me just about every year before I started to wear this robe and mask, but I was surprised they would still ask now.

“Are you sure you want me to do it?” I asked.

“Yes. We weren’t sure who to ask, but you have Sheila and Guildmaster Wolf’s approval. And personally, I think you’ll be fine too.”

That was the power of having acquaintances that trusted you. But even this staff member here seemed to have faith in me. I wanted to live up to that trust, so I decided to take the job.



The job itself was simple enough, but one of the new staff members was shocked to see me.

“Huh? You’re that senior staff member who told me about the rules,” she said. It was the girl I’d talked to before.

“I never said I worked for the guild. I’m an adventurer,” I replied wearily.

“Come on, no adventurer knows that much about the rules! Geez, this is a surprise. Well, if that’s true, why don’t you quit being an adventurer and work for the guild instead? I’d love to work with someone like you, and it’d make the job easier.”

“Not going to do that, no. I’m sure you’ll be great at the job without me anyway. Good luck.”

The girl looked surprised. “Wow, I never thought I’d hear that. Most people say I don’t seem serious enough.”

“There aren’t that many staff members who try to understand the rules in as much detail as you are. It seems to me like you’re the sort who acts casual but gets the job done.”

“Now I feel really motivated all of a sudden! Let’s go do this job quick,” she said smiling. Then she pumped her fist in the air.

“I feel like your personality is more suited to adventuring. Well, do your best and try not to hurt yourself,” I responded and began to walk off.

## **Troupe Member Rentt**

“Well, this is a problem. What should I do?”

I was walking through Maalt when I suddenly heard that. Curious, I looked over and saw a small group of men and women standing around. The one who spoke was a plump middle-aged man; the rest of them looked attractive by comparison. It was hard to tell what this group’s purpose was at a glance. But as much as I liked to assist people, I couldn’t stop and help every troubled person I encountered.

I tried to walk past them, but then someone said, “You there! Wait a moment,” and grabbed me by the arm. It was, once again, the plump man. I noticed the instant he started to move and could have avoided him, but he could’ve fallen over if I did, so I didn’t. However, I suspected that I made the wrong choice. These people seemed like nothing but trouble, but maybe I was fated to get involved in this.

“What?” I asked with a sigh.

The man didn’t respond right away. Now that he got a good look at me, he seemed intimidated. I had a skull mask, a robe, and a well-worn sword, after all. Adventurers were used to seeing men like me, but any civilian would see me as dangerous. The man still didn’t back off, though.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said after he mustered up his courage. When I saw how serious he was, I gave up on figuring out how to get out of here quickly.



“I’ll let you tell me what it is, at least,” I said.



“So, essentially, you can’t use the theater you were planning to and you’re not sure what to do. I see, so you’re a theater troupe.”

I listened to their story, and it turned out that they were a traveling troupe who’d arrived in Maalt the other day. Maalt wasn’t that big, but it was at least big enough to be considered a city, so it had its fair share of entertainment. There was a small theater in Maalt where troupes periodically performed. Troupes from Maalt itself performed there, of course, but some came from outside town too. These people were one of the latter, and they were supposed to put on a show at the theater for a few days starting tomorrow. But the head of the theater suddenly decided against it.

“That theater’s owner is just the worst,” explained the troupe’s leading actress. “He said a local troupe insists on using the theater, but he’s the one who called us to this town in the first place. Oh, it’s so frustrating.” Her glamorous face was fit for the stage, and her mannerisms were refined and conspicuous. She was the kind of person who you’d want to see act.

“Liesse, it’s just how things are. Traveling troupes like ours are treated this way everywhere,” said another actor. At first glance, he looked docile and timid, but something about him made it hard to look away. It was easy to see that he was another performer. “I just hope we get our own theater eventually. But we sure don’t have the money for that yet. Let’s forget about this town and try somewhere else.”

I was an absolute amateur at anything regarding performing, but every member of the troupe had an interesting aura that I didn’t have the words to describe. I only talked with them a bit, but it was enough to make me curious to see their show. There was no way I’d actually be able to, though, which I thought was unfortunate. But the middle-aged man, who seemed to be the leader of the troupe and a manager rather than a performer, showed me that wasn’t the case with the next thing he said.

“We’ll perform in the town square if we have to. As long as we have enough space, we can make it work somehow. But it’ll be hard to have backgrounds or

acoustics without a proper theater.”

That gave me an idea. “If I can secure a location for you and do something about the backgrounds and acoustics, would I be able to watch your show?” I asked.

“What? Oh, yes, but we didn’t get permission to use the town square.”

“No, I have another idea. I’ll see if I can make it work, but if it doesn’t, then I’m sorry.”

The man shook his head. “We’re out of options anyway. If there’s even a slight possibility, we’ll take it. We’re trying to come up with something as it is.”

“Got it. But why did you stop me anyway? You’re lucky I thought of something, but I don’t think there was any reason to assume that I could help you.”

“Oh, I wasn’t really going to have you do anything about that, but...”

Then the troupe leader told me why he stopped me, and the answer was shocking.



I never thought I would end up on the stage myself. But I didn't say that. What I did say while I was up there was the villain’s dialogue written in the troupe leader's script. He wanted to hire me to play the villain. The man who was supposed to play the part fell terribly ill, so they happened to be seeking out a replacement when I was passing by.

The villain was a masked sorcerer who used dark magic. The leading actress played a woman who was kidnapped by the sorcerer as a sacrifice, and the timid actor played a confident knight who set off to rescue her. Surprisingly, the show was received favorably for all four days it ran.

As for the location, I talked to Lorraine. I asked her if the troupe could borrow the land she owned on the outskirts of town, and she was quick to give permission as long as she got to watch. She also solved any problems with the backgrounds by using her illusion magic. Lorraine’s versatility was greatly appreciated by the troupe.

“Then I shall sleep. It will come to you too one day, in the deep darkness, quietly. Ah, I will be waiting,” I cried after being slashed by the knight. Then I fell from the side of the stage and disappeared.

Lorraine was waiting there for me. “You’re a surprisingly decent actor, Rentt,” she said with a laugh.

“All these actors are more brutal than monsters. Well, not really, but they’re a good troupe. I hammed it up, but they’re all really talented, so I guess it worked out.” Even when I flubbed my lines, they changed up their own to make it seem like I didn’t mess up. Anyone could have played my role, really. I just happened to look the part.

“They do seem like a good troupe,” Lorraine agreed. “I was even thinking about introducing them to an acquaintance I have in the Empire.”

“You should do that. I would hate to see their talent squandered by lack of opportunity.”

“I’ll do that then. By the way, did you hear what happened at the theater?”

“Hm?”

“So many people came to watch this show that they didn’t have much of an audience. They should have stuck to their plans.”

“I see. I guess they made a big mistake.”

Lorraine laughed. “Well, this was pretty fun. Tell me if anything like this happens again.”

“Hopefully it doesn’t, but I’ll consider it.”

## **Heirloom Management**

“Sorry, Rentt. You’re a pretty strong adventurer, right? You should be above this,” a middle-aged woman said as she restlessly moved her hands. Her name was Rota, and she was from an ordinary household in Maalt. Her grandfather was an adventurer, but I never knew him.

“Oh, I don’t mind. That’s just the kind of job this is. I saw it was about cleaning

a house and took it anyway, so it's on me."

I was here for a house cleaning job. Not Rota's house, but that of her grandfather. He passed away the other day and Rota inherited the house and all his assets, so she needed to sort it all out. Her family could have done it on their own, but the fact that Rota's grandfather was an adventurer presented a problem.

Most adventurers did some dungeon diving, and dungeons were full of special magic items. Finding and selling them was the quickest way for an adventurer to make money. That seemed to be what Rota's grandfather was doing. But while some magic items sold just fine, others didn't because their uses were unclear. Unsure of what to do with those items, many adventurers would leave them lying around the house.

That was fine as long as the adventurer kept track of them, but it became an issue when their family inherited their assets. They wouldn't be able to tell which items were dangerous and which weren't. Sometimes a magic item could injure them or cause a huge disaster. To avoid that, most families sought help from other adventurers when sorting out these belongings. That was the purpose of this job.

"I appreciate your attitude. I wish I could have sorted these out on my own, but his will said that some of the magic items might be dangerous. At least it kept my relatives from hounding me about the inheritance, though."

"They belonged to an adventurer, after all. I guess they thought some of these things could be fairly valuable. But they valued their lives more. That was probably smart of them."

"And very calculating, but yes. It doesn't seem like anything has been dangerous so far, though."

I finished going through most of the heirlooms, but they all seemed to be safe. It was possible that her grandfather's will only said what it did to keep her relatives away.

When I told that to Rota, she thought for a bit and then nodded. "He was certainly wise," she said. "Maybe he did have that in mind. If so, I may have wasted money paying for this job."

I almost agreed to that, but then I noticed something strange between two shelves. “Maybe you didn’t waste your money after all.”

“Oh, did you find something?”

“Yeah, look at this.” I’d found a cube about the size of my palm.

“What’s that?”

“Probably a magic item. I can feel mana flowing through it. It doesn’t seem active, though, and it’ll take some research to figure out the effects. I think Lorraine could appraise it, if you’re interested.”

Rota knew a lot of people around Maalt, including Lorraine. She knew what Lorraine was like and knew her occupation as well. “Sounds good. Would you mind asking her? I’ll pay her for it, of course.”

“Sure, then I’ll be taking this.”

“Thanks.”

I finished cleaning the house by that night and then headed off to see Lorraine.



“I see, this belonged to Rota’s grandfather? It’s certainly a magic item,” Lorraine said after taking a close look at the cube.

“Well, I don’t think it’s anything too dangerous, but it doesn’t hurt to be careful. You don’t see a lot of magic items that look like this, so I decided against filling it with mana while I was there.”

“These types are rare, yes, but I’ve seen one before.”

“Oh, you know something about this already?”

“Yes. I’ll pour mana into it now.”

Lorraine let a little mana flow into the cube. It was sitting on the dinner table, so I wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but Lorraine wouldn’t do anything dangerous. Well, maybe she would, but she at least must have thought this would be safe.

The cube didn’t appear to do anything dangerous, but glowing particles began

to float from it. Then they condensed into an image in the air. Now I knew what this cube was too.

“This magic item is used to create projections, right? These are pretty rare, but they’re not impossible to get ahold of. I’ve never seen one that’s cube-shaped, though. Or this size, either. They usually look like crystals.”

“Yes, that’s how they tend to look in Maalt. In the Empire, they’re often cube-shaped. Ones this small are only found fairly deep in a dungeon, though. Rota’s grandfather must have been a decent adventurer.”

“I see. This image is unexpected, though.”

Lorraine paused before saying, “I think this magic item would go for a fair bit, but I don’t expect Rota to sell it.”

“Probably not. Maybe her grandfather wanted to keep his relatives away so it wouldn’t be sold.”

“That would make sense. Well, bring it to her tomorrow,” Lorraine said. I nodded.



“I see, so that’s what this magic item does. This is a very clean image of the past.”

I delivered the magic item to Rota the next day, and when I showed her how it worked, she gazed at it with a nostalgic look on her face. The image depicted Rota’s grandfather, his son and daughter-in-law, and their baby, Rota.

“I can tell you about a place where this’d sell for a decent price,” I said, but I didn’t expect her to take me up on the offer.

She smiled and shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m keeping this. It’s not like I’m hurting for money anyway. And even if I were, I could never sell this. Thanks, Rentt. I’m glad I asked for your help. If not, maybe I never would’ve learned what this was.”

I doubted that, but if her relatives did the cleaning, maybe that could have happened.

“No problem,” I said.

## A Researcher's Nature

"What? Well, uh, but..."

As I was napping on the second floor of Lorraine's house, I heard someone speaking on the floor below. We must have had a visitor. Lorraine was an alchemist and a magic medic, so she received her fair share of visitors at night. People would suddenly fall ill and come for medicine and such. I didn't think she had to go out of her way to assist everyone who came to her doorstep, but Lorraine was always happy to help. When someone came to see her out of concern for their family, she almost never ignored them. She did turn particularly awful people away, though, so she wasn't too generous.

I thought that this was one of those people looking for medicine at first, but if so, then their conversation was lasting an oddly long time. Lorraine would usually just ask about their symptoms and hand over some concoction. Maybe it was about something else, but it was wrong to eavesdrop, I guess. I tried to ignore what I heard and go back to sleep, but a few minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

"Lorraine?" I said as I cocked my head, got up, and opened the door. There stood the head of the household.

"Yes, sorry to bother you so late."

"It's fine. Does this have something to do with your guest?"

"You heard us? Well, you do have incredible ears, so I suppose you would. That makes things quick, then."

"Hold it, I didn't hear exactly what it was about. I could have, but I thought it best not to listen. You'll have to explain."

"Thanks for being considerate," Lorraine said. "All right, I have a bit of a favor to ask."

What Lorraine described to me was just a bit disheartening. She sounded like she didn't even even want to discuss it, but I could tell it was something that had to be dealt with.

"So a scholar you know caused an accident at their research facility in Maalt.

It isn't a problem for that scholar, but now the facility is full of dangerous gas and there may be modified monsters living there. And you want me to do something about it?"

"That's the idea. It's not that big of a facility. You know that building that looks like a warehouse next to that blue spire?"

I immediately thought of the building she meant. I'd lived in this town for a decade, so I knew what was where.

"That? I never knew it was used for experiments."

"It's privately owned, so there's no sign or anything. But they've gotten some decent results there. They aren't lacking in funding either. But they're having trouble cleaning up after this mess, so they came crying to me. I could ask another adventurer, but the gas seems to be pretty bad. They've kept it from leaking outside, but nobody can get inside."

"But this acquaintance thought you could go inside?"

"I'm Silver-class, after all. And I know a lot about alchemy, so they thought I could handle it. They overestimate me, though. I was going to say nothing could be done, but I do have you. Gas would have no effect on you, would it?"

"That's true, it wouldn't. Well, I got it. I just need to kill all the monsters, right?"

"Right. According to them, the gas should be neutralized within a few days, so we don't need to worry about that. I imagine that most human beings would still be worried about it, though."

"I'm glad this job is perfect for me," I said as I got ready to leave. "I'll be off, then."

"It's in your hands."



"Well, well, there are some interesting monsters living in here."

When I got to the research facility, a few robed sorcerers were standing outside the building. They were probably researchers. When I told them I was here to slay the monsters, they guided me to the entrance.



“You can enter through here,” one said. “We’ve used magic to keep the gas from leaking out, so don’t concern yourself with that. But this gas makes monsters go wild, so be careful.”

“Thanks for the unpleasant information. Well, at least I know what the gas does. What types of monsters are there?”

“Slimes and goblins, and slimes and orcs, but...”

“But what?”

“I think you’ll understand when you see them. Good luck.”

That didn’t sound good, but I just sighed and went inside. The building was fairly large, but when one monster spotted a human, the rest would gather around as well. I couldn’t exactly call myself human, but I looked humanoid enough that they might see me as worth attacking. That made things quick, so that was nice.

But the monsters themselves were a problem. I saw what the researcher was talking about. There were goblin-shaped slimes and orc-shaped slimes. Slimes could change their shape in an attempt to intimidate foes, but only more advanced slimes could imitate other monsters this accurately. These didn’t look as powerful as those advanced slimes, however. They were just a little stronger than an ordinary slime. Lorraine’s acquaintance probably created these, whether on purpose or by accident. Maybe this actually made that acquaintance an excellent researcher. But I couldn’t just run away. If I did, a whole new type of monster might start to thrive in the wild. I had to stop them all here. So I drew my sword, charged it with spirit, and dashed at them.

To my surprise, the goblin and orc slimes both moved exactly like the monsters they were copying. I didn’t know how these could have been created, but they were amazing. Just on a technical level though; they weren’t that strong. The gas probably had some effect on them too, making their movements exceedingly repetitive. It seemed like it made them more powerful too, but they were no match for me. I destroyed all of their cores in one strike.

I left the research facility and told the researcher who I presumed to be Lorraine’s acquaintance that I’d defeated all the monsters. The researcher looked somewhat disappointed but said, “What’s important is that nobody was

hurt. Thank goodness for that.” It didn’t sound like she was a mad scientist, at least.

“If something like this ever happens again, just tell me. Gas like this doesn’t pose much problem to me.”

I’d said it to make her feel better, but it made her eyes light up. “Oh, very interesting. Could I do some research on you?” she asked.

At that, I frantically ran away. “What else should I have expected from an acquaintance of Lorraine’s? She’s just like her, in a way,” I muttered to myself as I rushed to Lorraine’s house.

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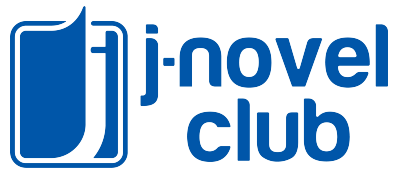
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by Yu Okano

Translated by Noah Rozenberg Edited by Suzanne Seals

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